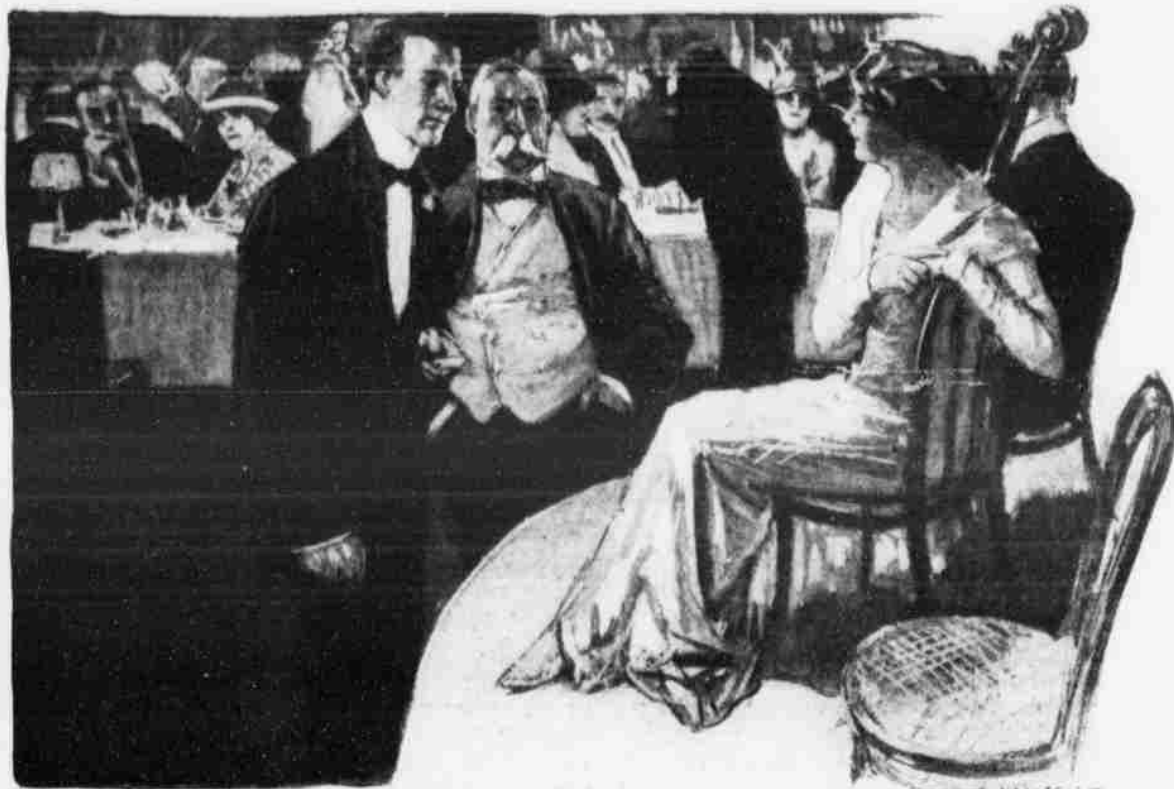


# A BLUNDER IN EDEN

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He felt as if every one in that room knew why he was dining there



ATE HERSELF had led Bobby Lorimer to the little cafe that night. He had become so thoroughly sick of the garish high lights of his accustomed haunts that the monotone of this place and its patrons seemed a blessed relief. He was glad there was no music.

Dessert had just been set before him when he heard the sound of a violin, and looked up to see that some musicians had taken possession of a little platform where there was a piano that he had not noticed.

"And this place," he muttered to himself regretfully, "was so restful."

He was hurrying through his dessert so that he might take his leave before the orchestra began to play; he knew just what it would be like. And then — an elusive note or two of prelude, and *The Voice*.

It was as if a silver lute held to the warm lips of Spring had blown from out a dull gray sky; a high sweet note, that trembled for an instant, broke and rippled down like fairy laughter, then hung in midair swinging upon the words of the song:

*I'm down upon the thistle!  
I'm cobweb in the air!*

Lorimer looked up in astonishment. The people at the next table obstructed his view and prevented his seeing the singer. She would be young and fair and smiling. He could see that by the way the violinist looked at her as he played. He knew that she swayed rhythmically with the music, and her hands fluttered involuntarily to the tune of it. And on ran the song, gay and rhythmic and free as the hours of youth, and Lorimer gave himself up to the sheer joy of listening.

*My heart will dance on laughter,  
Float off upon a sigh;  
You could not follow after,  
And I will tell you why:*

And then the gay lilt of the refrain, that afterward he came to know so well that the words sang themselves over and over, and always with that strange little tug at his heart that he could never understand. Words and voice enthralled him.

