

ALLEN JAMES LANE

A CATHEDRAL SINGER

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A Cathedral Singer

I

Slowly on Morningside Heights rises the Cathedral of St. John the Divine: standing on a high rock under the Northern sky above the long wash of the untroubled sea, above the wash of the troubled waves of men.

It has fit neighbors. Across the street to the north looms the many-towered gray-walled Hospital of St. Luke—cathedral of our ruins, of our sufferings and our dust, near the cathedral of our souls.

Across the block to the south is situated a shed-like two-story building with dormer-windows and a crumpled three-sided roof, the studios of the National Academy of Design; and under that low brittle skylight youth toils over the shapes and colors of the visible vanishing paradise of the earth in the shadow of the cathedral which promises an unseen, an eternal one.

At the rear of the cathedral, across the roadway, stands a low stone wall. Just over the wall the earth sinks like a precipice to a green valley bottom far below. Out here is a rugged slope of rock and verdure and forest growth which brings into the city an ancient presence, nature—nature, the Elysian Fields of the art school, the potter's field of the hospital, the harvest field of the church.

This strip of nature fronts the dawn and is called Morningside Park. Past the foot of it a thoroughfare stretches northward and southward, level and wide and smooth. Over this thoroughfare the two opposite-moving streams of the city's traffic and travel rush headlong. Beyond the thoroughfare an embankment of houses shoves its mass before the eyes, and beyond the embankment the city spreads out over flats where human beings are as thick as river reeds.

Thus within small compass humanity is here: the cathedral, the hospital, the art school, and a strip of nature, and a broad highway along which, with their hearth-fires flickering fitfully under their tents of stone, are encamped life's restless, light-hearted, heavy-hearted Gipsies.

It was Monday morning and it was nine o'clock. Over at the National Academy of Design, in an upper room, the members of one of the women's portrait classes were assembled, ready to begin work. Easels had been drawn into position; a clear light from the blue sky of the last of April fell through the opened roof upon new canvases fastened to the frames. And it poured down bountifully upon intelligent young faces. The scene was a beautiful one, and it was complete except in one particular: the teacher of the class was missing—the teacher and a model.

Minutes passed without his coming, and when at last he did enter the room, he advanced two or three steps and paused as though he meant presently to go out again. After his usual quiet good-morning with his sober smile, he gave his alert listeners the clue to an unusual situation:

"I told the class that to-day we should begin a fresh study. I had not myself decided what this should be. Several models were in reserve, any one of whom could have been used to advantage at this closing stage of the year's course. Then the unexpected happened: on Saturday a stranger, a woman, came to see me and asked to be engaged. It is this model that I have been waiting for down-stairs."

Their thoughts instantly passed to the model: his impressive manner, his respectful words, invested her with mystery, with fascination. His countenance lighted up with wonderful interest as he went on:

"She is not a professional; she has never posed. In asking me to engage her she proffered barely the explanation which she seemed to feel due herself. I turn this explanation over to you because she wished, I think, that you also should not misunderstand her. It is the fee, then, that is needed, the model's wage; she has felt the common lash of the poor. Plainly here is some one who has stepped down from her place in life, who has descended far below her inclinations, to raise a small sum of

money. Why she does so is of course her own sacred and delicate affair. But the spirit in which she does this becomes our affair, because it becomes a matter of expression with her. This self-sacrifice, this ordeal which she voluntarily undergoes to gain her end, shows in her face; and if while she poses, you should be fortunate enough to see this look along with other fine things, great things, it will be your aim to transfer them all to your canvases—if you can."

