

MAUREEN

By Eric Koch

In the early spring of 1953, I tore myself away from my new girlfriend, Holly, for an hour and visited André Lavigne in his spacious but invitingly sleazy office on Clark Street in Montreal. I wanted to know whether it was time to think seriously about investing in the manufacture of guitars. After all, it was not impossible that others were as prescient as we were and were also making plans to profit from the love-and-music revolution to come.

“It’s taking longer than I thought, Quentin,” he said. Once again I observed how much like a small-town dentist he looked, in such dramatic contrast to the sleazy grandeur of his office and the lofty scope of his licit and illicit enterprises. “No need to hurry. Nothing is happening yet. True, hardly anybody wants to become a priest any more and there’s a severe shortage of nuns. But nothing has turned up yet to fill their shoes.”

“How’s Pauline doing?” Pauline Désy was his elegant friend and business partner, the co-owner of their profitable houses on de Bullion Street.

“Pauline is at her best in times of adversity,” he smiled, stroking his little mustache. “The demand is still pretty impressive but since City Hall has suddenly discovered Virtue, the poor girl and her labour force have had to go underground. And it didn’t help, of course, that *Le Devoir* has recently been so unkind to the police, suddenly accusing it of corruption of all things, as though this was going to make any difference. I hate hypocrisy more than anything else. But don’t worry. She’ll manage.”

“I thought if the girls lost their jobs they may want to help us manufacture guitars.”

“Yes, no doubt they will when the time comes.”

André paused.

“Do you mind if we talk about something else?” he asked. “I am very glad you came to see me today because there is something you can do for me. You can help me with a different kind of investment. Something requiring unusual tact and diplomacy.”

“You’re a master at both, André,” I laughed. “How can I do better?”

“I don’t need your flattery, young man. I am serious. No, this is something I can’t do. You may not know that I am very fond of music, especially Italian opera.”

“Oh? No, I didn’t know that.”

Holly, too, is musical and constantly teases me because I can’t carry a tune.

“About two weeks ago somebody told me about a young girl with a great voice who was born a few blocks east of her, on the rue Fabre, Just drive east on the Boulevard St. Joseph until you come to the Eglise St. Stanislas, and you’ll see the row house in which she was brought up. With a

wrought-iron staircase outside. In a three-room apartment. Very poor. Her mother is Irish, her father Scottish. Protestant. She was the youngest of four. Dropped out of high school at thirteen. Took all kinds of jobs. From selling ice cream to being a Bell Telephone operator. She's now twenty-three. Even today she still hands over to her family most of the little money she makes, singing in church choirs, at weddings, and giving solo recitals for twenty-five dollars. A few thousand dollars would make all the difference. She could stop singing for money and spend all her time studying. Her teachers say that if she carries on this way she will ruin her voice and never get anywhere."

"Have you heard her sing?"

"I have. I most certainly have. She is incredible. A contralto, warm and clear and very expressive. I know enough to be able to tell that her teachers are right and that she has the voice and the talent to become an international star. But she is proud and strong willed and won't accept any help she considers charity."

"You amaze me, André," I said. "I would never have expected you to take on this sort of project. I am really impressed."

"That goes to show that you've got to be very careful about making assumptions. In fact, that's exactly the point."

"The point of what?"

"The point of my problem. I am too well known. Everybody makes assumptions. So probably does she. I have not the slightest doubt that the girl has heard of me and my association with Pauline. Everybody has. She would never accept help from me even if it's made clear to her that it's not charity I have in mind but a business investment in her future. There's no point asking her."

"I see the problem," I observed. "You're right. This requires tact and diplomacy. And ingenuity. What's her name?"

"Maureen Forrester."

"Give me a day to think about it, André."

"But remember, one false move and you'll ruin everything."

"Don't worry."

Discussing the matter with Holly was far from a false move. One of the men I had often heard her rave about, John Newmark, happened to be Maureen Forrester's accompanist. Life is full of such little coincidences.

