

we're doing. Our nephew, Jemmy Birt, who went to Australia years ago, has sent home his daughter on a visit to us. And, oh, it seems only yesterday that he was a mere lad, going off to a new country; and here is his daughter, as tall as he was then! She came last night, just as Hannah was putting up the shutters, and Clara was taking out her beads, ready for Hannah to come in to Rosary. And—but I mustn't keep you to chatter away like this. Must you go? Well, you'll come again soon—or I'll come to you. She's so pretty, Sister, and so nice! You will be charmed with her. And she and darling Clara have very much in common. She plays beautifully, and will be able to accompany her aunt, which is delightful. They have just been trying "Cleansing Fires"—practising, you know, for the concert.

'Does she sing?' asked Sister Agnes, a wild, unreasonable hope flashing upon her mind.

'Oh, no! She only plays. It is nice to have her. But such a surprise! O Sister, won't you stay? No? Well, then, if you must go, I won't hinder you. Say a prayer for us, Sister, won't you? and for our bonnie girl, Jem's child?'

Sister Agnes went away, smiling at Miss Birt's delightful unconsciousness that it was not Sister Agnes who was too busy to stay—smiling, and then feeling sorry, and yet in a sense relieved at having had to go without saying one word of what had cost her so much to prepare.

Sara Birt—known to her family, and so, of course, to the great-aunts, as Sadie—was in the little wood at the bottom of the garden, watching the birds, strange to her as a Colonial, and watching the insects, and the play of light and shadow on the leaves. Sometimes she hummed to herself a few bars of a song, then suddenly she would stop. 'No, I mustn't, I mustn't! They are not to know I can sing.'

She thought of their warm welcome of the unexpected guest; of the rapid preparation of the pretty spare-room, of their quick assumption that she would make their home hers for a long time, of their expressions of affection for her father. They had made her love them at once, as they had been drawn to love her. And then had come that funny, pathetic little scene at the piano, when Aunt Clara had sung and Aunt Laura had rapturously applauded. And she had heard all about the club, and how Aunt Clara loved to sing for the girls, and how she was to help them with their concert. 'It's God's beautiful gift to Aunt Clara,' Laura had said; 'and she loves to use it for him.'

Sadie had realised it all, and quickly; and, though her good sense told her it was a pity the dear, sweet old ladies should so deceive themselves, she could not but feel that it was not her part to undeceive them, and she made up her mind that neither of them should know, at least during her visit—perhaps they need never know—that she could sing.

So went by the next few days—Sister Agnes anxious and the club girls fidgety and discontented. But the Sister was quite sure that she ought to go and speak to Miss Birt. So she called, and found that lady happy and calm as was her wont. After a few words about a girl whom the Birts had helped to place at a training home, Sister Agnes began:

'Dear Miss Birt, I am going to say something that I fear must give you pain, but I think it will save you from pain in the end. Don't you think it would be better if dear Miss Clara were to give up singing?'

Miss Laura almost jumped, so startled was she. 'Clara give up singing! Sister! Why? She is quite well and strong, and she loves it so! Indeed, dear Sister, she does it in as good a spirit as even a holy woman like you might do it.'

'I never thought of anything else,' said the Sister, 'only—only—dear Miss Birt, has it never struck you that even Miss Clara cannot always go on? You see, the voice, the singing voice, stays with us only a part of our lives; it is a lovely gift, but not a lifelong one; and—' she hesitated.

'You mean that my darling Clara is losing her voice?'

Sister Agnes said simply, 'Yes.'

'Oh, no, no! It cannot be! She sometimes has a cold, and then it may be husky; but surely, surely, her voice is, on the whole, quite—quite good.'

Tears were very near the old lady's eyes. Sister Agnes took her hand—a kind, wrinkled, mitted hand.

'You know I would not pain you unnecessarily,' she said; 'and I am grateful to you for listening to me. I am afraid that we all feel it is not kind to Miss Clara to let her sing now. You see, the girls—and others—notice that—that she is older than she used to be, and that her voice has failed.'

