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opening extract from

Historical House: Mary Ann and Miss Mozart

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Anne Turnbull

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Mary Ann & Miss Mozart

Chapter One

A New School

Mary Ann had read Mrs. Neave's advertisement card so many times, and with such happy anticipation, that she knew it by heart:

MRS. NEAVE'S BOARDING SCHOOL

FOR YOUNG LADIES

A genteel riverside establishment in the village of Chelsea, having the advantage of clean air and proximity to the countryside, and yet within four miles of the City.

Parents may be assured that every care is taken of our pupils, and attention paid to their manners and behaviour at all times. Young ladies are taught: English, French, Arithmetic, Geography, Needlework, Deportment and Dancing; with the opportunity to take lessons in Singing and Harpsichord at a small extra cost. 21 guineas a year.

Singing and harpsichord lessons! Mary Ann could imagine nothing she would like more. And that small extra cost would easily be borne by her father, who spared no expense if it would further his children's advancement in the world. Her mother had visited Mrs. Neave's establishment and pronounced it suitable, and today, 30th April 1764, Mary Ann was to leave home.

She looked out of the window and glimpsed, between rooftops and chimneys, the Thames, busy with small boats. Soon she would be there, on the river, on her way to Chelsea. Now that the moment had come she felt a rush of affection for her home, for her family and servants, the old dog Bullet with his unsteady waddle and adoring eyes, the familiar streets of the City.

Her elder sister Harriet tapped at the door and came in.

"I see you are dressed and ready." She joined Mary Ann at the window. "Are you nervous?"

"Yes." It would be strange to be away from home, sharing every moment with other girls. And what would those girls be like? Most of them would be older than her:

“refined, elegant young ladies”, Mrs. Neave had told her mother. “Will they all be very grand, do you think?”

“Of course not! They’ll be girls like you. You’ll soon make friends.”

Harriet smiled. She smiled often these days. Her own schooldays were behind her and she had recently become engaged to be married. Mary Ann thought her fiancé, Mr. Philip Browne, rather old and dull, but she supposed Harriet must like him; certainly Harriet liked the prospect of having a home and servants of her own.

“We’ll write to each other,” said Harriet.

“Yes! And I’ll write to George.”

Her brother was at a boarding school in Hertfordshire. They were close in age and she missed him.

“Mary Ann!”

Her mother’s voice sounded from the floor below; and Amy, their lady’s maid, came back into the room to check Mary Ann’s dress and hair before allowing her downstairs to be inspected.

The sisters went down together to the drawing room, where their mother was waiting.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “How grown-up you look, Mary Ann!”

Mary Ann’s fair hair was drawn back from her face and arranged in neat curls. Her blue cotton gown (expensive but not showy, as befitted a merchant’s schoolgirl daughter) was worn over a hooped frame, and this, together with stays boned at front and back, forced her to stand up straight under her mother’s scrutiny.

Her mother turned her around and nodded approval. “Yes. You’ll do well. And now we must go. Tom is waiting downstairs with your trunk.”

They all went out into the courtyard. The servants – Sarah and Betty – came out to wish Mary Ann well, and Harriet kissed her goodbye. Bullet wagged his tail and pushed a damp nose against her hand. Her father, who went early to the coffee house to do business, had already said his farewell. Now their serving man Tom

lifted the trunk and the three of them set off on the short walk to the landing stage at Old Swan Stairs.

Tom soon found them a boatman, and helped both mother and daughter aboard. The boat rocked alarmingly as Mary Ann stepped in, and it was no easy task to arrange her hooped skirts around herself as she sat down. She knew that getting in and out of boats and carriages gracefully was one of the many skills she would be expected to learn at Mrs. Neave's school.

She pulled her wrap around her shoulders as the boat moved out into the centre of the river. They left the City and travelled west, passing Whitehall, Westminster and the Houses of Parliament. Then came a great bend in the river, the buildings on the shore were less densely packed and she began to see fields beyond them. Mary Ann thought they must be nearly there, but it still seemed an age before the boatman pulled in at a small landing stage on a tree-lined bank, and she saw beyond it a road with a row of tall terraced houses facing the river.

