

Antoinette Sterling And Other Celebrities
Chapter 3 – First Years In England
By Lady Mary Sinner-Hendrickson
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Antoinette arrived in London, in the early part of 1873, and lived there until her death in 1904. She only went to America three times after leaving in 1872, once was to tour with Theodore Thomas' Orchestra, in the summer of 1873. Although she resided in London, she was a true blue American. Malcolm wrote that if someone she'd helped, such as a London beggar, were to be discovered as a fraud, Antoinette would say "It wouldn't have been so in America." If anything went wrong during a concert tour, she would say "Ah, they don't make mistakes like that where I was born." Some of her childhood phrases held in her adult years. For example, she referred to Rhubarb as "pie plant," jam as "preserves," sweets would be "Say, let's get some candy," and meat undercooked was "rare." Anyone who spoke ill of her birth country, they would think twice before doing so again!

She arrived in London, with love for her homeland, and dislike for all things English, which was instilled in her by one of her grandmothers. (Note: In chapter one, it is mentioned that only one of Antoinette's grandmother's was alive when Antoinette was a child. This would have been her mother's mother, as James' mother, Mary Molly Bradford-Sterling had died in 1828. It has not been determined who this 'other' grandmother was.) Antoinette eventually came to love England, and in 1895, came to realize how much England had become a part of her very being. It was in this year, for six months, she visited her American family and friends. She felt as an outsider, even in the once familiar places. The greatest impression was of passers-by on the streets, hotels, etc. They all seemed to have blank stares, but in England, people knew her, and were always cordial. Her love of both countries, and the differences, she expressed at a banquet during Thanksgiving time. She had been asked to sing, unexpectedly, and couldn't refuse. The air was filled with the smoke of the men's cigars and cigarettes, and effected her throat, so that any attempt to sing was quite impossible. Following, is the little speech she gave, concerning the countries, and her feelings: My brothers, I have worshipped America for twenty years; I have lived in England for twenty years. America is my mother, but England is my grandmother, and I have lived so long with my grandmother that I seem somehow to have lost touch with my mother's sons, and I'm in too bad voice to sing. So you must forgive me."

At the end of 1873, with a letter of introduction, she went to see Sir Julius Benedict, a great force in the musical world at that time. He asked her if she would like to make her debut at the Covent Garden Concerts. She said "Yes," but she then went on the American tour with Theodore Thomas' Orchestra, leaving without telling Sir Benedict. This, of course, threw his plans of her debut, into a waiting mode, of which he was not happy. Sir Benedict and Antoinette became great friends, but he never, according to Malcolm, never really understood her American temperament, such as leaving the country, on what he felt, a whim, or a touch of irresponsibility. I guess he never realized the fact that she was born a Sterling, and most Sterlings do as they wish!

Sir Benedict set the date of the singer's debut for November 5th, at Mons. Jules Riviere's Promenade Concert. She met with Sir Benedict, Dannreuther, and Joseph Bennett, to discuss the program for the debut, but the entire meeting was spent discussing what she would wear for that performance. Antoinette, due to her Quaker upbringing, refused to wear a low-necked gown, which was the style of the day. It was suggested a gown could be made, with a square of pale pink satin, to represent skin. Still she refused, and in the end, said she would wear what she pleased, and did just that. She wore a dress that she'd worn in New York. A friend of hers,

overheard some people talking about Antoinette being improperly dressed for the evening. A man behind them, yelled "I wish to God *every* woman dressed like Miss Sterling!"

People became accustomed to Antoinette's style of dress, and she was praised by many. Following, is a letter from a complete stranger, a lady physician: Dear Madame, -- As a woman and as a physician, I take the liberty of thanking you for the sensible, simple, and artistic manner in which you dress for the stage. You are the first professional singer of our sex to whom I have ever listened whose voice came forth unimpeded by muscular compression. The delightful ease with which you sang gratified me almost as much as the charm of your voice. With the memory of Madame _____ so fresh in my mind, I am all the more prepared to express my delight at seeing that you do not bare your body, as so many do, to the gaze of an audience. I have always believed it possible for a professional singer or actress to educate the public up to a standard of decency instead of being herself dragged down to its level. It gives me great pleasure to know that you are so successfully demonstrating the possibility of my theory. Interested in all that women do well, and wishing you continued success, I am, very truly yours..."

