

The Free Press Short Story

THE GREAT SOPRANO

MARIANNE CLARK

The wind howled about Blizard Inn and the frozen snow which had upon the windows told of bitter cold on the heights above. Winter's Peak would be eighty below tonight—no cold and as desolate as lands of the North Pole. Morning-glory Clark, the cook at the inn, was not stringing about her work that day.

"Why so quiet, Glory?" With a wink at the young man beside her, one of the college students spending the holidays between semesters up here, directed this question at the girl cook who was revivifying a pile of used lunch dishes.

"I think," answered Glory, smilingly, "I sang once to-night."

Even then the college girl did not realize that Glory knew the others had laughed at her singing. She protested, stammering, "Oh, but you can't sing too—that is, to me," declared the boy.

There were no dish washers out of season; Glory and her brother, Milton, did the work with a little help from a younger sister every day. As the blizzard increased in fury, Glory's tears splashed into the hot-water dish pan. She could hear the guests laughing and singing their college songs around a huge fire in the living room.

It seemed she could never forget the little brown-eyed girl, the others called her Cecelia, who had the lovely soprano voice. Cecelia fairly quivered with music; when she sang it was as if she could not get the beauty she was feeling into the tones of a human voice. Those who listened felt her with praise until it made one sick. Was this the reason she was so unkind, Cecelia had not giggled openly, like the others, but she had pretended to be pleased when Glory was doing her worst and imagining she sang.

Milton came in with a huge armful of wood. "To cook, sliced potatoes for Miss Cecelia to-night!" he explained, for, like everyone else, he was sympathetic to Cecelia. "I'll make sliced potatoes, but not because she asked for 'em!" blazed Morning-glory. "I'd think more of her if she'd come out and say what she thought. She pretended to be so sweet, and was afraid to giggle like the others; but she had her joke with her brother. I don't care for people like them!" The girl's big chest heaved, and for an instant her breath seemed to stop.

"That all sounds very fine!" Glory chided again; it was not, somehow, a satisfying idea to a person who had longed to stand upon some great concert platform and hear the applause of thousands; yet what Milton said was true. Now, at that time, Glory did not know that Cecelia, and her music-teacher brother, who was only a fair mountaineer, had set off to climb the peak. It was not in order to save a great voice for the world that she performed that afternoon the feat of which so much has since been said in the newspapers. She continued, while Milton filled all the wood boxes to reach dishes and to hear the rattle of the wind down from the heights.

At one thirty two o'clocks from a mountain ranch-dropped in. "Do you folks know that a couple of city people started to 'Whisper Peak' this morning?" "They're kidding!" declared Milton. "I don't know what you mean by that to-day, but they were kidding out of their minds. I saw them go by our place!" "Kidding? No, no, they were as real as we could get. You heard the man."

had on one of these stylish knicker suits and the girl wore a fur cap.

"They must be some man and his wife from one of the winter ranches," remarked the girl. "Milton warned all our crowd there was likely to be bad weather."

"It's up to us to go after them, isn't it?" asked one of the cowboys.

"You know what all the ranch people said last winter when Jack Higby was killed going after a city man?" reminded Milton. "If people don't know enough to stay where they belong in winter, they can freeze for all of us."

"Meaning you won't go to-day?" asked the other men, doubtfully, for Milton was the best mountaineer about Winter Peak.

"Meaning that my life happens to be worth as much as the other fellow's—that is, to me," declared the boy.

There was silence in the warm kitchen, except for the big wind. Glory looked at the cowboys. "Well, Jake," she told the one she knew best, "I'll go if Milton won't. I'm a better climber than any of you men."

The others could not deny it; Glory was a giant of a girl, beautiful in a deep-chested, powerful fashion, and wise in the secrets of the hills. Her brother looked at her, and said, "Then I guess I'll go myself—just to look after sis."

Glory hastened to dress herself for the trip. When she went in to her guests, she found they were singing around the fire. "You folks will have to eat my sister's cooking at dinner."

"What—you're going out?" the speaker was that little, cruel one, who had originally begged Glory to sing for the amusement of the crowd. "You know, if you look cold you might lose your voice. I don't think," the speaker continued with perfect gravity, "it's right for a person with a great voice to take such risks; it should be given to the world."

Glory winced, then brushed her hand across her eyes as if to rid herself of a stinging fly. "I'm going to look for some lost mountain climbers."

"Lost? In this storm?" Two or three of the wiser ones lifted frightened faces to that of the cook. There was one girl, especially, whose pallor showed more plainly for the red glow of the log fire. "Wait a minute!" she called, as Glory was hurrying away. "Who are the people lost on the peak to-day?"

Glory had grown up without faith, her people did not believe in a God, and it seemed to her that if the religious people had been right, God would not have made a girl like her without any gifts, but just a longing for music. It was not fair that Cecelia had everything.

"Are you keeping the trail, Glory?" called Milton. He snatched her arm and she saw below her the sheer slope of a precipice. Her brother shouted above the wind, "Are you crazy? You'd have some over next minute."