He smiled at them with a kind of fostering challenge to their over-confident impulses and immature art. But he had not yet fully brought out what he had in mind about the mysterious stranger and he continued:

"We teachers of art schools in engaging models have to take from human material as we find it. The best we find is seldom or never what we would prefer. If I, for instance, could have my choice, my students would never be allowed to work from a model who repelled the student or left the student indifferent. No students of mine, if I could have my way, should ever paint from a model that failed to call forth the finest feelings. Otherwise, how can your best emotions have full play in your work; and unless your best emotions enter into your work, what will your work be worth? For if you have never before understood the truth, try to realize it now: that you will succeed in painting only through the best that is in you; just as only the best in you will ever carry you triumphantly to the end of any practical human road that is worth the travel; just as you will reach all life's best goals only through your best. And in painting remember that the best is never in the eye, for the eye can only perceive, the eye can only direct; and the best is never in the hand, for the hand can only measure, the hand can only move. In painting the best comes from emotion. A human being may lack eyes and be none the poorer in character; a human being may lack hands and be none the poorer in character; but whenever in life a person lacks any great emotion, that person is the poorer in everything. And so in painting you can fail after the eye has gained all necessary knowledge, you can fail after your hand has received all necessary training, either because nature has denied you the foundations of great feeling, or because, having these foundations, you have failed to make them the foundations of your work.

"But among a hundred models there might not be one to arouse such emotion. Actually in the world, among the thousands of people we know, how few stir in us our best, force us to our best! It is the rarest experience of our lifetimes that we meet a man or a woman who literally drives us to the realization of what we really are and can really do when we do our best. What we all most need in our careers is the one who can liberate within us that lifelong prisoner whose doom it is to remain a captive until another sets it free—our best. For we can never set our best free by our own hands; that must always be done by another."

They were listening to him with a startled recognition of their inmost selves. He went on to drive home his point about the stranger:

"I am going to introduce to you, then, a model who beyond all the others you have worked with will liberate in you your finer selves. It is a rare opportunity. Do not thank me. I did not find her. Life's storms have blown her violently against the walls of the art school; we must see to it at least that she be not further bruised while it becomes her shelter, her refuge. Who she is, what her life has been, where she comes from, how she happens to arrive here—these are privacies into which of course we do not intrude. Immediately behind herself she drops a curtain of silence which shuts away every such sign of her past. But there are other signs of that past which she cannot hide and which it is our privilege, our duty, the province of our art, to read. They are written on her face, on her hands, on her bearing; they are written all over her—the bruises of life's rudenesses, the lingering shadows of dark days, the unwounded pride once and the wounded pride now, the unconquerable will, a soaring spirit whose wings were meant for the upper air but which are broken and beat the dust. All these are sublime things to paint in any human countenance; they are the footprints of destiny on our faces. The greatest masters of the brush that the world has ever known could not have asked for anything greater. When you behold her, perhaps some of you may think of certain brief but eternal words of Pascal: 'Man is a reed that bends but does not break.' Such is your model, then, a woman with a great countenance;

the fighting face of a woman at peace. Now out upon the darkened battle-field of this woman's face shines one serene sun, and it is that sun that brings out upon it its marvelous human radiance, its supreme expression: the love of the mother. Your model is the beauty of motherhood, the sacredness of motherhood, the glory of motherhood: that is to be the portrait of her that you are to paint."

He stopped. Their faces glowed; their eyes disclosed depths in their natures never stirred before; from out those depths youthful, tender creative forces came forth, eager to serve, to obey. He added a few particulars:

"For a while after she is posed you will no doubt see many different expressions pass rapidly over her face. This will be a new and painful experience to which she will not be able to adapt herself at once. She will be uncomfortable, she will be awkward, she will be embarrassed, she will be without her full value. But I think from what I discovered while talking with her that she will soon grow oblivious to her surroundings. They will not overwhelm her; she will finally overwhelm them. She will soon forget you and me and the studio; the one ruling passion of her life will sweep back into consciousness; and then out upon her features will come again that marvelous look which has almost remodeled them to itself alone."

He added, "I will go for her. By this time she must be waiting down-stairs."

As he turned he glanced at the screens placed at that end of the room; behind these the models made their preparations to pose.

"I have arranged," he said significantly, "that she shall leave her things down-stairs."

