

"Idiot! He Wastes Thousands of Dollars' Worth of Voice!"

Richard Crooks—A Musical Spendthrift

ONE night Richard Crooks dropped into a little Italian restaurant in New York.

"Signor," cried the waiter, almost in tears. "I have saved my tips to hear you, and the manager, he would not let me off. I am sad, my friend, because I may not hear 'La Traviata' again this year."

"You shall hear it now," said Crooks, and without accompaniment he sang the leading aria. When he had finished, he took ten bows from the waiter, the manager, two taxi drivers, and an Italian importer.

But there was one witness to this performance, a well-known manager of concert artists, who was not delighted. "The idiot!" he exclaimed. "He wastes thousands of dollars' worth of precious voice. He's a musical spendthrift. He'll sing for anybody, anywhere—for nothing!"

Richard Crooks, at 35, is hailed by many critics as the foremost tenor of the world. He is the first native American to appear as leading tenor at the Metropolitan, an honour reserved for a European until this season, when tradition fell, like the highest wall of Jericho, before the splendid trumpet of his voice. He has a great gift, and he gives it freely. Through all his life, he has spilled song as wastefully as if it were water splashing in the sun. And the fountain, far from drying up, has increased in volume and beauty.

Richard Crooks is everybody's tenor, because he has lived an ordinary life. He has painted gas tanks; he has been an ice-man and a clerk; he plays good bridge, shoots average golf, and would rather be at home than anywhere else. But the story of this average American is most extraordinary.

Sitting beside his mother at the family organ, at four he discovered that he could sing and that singing was joyous. The family and neighbours remarked upon the child's voice, but vocal lessons were impossible because Crooks, sen., didn't make enough money. So young Crooks grew up with his voice, a wild and splendid thing, virtually untutored.

When he was 12 he sang a solo at the annual music festival in Trenton, New Jersey, his home town. When he finished and the auditorium was roaring with applause, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, then at the height of her fame, left her place on the platform, threw her arms around the blushing boy, and kissed him.

"You have the voice of an angel!" she cried. "If you will work, only greatness lies ahead!"

When he was 16, a friend got him a job at an ice plant. He went to work mornings at three, and for four hours shouldered the ice with a pair of tongs. When dawn came he was drenched to the skin and almost hoarse from singing. At first his fellow ice-men hooted at his solos, but presently the voice somehow

found its way into their hearts. When he had saved enough money Crooks went to New York to study music. He got a job in an insurance office at 80 dollars a month, and began to rise so rapidly that he was tempted to forget his musical career.

Mildred, his boyhood sweetheart, came to New York and they were married. She had not forgotten his career. They rented a little cottage near the city and began to save. When the fashionable Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church announced auditions for a new tenor, Crooks took a chance. He was 47th on the list and many followed him. But he got the job—at 25 dollars a Sunday. One Sunday, shortly afterward, while he was scrubbing the kitchen floor and Mildred was papering the pantry shelves with music-sheet covers, a representative of a famous Brooklyn singing society telephoned. Was Mr. Crooks engaged for Thursday night? The society wanted him as soloist at its annual meeting. The honorarium was 75 dollars.



Richard Crooks in N.Z. This Month

Tour of Famous Tenor

THE article on this page, condensed from "The American" is doubly interesting inasmuch as New Zealand will greet Richard Crooks himself within a few weeks. The world-famous tenor opens a Dominion tour in Wellington on September 29, giving concerts in the four centres. In the photograph he is seen with his family. Mrs. Crooks, her son and daughter, passed through Auckland last week en route for their home in America.

He quit his insurance job and went to work in earnest. He sang far into every night, with Mildred at the piano. She tightened up on the family budget and saved every possible penny. In a year they had 1300 dollars in the bank.

When Crooks was not singing he was keeping himself fit. The New York Symphony Orchestra offered him an engagement to sing the third act of Wagner's "Siegfried"—at the age of 22. (Continued on page 8.)