

# A CHAT WITH THE GREAT TETRAZZINI

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS PRIMA DONNA SPEAKS OF HER ART—VOICE ALONE NOT ENOUGH TO MAKE A GREAT SINGER—BREATHING AND DIET DISCUSSED—HAS SUNG IN NEARLY EVERY COUNTRY.

An interview with a prima donna is apt to be a complicated affair, for she is sure to be in the hands of somebody or other in her leisure moments. It may be merely an angry dressmaker fitting a gown for a mad Lucia, it may be a coiffeur, a masseuse, a manicurist, or, dressed for the fray, she may be facing a manager with a new contract to sign or an old one to live up to. It is a busy life, this of the high Cs.

Fortunately there is no one present when a New York Sun reporter calls on Mme. Tetrazzini, but the pianotuner who sits meekly in the background, with an apologetic cough now and then to announce his presence. The reporter has brought a corps of interpreters. The polyglot conversation that ensues is reminiscent of lunch hour at a school of languages, but the time devoted to waiting for interpretation is not lost, for it gives one the chance to observe Mme. Tetrazzini speaking in a language she loves, her face full of animation and her tiny hands gesturing freely to emphasize some point. She speaks but little English, and prefers Italian or Spanish to French, from one to the other of which she glides easily, according to the interpreter who is addressing her.

When she first enters the room there is a slight frigidity noticeable in her manner; it is not the dancing step with which she answers her encores. The temperature falls. The interpreters sit uneasily on their blue chairs and even the piano tuner shrinks visibly. There is surely something the matter. Italian looks at Spaniard, French and Anglo-Saxon exchange commiserating glances. What is it? Then it all comes out. It is a crisis, and, of course, being a member of the fourth estate, the reporter is held responsible. Just who dared to make an unfavorable remark in print is never learned, but the effect is discernible.

The Spanish interpreter throws himself nobly into the breach. What he says is as mysterious as the absent criticism, but the effect is no less apparent. The diva's face is gradually wreathed in smiles, her attitude relaxes, she looks across the chasm that has intervened and the chasm seems to close up. You hear the words "Barcelona" and later "quien sabe?" and mentally make a note of the proper recipe for overcoming the resentment of the Latin race. "Barcelona" and "quien sabe?" properly mixed and applied.

And while the prima donna is thawing, you notice again the expressive hands that hover like butterflies in the air. They are jewels, except for a narrow circle of gold, and they are the tea hour, when excuse, if needed, is provided for all and every amount of ornament. Madame Tetrazzini has not even the tiniest gem about her. Not but that she has plenty of jewels, among them an excellent bracelet presented by Nicholas II, as a tribute to her vocal charm, but, like many of her profession, she prefers to separate the opulence of her stage appearance from the simplicity of her everyday attire.

## A CHILD'S FACE.

Her waist is a combination of brocade ribbon and lace and is worn with a champagne colored broadcloth skirt. When she sits you get the impression of a large woman, but when she rises and walks the impression vanishes, and you see it is merely the great chest expansion, rather than undue weight that has caused this.

Her hair is of reddish tint, marcelled and coiffured very carefully. Her blue gray eyes are set in a face of small features, over which every thought passes, leaving a ripple of expression, like a pond where each breeze marks its passage but leaves no permanent trace. It reminds one of a child's face, the child who has never had to learn the rule of restraint, to whom emotion and thought have their natural physical sequence.

And you are convinced that if such a catastrophe could occur as the loss of her voice, the famous diva could make a reputation and fortune as a pantomimist.

The conversation, duly interpreted, begins with an interrogation in regard to the high note that Mme. Tetrazzini takes so nonchalantly in "La Traviata," the vocal height being emphasized, not as usual, by a step forward toward the orchestra, a raising of the head so as to give the throat full expansion and an uplift of the eyes to the fly gallery. When Mme. Tetrazzini accomplishes it she leans over and picks up her long train as coolly as if she were asking in an ordinary conversational tone what the weather was.

"It is no effort for me to take a note in any position," is the quick answer. "I can sing lying down, walking about, sitting leaning over, whatever pose suggests itself."

