

Next to Claire sat a little old lady, and beyond her a slender old gentleman. The little old lady's cheeks were pink, her eyes bright with excitement; she was trying hard to get back to the mood from which Claire's disturbing entrance had shaken her, and her husband still frowned—so there were three people over whom the first stanza of the song flowed to soothe them before they could hear properly.

The little old lady's cheeks beside her lost none of their pinkness, nor her eyes their brightness, but the pucker smoothed out of her forehead as she listened, and her lips parted as if to drink in the song. Her husband leaned forward, no less enraptured, toward the end making small inarticulate sounds of satisfaction, preluding the applause into which he broke wildly as the last note of the song died away. Claire began to be amused at the fresh delight of her neighbors, thrice her age in years, far younger than she in enthusiasm. There was a smile in her eyes as she glanced at the little old lady, who caught it and responded to it with misapprehension of what called it forth.

'Such a pity, dear, you lost the first two numbers,' she murmured. 'She is wonderful.'

Claire smiled slightly, but did not reply, for the accompanist struck the opening chords of the next number, and Claire was not inclined to make acquaintance, even with gentle little old ladies, if they were not accredited to her. But the dear couple's enthusiastic joy increased through these next two songs, which completed the first part of the programme and liberated Madam Schumann-Heink, whose amber gown disappeared through the stage door in the midst of thundering applause. The little old lady drew a long breath and removed her hand from her husband's arm, which she had grasped to emphasize her delight in the 'Frühlingslied' that closed the group of Mendelssohn songs.

Unconsciously Claire had been watching what is always one of the prettiest things in the world—old age that has retained the heart of childhood. The old lady caught her eye before she looked away. She smiled with entire friendliness and confidence in being welcome. Claire's delinquency in coming late had been forgiven, the annoyance it caused giving way to pity that she had missed two of the songs.

'Oh,' said the little old lady, rapturously, 'isn't it a blessing to hear such music while we are waiting for heaven?'

'She has a beautiful voice and uses it well,' said Claire with her older note of competent, experienced criticism.

'Oh, my dear, she's wonderful!' cried the little old lady. 'Such range, such expression, such delicious melting depth, yet delicacy! We've been counting on this recital ever since the last one; we come to hear her whenever she sings.'

'I came near not coming,' said Claire involuntarily.

'Oh, I'm so glad you didn't miss it!' exclaimed the little old lady, assuming that this had been due to some obstacle that Claire had surmounted. 'Never mind being late; you missed only two songs, and look what a long programme she gives us! And she is so kind, and everybody loves her so, as a woman as well as a singer, that she is sure to be generous to us and give us encores!' The little old lady almost smacked her lips over the anticipation, and her eyes brightened still more.

'Oh, dear me, yes; there will be a good deal of singing before we get through,' said Claire, and she smiled outright this time, remembering that she had planned to get away before the end of the recital and go to tea somewhere. Claire had a winning smile when her eyes smiled, too. Now the dear little old lady, ignorant of the heretical intention that had called out the smile, smiled back and grew confidential.

'You see, my dear,' she said happily, 'we are not rich people, and six dollars is really a great deal to spend for a recital. But my husband and I have been planning—saving—for it for a good while. There isn't anything better to invest money in, if you can spare it, than such a treat as this!'

Claire remembered the unused ticket at home and she glanced at the seat beside her, on which she had piled her wraps, with an unusual pang of shame. She might have tried to have found some one to whom to send the ticket! There was her dressmaker's daughter, studying singing—undoubtedly Nellie Hartung would have been delighted to have had that ticket. And her pleasure would have cost Claire no more effort than the addressing of an envelope! Claire could not understand, when she stopped to consider it, why she should feel so sorry for her thoughtlessness, but the delight of the little lady beside her and her revelation of its rarity, explained her awakening.

'Here she comes!' said the little old lady in breathless delight, as Madam Schumann-Heink came out again, smiling at her friends, for such the entire great audience was.

She sang Schubert songs then to them, with the encores the little old lady had anticipated, and the little old lady and her husband exchanged murmurs, hand-claps, and glances that were dewy with the emotions the music awakened. Often they both included Claire in their enjoyment, and were so sure of her sympathy that they got it. When the great singer had gone again and this second part of the recital was over, the little old lady turned to Claire.