It seemed long before they heard him on the way back. He came slowly, as though concerned not to hurry his model, as though to save her from the disrespect of urgency. Even the natural noise of his feet on the bare hallway was restrained. They listened for the sounds of her footsteps. In the tense silence of the studio a pin-drop might have been noticeable, a breath would have been audible; but they could not hear her footsteps. He might have been followed by a spirit. Those feet of hers must be very light feet, very quiet feet, the feet of the well-bred.

He entered and advanced a few paces and turned as though to make way for some one of far more importance than himself; and there walked forward and stopped at a delicate distance from them all a woman, bareheaded, ungloved, slender, straight, of middle height, and in life's middle years—Rachel Truesdale.

She did not look at him or at them; she did not look at anything. It was not her role to notice. She merely waited, perfectly composed, to be told what to do. Her thoughts and emotions did not enter into the scene at all; she was there solely as having been hired for work.

One privilege she had exercised unsparingly—not to offer herself for this employment as becomingly dressed for it. She submitted herself to be painted in austere fidelity to nature, plainly dressed, her hair parted and brushed severely back. Women, sometimes great women, have in history, at the hour of their supreme tragedies, thus demeaned themselves—for the hospital, for baptism, for the guillotine, for the stake, for the cross.

But because she made herself poor in apparel, she became most rich in her humanity. There was nothing for the eye to rest upon but her bare self. And thus the contours of the head, the beauty of the hair, the line of it along the forehead and temples, the curvature of the brows, the chiseling of the proud nostrils and the high bridge of the nose, the molding of the mouth, the modeling of the throat, the shaping of the shoulders, the grace of the arms and the hands—all became conspicuous, absorbing. The slightest elements of physique and of personality came into view powerful, unforgettable.

She stood, not noticing anything, waiting for instructions. With the courtesy which was the soul of him and the secret of his genius for inspiring others to do their utmost, the master of the class glanced at her and glanced at the members of the class, and tried to draw them together with a mere smile of sympathetic introduction. It was an attempt to break the ice. For them it did break the ice; all responded with a smile for her or with other play of the features that meant gracious recognition. With her the ice remained unbroken; she withheld all response to their courteous overtures. Either

she may not have trusted herself to respond; or waiting there merely as a model, she declined to establish any other understanding with them whatsoever. So that he went further in the kindness of his intention and said:

"Madam, this is my class of eager, warm, generous young natures who are to have the opportunity of trying to paint you. They are mere beginners; their art is still unformed. But you may believe that they will put their best into what they are about to undertake; the loyalty of the hand, the respect of the eye, the tenderness of their memories, consecration to their art, their dreams and hopes of future success. Now if you will be good enough to sit here, I will pose you."

He stepped toward a circular revolving-platform placed at the focus of the massed easels: it was the model's rack of patience, the mount of humiliation, the scaffold of exposure.

She had perhaps not understood that this would be required of her, this indignity, that she must climb upon a block like an old-time slave at an auction. For one instant her fighting look came back and her eyes, though they rested on vacancy, blazed on vacancy and an ugly red rushed over her face which had been whiter than colorless. Then as though she had become disciplined through years of necessity to do the unworthy things that must be done, she stepped resolutely though unsteadily upon the platform. A long procession of men and women had climbed thither from many a motive on life's upward or downward road.

He had specially chosen a chair for a three-quarter portrait, stately, richly carved; about it hung an atmosphere of high-born things.

Now, the body has definite memories as the mind has definite memories, and scarcely had she seated herself before the recollections of former years revived in her and she yielded herself to the chair as though she had risen from it a moment before. He did not have to pose her; she had posed herself by grace of bygone luxurious ways. A few changes in the arrangement of the hands he did make. There was required some separation of the fingers; excitement caused her to hold them too closely together. And he drew the entire hands into notice; he specially wished them to be appreciated in the portrait. They were wonderful hands: they looked eloquent with the histories of generations; their youthfulness seemed centuries old. Yet all over them, barely to be seen, were the marks of life's experience, the delicate but dread sculpture of adversity.