The refrain ended as it had begun, in midair, for it was too fine and elusive a thing to touch dull earth.

The people began to applaud, the singer moved to a chair — and Lorimer, watching eagerly, saw a shy, half frightened little woman, in a white lawn dress, who seemed a little surprised, a little incredulous, and ready to be very grateful for the applause if she could think they meant it.

She was not awkward, but in all her body there was an utter absence of grace; she was not old, twenty-seven or eight at most, but youthless, with a look not so much of innocence as of inexperience. She had been fashioned lithe of limb and fleet for dancing, but her feet had trod sedately the somber path of her life; her eyes were dark, for tender glancing, but were lackluster from looking out on common things, and her dark brown hair had been so primly done into a knot on the top of her shapely little head as to subdue any pretty waywardness the curls may once have had. Her expression was not sad, only the eyes and lips were queerly dispassionate, as of one who suffered the tragedy of a life lived always on the barren plain of commonplace, with never a steep breathless ascent to the heights of joy, or sudden plunge into the depths of grief. It was as if life had been at once too serious for smiling and too monotonous for tears.

AND yet, — the voice. It was she who had sung that song! Surely then, when she sang, her beauty would come to life, her youth leap up awake, and the joy return to her eyes. She was standing almost stiffly, looking gravely and speculatively about, and then, remembering suddenly her duty, smiled a queer timorous little smile which held less of assurance than her first expression. But the people wanted more of her song and in response to the applause the leader nodded to her, raised his bow, and without the least perceptible change of expression, there floated between those passive lips the high, sweet, careless refrain:

*Butterfly, Butterfly,  
I am your sister, aye;  
Love is a thing of airy wing,  
No long flights to try!*

Lorimer looked on amazed. The prim, colorless little woman; but, ah, the wonderful voice that had in it the flash and dart of butterfly wings, and all the youth that she had not!

Ending, she seated herself, and the applause gave way again to the light hum of conversation. Lorimer could not take his eyes from her.

"Will that be all, sir?" asked a voice at his elbow. He had forgotten his dessert, forgotten there was a waiter, forgotten everything but the strange paradox of voice and singer. He would order something more, so that the waiter would not annoy him; he must hear her sing again.

"Bring me — some fruit, and black coffee."

THE waiter disappeared. The orchestra began playing an air from a popular opera, and Lorimer continued to look at the singer, wondering. Then the waiter returned, set down the plate and the *demi-tasse* and turned to go. Lorimer detained him with a gesture.

"Waiter," he said, "who is the lady who sang just now?"

The waiter, bending to catch his words, smiled a bit sarcastically and said, lowering his voice confidentially:

"I don't know who she is. You see, sir, this is the first entertaining they've had here; I guess it'll be better next week. The big cafés get all the classy singers."

Lorimer could have sworn at him. "I have never heard," he said, "so marvelous a voice."

Whence came its joyous youth? Whence the splendid ease with which she sang? Lorimer had listened to the greatest of them in all quarters of the earth, but never had he heard one sing with so little effort and with the same effect of color and life. Who had been her master, or could it be that the voice was a perfect gift of the gods? Everything about her spoke of a life of frugality, even poverty. There was something about her dress that told as plainly as words that her own hands had made it, and that she herself had ironed it, probably that very day. And she wore her clothes with that precision and lack of style that also tell plainer than words that one has not had association with people who afford the best dressmakers and tailors. It was just as plain that there had never been a time when she had had more, for she was so unconscious of any lack.

Was it, he wondered, merely an absence of feeling, a complete lack of any emotion, that gave that fine free lilt to her song? He found himself speculating, idly picturing her meager childhood, the chance discovery of her talent, her shy unspoken ambitions, the frugal home life, and the family that took her voice as a matter of course, keeping always before her their sacrifices in order that they might selfishly give her lessons because of the prophecy that one day she would bring them fame and riches. Lorimer felt that he could find, unguided, the house where she lived. It would be in the old part of town, where the houses huddle together as if to give each other courage to stand a while longer; and it would be one room and a kitchen on the top floor, and there would be faded paper on the walls, faded roses in the carpet, and faded old furniture, and her mother, a faded listless woman, always waiting for her to come home at night. And on the window sill where the sun comes in the morning, there would be the one note of color in the room, a flowering plant, perhaps a hyacinth.

THESE, and many more details he wove for himself that night, and they became to him a definite part of her. But it was not until he had come the second time and had heard her sing again that first gay butterfly song that he fell to wondering if her youth were quite lost, and if there might not be some magic to lure the laughter again to the lips, win back the joy and grace to the body, the flame to her eyes, and the color to her cheeks.