'We have a gramophone, my dear,' she said, 'and we have most of Schumann-Heink's records. You don't know how we enjoy it—unless you have one?'

Claire shook her head. 'I wish you had,' said the dear little old lady simply. 'It is wonderful to bring the great musicians into your home. My husband and I hesitated in coming to this recital, because, you see, records are expensive, the good ones, and we could have bought two for the price of our tickets. But I told him I thought we should enjoy those we had more for having heard Schumann-Heink, and I'm certainly glad we came. We have been economizing for the recital; now we shall begin to economize for the records!' She laughed with a bright glance, like a blue-eyed bird's, her head on one side. Claire smiled down at her with a soft look, remembering her box at the opera, her pleasures, the indifference with which she had decided to come to this recital since nothing better offered. 'You ought to hear all the fine concerts, you love music so dearly,' she said.

'Oh, who doesn't love it?' cried the little old lady. 'My dear father was a violinist of no mean order; he played wonderfully. I was brought up in music and on it. My husband would have sung, and his voice been one to have remembered, only he had to provide for his mother when he was young, and then was ill—and then youth was over. But you are wrong that we should hear everything! I'm sure we enjoy our records at home better for having to deny ourselves many that we want, and our concerts the more for having so few of them. I believe, really, we are the happiest people here to-day!'

'I'm sure you are,' said Claire, 'and you have made me enjoy it twice as much. But I'd like to have you hear all the great singers, often.'

'My dear, you are young and I can see you have most of your desires gratified. You have no notion of the pleasure that lies in choosing and waiting for pleasure,' said the little old lady.

'Nor any notion of contentment, I'm afraid,' said Claire involuntarily.

The reappearance of the singer ended this conversation, and with new appreciation Claire listened to the third part of the programme, the Brahms, Strauss and English songs. At last this, too, was over, and Madam Schumann-Heink bowed and waved her hands, with her cordial, bright smile, at the vociferous audience clapping and crowding to the stage, insatiable of her voice, begging for more.

'She'll sing ever so many times; I know she will!' cried the little old lady, standing up and clapping wildly.

'Now, Mary, don't get tired!' remonstrated her husband, pounding away madly with his stick. 'She's sure to come. Just look at those flowers! I couldn't half see them while I was sitting down.'

'We are Catholics and we hear beautiful music every Sunday—I was thinking of what you said about our hearing fine music,' said the little old lady, pausing breathless, and turning to Claire. 'and you have no idea what joy we get out of our records. Why, my dear, we have Caruso, Sembrich, Melba—I couldn't begin to tell you who, nor how beautiful they are—singing to us right in our little flat! We are the luckiest people, my husband and I! Look! There she comes; I knew she would! Now we'll settle down for a greater treat than ever. Oh, listen! That's the "Erlkönig" she's beginning!'

At last Schumann-Heink made her final bow and went away in her sunshiny satin, with her sunshiny smile. The little old lady turned to pick up her coat and muff with a sigh of supreme content.

'Think of being able to make people happy as she can!' she said.

'Would you think me impertinent if I asked for your card?' said Claire. 'Because you have given me more pleasure than you know.'

The little old lady asked her husband to write their name and address, quite flustered by Claire's request. It was only afterward that she remembered that she had not asked the tall girl, so beautifully clad, to return the courtesy. But two days later, when a big box containing seventy-five records of glorious music came, and in it a note, she knew from whom it came, though the note was not signed.

'You taught me harmonies that are sweeter than music—contentment and unselfishness. Please let me send you these harmonies which we all love, but which are only music. And pray for the sender, a Catholic like you, that she may be less selfish, more in tune to your key.'

On the way home from the recital Claire passed in her cab a young man whose poverty was his one serious fault. She leaned out and he saw her. She beckoned him.

He came to her and she put out her hand. 'I am going to take you home with me for a cup of tea,' she said. 'I have been to Schumann-Heink's recital.'

He flushed.

'Claire, why do you torment me? I have tried not to see you,' he said.

'I know, but I want to see you,' she said gently. 'There was the dearest old couple at the concert, rather poor, I'm afraid, but blissfully happy and, oh, so dear and sweet! I want to tell you about them.'

'Claire!' he protested. 'Claire?' he added questioningly.

'I know, Tom. It was a wonderful recital, and they were more wonderful. I've been thinking,' she said.—*Benziger's Magazine.*