"The resonant cavities in the head of the born singer are so formed that she does not have to find out the best position of the mouth for every vowel tone and practice in that position until the movements become automatic. To an audience it is perhaps a wonderful thing to see this done, especially if they have been trained by singers who make considerable effort of it and emphasize the difficulty of the high note by giving the impression of a tremendous physical strain, but I do not think any more of taking that note leaning over than of those that precede it. Patti could sing in any position."

## THE BREATHING.

And the breathing? Singers who are

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familiar with all the tricks and methods of their contemporaries complain that they cannot tell where this process takes place in Mme. Tetrazzini's case.

"It is perfectly natural," she says. "I breathe low down with the diaphragm, not as some do, high up in the upper part of the chest. I always hold some breath in reserve for the crescendos, employing only what is absolutely necessary, and I renew the breath wherever it is easiest."

"In breathing I find, as in other matters pertaining to singing, that as one goes on and practices, no matter how long you may have been singing, there are constantly new surprises awaiting one. You may have been accustomed for years to take a note in a certain way, and after a long while you discover that while it is a very good way there is a better."

"You may have caught your breath at a certain part of a cadenza and all at once some morning while you are practicing the method you have employed gives place to an entirely different one, which comes about so easily that you marvel that you ever could have employed the other."

"This, however, does not happen to you in your early days of singing, and it never happens while you are studying with a teacher; it is something that comes to you while you are working out your own methods, after the days of apprenticeship are long past, and I would not recommend the young singer to make experiments. Let her follow strictly her chosen tutelage; there is plenty of time for the individual work."

The next question causes an unexpected commotion. The Spanish interpreter hastens to insert the remark that he is a married man. The pianotuner, who is flat against the wall paper by this time, gives a cough more like that than ever and the rest of the corps of interpreters are visibly enduring the moment, not really living it.

Mme. Tetrazzini preserves her composure until she gets her answer out of the way, and then at the sight of the interpreting faces she breaks into a peal of rippling laughter. There are people who would pay the price of an orchestra chair at the Manhattan to hear that—and it is worth it.

"Corsets? Of course, I wear them, but they are very short in the front, just a square girling, the lungs are absolute freedom. One must not have any pressure there, even in the moments when one is off duty, so to speak."

## PRACTICE AND DIET.

"I laugh easily and quickly, and when I look down in the audience and see a familiar face with an expression on it as if I were some strange, curious person that the friend had never seen before, I laugh right out, just as I do when the friend makes me some gesture and I respond in the only way I can. I laugh and sing at the same time, as you may have noticed."

"I do not practice at all during the season, except, of course, when I am going over a new role. When I go on the stage, the orchestra says 'la-la' and I respond 'la-la,' and the conductor nods that it is all right and I sing away. That is all the rehearsing I have."

"And the diet? Whatever I like, always avoiding much oil, which is very bad, and all highly-spiced food. I find all greasy foods very bad for the vocal chords."

Mme. Tetrazzini expresses great regret that she is not able to hear some of the other prima donnas in the roles she sings herself.

"One of the first seasons I sang in St. Petersburg, Mme. Sembrich and Mme. Arnoldson were singing there, too, but according to the usual contract we did not sing each other's parts and so I did not have the pleasure of comparison, which all singers so much enjoy."

It is put as diplomatically as possible that the coming of Mme. Tetrazzini to New York was to many, even to some of the musical world, the appearance of an entirely new comet in the operatic firmament. "Why and how could this be, in the case of a woman so well known in other parts of the world?"

The diva explains it after an amused look of mutual comprehension between herself and her French interpreter.

"There are a great many singers in Europe, fine singers, both men and women, who never think of singing in America. Naturally you think singing here is the greatest thing in the world. Why shouldn't you? But you would be surprised if I could name to you the records and reputations of those who make their contracts year after year without any such thought coming into their heads as a tour in the United States."

"Until a few years ago that was my own experience, and it was the merest chance that I came here at all. I was in London, and for a wonder I had a week, a wet week, on my hands. You know people will do anything in a wet week in London."