Holly was the most bohemian girlfriend I ever had, and one of the most alluring. She was gorgeous, looked like a model, dressed like a model and in fact occasionally she *was* a model. But most models are boring and conventional but Holly was the opposite. She was maddeningly unpredictable and always late. Her most common term of abuse was "bourgeois." Anybody or anything "bourgeois" was despicable beyond belief. She was a delightful flirt and great fun to be with (when she turned up for a date). However, it took a long time to persuade her to move in with

me. For many weeks she always moved her head when I tried to kiss her even though she said she loved going out with me. Whenever that happened, I just shrugged and told myself to be patient and that eventually she will reconsider. Once again I was proven right.

Holly adored the glamorous and handsome John Newmark, universally known in the world of music, I was told, as “one of the greatest and most sensitive accompanists in the world today.” She first met him when she lined up to see him after a concert, congratulated him on his playing and asked if ever he ever needed a page-turner on the stage, she would love to do it and gave him her phone number. He called her the next morning and booked her for the following Tuesday afternoon for a recital by George London at the Ladies Morning Musical Concert Series in the Ritz Carlton Hotel.

Newmark was a refugee from Germany and had already been an accomplished pianist before the Nazis came to power. He often talked about his exciting life in the Berlin of Marlene Dietrich. After her successful *début* as a page-turner, Holly often met prominent music lovers in his elegant apartment on 1454 Crescent Street, just north of St. Catherine Street and exactly opposite Roncarelli’s former restaurant. It was closed a few years ago.

When I told Holly about André’s problem at dinner, she suggested two things. First I should talk to John and then call Eric McLean, music critic of the *Montreal Star* and sound him out.

“Just ask John directly whether he thinks André was right when he said that one can’t discuss his proposition with the girl. John knows her well. I’ll introduce you if you like. I’ll phone him right now.”

After three minutes she was back.

“He’ll give us tea tomorrow afternoon at four thirty. At five what’s-her-name is coming to rehearse with him. When you meet her, you can play it by ear.”

I phoned Eric McLean from home. I remember meeting him at a party not long ago. I mentioned Maureen without saying a word about André. I told him I had heard for some career reason I didn’t quite understand that this was a good time to write a piece about her. He said thank you very much, he would put in a piece about Maureen in tomorrow’s paper.

Next day, I was charmed by John Newmark and his impeccably kept apartment. He was superbly well groomed. He wore a light blue ascot and a maroon velvet jacket. He welcomed me with just the right combination of *bonhommie* and caution. The tea and delectable *petits fours* were ready.

“Oh John,” Holly commented reproachfully as she helped herself. “You’re so ‘bourgeois!’”

“Too bad,” he laughed. “That’s the way God made me.”

He had a slight German accent, less noticeable, Holly told me later, when he spoke French than when he spoke English.

Over the grand piano there was a painting of a forest scene he had just bought from a friend of his, Dr. Max Stern, the owner of the Dominion Gallery on Sherbrooke Street. The painter was Emily Carr. Dr. Stern had recently discovered her in B.C. I should try and remember the name.

“So what is all this about?” John turned to me.

I told him, without minimizing André’s involvement in dubious enterprises.

“Ouch,” he cried as though he had just stubbed his toe. “She’ll never accept money from him. She needs an angel, but not from a character like that.”

“Why not?” Holly asked. “Is she such a prude? Doesn’t she know money is money?”

“Don’t be so cynical, young lady,” John rebuked her. “Money is *not* money.”

“I accept money from anybody,” Holly shot back. “For anything.”

“Isn’t there a way around it?” I asked. “Perhaps one could establish a trust fund or something like that. All her friends could contribute. She would never find out which ones.”

