

Antoinette Sterling and Other Celebrities
Chapter 7 – Her Philanthropic Interests
By Lady Mary Sinner-Hendrickson
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Mme. Sterling, where religion was concerned, lived her life doing good deeds. She was slow to condemn, quick to forgive. She had an aura about her which invited others to share their life's turmoils with her. Malcolm wrote that this happened on numerous occasions, too many times to count. Some of these times were when she traveled by train. She truly possessed a spirit of benevolence, and honestly cared for those around her, stranger, family, or friend.

Antoinette signed a pledge of total abstinence from alcohol, and did so only for philanthropic reasons. She felt in taking the oath, she could save others from the temptation of drink. As for herself, her childhood upbringing made her strong, and she did not have a problem with not drinking the 'spirits.' When she first went to England, it was considered rude if a person didn't have a glass of wine at dinner, and special occasions. So, for the first few years she joined in with the custom, having an occasional glass of champagne and port, on birthdays, Christmas, and such. She wrote in her journal: "At last, there came a time when I made up my mind that I would never touch another drop of wine. With my puritanical training that resolution was exactly the same to me as taking the pledge. I had a friend, a gifted woman, to whom strong drink was a snare. From being an ardent disciple of the temperance movement I went to the extreme, and for her sake became a 'total abstainer,' upon her promising to become one at the same time. It was not, however, until some years after this that I actually signed the pledge. When eventually I took this step, it was quite by chance. I had never thought of such a thing. It had always seemed to me that to pledge one's word to do anything was exactly the same as swearing to do so, or putting down one's promise in black and white. Eventually, however, I was shown that there was another point of view. I happened to hear one morning that there was to be a Band of Hope meeting that same day at Exeter Hall. I felt in my heart 'a leading' to attend it, though I had not been invited. When I entered the Hall there was a burst of applause and welcome from the people. Later on I learned the reason of their excitement. Two of the principal speakers had disappointed them, and the committee had felt that they must leave the meeting to God, and He would provide for it. I sang and spoke just as I was 'led' to do throughout the afternoon. At last one of the leading speakers asked me whether I would not sign the pledge. It would, he said, be such an encouragement to the children. I had not thought of that before, and very gladly affixed my name then and there."

Antoinette Sterling identified with the temperance movement, attending meetings. She was also involved with The Church Army, Lord Kinnaird with the Young Men's Christian Association, Quintin Hogg, of the Polytechnic, Dr. Barnardo's Homes, General Booth, Passmore Edwards, the College for the Blind, and the Pearson's Fresh Air Fund. In Malcolm's words: Her religious thought was ever one of broadest toleration. She would read from the Bible to Buddhism, from Spurgeon's sermons to Christian Science. Although a Quaker, she was attached to the Conformists, and devoted to Theosophy, and books of Annie Besant.

It was Antoinette's broadmindedness that brought about a deep, lasting relationship with Lord Mount Temple, and his wife, the former Georgina Cowper. Lord Mount Temple (the Honorable William Cowper) was named Godfather of Malcolm. Their home was at Hampshire, near Romsey, and named "Broadlands." Broadlands was the site of many religious conferences held in England, and were suggested by Quaker friends, the Persall-Smiths. The Smiths came from America, and along with them, the idea of camp-meetings. The Smiths, had

moved to Haslemere, not far from Aldworth, where Lord Tennyson lived. Malcolm wrote that on one of the visits to the Smith's home, he was strolling, and passed the poet on a little country lane.

Mrs. Smith, who was called Hannah Smith, one evening suggested having a camp-meeting, and the guests agreed it would be wonderful. In July of 1874, the first open-air religious conferences, at Broadlands, was held. They continued until Lord Temple's death, fifteen years. Edward Clifford, another Godfather of Malcolm's describes, in his own words: "The first conference lasted from the 16th to the 21st of July, 1874. Robert Piersall-Smith directed it with a tact which was marvellous. Such hosts as Mr. and Mrs. Cowper I do not think I shall ever know again. The meetings began at eight o'clock in the morning, and lasted, with intervals for feasting and converse, all through the day till bedtime. We sat in the shade under the beech trees, with sun and sky shining through the branches, and the wood-pigeons cooing all around. The sense of a Divine Presence was wonderfully real. Probably it was a crisis in the life of nearly every one present. The sight of the people sitting or walking about in little groups, the joyful discovery, which continually recurred, that some one had passed into new and bright experiences, and the delight of learning that persons from whom we had been separated by wretched party feeling were beautiful souls able to bring fresh life to us (as we, perhaps, to them), all combined to raise us into a region that was more than earthly. Mr. Cowper himself seemed in his natural element, radiant with light and happiness, perfect in humility and kindness, and tender in his prayers."

