

The Storyteller

THE PROFESSOR'S SECRET

I.

A few gleams of sunshine stole playfully into the large, cheerful music-room and threw their dreamy shadows on a white marble bust of Beethoven that stood on the elegant Chickering in the corner. Signor Francesco Bottini had been busy most of the afternoon, and there, at his table, he still sat, pouring over the manuscripts of a new Requiem Mass which he had just completed. His eyes had a satisfied look in them and deep in his heart he knew that he had written his masterpiece, something that would at least ring itself into the ears of the musical critics.

Presently he rose and walked to the window and, brushing back the heavy damask curtains, his eyes wandered down into the busy, throbbing street, pulsating with life. Dear old St. Patrick's across the street looked radiant in her twilight glory and over the distant, lone, blue hills the sun was throwing his last, bright shafts of light. Without, everything was bright and cheerful, but within the heart of the old professor all was dark and desolate. As he stood there one could not help but admire him—this son of vine-clad, sunny Italy. He was not very tall, in years about sixty, and there was a bold sweep of fulness in his appearance. His hair was black as the raven and it somehow intensified the golden tint of his complexion. On his face were written earnestness, refinement, and great depth of character. It was a face of marvellous sweetness and great gentleness, and yet there was a latent sadness in those dark, fiery, dancing eyes whose secret no one could understand, much less fathom.

For a moment Signor Bottini sighed heavily and, turning, walked over and sat down at his piano. His eyes were moist and his fingers trembled as they moved slowly over the cold, ivory keys. He was playing the 'Miserere'—the heart-song of Verdi, his fellow-countryman and teacher—and the sad, plaintive tones seemed to find an echo in his lonely soul. The tender air that followed was sweet and stirring. It also seemed to appeal strongly to the Signor's present feelings and several large tears rolled down his cheeks.

'Hortense!' he whispered tenderly. 'Hortense! O Blessed Jesu, have mercy on her soul!'

There was a rap at the door and suddenly a well-dressed young Italian entered. It was Angelico, the professor's trusty office-boy, and his voice had a ring of freshness in it when he said:

'Signor, Mademoiselle Laporte!'

The old man read the perfumed card and exclaimed: 'Please show the young lady upstairs, Angelico.'

The door closed gently and in a few moments opened again. 'I am delighted to see you, Signor,' came from the handsome young woman as she entered the study, gowned in a simple dress of black. 'But you are not well—you look—'

'I am pretty well, Felice,' interrupted the professor. 'Tis true I look somewhat strange—but that is nothing, child. You see I am so troubled and worried with my new Mass and this accounts for it. But, pardon me, how are you, Felice? I have missed you in my study. You were always so bright and cheerful.'

The soft deep eyes—blue as the sea—suddenly opened and the young woman replied somewhat nervously: 'I am not well, Signor. There is a wound deep in my heart that time alone can heal. Since God, in His wisdom, took Hortense away from us, our home has been empty. With her went its brightest sunbeam, its purest flower, and its highest and noblest inspiration. Six months have gone by since that sad day, and dear old mother's heart will never be the same again. To-day mother asked me to open the piano. It was the first time for many days. I sang for her, and when I turned she was smiling. It was the first smile I had seen on mother's face in all these long, weary months—and, oh, it made my heart so glad. Then she came over and put her hand on my shoulder and said: "Felice, my child, you must call and see Signor Bottini and arrange with him for your singing lessons. The house is empty since Hortense sings no more. I miss her in the parlor, in the cathedral, in the concert hall—here, there, everywhere—and I want you to take her place." Signor, will you then for mother's sake, for Hortense's sake, take an interest in me?'

'Certainly, Felice,' answered the dear old musician. 'For your mother's sake, for Hortense's sake, I will do anything. There are great possibilities in your voice, my child, and I know you will succeed because you work diligently. Only to-day I met Father O'Brien and he regretted that Hortense's place had not yet been filled in the choir. "The pure, innocent soul," he said, "how

we have missed her! But God knew best. He heard her voice. It was clear and penetrating like a lark's and He called her to sing His praises in that heavenly choir, whose sweetness surpasses all understanding." Felice! the position is open. Work hard and you may fill your dead sister's place.'

