

From  
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### Chapter III



AMONG THE AMERICAN SINGERS WELL KNOWN TO PARIS MUSICAL audiences at the beginning of the century were two western women—Sybil Sanderson from California and Madame Emma Nevada from the state whose name she had adopted for her own. The latter was a warm friend of Loie Fuller and took her to the studio of the young Californian dancer whose acquaintance she had very recently made. La Loie, as the French called her, watching the younger woman dance, immediately thought that she was someone with a talent that could be developed and presented to a wider audience than she had hitherto found. This was at the close of 1901. At the beginning of the new year La Loie was to take her Japanese *protégée*, Sada Yacco, and her company on a tour through the larger cities of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and it was arranged that Isadora should join her in Berlin where the tour was to begin.

Like her younger compatriot, Loie Fuller had been taken up by Parisian society and had a wide acquaintance among the fashionable and artistic sets in the French capital. Her fragmentary autobiography, which she was to write a few years later, was prefaced by no less a literary figure than Anatole France. In this work, published in French in 1908, she details her friendships with Flammarion, the eminent astronomer, with the Curies, and others whose names were then better known than they are since the passing of *la belle époque*. She also

devotes a chapter to the fascinating story of an attempt to launch a *protégée* whom she never mentions by name. Although the story varies considerably from Isadora's account, its logical sequence of events and the verisimilitude of the details make it acceptable to the objective reader.

"It was in February 1902," begins Loie's account of the launching of her new acquaintance. "I arrived in Vienna with my Japanese troupe, Sada Yacco heading it. With us was an artiste, a dancer to whom I would have been happy to help. . . . She danced with much grace—her body barely veiled by the sheerest of Greek costumes, and in particular, with bare feet. She gave promise of being someone—a promise kept."

In the Austrian capital the managerial Miss Fuller took the younger woman to all the salons to which she had an *entrée*, beginning with that of the wife of the British Ambassador whom she had formerly known in Brussels. There she almost stopped in her tracks upon taking a second look at her companion's dress. "She was wearing an Empire gown, gray, and with a long train and a man's soft felt hat with a floating veil. Dressed thus she was at such a disadvantage that I feared for a turn-down."

But the English lady, whose own sartorial tastes were perhaps not very pronounced, graciously promised to attend the matinee which Loie was going to arrange for Isadora. The Princess Metternich—an all-powerful member of Viennese society whom Miss Fuller had known as Ambadress in Paris—also said she would be pleased to honor the gathering with her presence. Naturally it was important to get the American Ambassador and his wife to come to the "unveiling" of their compatriot. The Ambassador was a member of the McCormick dynasty in Chicago, and had married Katherine Van Etta whose sister was the wife of Joseph Patterson, then editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. One of the Ambassador's sons, Robert, was later to achieve a certain kind of undiplomatic fame as the extremely vocal editor of the family newspaper. Mrs. McCormick recalled to Miss Fuller that she had already seen her young *protégée* at a performance in her sister's drawing room in Chicago and "to tell the truth, had not been particularly interested by her, but if she could be of any help in any way she would be happy to come to the performance."

So, having lined up the social and diplomatic *élite*, engaged a small

orchestra, decorated the salon of the Hotel Bristol with flowers, and prepared a well-stocked buffet, all was ready for Isadora's Viennese debut. The bustling dancer-impresario welcomed her distinguished guests and then went back-stage to see the debutante.

"It was 4:30. In ten minutes she was to begin. I found her with her feet in hot water slowly curling her hair. In a panic I asked her to hurry up, explaining that by her negligence she was risking annoying a public which might definitely launch her. My words remained without effect. She continued very slowly to do her hair. Feeling I could do no more I went back to the salon.

"Suddenly she made her entrance, calm, indifferent, not worrying in the least what our guests might think of her.

"But it was not her air of indifference which surprised me most. Even though I rubbed my eyes she still seemed nude to me, or almost so, so slight were the gauzes which draped her.

"She came down stage and while the orchestra played a Chopin prelude she stood motionless, her eyes downcast, her arms pendant. Then she began to dance.

"Oh! how I loved that dance. For me it was the loveliest thing in the world. I forgot the woman and all her faults, her silly inventions, her absurd manners, her costume even, and down to her bare legs. I only saw the dancer and all the artistic pleasure which she gave me. When she was through, no one spoke.

"I went toward the princess who whispered to me:

" 'Why does she dance in such a slight dress?'

"Then I suddenly understood the public's strange attitude and spoke up with a voice loud enough for everybody to hear.

" 'I forgot to tell you how amiable our artiste is. Her baggage upon which she was absolutely depending today has not yet arrived, and rather than disappoint us by not dancing, she has appeared before us in her rehearsal dress!'

At the soirée which La Loie had arranged following the coolness of the matinee, there was much more enthusiasm. The members of the press were more shock-proof than the princess had been. Nor were the painters and sculptors, for whom Miss Fuller arranged a third performance, any less fervent in their admiration than their fellows of the Viennese press. The poet-dramatist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal

and the successful dramatist, Hermann Bahr, both led off with poetic praise in the newspapers; other lesser writers enthusiastically hailed the artistry of the young American dancer in her subsequent performances in both Vienna and Budapest.

One of the men who had watched the dancer with mounting excitement was the professional impresario, Alexander Grosz. He it was who weaned her away from the chagrined La Loie and dependence upon capricious dowagers; he it was who perspicaciously foresaw a greater and surer financial future for her—and, of course, for himself—in performances in large theatres throughout Austria-Hungary and Germany. He started her off with a series of evenings at the Urania Theatre in the Hungarian capital and then arranged for other well-publicized appearances in theatres in the larger Hungarian cities where her latest creations, a ravishing waltz to the Strauss "Blue Danube" and a thrilling, heroic dance to Liszt's "Rakoczy March," aroused tremendous enthusiasm.

