



BY GRANT ALLEN

I.

"I AM glad you are prepared to accept my terms," said the manager; "and now, if you please, what songs will you sing? We want their names at once, as we must get out our announce-

ments and programmes and advertisements immediately. Time presses." He glanced at the sheet of paper he held in his hand. Let me see: how does it read? 'Signor Giovanni Metelli's Great Christmas Eve Concert of Sacred Music. Madame Lydia de Meza, the famous American cantatrice, will sing;—what shall we put down? The 'Amore Divino'?"

The famous American cantatrice drew up to her full height—she was a tall and handsome woman, just past her prime, with traces of Cuban blood and some faint reminiscence both of the negress and the Red Indian. "No," she answered haughtily, for she was an imperious creature. "Not the 'Amore Divino.' I do not approve of it. It has no soul in it."

"What then?" the manager asked, leaning forward with marked politeness, a lithe, keen-eyed man, pencil in hand, ready to take down the great singer's words as she uttered them.

"How should I know?" Madame de Meza answered, with a genuine air of inspiration. "It comes—my song. I sing what is forced upon me. I am not like all these commercial singers who get up their little parts pat and can bring forth any one of them with equal ease whenever an *impresario* pays them enough for it. That is not my way. I have studied my art—oh! how hard; but I cherish it still as a gift from heaven—cherish it as treasure held in trust for humanity. When I walk upon the platform I never know what I am going to sing. I just cast my eyes round my audience and take their measure. Then I murmur a little prayer and wait for guidance."

"A prayer!" the manager cried, astonished.

"Yes, a prayer," Madame answered solemnly. "In a minute the guidance comes; some inner prompting tells me what piece will then and there be best for that public. If it is a sacred piece, well and good; it may touch some hearts. If it is a secular piece, well, too; it may be blessed in its own kind, for all art is to me, in a high sense, sacred. I shall wait and see. When I stand face to face with your people, signor, I shall cast my eyes about and know what to choose for them."

Signor Metelli gazed at her in blank astonishment. Was this woman mad, or was she only affected? In spite of his Italian name, which he had assumed as a matter of business, he was born plain John Mettle, of Bradford, and he was a hard-headed Yorkshireman who had no sympathy with, no comprehension of, this strange wayward American. "But we *must* put down something," he went on, fingering his pencil nervously, "we can't leave it quite blank. You are the star of the list, you know."

"Put it down, 'Madame Lydia de Meza will sing two selected songs,' if you like," the handsome American answered. Then she smiled at him curiously. "Look here, Signor Metelli," she went on, "or whatever else you call yourself. You don't understand me. You think this is just a singer woman's freak. But I tell you it isn't. You may call me superstitious if you choose. I dare say I am

a little bit superstitious. I have Spanish blood in my veins, and black blood, too; a drop of Carib from Cuba, a drop of Seneca Indian from North America; but at heart I am a New Englander, a Puritan woman. I've been singing here in Europe, on the public platform, for thirty years, and, thank heaven, I have my voice still, and I have my husband and my children. I don't look upon my

art as a toy, I look upon it as a priesthood. Why did God give me this voice? Was it not that I might use it for the good and the hallowing of my fellow-creatures? I use it for that, and I try to do what better work I can with it. Sometimes I succeed. I set men and women weeping, I set them working, I set them praising God, I set them praying. You call that silly. I don't; it's the way God made me." She paused a moment, and looked up once more, with that strange air of inspiration in her big brown eyes. "When I was first studying music," she said, slowly, "I went to Florence, and there in Florence I saw some of Fra Angelico's pictures, who was the holiest man that ever painted. Those pictures made me think; they made me pray. Then I read in a book that Fra Angelico never took brush in hand without falling on his knees and asking for guidance. I thought to myself: 'That's why he could paint like an angel!' Then it occurred to me that I, too, would do the same in my art. You can't fall on your knees on a public platform, but you can pray, and I would pray for guidance. It is all the better for the art itself, for, the more you think of the sacredness of your art, the nobler will it be; and it's a thousand times better for your own soul and for the souls of your audiences."

The manager stared at her with a blank stare of surprise. "Well, I suppose I must submit," he said, turning it over slowly. "Though, if you'll excuse me, madame, that may be all very well in its way, but—it isn't business."

Madame's eyes flashed fire. "No, thank God!" she answered fervently, for she was a devout woman in her way. "You have hit the truth there. Thank God, it isn't business!"

II.

It was the day before Christmas. Hilda Lovell was walking in a retired part of Kensington Gardens with Percy Emlyn. She had met him by accident, it is true, so far as she was concerned; but he had been loitering about for an hour waiting for her. He knew she often walked back that way from her art-school at Kensington; and this morning he had intercepted her, and told her his secret. Not much of a secret, either, for she had guessed it, and even anticipated it, weeks ago.

"O Hilda," the young man said, as he stepped by her side, all tremulous, after she had whispered her "Yes" to him, "you don't know how happy, how proud you have made me. Darling, my own home has always been so miserable that I scarcely dared to ask you. I scarcely dared to think you would ever accept me. You know about my poor mother—it is terrible to see her, so lonely, so heart broken. And it was not my father's fault entirely, either, though he has a violent temper. It was what no one can help—natural incompatibility. They were not the two people best fitted to get on in life together. Each had great virtues, but even their virtues somehow clashed with one another. That made me feel half afraid to ask you. I wondered whether you might think I was too like my father in temper and disposition. But, when I remember how you and I were created for one another, it makes me bolder. And when I look at your family—at the happy lie your father and mother lead after so many years of marriage—the way they are still like lovers together—"

Hilda's heart gave a sudden jump. Something seemed to stab her inwardly. What a false note to touch at such a moment! It broke in upon her dream with a hateful