'Her voice has failed! O Sister, my poor, poor Clara! And she is only—'

She stopped short. 'Only sixty-five,' she had been going to say. Sixty-five was not very old in compari-

son to Miss Birt's own age—more by over a decade. But what was it absolutely and uncomparably?

In one moment Miss Birt saw it all; and she knew that, just as Clara's age had been unrealised by her, so also had she been determinedly ignorant of the failure in her voice; had put aside certain warnings, as if to heed them were but unfaithfulness. How often had she had occasion to say to herself: 'Clara must be more careful of her beautiful voice!' Or to her sister: 'My darling, you really must not eat nuts: they are very bad for the voice.' Or: 'Clara, love, you mustn't take coffee before you sing.'

Laura Birt went through much pain in those few minutes of silence.

'It is all my fault—my fault!' she said at last. 'We have made fools of ourselves; but it has been my doing, not my dear sister's. Oh, my darling Clara—my darling Clara!'

'Dearest Miss Laura, you have always been good and kind, and—and—you are both such dear good women that you will—understand.'

'I will tell my Clara,' said the old lady. 'We must have no more of a Fools' Paradise.'

Sister Agnes' tender heart was very sore when she went away.

Miss Birt sat there, seeing and understanding as she thought over past things. How strange it seemed to her that it was only now she read the meaning of that hesitancy in Father Lyons' manner when music was mentioned in connection with Clara; only now that she understood other people's reserve in praise; only now that she knew why the comic songs had been suggested; only now that she saw how it was that it had seemed a difficulty to Sister Agnes to keep the girls quiet while Clara was singing! It was hard for them to check the little bursts of laughter that came when the songs were not comic and the notes were high. Clara was an old woman! Clara was an old woman who had lost her voice! All old women did not lose their voices, or get them quite spoiled! 'But Clara!—O my poor, poor darling! If I might only bear the pain for you!'

That evening Clara hesitated when Sadie opened the piano.

'I am not sure—' she said, and stopped.

Then she went over and began to sing 'Cleansing Fires,' which Sadie had opened. The voice sounded husky as well as thin, and on the high note it broke. Then Sadie played the accompaniment in a lower key. But the song would not go, and Miss Clara stopped.

'I cannot sing!' she said, pitifully.

'Clara, my darling, you had better rest!' observed Laura.

Clara looked round.

'Yes, I must—rest. I am frightened, Laura. I heard something of what Sister Agnes said. I couldn't help it: the window was open and I heard. Then I went on, but it seemed to paralyse me. I think it took away my voice.'

She did not wait for a word, but went quickly away, and the others heard her door shut.

'Will you go to her, Aunt Laura?' said Sadie, full of pity and ready to weep.

'No, my child, she would rather be alone. By and by we have always accustomed ourselves not to give way before each other, if we could help it: for your grandmother—I mean your great-grandmother, Sadie—taught us to be self-controlled. She thought hysterics were a disgrace, and she taught us to keep back our tears as much as possible. I will go by and by, but not now. And yet, Sadie, we have shared each other's joys and sorrows all our lives—all Clara's life, I mean, of course, for I am very much older than she.'

Sadie was just crossing the room to tidy the music and shut the piano, when Clara came back.

'Thank you, my love!' she said, quietly. 'Laura, dearest, it is time to ring for Hannah, is it not?'

'Will you ring, love?'

Miss Clara rang. And it was she who led the Rosary that evening.

The sisters had said 'Good-night' to the niece, and 'Good-night' to each other, and shut their doors. Laura could not sleep. She was sure Clara was suffering—had she heard something like a sob? She listened. There were light, rustling movements—then something like a sigh—then silence.

Clara's room was inside Laura's and she could see the light under the door. Was the light from Clara's candle not yet put out; or was it from the little votive lamp that burned before the statue of our Lady? The hours went by, and the tenseness of the hush grew painful to Laura. She got up and put on her dressing gown, and very, very softly knocked. There was no answer, and she gently opened the door. Clara was kneeling before the statue, and her face was lifted up. Was the light on her face from the little lamp, or was it the shining of that which is given when the Will which is our peace has clasped our will and made it one