

# The Storyteller

## THE VOICE OF A SINGING WOMAN

Laura Birt saw, day by day, in the pretty little home that her sister and she had shared since long ago, the figure of a beautiful young woman with bright eyes, rosy mouth, and auburn hair, glossy and abundant. This beautiful young woman had a quick, light step and agile fingers, and, above all, the loveliest voice you ever heard—a clear, rich mezzo-soprano of good compass and pure in tone. She would sing for Laura, her elder sister, evening after evening, songs that had been in fashion many years before this time, and Laura would listen with all delight.

And on Thursday evenings Laura and this beautiful young woman would put on their boots and wraps and go down to the Girls' Club, where Sister Agnes presided. And, after the usual greetings, Clara would go straight to the piano, while Laura would sit in the easy-chair that Sister Agnes always pulled out some couple of feet from the wall, close against which it usually stood, and listen to the songs her sister sang.

Latterly Sister Agnes had been suggesting that the girls, she thought, would like some lighter music. Might they, now and then, have a comic song? Laura thought this a little 'infra dig'; but no one could be offended with Sister Agnes, and so Clara would sing 'something light.' She had a song in which a grandmamma warned her granddaughter to have nothing to do with young men; and the granddaughter objected to the prospect before her—'die an old maid, die an old maid'—until her difficulties were smoothed away by the thought that—

If all the young girls of the men were afraid,  
My grandmother herself would have died an old maid,  
Died an old maid, died an old maid—  
My grandmother herself would have died an old maid.

There was another about a girl who went to meet her Lubin, and was encountered by a sage, who plied her with indiscreet questions and knocked her answers into a cocked hat.

More than once Sister Agnes had asked if Miss Clara would mind playing a little, instead of singing, perhaps the girls would like this, as some of them were tired, and might rather not be too closely attentive. And Clara smiled and swept off a few arpeggios, and then—broke into a warble, a girl said, not sentimentally but ironically. After an hour or so, during which she had said, 'Oh, no, not the least!' to repeated inquiries as to whether she were not tired, Clara would rise, and, amid thanks, she and Laura would go home, tired but happy.

It will have been guessed that, in Clara Birt, Laura's younger sister to whom she had always been as a mother, Sister Agnes and the girls at the club did not see a beautiful young woman, nor hear in her voice the melody and sweetness which were there to the ear of undiscerning affection. Sister Agnes did not see with the girls' eyes nor hear with their ears, but she saw and heard what made her feel grieved and puzzled. The girls saw Clara Birt as one of two old maids, kind indeed, but silly, or more than silly; and they blamed Laura as partly the cause of her sister's folly. Poor Miss Laura! to imagine that an elderly, wrinkled, faded woman was young and beautiful! And, above all, to imagine that a voice which often went flat and which cracked, or almost cracked, on certain notes, and which had very little tone indeed on any notes, was sweet and clear and true!

Sister Agnes had tried to minimise the ridicule the girls could hardly keep from showing, by asking for comic songs. But, somehow, it did not do. And there was going to be a village concert to help the fund for an organ in the church, and Miss Clara Birt had offered to sing—offered, as a matter of course. Poor Father Lyons had not known what to say, but he begged that Sister Agnes would say something.

Would Clara Birt ever be old in Laura's eyes—eyes that were fond as any lover's; eyes that ignored the changes which time had not failed to work in her? She was old, but Clara? Never, never! And yet, though Laura looked thus on her sister, and heard sweetness and fulness in the voice that, so many years ago, she had helped to train, just now and then there stole over her a strange feeling, which she put away almost as if it were a sin; for did it not seem like unfaithfulness? Were Sister Agnes and the club girls less kindly disposed than Sister Martha and other generations of club girls had been? Or—was Clara's voice a little smaller in compass, a little thinner in tone? No, no, of

course not! It was the fog, or the remains of a cold; or—what? Was Laura's step a little slower? Were her movements less agile? Was her hearing a little—a very, very little—less acute? No, no! It was only fancy, only a sort of reflection of the elder sister's own increasing infirmities.

Unhappily, Clara had never donned glasses to read by artificial light—but gradually she had ceased to read at all in the long or lengthening evenings. She liked a chat, or to hear what Laura had found interesting in the paper, or to play and sing from memory. No, if Laura had grown old, and beautifully grown old, with the atmosphere around her of that sweetly wise dependence which gives more help than it receives, Clara, in her eyes, was young and fair and strong, and had much to do with that lovely gift—her voice.

Clara wished to sing 'Cleansing Fires' at the concert. She had sung it at the club one evening, and it had sounded funny—so funny that Sister Agnes had felt that to listen to such singing was really growing to be too great a strain on the courtesy of the girls; and it was, of course, bad for them to turn Miss Clara covertly into ridicule. There had been choking sounds, and even something like giggling, and a suspicious use of handkerchiefs, when that terrible high note had come—if note it could be called.

What was to be done? It would give both the sisters such pain to suggest that Miss Clara's voice—no, she could not say it, could she? Yet was it fair to the club, to its members, even to the dear old ladies themselves, to allow this to go on?

Not only did Miss Clara want to sing 'Cleansing Fires,' but she also wished to take the leading part in a cantata which Sister Agnes had suggested to the girls to get up. It had been in vain that Sister Agnes had gently remarked that the girls had better do it themselves. She had even gone to the length of saying that the part of a fairy might be most suitable to a young girl—quite a young girl. But Laura had met her suggestion with, 'Oh, yes!' But you see also that everything goes better when a trained singer takes the leading part. Both the sisters thought that Clara's singing 'would make all the difference.' 'So it would!' thought poor Sister Agnes.

The girls made up their minds to take the matter into their own hands. The leader of this movement of determination spoke.

'Sister, it's this way. If Miss Clara insists on being Fairy Listavorana, the others and I are not going to make sillies of ourselves. We mean no disrespect to you, Sister, but there's no use in making sillies of ourselves if that old—'

'Alice!' There was authority as well as remonstrance in the tone; and, somehow, the look conveyed the remembrance of Miss Clara's real kindheartedness, and the sense of its not being 'nice' to talk about her as 'that old'—whatever noun the adjective was meant to qualify.

With some deprecation in her tone, the girl proceeded:

'Well, Sister, what would you have us to do? Not have the cantata at all, I think. She said—I mean Miss Clara said she was coming to practise it next Thursday and Saturday.'

'Alice, you must give me a little time to think. I will tell you soon.'

It was not easy for Sister Agnes to find time to think out the matter; but being one of the people who make time, she did think over it and carefully; and as soon as possible she went to see the Birts. She felt very sorry for them, but she knew that what she had to say must be said, and her little bit of comfort was that she knew she would say kindly and carefully what might, and probably would, reach the old ladies (for, being fairly young herself, she classed them together) in some way that might bring pain greater and sharper yet.

When she was shown into the little drawing-room she could not help noticing that, somehow, it did not look quite like itself. What was the reason? It was not untidy, but there was about it something unlike its ordinary prim neatness. The flowers, in particular, looked different. They were not as usual in tidy little rotund groups, edged about with leaves: there were sprays and trails, and here and there one tall flower alone in its beauty. The piano was open, and there was music on the desk. Sister Agnes saw the title 'Cleansing Fires,' and her heart sank.

After a little delay (and there was not wont to be any delay in receiving Sister Agnes) the door opened and Miss Birt came in.

'O Sister, how nice of you to come up! And I am so sorry to have kept you! But we're so busy and so—what shall I say? Not exactly flustered that—no, no, you mustn't go away yet! Sit down again just a few minutes. We're in such a state of surprise—delightful surprise, too—that we hardly know what