When Felice Laporte was gone Signor Bottini heaved a sigh of relief. The young girl had not surmised, in fact did not know, that the very mention of Hortense's name was extremely painful to him and recalled many precious memories that echoed through the sacred aisles of the past. He walked to the window, the day was getting dark, and down in the streets the newsboys were busy. Then he stirred the fire in the grate and for a long time watched the flames leaping wildly in their mad endeavor to get away up the chimney. Then he sank into an arm-chair and, burying his face in his hands, whispered under his breath:

'You may fill your dead sister's place. Ah, yes, you may, but there is one place your voice can never reach, Felice. It is the audience-chamber of my heart, and when Hortense, bright bird, stopped singing, I closed its doors upon the cold world forever.'

II.

Mademoiselle Hortense Laporte, though young in years, had been a power in her native city. Everywhere she was heralded as a musical prodigy—a born artist—and her sweet, cultivated voice stamped her at once as one of the leading prima donnas. Signor Bottini was proud of his talented pupil and wrote an opera especially for her, in which she fairly electrified her audiences with her marvellous soprano voice. She had many rich triumphs, yet, withal, hers was the self-same, unassuming, beautiful, Christian character, that won its way right into the heart of everyone. She was loved by all classes of people and the poor of many cities were pleased to call her their queen of song, because she had repeatedly given so much of her income and services to lighten their burdens. But in the height of her glory she was stricken down with the fever, while watching at the bedside of her widowed mother, and alas, never recovered from her attack. Her death was regretted everywhere, and especially in her native city, and none felt her loss more keenly than Signor Bottini. Often he would say to himself: 'Since Hortense has gone out of my life, I feel so lonely. My nights are restless and my days are sunless.' Then he would mutter loving words and ask God to bless his lost one with eternal sunshine and happiness.

The days were getting longer, and, with his many pupils and choir rehearsals, Bottini was an overworked man. The members of the St. Patrick's Choir were simply delighted with the new Requiem Mass, and all were diligently preparing their respective parts. Felice, too, was putting her whole soul into her music, and Signor Bottini was more than pleased with his new 'l'enfant adorable,' for she was, without doubt, the most promising of his many pupils.

One day she came to his cosy studio for her lesson and expressed her delight at finding the Signor in better spirits. 'Ah, Signor,' she said, 'I am delighted to find you so happy. Do you know, I often used to wonder why the heart of my old professor should be always so sad.'

Signor Bottini raised himself in his chair, straight as an arrow, and said, with much feeling: 'Felice, my past has many tender memories.'

When the lesson was over Signor Bottini rose from the piano and complained of being dizzy. He walked a few steps, a strange, wild look crept into his face; he tottered from side to side, then staggered and fell to the floor with a heavy crash. Felice uttered a wild cry and Angelico, upon hearing the noise, quickly ran upstairs.

'What is the matter, Mademoiselle?' he gasped.

'The Signor has fainted. I am afraid he is dying,' cried Felice, distractedly. 'Run for the priest and the doctor! Quick, Angelico! There's not a moment to lose! Run for your very life.'

Felice, poor girl, was trembling like a leaf. She tried to arouse the poor man, but, alas, it was useless. Father O'Brien and Dr. McCabe arrived in a few minutes and lifted the dying man to the couch.

'Is there any danger to life, Doctor?' asked the good priest somewhat nervously, after a few minutes.

'Yes, the poor fellow is in a serious condition,' answered the doctor. 'He has sustained a paralytic stroke—hemorrhage into the brain. See, his left arm is paralysed!'

'Left arm paralysed!' shrieked Felice. 'Oh, my God! The poor Signor—the poor Signor!' and she wept convulsively.

There was some talk later of taking him to the hospital, but Felice interposed. 'If he must die, Father,' she pleaded, 'let it be here where he has lived over 40 years of his life—here, in this very room, surrounded on all sides by his books. Let it be here in the light of