At her debut, and against all advice, she chose to sing Bach's "Slumber Song" from the "Christmas Oratorio." To the amazement of those who said it would be disastrous to sing such a song, the singer was met with deafening applause. The opinion now was that there had never been so successful a debut. But the second part of the concert was even more fantastic. She sang "The Three Fishers." People rose to their feet, and cheered, waving their hats and handkerchiefs, seeming to never stop. Born that evening was a new breath of life to opera.

In the Spring of 1874, Queen Victoria summoned the singer to appear on April 8th. However, Antoinette had a previous engagement scheduled, and sent word to the queen that she was unavailable on the 8th, but would be happy to come the following week. Antoinette was innocent of the customs of England, and told the queen's messenger this when he came to her to speak with her about the matter. She apologized, and said she would ask the person whom she had the first engagement with, if she could cancel, to which they understandably agreed. Then, there was the problem of Antoinette being advised that she would have to wear a low-necked gown when she performed for the queen. To this, she did not falter, and when the queen heard of this problem for Antoinette, she graciously told Antoinette that she could wear what she would like. On April 8th, Antoinette appeared before Her Majesty and The Royal Family, at Osborne, on Prince Leopold's birthday. She sang Schubert's "Doppeltgänger," "The Three Fishers," and "Don't Be Sorrowful." The other artists appearing with Antoinette at the celebration were Mr. Cusins and Herr Ludwig Strauss.

In appreciation, knowing that Antoinette did not favor the wearing of much jewelry, Queen Victoria presented her with a silver tea set. Malcolm wrote that his mother was quite angry about the gift, due to her grandmother, and the town cobbler in Sterlingville, New York instilling such dislike for the English, and The Boston Tea Party. As long as Antoinette used the tea set, she personally did not allow tea to be brewed in it. If any of her family or friends brewed tea in it, that was their choice. How our childhood experiences remain a deep part of our lives, as adults, and can mold our thoughts, and destiny. Antoinette only used the tea set for hot chocolate. In a later chapter, mention will be made of a 'special' chocolate, and the tea set.

Antoinette was a lover of organs, and of course, organ lofts. It was in a New York church organ loft that love, as Malcolm wrote, was first awakened in his mother's heart. She met John MacKinlay, her future husband, in

that church organ loft, in Wappinger's Falls. After their marriage, Antoinette would call John "W.F.", after his home in Wappinger's Falls.

John was a very talented amateur organist, and when one of the richest men in the area was approached to contribute funds toward a new church organ, he agreed to do so, but only on the condition that John MacKinlay play for the services during the next three years.

"W.F.", or John, had a new organ placed in the music room of his home, and decided to have a party to celebrate the occasion. To this party, he contracted with Sarasate and Miss Sterling to perform. It must have been a great performance, as Miss Sterling later became Mrs. John MacKinlay!

After their engagement, one of the first gifts Antoinette received was an Easter Egg, within which reposed, on a bed of Violets, an oblong-shaped signet ring. Upon it there was engraved the following bar of music:



The word itself, of course, signifies "Noblest." The intention of the notes is not at first quite so obvious. To make it clear, one must call to mind the fact that E flat is in the German notation known as Es. Hence the three notes A, E flat, G, become A.S.G., Antoinette Sterling.

John and Antoinette first met on Easter Sunday, and it was on Easter Sunday, in 1875, they married. Sometimes I feel a special connection with these two, my great grand aunt and uncle. My husband and I met on March 26, 1973, and married on Easter Sunday, March 26, 1989. I also was a professional singer, for many years, and remember fondly the joy people expressed after hearing my voice. They are nice memories, and I can imagine how Great Grand Aunt Antoinette must have felt receiving the applause of her audiences. And, accept the love they must have had for her.

Their wedding was a well-kept secret, until Antoinette walked down the aisle, on the arm of George MacDonald, the great Scotch preacher and novelist. The newlyweds had a wedding breakfast at the MacDonald's home. This is when Antoinette realized she would no longer make appearances as "Miss" Antoinette Sterling.

Stay tuned...