"It wouldn't have mattered," replied Glory, but the wind roared so he did not hear.

The brother and sister turned a bend in the trail. Her feet were cold as never before. As they climbed on, the chill spread to the knees and she began to feel as though she must lie down, or die; she leaned against a rock, sheltered from the wind. "You go on, Milton; I have to get my breath."

What was that strange, red stain spreading through the snow? Glory stooped to inspect it. It was not blood, but bright red silk, wet and then frozen. "A scarf!" she shouted, as she dragged it from the icy trail. "Milton, they must be just ahead!" With the excitement of the trail, her heartbeat quickened and she sprang forward, in advance of her brother.

Presently they saw a dark figure resting toward them, and a man, half dead from cold, stumbled and fell. He could never have risen had not Milton dragged him to his feet.

"He says," the mountaineer shouted back to his sister, "a lady who was with him is dead. She's on the other side of the big rock, right where she fell."

Glory cried out and ran toward the rock, for everything was forgotten, now, except the one she had come to save. She found a fur cap sticking from a drift, but Milton came and thrust her aside, to make a brief examination of the girl who had lost her battle with the cold. After a moment he said, "Yes, she's dead. We can't do anything for her, and we'd better press on while we have strength to reach 'Last Hope.' It is only a little way now. I see how you feel, sis, but I tell you, she's dead."

Glory sobbed, "She might come to."

"No, she won't, and you might freeze to death trying to help her."

"I'm not cold!" cried Glory. "Give me that rope around your waist, Milton."

The man had revived somewhat with the return of hope; he managed to stagger after his guide, through the blinding storm, toward shelter. The stiff body of the girl was brushed against rocks and evergreens, while once they lifted it ten feet by their rope. Again, Milton carried it in his arms.

"I'll teach you without pay," offered Ben, "I'll you are as to get a child position, and Cecelia'll help you get living expenses down. Some day we think you will earn good money."

"You're not speaking of me!" cried Glory.

Such a beautiful light shone on Cecelia's face that Glory knew it came from some source beyond this world. "I won't mention your saving my life because it would sound as if I wanted to pay you." But listen, Miss Clark, the Lord didn't give me the big voice, He gave it to you—and He doesn't make mistakes. I'd like to help bring it out in you; it's something I can do for Him."

Glory longed to cry out, "Oh, Cecelia, your gift is more than the greatest voice in the world!"

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DEAF AND DUMB
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A PASSING VIEW
The artist took a brush dipped in it in some paint and wiped it across the canvas several times. Then he put the canvas in a frame and gazed at it with evident pride and satisfaction.

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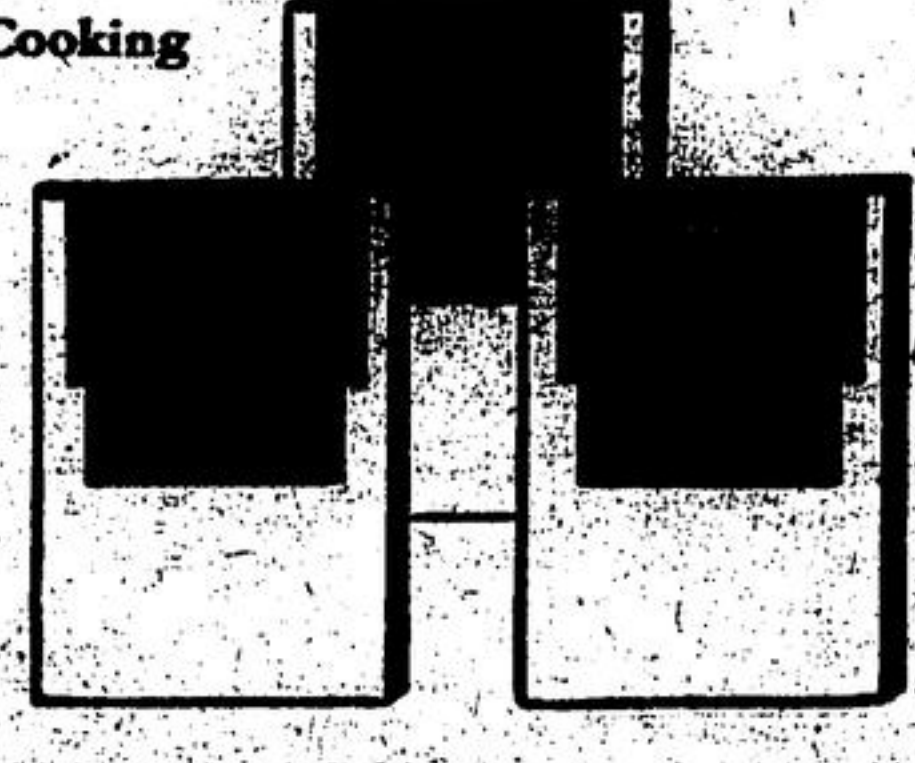
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