For a while it was as he had foreseen. She was aware only of the brutality of her position; and her face, by its confused expressions and quick changes of color, showed what painful thoughts surged. Afterward a change came gradually. As though she could endure the ordeal only by forgetting it and could forget it only by looking ahead into the happiness for which it was endured, slowly there began to shine out upon her face its ruling passion—the acceptance of life and the love of the mother glinting as from a cloud-hidden sun across the world's storm. When this expression had come out, it stayed there. She had forgotten her surroundings, she had forgotten herself. Poor indeed must have been the soul that would not have been touched by the spectacle of her, thrilled by her as by a great vision.

There was silence in the room of young workers. Before them, on the face of the unknown, was the only look that the whole world knows—the love and self-sacrifice of the mother; perhaps the only element of our better humanity that never once in the history of man kind has been misunderstood and ridiculed or envied and reviled.

Some of them worked with faces brightened by thoughts of devoted mothers at home; the eyes of a few were shadowed by memories of mothers alienated or dead.

II

That morning on the ledge of rock at the rear of the cathedral Nature hinted to passers what they would more abundantly see if fortunate enough to be with her where she was entirely at home—out in the country.

The young grass along the foot of this slope was thick and green; imagination missed from the picture rural sheep, their fleeces wet with April rain. Along the summit of the slope trees of oak and ash and maple and chestnut and poplar lifted against the sky their united forest strength. Between the trees above and the grass below, the embankment spread before the eye the enchantment of a spring landscape, with late bare boughs and early green boughs and other boughs in blossom.

The earliest blossoms on our part of the earth's surface are nearly always white. They have forced their way to the sun along a frozen path and look akin to the perils of their road: the snow-threatened lily of the valley, the chill snowdrop, the frosty snowball, the bleak hawtree, the wintry wild cherry, the wintry dogwood. As the eye swept the park expanse this morning, here and there some of these were as the last tokens of winter's mantle instead of the first tokens of summer's.

There were flushes of color also, as where in deep soil, on a projection of rock, a pink hawthorn stood studded to the tips of its branches with leaf and flower. But such flushes of color were as false notes of the earth, as harmonies of summer thrust into the wrong places and become discords. The time for them was not yet. The hour called for hardy adventurous things, awakened out of their cold sleep on the rocks. The blue of the firmament was not dark summer blue but seemed the sky's first pale response to the sun. The sun was not rich summer gold but flashed silver rays. The ground scattered no odors; all was the budding youth of Nature on the rocks.

Paths wind hither and thither over this park hillside. Benches are placed at different levels along the way. If you are going up, you may rest; if you are coming down, you may linger; if neither going up nor coming down, you may with a book seek out some retreat of shade and coolness and keep at a distance the millions that rush and crush around the park as waters roar against some lone mid-ocean island.

About eleven o'clock that morning, on one of these benches placed where rock is steepest and forest trees stand close together and vines are rank with shade, a sociable-looking little fellow of some ten hardy well-buffed years had sat down for the moment without a companion. He had thrown upon the bench beside him his sun-faded, rain-faded, shapeless cap, uncovering much bronzed hair; and as though by this simple act he had cleared the way for business, he thrust one capable-looking hand deep into one of his pockets. The fingers closed upon what they found there, like the meshes of a deep-sea net filled with its catch, and were slowly drawn to the surface. The catch consisted of one-cent and five-cent pieces, representing the sales of his morning papers. He counted the coins one by one over into the palm of the other hand, which then closed upon the total like another net, and dropped the treasure back into the deep sea of the other pocket.

His absorption in this process had been intense; his satisfaction with the result was complete. Perhaps after every act of successful banking there takes place in the mind of man, spendthrift and miser, a momentary lull of energy, a kind of brief *Pax vobiscum*, O my soul and stomach, my twin masters of need and greed! And possibly, as the lad deposited his earnings, he was old enough to enter a little way into this adult and despicable joy. Be this as it may, he was not the next instant up again and busy. He caught up his cap, dropped it not on his head but on one of his ragged knees; planted a sturdy hand on it and the other sturdy hand on the other knee; and with his sturdy legs swinging under the bench, toe kicking heel and heel kicking toe, he rested briefly from life's battle.