"There were contracts from all over the continent and South America pending. There was much discussion naturally in regard to settlements and arrangements of one kind and another."

"Suddenly, just like that," she makes a butterfly gesture—"Monsieur Hammerstein came, and just like that"—a duplicate gesture—"I made up my mind, that I would come here. If his offer to me had been seven days later I should not have signed, and if I had not I should undoubtedly never have come, for a contract that I might have signed to go elsewhere would probably have been for a number of years."

"I have sung seven seasons in St. Petersburg, three in Mexico, two in Madrid and four in Buenos Ayres. Of ten in these southern countries there are two opera seasons, a second one

which comes in carnival time, as well as the regular opera period."

"The first night in these places are always much alike, for the southern people are so demonstrative. London and New York are alike in this, that they are not willing to accept any singer on the reputation she has acquired in other countries. They must see and hear for themselves and then they will judge. The Anglo-Saxon judges; he is not carried away by his enthusiasms."

"So, I, although I have never known what it is to suffer from stage fright, have faced those audiences in—the Spanish interpreter interpolates—"blue funk"—"Yes, thank you. I knew that there would not be any bang from the moment I appeared."

"I sang both of those first nights entirely obsessed by a feeling of expectation. I really wondered, although I had never had to wonder before, whether I was going to be successful."

## LONDON'S WELCOME.

"I had sung Lucia, for example, more than 200 times before I sang it at Covent Garden, and my twenty curtain calls that I received there were more of a surprise than any demonstration that I had experienced. I was told then that my reception had never been exceeded on the operatic stage, and only on the theatrical by Mrs. Pat Campbell, when she played 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray' which was one of the notable events of London stage life."

"While I have not had to suffer from stage fright, like all singers I have nerves, and they felt like those violin strings at the flowers and the applause and demonstrations of London. I suffered from the same reaction the day after my debut here, but the feeling of sympathy and understanding and appreciation that the New York audiences have given me has utterly destroyed that abnormal feeling now and I look forward with the greatest delight to the evenings when I am scheduled to appear."

"My early training? As you know, in Italy everybody sings, the boy on the street who is going on his errands, the man with his little wares for sale, the family after the dinner hour. The Italian people have music in their blood as well as in their hearts."

"As nearly as I can remember I sang before I could talk, certainly by the time I was 3 years old. As I grew older it seemed to me that the most enviable person in the world was my sister, Signora Campanini, who has had a wide experience in concert and operatic work."

"One prima donna, so the parents said, was enough. If one prima donna is good why would not two be better? But for a long time my arguments had no weight. Meanwhile I had perfected myself in piano music. At length I was allowed to go to school and after much thought and deliberation the Lyceum Musical was selected."

"There I was placed under the tutelage of Professor Cocherini, now dead. How many faltering footsteps he has placed right, how many hopes he has been obliged to shatter, but always, mind you, kindly."

"Naturally I was scared—who would not be?—although I had the confidence in myself which I think all must have who eventually succeed. I sang him the chief soprano scenes from Bollo's 'Mediotofolo' and 'Sembrichina' and the 'Ave Maria' from Verdi's 'Otello.' I did my best, and to my delight he was surprised, visibly so. He told me that I had a natural trill and I had nothing to learn in the matter of respiration."

"I studied hard with him for six months and then one day he took me aside, complimented me highly on my work and said sadly that he could teach me nothing more. It was a grief for me to go as well as it was apparently for him to lose me."

"I have never had any active training and teaching since those days, but the fact that, as he said, he could teach me nothing more did not mean that I had nothing more to learn, for after the doors of the Lyceum are closed behind one and the farewells to the teacher are said, comes the hardest work of all, the work that one has to teach oneself, that no one can impart, the education in one's profession that comes through the individual herself."

"I had little difficulty in making a public appearance, for my family was well known in Florence and nearly twelve years ago—how time flies—I appeared as Inez in Meyerbeer's opera, 'L'Africaine,' at the Pagliano Theater in Florence, now known as the Verdi Theater. I commenced there at 20 a month, which was not munificent, but represented a very fair salary for a debutante."

