

THE FIRST SOPRANO

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The First Soprano by Mary Hitchcock

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MARY HITCHCOCK

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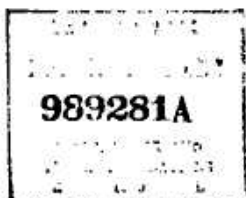
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BY
MARY HITCHCOCK



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WORLD'S BEST



THE FIRST SOPRANO

CHAPTER I

IN THE CHURCH

It was Sunday morning in a church at New Laodicea. The bell had ceased pealing and the great organ began its prelude with deep bass notes that vibrated through the stately building. The members of the choir were all in their places in the rear gallery, and prepared in order their music in the racks before them. Below the worshipers poured in steady, quiet streams down the carpeted aisles to their places, and there was a gentle murmur of silk as ladies settled in their pews and bowed their heads for the conventional moment of prayer. Exquisitely stained windows challenged the too garish daylight, but permitted to enter subdued rays in azure, violet and crimson tints which fell athwart the eastern pews and garnished the marble font and the finely carved pulpit. They fell upon the silvering hair of the Reverend Doctor Schoolman as he pronounced the invocation and read the opening hymn, but they failed to reach the young stranger, seated behind, who accompanied him this morning.

Faultlessly in their usual current ran the services until the time for the anthem by the choir, and then the people settled themselves comfortably in their pews with expectant faces and ears slightly turned

THE END

to catch every strain from the well-trained voices in the gallery behind. This time the selection was from Mendelssohn and a soprano voice began alone:

"Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove!
Far away, far away would I rove!"

Clear, pure and true, the sweet voice floated through the church. With dramatic sympathy it yielded to the spirit of the melody and the pathos of the words. It touched hearts with a sense of undefined sorrow and longing. Madame Chapeau, the French milliner, who rented a sitting in the church of her patrons, sat with eyes filled with tears that threatened to plough pale furrows through the roses of her cheeks.

"In the wilderness build me a nest,"

suggested the sweet voice. Two weeks in a lonely country place had been far too long the summer before for Madame, and a wilderness was the last place she desired. But the plaintive song touched a sentimental chord and answered every purpose. Mr. Stockman, who sat midway of the center aisle, grasping his gold-headed cane, suffered the keen business lines of his face to relax and looked palpably pleased. He recalled the money contributed to the expense of the choir, and reflected that he would not withdraw a dollar of it. To be sure, he remembered that the services of this soprano, daughter of Robert Gray, the iron merchant and elder of the church, were gratuitous; but still he was glad to associate the thought of his money with the choir that could render such music. And presently the chorus joined in the song, and many voices added their harmony to the increasing passion of the cry:

J 9 V N

"In the wilderness build me a nest,
And remain there forever at rest!"

Sensitive souls thrilled to the music, which unquestionably always added the capstone to the aesthetic enjoyment of this, the most elegant church at New Laodicea. The minister sat with a studied expression of approbation and subdued enjoyment. The young stranger at his side sat with eyes shaded by his hand.

The choir seated themselves with pleased relief, for there had been no noticeable flaw in the production. The leader's sensitive face looked as nearly satisfied as it ever became over any performance. The organist slid off his bench and dropped into his chair to listen to the sermon—or, perhaps not to listen. But he had done his part well, faithfully filling in all the interstices of time between numbers of the program, so that the congregation had been bored by no moments of silence nor thrust back upon the necessity of meditation.

There were a few words of introduction, and it was found that the stranger was to speak. He was just a trifle surprising in appearance, for his coat had no ministerial cut, and was even a bit more suggestive of business than of the profession of divinity. But he was soon forgiven this; for his voice was even and pleasant, and he looked at his congregation with a pair of frank blue eyes, while he spoke with the simplicity of a man who has somewhat to say to his fellowmen and says it honestly. His text excited no curiosity, for it was this: "*The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.*"

In the choir Miss Winifred Gray had composed herself to listen. Fortunately she was at the rear of her