

Won by a Violin.

By EPES W. SARGENT.

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Avard clambered up through the trap leading from the music room with the same intolerable feeling of disgust that always filled his soul when it came time to take his place beside the leader of the Odeon orchestra.

He hated it all, the endless procession of sidewalk comedians, serio-comics, sketch artists, trained dogs and all the other component parts of the vaudeville show.

He had come to America fresh from the conservatory, with visions of a concert tournee that should make him famous. They told him that America was a land of money; that there people sat up nights for an opportunity to hear some great artist.

Instead, he had discovered that only those heralded by a skillful promoter stood any chance. He was glad to get an occasional engagement for some small concert, and even these grew less and less frequent as the season waned.

Then had come that awful time when, penitence and hungry, he faced the realization that he could never hope for success. He was too proud to go back home a failure, and he thankfully accepted an opening in a concert hall, where he, a pianist and a cornet player comprised the orchestra.

Benson had found him there one night when he dropped in to see the proprietor. Benson had played violin there himself before he had become a bandmaster, with a blue and gold band at a summer resort, and he dropped in at intervals for old times' sake.

He called Avard over to his table and offered him a place in his orchestra in the fall, when the season opened, so ever since September Avard had sat beside Benson playing first violin. He loathed it all, but it was better than the concert hall, and he was grateful.

But this afternoon he was gloomy. A great artist, one with whom he had studied, was giving a matinee, and some one had told him how the people were thronging to the hall. Their master had declared Avard to be the better, yet Herman drew the crowds.

Monday was always a bad day. The music sheets, some of them yellow with age and filthy with dirt, were hard to read. Rehearsal had been more or less of a farce, and he scarcely noticed the performance. Then suddenly a voice broke on his ears, and he looked up in wonder.

A mere girl stood in the gleam of the spot light. She could not be more than sixteen or seventeen, but from her throat there poured tones of crystal purity. The voice was untrained and unschooled, but she had a natural gift for singing, and her tones had not yet become hardened through overwork.

The music thrilled him through and through, and once or twice he broke in his accompaniment. Long after she left the stage she still occupied his thoughts, and as he started to leave the theater after the matinee she con-

fronted him at the top of the stairs. "What did you crab my act for?" she demanded.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle," he said, with humility. "But such a voice—in vaudeville. The surprise was too great. I faltered."

"It looked as if you were scared," she agreed, mollified at the compliment. "But don't you do it again?"

"I protest that I shall offend no more," he assured, and she turned to the elderly woman who hovered in the background.

"Come on, ma," she called. "He didn't do it a-purpose. I knocked him off his pins; that's all. Come on."

She passed out of the stage door, and Avard followed slowly. Into his life love had come. He could forgive the uncouth speech for the sake of the voice, and Gertrude Clayton, "phenomenal" (she invariably misspelled the word) soprano, had become a goddess to him.

All that week he drank in the flute-like tones, as a drunkard imbibes his tipples. Saturday night, when the engagement closed, he left a single rose, perfect in its loveliness, with the doorkeeper, to be given her as she left.

She was gone when the show was over, and he hurried to the doorkeeper for his report.

"What did mademoiselle say?" he demanded eagerly.

"Stingy," grinned the unsympathetic soul, and Avard slowly passed out.

But the slight was forgotten the next day, and only the memory of that perfect voice remained. From the press agent he begged one of her photographs, and when he came home at night, tired and disheartened, he looked upon her youthful face and seemed to hear again the liquid sweetness of her singing.

It was several months before she came again. Avard feared that perhaps the hard work, the singing in smoke filled music halls, had spoiled her tones, but she did not strain for high notes, and her voice retained its clarity and freshness.

It seemed an interminable time after he took his place before she came on, and again after her appearance the moments dragged woefully, but they were to be endured for the sake of those momentary uplifts to paradise, and he was content.

Several times, when the sketches were on, he left his place and prowled about the stage in the hope of gaining speech with her, but she always was dressed and out before the sketch brought him an intermission from his labors.

As the week progressed these repeated disappointments preyed upon him, and he grew more and more gloomy. Saturday night came all too soon, and it was with an aching heart that he opened her music to play her accompaniment for the last time.

Gertrude had put in a new song to try the last night. It was a popular ballad, one that had just come out, cheaply constructed, but with a slow melodic chorus. They had tried it over in the music room before the performance, and he had liked it then. Now the melody seemed to fill his heart, and he put all of his artistic soul into the interpretation of the chorus. The other musicians, as if by common impulse, lowered their instruments, and the wailing tones of the violin formed such a perfect accompaniment to the voice

that as the strains swelled out the audience suddenly grew quiet. Twice the chorus was repeated, and the bathos of the words became pathos when sung to the sobbing accompaniment of the violin. Now the chorus was ended, and the singer looked up expectantly.

For a moment the audience sat silent as if in the presence of death. Then a great outburst of applause swept down from the gallery, to be met with a demonstration from the lower floor. Three times Benson played over the "vamp"—the short symphony between the verses—before the house became quiet again. Then Gertrude began, and the house was hushed. At the chorus the other players settled back, and once more the duet between violin and voice thrilled the hearers. Again the applause thundered out. The singer bowed repeatedly, but still the hand clapping continued, and she leaned over the footlights. "Get up and take a bow," she shouted. "Push him up, Benson."

The leader guided Avard to his feet, and he stood there, abashed by the sensation he had created. Three times they repeated the double chorus, and even then the stage manager had to ring up in the next act and hold the curtain up before the house would quiet down.

Presently the call boy poked his head through the trap and handed a note to Benson. He turned to Avard. "Miss Clayton wants to see you in her dressing room," he said. "Never mind this act. I can get along."

Weak and trembling from the reaction, Avard slipped out of the orchestra pit and presently presented himself before the singer.

"What's your name?" she demanded curiously.

"Pierre Avard," he said hesitatingly.

"Sounds good for the bills," she said critically. "Say, we'd make a great team, something like the three Diamonds' stunt—street singers, you know. I'll fix Benson all right. Will you come?"

"Mademoiselle wishes my services?" he asked haltingly, unwilling to believe that such good fortune could be true.

"Sure thing," she confirmed. "We stopped the show. We'll be headliners. Want to double up?"

"Double up?" he repeated wonderingly. "Mademoiselle does me the honor of proposing a matrimonial alliance?"

Gertrude eyed him curiously. To double up meant to form a team. Then an idea came to her. "I guess so," she answered carelessly. "It'll keep some other dame from getting her hooks on you."

Benson summed up the situation later over his nightcap.

"It's a good thing for both of them," he declared oracularly. "He'll keep her straight and do something with her voice. He's too much in love with her to realize what a silly little fool she is. By the time she's really ready to fall in love he'll be there to be fallen in love with. Here's luck to 'em."

And they all drained their glasses.

LISTEN

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