The signs of battle were thick on him, unmistakable. The palpable sign, the conqueror's sign, was the profits won in the struggle of the streets. The other signs may be set down as loss—dirt and raggedness and disorder. His hair might never have been straightened out with a comb; his hands were

not politely mentionable; his coarse shoes, which seemed to have been bought with the agreement that they were never to wear out, were ill-conditioned with general dust and the special grime of melted pitch from the typical contractor's cheapened asphalt; one of his stockings had a fresh rent and old rents enlarged their grievances.

A single sign of victory was better even than the money in the pocket—the whole lad himself. He was strongly built, frankly fashioned, with happy grayish eyes, which had in them some of the cold warrior blue of the sky that day; and they were set wide apart in a compact round head, which somehow suggested a bronze sphere on a column of triumph. Altogether he belonged to that hillside of nature, himself a human growth budding out of wintry fortunes into life's April, opening on the rocks hardy and all white.

But to sit there swinging his legs—this did not suffice to satisfy his heart, did not enable him to celebrate his instincts; and suddenly from his thicket of forest trees and greening bushes he began to pour forth a thrilling little tide of song, with the native sweetness of some human linnet unaware of its transcendent gift.

Up the steep hill a man not yet of middle age had mounted from the flats. He was on his way toward the parapet above. He came on slowly, hat in hand, perspiration on his forehead; that climb from base to summit stretches a healthy walker and does him good. At a turn of the road under the forest trees with shrubbery alongside he stopped suddenly, as a naturalist might pause with half-lifted foot beside a dense copse in which some unknown species of bird sang—a young bird just finding its notes.

It was his vocation to discover and to train voices. His definite work in music was to help perpetually to rebuild for the world that ever-sinking bridge of sound over which Faith aids itself in walking-toward the eternal. This bridge of falling notes is as Nature's bridge of falling drops: individual drops appear for an instant in the rainbow, then disappear, but century after century the great arch stands there on the sky unshaken. So throughout the ages the bridge of sacred music, in which individual voices are heard a little while and then are heard no longer, remains for man as one same structure of rock by which he passes over from the mortal to the immortal.

Such was his life-work. As he now paused and listened, you might have interpreted his demeanor as that of a professional musician whose ears brought tidings that greatly astonished him. The thought had at once come to him of how the New York papers once in a while print a story of the accidental finding in it of a wonderful voice—in New York, where you can find everything that is human. He recalled throughout the history of music instances in which some one of the world's famous singers had been picked up on life's road where it was roughest. Was anything like this now to become his own experience? Falling on his ear was an unmistakable gift of song, a wandering, haunting, unidentified note under that early April blue. He had never heard anything like it. It was a singing soul.

Voice alone did not suffice for his purpose; the singer's face, personality, manners, some unfortunate strain in the blood, might debar the voice, block its acceptance, ruin everything. He almost dreaded to walk on, to explore what was ahead. But his road led that way, and three steps brought him around the woody bend of it.

There he stopped again. In an embrasure of rock on which vines were turning green, a little fellow, seasoned by wind and sun, with a countenance open and friendly, like the sky, was pouring out his full heart.

The instant the man came into view, the song was broken off. The sturdy figure started up and sprang forward with the instinct of business. When any one paused and looked questioningly at him, as this man now did, it meant papers and pennies. His inquiry was quite breathless:

"Do you want a paper, Mister? What paper do you want? I can get you one on the avenue in a minute."

He stood looking up at the man, alert, capable, fearless, ingratiating. The man had instantly taken note of the speaking voice, which is often a safer first criterion to go by than the singing voice itself. He pronounced it sincere, robust, true, sweet, victorious. And very quickly also he made up his mind that conditions must have been rare and fortunate with the lad at his birth: blood will tell, and blood told now even in this dirt and in these rags.

His reply bore testimony to how appreciative he felt of all that faced him there so humanly on the rock.

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