## SUNG ALL OVER THE WORLD.

"I sang at that time before Queen Margherita, who complimented me highly and prophesied that I would have a great career. That was my first experience in singing before royalty and I was so agitated that I committed an error that I have never duplicated. I told her that I was 6 years older, in my confusion, than I actually was. And yet they say that prima donnas and actresses are always discounting their ages! This is a direct proof of the contrary."

"I have sung in nearly all the countries of the world except France, and I go there after the next Covent Garden season, the first of three for which I have signed with Mr. Higgins, which will be followed by the usual vacation at my home in Italy, after which I return to New York to keep my four-year contract with Mr. Hammerstein."

"My favorite opera is 'Lucia di Lammermoor,' but I love the old-fashioned Italian operas, so replete with feeling. When one sings with such men as Caruso, Tamagno, Battistini, Mazzini, as I did in Russia, and those of the Covent Garden and the Manhattan stage, it is a delight it is to give oneself up to the beauty of the role, to live it, not merely to sing it!"

"It is living the role that makes the artist. To lose oneself; to forget one's everyday identity."

"The first night I sang at Covent Garden I did not know what kind of place it was. I did not take any thought of the appearance of the audience. The next day I was asked if I did not think it very gloomy. I could not have told."

"If I try to phrase my part according to the meaning of the words and with the idea of musical display, the run expressive, the high note, a natural

dramatic climax. At the end of 'Ab fors e lui,' which is so much admired by the New York people, the upward trill I endeavored to make express the hysterical feeling of Violetta. My range? It is said to be extraordinarily elastic, going from B below the stave to E in alt."

"Is it possible to become a singer unless one is born so? I do not think so. I believe that this is one of the necessary requirements for a great artist, but there is something else that is of equal importance, and that is heart, the possession of heart and soul—with those two you have the complete singer."

"And remember this. You can train the voice. You can take the raw material and make of it a finished product; not so the heart. It is there or it is not there, if it is not there you will never move an audience to tears. You will never find sympathy responding to your lack of sympathy; tears to a fearless voice; never!"

"Mind, I am not saying in all this that if you have a natural gift and are very, very sympathetic you can succeed without the usual hard work. I have simply not emphasized that point, for it seems to me that every thinking person must know that nothing in the world, no matter what the profession or trade, can be accomplished without that aid."

"Have I ever heard Patti? Melba? Not until quite recently except through a gramophone, which I listen to frequently."

"Curiously enough, when I sang for the first time in America, at the Tivoli in San Francisco, Melba was singing then at the Alhambra. I was crazy to hear her, but how could I when we sang the same nights? It has often been so in my travels about the world. That is why I so often go to the Manhattan, the evenings I am not singing; for the delight of hearing my musical friends."

## TEN REALLY BEST POEMS.

Thomas M. Johnson, of Osceola, has picked out ten poems which he says are the noblest in the English language, but the Springfield Leader deems that he is giving the plain people a "bum steer." Says the Leader: "He flatters the vanity of the 'intellectuals' by making a list of poems that are angel's food. The last one he picked is Milton's 'Comus' because he liked it was killed by Georgia crackers at the first battle of Bull's Run. The men who have gone crazy from trying to understand Emerson's 'Brahma' are now under the influence of New England clearing-house checks that they can ill afford to send to the treasurer of the foolish house. Placing Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' on the list was nothing but a foxy attempt to stand in with the young lady teachers, a piece of platonic affection for a bunch of bookworms. A list of the ten great poems in the English language should be made up something like this: John Jay's 'Little Name is Nerval'; 'Joe Bowers'; 'The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck'; 'The Blue and the Gray'; 'I Am Dying, Egypt, Dying'; 'If I Should Die Tonight'; 'Lines on Receding a Registered Letter From My Aunt'; 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'; 'Little Drops of Water';—Kansas City Star."

The celebration by the Pope at the Vatican recently of the fifteenth centennial of St. John Chrysostom was particularly noteworthy, because no pope nor any member of the Sacred College has participated in this ceremony since 1424.

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