“She would, she would,” John said. “In the end this man himself won’t be able to resist boasting about her. Maureen is unique. I have worked with dozens of excellent young singers, in Europe and here. Only one of them had similar natural gifts and instinctive understanding. And that is Kathleen Ferrier. But Maureen is her equal. A glorious voice. And what a marvellous temperament and determination! And – how shall I put it? What *goodness*. Generosity. Humanity. Good humour. Gutsiness. Call it what you want. For her, the music and the meaning of the words she sings always come first, in whatever language. And what stage presence! And no stage fright, ever. And considerable acting talent as well – she’ll be great in opera. Especially comic roles. No nervousness at all. And no prima donna tantrums. A real trooper. Amazing! The public all over the world will love her. The greatest conductors will fight over her. She’ll be booked two, three years in advance. It’s a miracle how a talent like that can emerge from such an unlikely background. It really gives one hope. This sort of thing can happen anywhere, any time. No one can tell in advance. For her, this is the right time, and Canada the right place, just when things are beginning to sprout. Mind you, some of her gifts she seems to have inherited from her mother. But without training, and years of hard work and sacrifice, all this will evaporate. And without a lot of money and support. Oh my God, things can go wrong so easily. Her family makes tremendous demands on her. I have no idea how she will cope with that. I understand her father has just had a stroke. That’s certainly something to worry about. And then, of course, she can fall in love with the wrong man.”

“Come on, John,” Holly cried. “One thing at a time. She can also catch the bubonic plague.”

The doorbell rang. It was five to five.

Maureen Forrester came in, a little out of breath. John helped her with the coat. She was a tall girl, wholesome, agreeable without being beautiful, a little on the plump side, wearing a pleasant blue dress.

John made the introductions. Holly he described as his most talented page-turner, and me as the page-turner's faithful escort who may also have a great career as a page-turner himself if he works hard.

"I won't," I declared. "I can't read a note."

"You don't need to," Holly said. "John always gives a little nod."

"Have a little something to eat," John offered Maureen the plate of *petits fours*. "You need strength for the Schubert. My friends will leave in a minute. Unless they first want to ask you a question."

"Don't go," she said without listening to John. "You must hear my story. Did you see Eric McLean's piece in the *Star* today?"

No, we had not.

"It's quite a long piece, all about me, and he gave me hell." She pulled it out of her handbag and handed it to us. "He said I was doing all the wrong things, singing all over the place and spreading myself too thin. At my age I should be studying and expanding my repertoire. Such a taxing schedule could threaten a beginner's voice and health. I should stop singing in public immediately."

She put the paper away and looked at John.

"Did you tell him to write that?" he replied.

"No, I did not," he said. "I think Eric is asking for a lot."

"He sure is. Anyway, this morning I got a call from Mr. McConnell's secretary. He's the publisher of the *Star*, you know. I should go and see him right away. So I did. He's about eighty. He said he had been interested in me for some time. Somebody had told him that I was supporting my family with my singing. When he read Eric McLean's piece in today's paper, he decided to have a little talk with me. He said it was probably unrealistic to expect me to stop singing in public, as his music critic demanded, but didn't he have a good point? How did I manage financially?"

Holly poked me violently in the ribs.

"And what did you say to the old man?" John asked.

"I said yes, I would find it painful to stop singing right now, as his music critic demanded, just as I was beginning to get steady engagements and build a reputation. My real problem was that my performances were costing me more than I was earning. Sometimes my fee was only twenty-five dollars. By the time I paid for my transportation and got my hair done and bought a pair of nylons there was nothing left."

"I hope," John interrupted, "you also mentioned that your accompanist had to have enough money to buy *petits fours*. Though of course he could bake them himself."

"John, please be serious. I said my expenses for sheet music were as much as four hundred dollars a year, and of course there was still the price of my singing lessons twice a week. I was constantly in the red. There were times I hated to answer the door in case it was the bank manager

announcing another overdraft. And do you know what Mr. McConnell said? He asked me whether I would allow him to cover all my deficits, on condition that I didn't tell anybody. He didn't want every mother with a talented child on his doorstep."

"We won't tell a soul," Holly said. "Will we?"

"No," I promised. "We won't."

"After I told him that I was flabbergasted by his offer," Maureen continued, "he disappeared into his own private washroom and came back wearing a ratty old brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows and sleeves that were too short for him."

"You know, I, too, was poor once," he said. "This was my first jacket."