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## SINGING LESSONS FOR A CURE

### The Story of Phyllis Pothecarry of Cairo

THIS story begins ten years ago when a Cairo doctor, having tried everything else, prescribed a course of singing lessons to cure a stubborn lung complaint in a young patient, Phyllis Pothecarry, the daughter of the Chief Inspector in the Egyptian Government's Ministry of Public Works.

And the story ends, for the purposes of this article, this week in the studios of 1YA, Auckland, where I found Phyllis Pothecarry, a resident of Auckland, arranging for her broadcasts. She told me the story, beginning with the young girl of Cairo, with her doctor's prescription to sing.

PROFESSOR POGGIOLINI from Bologna was the teacher to whom this young girl went.

"I do not want to sing in public," she told him. "I merely want my lungs made strong."

"In three months," he told her, having listened to her, "you will be singing in opera." And she was.

"And that was when I had stage fright, real stage fright," she told *The Listener*. "I stood by the footlights for a minute and I couldn't think of a thing, so I ran for my life. My teacher followed me and was furious. Then I had stage fright of him and that was worse than the other, so I went back and sang. But I always have a moment of it still. People think how calm I look, but they don't know what a revolution is going on inside. But I have never run away again."

"But you had surely sung at concerts or at school before?"

"Oh, yes! I made my debut when I was eight. This is just a joke. We were in Cyprus for the summer—we always had to go away for the summer every year, to France or Italy or Cyprus—and there were many soldiers convalescing in a hospital there, so my sister and I arranged an entertainment for them and I sang. But I did sing in our school productions and sometimes we put on bits of operas."

"But the idea of singing at concerts was a surprise to you?"

"Yes. No one ever praised me at home. My sister would say she didn't like it and my mother wouldn't encourage me because she didn't want me to be conceited, and altogether I didn't have any idea I could sing. And then I went to Bologna to live with my teacher's family while he taught me. And about then I began to have the ambition to sing at Covent Garden."

#### The BBC and Covent Garden

In Cairo, Phyllis Pothecarry began to sing her way to fame and London. She sang many times for the Egyptian State Broadcasting Corporation (which has European programmes and Egyptian ones also: "You probably wouldn't like the Egyptian singing unless you knew it very well"). She sang for garden parties and charitable concerts and won an all-Egypt singing contest; she sang in the Cairo Opera House; and she sang before King Farouk.

In 1939 it seemed as if she would have her ambition. She arrived in London with

a bag full of letters of glowing introduction. She had auditions here, auditions there. And the results were: a six months' contract with the BBC; and engagements to sing in *Madame Butterfly* and *La Boheme* at Covent Garden.

The BBC contract began first. She had sung three times by August 30. On that day she received an urgently-worded cable from her mother: "Come home at once." On September 3 she was aboard a ship at Marseilles and war had begun.

"There were thousands stranded in Marseilles. If I hadn't been on that ship



Alan Blakey photograph

PHYLLIS POTHECARRY

I'd have been in the same plight. Everywhere I go I seem to have narrow escapes. But I was back in Cairo and I began singing there again. It was quite a long while before I realised I had failed in my ambition."

More charitable concerts, more opera, more garden party engagements, the beginnings of war work, entertainment for servicemen; and then, in 1940, the meeting with the Kiwis. Singing for the Kiwis in Cairo and Alexandria and Maadi; working full time as private secretary to the Director of Publicity and Propaganda attached to the British Embassy; using her good knowledge of French and Italian and Arabic; meeting all the interesting people (including General de Gaulle); and, most important of all, meeting and marrying A. L. Smith, a member of the First Echelon who was commissioned in the field. He was later wounded and returned home.

Before she became Mrs. A. L. Smith, Phyllis Pothecarry sang in Tel Aviv. On this occasion she left for Haifa just two hours before there was a bombing raid. Another time she was singing in a service club in Alexandria when an air raid began on the harbour. Bombs came near the building, but she kept singing.

"I wasn't nervous then, with all the audience around me. But I was nervous after I was back in the hotel and the raid began again while I was alone."

#### The Queen Elizabeth—and a Tub

In 1942 Mrs. Smith left Egypt by the Queen Elizabeth for New Zealand—but she went only as far as Cape Town on that luxury liner disguised very successfully as a ship of war. She then changed into what she describes as a tub and

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