"There is Chelsea Walk," said her mother.

They disembarked and climbed the shallow steps to the road, Tom following with the trunk.

Mrs. Neave's establishment was at Number Six: a large five-storey house of red brick with tall wrought-iron gates.

Mary Ann looked up. She had an impression of many rows of windows, all watching her as she shook down the crumpled layers of her skirts and began to pick her way across the muddy road. Beyond the gates was a short garden and a flight of steps leading to the front door.

Her mother took her hand and squeezed it. She led Mary Ann in through the gateway and up the steps, and knocked at the door. A maid – a dark-eyed, handsome girl – let them into the hall and then went to fetch her mistress.

Mary Ann stood on the black and white tiled floor and looked around at the lofty space. The hall was panelled in wood, and there were several closed doors – one with a murmur of voices behind it – and an archway leading to the back where a

great staircase with polished wooden boards led up to a tall window on the half landing, then turned and carried on upwards. She felt very small.

“Mrs. Giffard!”

“Mrs. Neave.”

A woman of about her mother’s age had appeared. She was dressed in dark blue silk and looked, Mary Ann thought, rather severe compared to Mama in her striped yellow gown and little tilted straw hat. The two women nodded politely to each other.

“And Mary Ann,” said Mrs. Neave, turning to her. “Welcome to our school.”

Mary Ann made a small, nervous curtsy.

“You will take tea, Mrs. Giffard, before you return to the City?”

Her mother accepted, and Mrs. Neave called to the maid. “Tea, Jenny, in my office. And tell Mrs. Giffard’s man to take the young lady’s trunk to the rear entrance.”

Jenny disappeared into the back area of the building.

Nearby, in the hall, a door opened and several girls of about Mary Ann’s own age came out, carrying books. Mrs. Neave stopped one of them – a plump, saucy-looking girl with auburn curls.

“Sophia, this is Mary Ann Giffard. Mary Ann, Sophia Hammond.”

The girls nodded to each other, and Mary Ann felt Sophia’s eyes taking in every detail of her appearance.

“Sophia will take you around the school and show you where you are to sleep. But first: say goodbye to your mother.”

Mary Ann turned to her mother. She wished they did not have to say goodbye so publicly. Her mother’s eyes were pink, as if she was holding back tears, and Mary Ann felt her own eyes pricking. She submitted to a brief kiss, then stepped brusquely away.

“You’ll be home for Whitsun,” her mother said, as if to reassure herself. “Now, be sure I hear well of you. And write to us...”

“I will,” said Mary Ann, retreating, aware that Sophia was observing the exchange with interest.

When the other girl moved away Mary Ann was glad to follow her and leave the two women to discuss finance over their tea.

Sophia waved a hand at the room she had just left, and from which people were still coming out.

“The downstairs rooms are the main classrooms, and the dining room is here too.” She briefly opened a door across the hall, and Mary Ann saw two long tables. “That room at the back is the office, where your mother is taking tea. Let’s go upstairs. I’ll show you the music room.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mary Ann. “A music room!”

“Do you like music?”

“I do. It’s quite my favourite occupation. I’m to have harpsichord and singing lessons.”

Sophia looked pleased. “I have music lessons too. Mrs. Corelli is our singing teacher and Mr. Ashton teaches harpsichord.”

She walked ahead of Mary Ann around the turn of the grand staircase, and Mary Ann thought what a big house this was, though rather dark and old-fashioned with its unpainted wood panelling.

“Most of the rooms on this floor are dormitories for the older girls,” said Sophia. “But over here is the music room.”

No one was in the room, so they were able to look around. There were shelves of books, music stands, flutes and other wind instruments, and a harpsichord.

“Do you have an instrument at home?” asked Sophia.

“A virginal. There is no space for anything bigger. But my sister and I both play.”

