

How Mary Garden Got Her First Chance, While Paris marvelled

By Neal McCay

SO much has been written of Mary Garden that one might wonder what else there could possibly be to say. Yet, though much light has been shed on the triumphant part of Miss Garden's career, little has been written of her earlier days, the student days in Paris when she was working obscurely but undauntedly toward the career which she had chosen. Already she had sounded the key-note of her life which she later expressed thus: "Decide what you want to do, set your goal, and never stop until you reach it!"

Perhaps it is a touch of vanity, or even a feeling of reflected glory, which prompts the writer to relate the following incident:

It was a long time ago—longer than I am going to say—but it was during the days when we were students in Paris and happened to be staying at the same pension that one day Miss Garden asked me if I would go to an *audition* which Fugère, with whom she was then working, was about to give for his pupils. I was only too glad to go, for I was keenly interested in this young girl's tireless and never-ceasing efforts, which at the time seemed so hopeless. Her capacity for work was enormous! Every morning she was the first one at some preparatory study for a lesson later in the

day—and there were few days when there were no lessons of some sort, for her studies included every possible thing that would advance her in her ambition to become an opera singer. When one wishes to become a great artist there are many things to be considered aside from the actual singing. There are the rôles to be learned, the diction, the *mise-en-scène*, and the other countless detailed studies—all of which are essential to artistic work.

Mary Garden's efforts were all the more praiseworthy for the fact that she was working in the face of little encouragement, and even less praise, for there were few who believed that she would ever "arrive." But if others were lacking in confidence, she made up for their mistaken judgment by her own absolute belief in herself and her ideals of art.

When Garden Sang

I confess, I went to the concert a little indifferently, expecting just what I found, a small hall, a small concert, given to a small audience. The program was made up of the usual exhibition arias, which were done well enough, and sometimes the singing was excellent; but in no case did one find that interest and indefinable something that is looked for in an artist who is said to be ready for the verdict of an unprejudiced public.

The afternoon was growing pretty tedious when the program announced that the duet from "Manon" would be sung by Mlle. Mary Garden and some tenor, whose name I can't recall, and who has no doubt long since been forgotten. As they walked out on the little six-by-eight platform they were greeted with the same friendly applause the others had received, and the number began. Now here was something different! When they finished there was a foundation to the applause that made the walls of the little hall ring—the kind of applause that only comes after the unusual. I don't suppose that there were many in that audience who were really conscious of just why they were applauding; for the singing of Miss Garden was then, as it has always since been, subservient to a deeper influence than that which is only too rarely found in the work of the general run of stereotype singers of emotional rôles. That audience only knew that they had been held spellbound without being able to know why.

After the concert, I waited for Miss Garden and we walked home together. I told her how delighted I had been with her singing, and that in my estimation if she ever got the chance there would be no holding her back. I can still see her face as she said, "But will the chance come—and when? Sometimes, the waiting seems very long." I realized too well how she felt; so I said nothing more, and we walked on in silence.

A few weeks later I left Paris and went my way. Spring passed into summer, summer into autumn, and when winter came I was again in Europe on my way to Australia. I had only been in London a few days when I happened to pick up a French paper and read of the recent successful debut of a young American singer. Her name was Mary Garden. It was fine to read of her triumph and to know that she had proved her worth beyond a doubt to her friends, and to the ones who failed her when she most needed their support.

It was not until several years had passed that I again met Miss Garden, and then it was in London while she was filling an engagement at Covent Garden, where she sang *Marguerite* and *Juliette* for the first time. When I called to see her she told me in detail all that she had gone through during those dark, cruel days just before the dawn. It was the old, old story, once more told, of friends losing confidence before one has had the opportunity of proving himself to be justified in the pursuit of a chosen ambition. But the final blow came when she went to the bank and was told that the allowance she had monthly received from some Chicago people had been stopped. There she stood, high and dry, without a word of warning, with but fifty centimes to her name, alone in Paris.

What happened after this has been told before—how while, one day, walking in the Bois to divert her mind from the situation into which she had been so suddenly thrust, she had the good fortune to meet Sibyl Sanderson, whom she had known for a long time. Miss Sanderson, one of the few who had faith in Miss Garden, had no hesitancy asking what was wrong, and she discovered during the conversation that all was not going as it should. At first Miss Garden was inclined to be evasive; but as Miss Sanderson was not so easily satisfied she finally told her all, and just where she stood.

To make a long story short, Miss Sanderson took her to live with her, arranged a hearing with M. Carré, the director of the Opéra Comique, where, before her retirement, Miss Sanderson had been a great favorite and power, and urged him to engage her. While M. Carré had much respect for Miss Sanderson's opinion and wishes, he had not, of late, been too fortunate with American singers, so he did not enter into the enthusiasm for Miss Garden that Miss Sanderson had hoped. However, probably to dismiss the subject, he did say that she could understudy *Louise*, which was then new, and for which no understudy had yet been assigned.

The next morning Miss Garden was at the theater and went to work. Every time the opera was given she was there, noting the things to do and the things not to do, were she ever so lucky as to "go on" for the part.

Little did she dream that her time was so near. If I recall correctly, it was about two weeks after she had been assigned the understudy that she received a message telling her to report at the theater at once, and be prepared to sing that night in case the hoarseness

of the prima donna had not worn off by eight o'clock. It was then six!

Did she hesitate? Oh, no! If there ever lived a person who believes in preparedness, that person is Mary Garden. Although she had had but the fewest flimsy rehearsals with the piano, she went to the theatre that night fully prepared and fully confident—a confidence which was not shared by Charpentier, the composer, nor by Messenger, the director. They knew that she had never been on the stage, that she had never sung with an orchestra, and did not believe it possible for so inexperienced an artist, no matter how clever, to get through so important a rôle. Carré was more inclined to take a chance. The house was sold out, and he said if the indisposed prima donna could not be persuaded to "go on" he was willing that Miss Garden should do the part. All concerned, then, turned to the prima donna, begged and implored that she save the situation, which she finally did by consenting to appear. This meant much relief to the powers, but to poor Miss Garden it meant another sad disappointment. As a precaution, they asked her to sit in a loge and hold herself in readiness in case of an emergency. At the end of the second act the prima donna became completely voiceless—and after all Mary Garden was to have her chance.

An announcement was made that with great regret the sudden hoarseness of the prima donna made it impossible for her to continue, and that the balance of the opera would be sung by Mlle. Mary Garden, a young American artist who would make her first appearance on any stage. Naturally, the audience was not too pleased to have its evening disturbed; but began to show interest when Miss Garden appeared in all her loveliness ready to sing the famous air with which the third act begins. The audience probably expected an indifferent singing of the number, but after a very few measures interest increased, and when Mary Garden finished "Depuis le jour" she had Paris at her feet.

Such was the start of Mary Garden. Much has been said about her luck, her unusual opportunities, her eccentricities, her singing, etc., but I happen to know that Mary Garden earned every opportunity she ever had through indefatigable perseverance, to which were added great natural endowments. Opportunity is all well and necessary; but opportunity without merit doesn't hold, and soon falls back into the commonplace; but from the day of Miss Garden's debut to the present moment, the proof of her exceptional ability and active brain have ever been in evidence. If one has real talent no power on earth can deny what is coming to him. Miss Garden has won her position in the operatic world by dint of keen intellect, the courage of her convictions at all times, her highly keyed temperament, and her fine musicianship—combined forces which make her the great artist that she is. When we meet, which is not often, I always find her to be the same gracious, courteous, kind-hearted Mary I knew when first we met at that plain, simple pension in the Avenue Marceau.

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