Not all the audiences, however, were at one with the ardent feeling for the newcomer's artful dance. Many theatregoers were as shocked as the society ladies in New York had been in March of 1899, or, as had been the high-born Princess Metternich in Vienna. Indeed it was from Vienna that a cable went to the American newspapers telling, not of the dancer's triumphs, but of such a minor scandal as the following:

Advice come from Vienna to the effect that Isadora Duncan a young American woman who dances in her bare feet has had trouble with her audiences. The last embarrassing experience was encountered at the Karl Theatre. Miss Duncan appeared on the stage in Greek costume minus shoes and stockings and an Austrian officer in a box exclaimed: "How disgusting!" Miss Duncan retired from the stage, refusing to reappear . . . After a 20 minute wait the military person retired and with him went every officer in the playhouse. Miss Duncan then resumed her role.

To one of the preview performances which had been arranged for the Budapest intelligentsia a group of the leading members of the Hungarian National Theatre had been invited. Among them was the handsome *jeune premier*, Oscar Beregi. At the presentations after Isadora's performance, he invited the dancer and her mother to come and see him play one evening in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Although she was well aware in the words of the poet that:

Beauty is more than hands or face or eyes,  
Or the long curve that lies  
Upon a bed waiting . . .

Isadora was taken by the virile Magyar Apollo at their first meeting, when his dark eyes burned through her and set up an answering flame. She describes him as "tall, of magnificent proportions, a head covered with luxuriant curls, black, with purple lights in them. Indeed, he might have posed for the David of Michael Angelo himself. . . . From our first look every power of attraction we possessed rushed from us in mad embrace. From that first gaze we were already in each other's arms, and no power on earth could have prevented this." Until then her passionate adorations had been reserved for much older men—paternalistic images of the father she had never really known—like Alma-Tadema and Charles Hallé in London, Rodin and Carrière in Paris. These were distinguished men whom she respectfully adored with the virginal filial emotions of a well-brought-up maiden even when, as in the case of Rodin, the satyric advances were a little frightening to her native puritanical spirit.

Oscar was a passionate youth and the time was spring, but as Isadora was to discover then—as later—a choice had to be made between Love and Art. For Oscar the question was quite simple: Isadora would settle down in Budapest and be his wife. For Isadora there were the engagements already arranged by Grosz in the larger Hungarian towns and the prospect of appearing in Munich and Berlin. For Isadora's mother and sister there was no question at all. The breadwinner of the family should continue to remain with the clever manager who was ready to arrange so many money-earning engagements. Thus in the end Art, for the moment, triumphed over young love.

From her triumphs in Austria-Hungary, Grosz took his artiste to Munich, the art center of Germany. There she was welcomed by the leading painters and sculptors, including Franz von Lenbach, Franz von Stuck, Fritz von Kaulbach, and Walter Schott, as she had been by their confreres in London and Paris. But not everyone felt as they did. The average theatregoer or dance-lover protested that the prices Grosz was asking for an evening—fifty cents to \$2.50—were a bit steep even for a neo-Greek nymph from the Golden West. Cléo de Merode, the dancing favorite of King Leopold of the Belgians, and a rival attraction in the choreographic field, could be seen for from

twenty-five cents up. Standing room at the opera was available at eighteen cents and the best seats could be had for the equivalent of seventy-five cents.

An American journalist, Allen Monroe Foster, writing to the *St. Louis Sunday Gazette* from Munich, December 26th, 1902, tells of the fuss over prices and continues:

"But what does this remarkable young person do?" you ask.

She creates, she poses, she dances. But not like anyone else. Oh, no! She is no toe acrobat, she would be a revelation to the star ballet dancer; she is no high kicker, dependent upon the vivacity and abandon of her contortions in spectacular rainbow tinted robes. She employs no illusions, no cunningly arranged mirrors, no beautifying multicolored lime-lights. Never was there anything less sensational than her work; it is severe in its simplicity. . . .

She appears here in the *Kunstler Haus* without a stage, not even a platform. A square space divided off from the spectators and carpeted for her bare feet, constitutes the whole of her paraphernalia, all the rest is Isadora Duncan.

The animus of her work is this: She selects a picture, a poem or musical morceau, and with her svelte young body she endeavors to interpret its meaning. It is posing, acting, dancing all combined. She is an adorer of Botticelli, and his wonderful picture of *Spring* is, with her, a favorite theme.

To the accompaniment of simple music . . . she glides quietly to her appointed place. Her dress is some soft gray stuff with printed blossoms. [The copy of the Botticelli dress made by Marie Hallé for the New Gallery, London performance.] And now with wreathing arms and undulating body and bare twinkling feet, she endeavors to present us the vibrant atmosphere, the pulsing ecstatic quickening of all life, the languorous, delicious *dolce far niente* of this marvelous season as she reads it in Botticelli's masterpiece. . . .

Her grace is indisputable. Never an abrupt movement, never a sharp angle. And to those with whom modesty, intelligence and feeling in the human countenance count far more than expressionless regularity of features, she is more pleasing than the much-vaunted Merode, whose immobile countenance affords about as much inspiration as would a wax mask.

The propriety of her dress is also a point on which opinions differ widely. She doesn't wear tights; foot and leg are bare to the knee. To some this is very shocking, as are also the glimpses of her form through the semi-transparent draperies. Others find it all absolutely unobjectionable, and I heard one apostle of high art declare that her bare feet was the one subtle touch that stamped her work exquisite art, and he insisted that tights or any covering of any description would spoil everything.