“Sometimes Mr. Ashton plays for us,” said Sophia. “He is a wonderful musician – and quite divinely handsome. Half the older girls are in love with him.” She sighed theatrically. “But he’s married, and quite old: twenty-eight at least.”

“My sister’s fiancé is twenty-eight,” said Mary Ann.

“Oh! Your sister is getting married! When?”

“Next year, or the one after.”

“And is she greatly in love?”

Mary Ann frowned. “I don’t think so. But Mother says love is not to be recommended and that girls may do better without it.”

“I shall insist on being in love when I marry,” said Sophia.

“I don’t think I want to marry at all,” said Mary Ann.

Sophia’s eyes opened wide. “But you would not wish to be a spinster?”

“I want to be a singer – at the opera.” Mary Ann did not often tell anyone this, for it was difficult to convey how strongly she wished it, but Sophia seemed to invite confidences. She added, “Of course my parents say it is not a respectable profession.”

“But you might catch the attention of a lord – and marry him! Several famous singers have. Think of that!”

She went on to ask Mary Ann about her family, and to talk about her own: her two younger brothers and baby sister; their house in Holborn; their spaniel.

“Come upstairs,” she said. “I’ll show you our room. Your trunk should be there by now.”

They went up yet another flight to another panelled hall full of closed doors.

“Those rooms at the front are Mrs. Neave’s own apartment,” said Sophia, “and Mrs. Corelli has this room by the stairs. Our dormitory is here. It’s above the music room.”

She opened the door into a plain room with four beds, neatly made, a few chairs, and a washstand with jug, bowl and mirror. Mary Ann's trunk was standing in front of the fireplace.

"Your clothes go in that cupboard by the door," said Sophia. She eyed the trunk, and Mary Ann knew she wanted to be there when it was opened.

She saw that the bed in the far corner seemed to be hers; the others had chairs or shelves with small things – a prayer book, a handkerchief, a locket – on them.

"Who else sleeps here?" she asked.

"Lucy Stanley, over there." Sophia indicated a bed set a little separate from the others, in the space behind the door. "And Phoebe Merrill, here, next to me. You may have the corner bed. We are the youngest girls in the school. Lucy and I are thirteen; we have been here since January. And Phoebe is twelve. She came a few weeks ago. How old are you?"

"Twelve," said Mary Ann. "Thirteen in September."

Sophia smiled. "We shall all be great friends, I'm sure. Phoebe – well, everyone likes Phoebe. And Lucy is our clever one; we are quite in awe of her." She glanced again at Mary Ann's trunk. "You should unpack soon or your clothes will be creased. I'll show you where they go."

She opened a cupboard beside the door, revealing shelves and a few hooks for hanging clothes. Most of the space was taken up by full-skirted gowns and petticoats.

"There are two hooks here," said Sophia, "and these lower shelves. Cloaks and hats go in the other cupboard. Have you brought much?"

"No."

Mary Ann lifted the lid of the trunk. Her night chemise lay on top and she removed it and laid it on her bed. Sophia watched as she took out two cotton gowns, several chemises, stays, and a gown of pale green silk with a yellow under-skirt – "for occasions," she explained, wondering if there would be any.

Sophia stroked the silk admiringly and found a place for it in the cupboard. “You might wear that if we go to Ranelagh Gardens,” she said.

“Ranelagh? To the Pleasure Gardens?” Mary Ann could scarcely believe she might go there. She had heard all about Chelsea’s famous Ranelagh Gardens, where concerts were held on summer evenings in the Rotunda – “with a roof, so that it may be used even in bad weather”, her sister had said – and where the gentry came to mingle and be seen.

“Mrs. Neave likes to take some of her girls to a concert there each summer,” said Sophia.

“Oh! I should so love to go! Have you ever been there?”

“No. But the older girls tell me it is not to be missed.”

From far below came the sound of someone ringing a bell.

“Dinner!” said Sophia. “Also not to be missed. Come and meet the others.”