Some of the attendees at Broadlands in Romsey, were Canon Wilkinson; Morley, a zealous philanthropist; J.W. Farquhar, an intellect; and Basil Wilberforce. George MacDonald attended, as well as Russell Gurney, the statesman; Arthur Staunton; Boyd Carpenter, Bishop of Ripon, and Keith Falconer, who died in Arabia, after dedicating his life to mission work among the sheikhs. Black singer, Amanda Smith; Lady Waterford, artist; Miss Yonge, story teller; Lady Darnley, and Lady Gainsborough, who was accompanied by Louis, Lady Ashburton.

Lord Mount Temple was involved in such matters as literature, prevention of cruelty to animals, and religious and philanthropic work. One interesting item, he was the person who instituted gardens in public parks.

While visiting the Temple's, Malcolm's Godfather took him on a long walk around Broadlands. He spoke to the Malcolm of difficulties he met in life, and gave much counsel to him. All along, Malcolm had no idea it would be the last walk, and private moments he would have with Lord Temple. That evening, during dinner, Lord Temple took ill, and with the help of his wife, retired to their bedroom, upstairs. The next day, visitors left Broadlands, for their own residences. Here is Antoinette's words on what transpired: "On the night of the 16th of October, I was suddenly awakened. There at the foot of my bed, between the curtains, stood the figure of Lord Mount Temple, smiling at me, and holding the curtain with one hand. I felt at once that he had passed up higher, and I knew that his spirit had come to bed me and comfort dear Lady Mount Temple. Sure enough in the morning a telegram came with the sad news. Each night after the concert, for the tour was going on day after day, I journeyed to Broadlands. From the town where I was singing I would take a train to Southsea, arrive there at two or three in the morning, go on early after a few hours' sleep, and spend the day with the dear Lady at Romsey. And there came unto us the Angel of Comfort and Sympathy.

"On the day of the funeral I was so impressed to sing before the mourners saw the coffin in the Abbey, that I spoke to Sir Evelyn Ashley on the subject. I was, however, engaged to sing on that same evening, and so would have to leave the town by a certain train, in order to arrive at my destination in time for the concert. Sir Evelyn felt that I was quite right, and when he found that the time was getting short, he descended from the carriage and

told the coachman to whip up the horses, giving further orders for the hearse to be drawn along faster, a sight which I should think had not been seen before. Canon Wilberforce, who was to perform the last rites, understood why it was best that I should sing before the actual service commenced. I therefore stood on the altar steps and gave, without any accompaniment, 'The Lord is our Shepherd.' Romsey Abbey was full of mourners, and here and there I saw some of the Horse Guards, the regiment to which Lord Mount Temple had belonged. It was an impressive sight. I could not wait to hear the rest of the service, for I had to hurry off immediately, in order to catch the train and join the rest of the concert party."

This chapter ends with the thoughts of Malcolm, on his mother's loss of a husband, and finally, with a sentiment, very fitting for this ancestress: Home, sweet Home! How truly the words expressed her feelings. She was never so happy as in her own home. When it was decided that she should undertake a concert tour in Australia which would involve her being absent from England for half a year, the wrench of parting was a grievous one. Then came the blow which fell upon her with cruel force in Australia – the death of her husband, followed by a return alone, to find herself obliged to give up the home in Stanhope Place which had been so dear. Of these things and of her last years it is needless to write. They were years of care, of anxiety, and of one overwhelming grief, which was only felt the more keenly because she sought to hide it beneath a smiling exterior. But all who knew her intimately were aware that the loss sustained by her had cast a deep shadow over her life, which time could not wipe out or even alleviate.

The son continues: Here the writer must bring to an end what claims to be no more than a very slight sketch of the career and personality of one who was ever the truest of friends and the kindest and best of mothers. It is not for him to undertake anything in the nature of a proper memoir of her life. To do justice to that with all its beauty, its grandness, and its intense simplicity, calls for the display of literary talents which he does not possess. The chapters cannot, perhaps, be better concluded than with an anagram which was sent by a stranger at the close of the visit to Australia. It was obtained from the letters of the three words "Madame Antoinette Sterling," and is indeed a sentiment applicable to her whole life work –

"List t'me, a great Amen intoned."

Stay tuned for more tidbits on Antoinette's life, and career.