

The opera continued. The great soprano, the prima donna, appeared and delivered herself of a song for which she was famous with astonishing éclat. Then in a little while the stage grew dark, the orchestration lapsed to a murmur, and the tenor and the soprano reëntered. He clasped her in his arms and sang a half-dozen bars, then holding her hand, one arm still about her waist, withdrew from her gradually, till she occupied the front-centre of the stage. He assumed an attitude of adoration and wonderment, his eyes uplifted as if entranced, and she, very softly, to the accompaniment of the sustained, dreamy chords of the orchestra, began her solo.

Laura shut her eyes. Never had she felt so soothed, so cradled and lulled and languid. Ah, to love like that! To love and be loved. There was no such love as that to-day. She wished that she could loose her clasp upon the sordid, material modern life that, perforce, she must hold to, she knew not why, and drift, drift off into the past, far away, through rose-coloured mists and diaphanous veils, or resign herself, reclining in a silver skiff drawn by swans, to the gentle current of some smooth-flowing river that ran on forever and forever.

But a discordant element developed. Close by—the lights were so low she could not tell where—a conversation, kept up in low whispers, began by degrees to intrude itself upon her attention. Try as she would, she could not shut it out, and now, as the music died away fainter and fainter, till voice and orchestra blended together in a single, barely audible murmur, vibrating with emotion, with romance, and with sentiment, she heard, in a hoarse, masculine whisper, the words:

“The shortage is a million bushels at the very