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Nearer To Thee

By Mrs. Paul E. King*

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*[No Author was shown. I am assuming that this story was written by Lucille King, but so far as I now know it might have been authored by someone else. -- DVM]

There was the quiet hush of early dawn hanging over the little Hoosier town -- the last quiet of the night just before the world awakens with the sudden clang of alarms, stove lids, and screen doors. The white horse that pulled the Meadow Milk Cart waited patiently as the slender girl ran around Dr. Martin's big house with the milk.

Usually Linda Greene ran to and from the milk cart, but this morning she paused to face the dawn over Martins' beautiful gardens. It was September, and the petunias, in their fancy beds, gave up a sweet, heavy musk into the damp morning air. Linda remembered that Ellen Martin's linen dress, at school the day before, had been the color of the lovely pink blossoms. Linda sighed -- a sigh too weary for a girl of sixteen -- and ran back to the cart. A soft word to old Dan, grabbing bottles, running to back doors, around through alleys, and the route was nearly finished when the homes began to take on the noise and rush of the new day.

Back to the edge of the town she went, to the little farm that would not pay; back to a scolding mother, the two sullen brothers and a scant breakfast.

Linda was starting to high school. She had gone the day before for the first day and had been so alone! The girls all seemed to have a pal or pals, and there was no other lone girl to whom she might become a friend. With an aching heart, she had gone



home in the evening, but determined to go on to school. She had finished in the country grade school two years before, but her father's untimely death had made high school an impossibility at that time. But now Grandfather had stood by her, and out of his own scarce funds was sending her to school. He had always been interested in her, and understood so well.

When Linda felt like crying, she sang. She sang now as she dressed for school -- a shapeless dress remodeled by her own unskilled hands from a "hand-me-down" of one of the church ladies.

"I'm clean, anyway," she murmured as she combed her dark waves before the cracked mirror, "and some day I shall find real friends."

The schooldays passed -- the same monotonous grind, the early rising in the cold dawn to deliver the milk while one's body shivered under the thin coat; the lonesome days at school -- walking the halls at recess alone, the march to classes without the friendly squeezing hand or a wink over some delightful secret.

Sometimes Linda would cry into her pillow, "I can't fit in -- they won't give me a chance. Oh, Grandpa, you say I'm as good as the rest -- sometimes I don't believe even you understand." But the old man did understand, and at times he loathed the attitude of her classmates that, through their indifference, made Linda's heart heavy while her lips sang.

The school was all astir over the program at the beginning of the year. There was to be a cantata, and a Mr. Gregory, from Chicago, was to direct it. The characters were to be chosen soon, and Linda heard the whisperings:

"Ellen Martin will have the lead."

"Yes, Ellen has a lovely voice."

"Yes, and Eli Martin is trustee," this from one who did not kneel around Ellen's throne.

There were try-outs and try-outs, and still the director made no decision, but Ellen Martin's crowd considered the question settled. No one thought of Linda making the try-out, and Linda, least of all.

Grandpa Greene had been singing master of the old school, and he taught Linda the old method of singing hymns. At night, she would sing to him -- her voice clear and sweet, and at the end of each score, her voice would raise in the lilting fashion of the old singing masters. He was very proud of her accomplishments, especially her singing.

"The theme of the program is an old pilgrim story and the speaking and singing must be sincere," stated the director firmly when the superintendent insisted that the cast be chosen.

"Ellen always has had the lead and has done it well."

"That is the point exactly," returned Mr. Gregory. "Ellen has had the lead all of her life -- Eli Martin's money has seen to that. No, Ellen is too proud to give herself wholly to the part."

"Who among the young people could or would?" questioned the superintendent.

"I don't know, but I do know I'll choose another theme before I'll make a failure of this lovely story."

And the days went on, Linda working hard, studying hard, and trying to forget that she was lonely.

One morning, as the sun was rising, Linda ran through the alley with her milk. A frosty sheet lay on all the trees and shrubs, and the red east reflected on it all. The beauty of the morning flooded over her, and she raised her arms toward the east as her voice sang out the old song:

"I love Thy Church, O God;
Her walls before Thee stand,"

A man paused in the yard behind her.

"Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And graven on Thy hand. "

Her voice ended as clearly as a bird's, and with the old-fashioned lilting sound.

The man hurried through the back hedge. "Wait, girl!"

Linda whirled, ready for flight, for always her grandfather was warning her of men who might speak to her on the route. But no, this man was Mr. Gregory. Perhaps he was going to tell her to stop leaving milk, and she felt sick at the thought; they needed the money so badly, and her mother would accuse her of poor service.

"My girl!" he repeated, when he reached her, "who taught you to sing like that?"

"Why, Grandpa did -- you see the morning was so pretty I just had to sing. I hope I didn't disturb you." "You are in high school, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Linda Greene."

"Come to my office this morning before classes-say 8:30." And that was all. He passed through the garden into the house.

Linda thought the sun was just a little more red, and the world just a little brighter as she finished the rounds. As she drove home, she kept dreaming and hoping, but, when she put Dan in the barn and set out the trays, she remembered that she was only the shabby Greene girl, and a very foolish one to hope so much.

She was too excited to eat breakfast, and started toward the school. As she passed the Martin house, Ellen came out, drawing the belt of her heavy coat tight around her slender waist, her bright hair curling out from under the wooly, red cap.

"Yoo, hoo!" she called gaily, and Linda stopped, too amazed and happy to speak. Surely Ellen was calling her and was going to be kind. But as she turned, she saw pretty Barbara Keller come running down the street, and Ellen was calling: "Barby! Today Mr. Gregory will have to announce his cast-Miss Eliot told mother last evening."

Linda hurried even faster as she heard the girls talking gaily behind her.

"Perhaps we can start to practice next week." Linda's face burned as she was ashamed even to have hoped for a chance in the program. No, Ellen Martin was the one; she had everything -- clothes, money, a lovely home, and a mother who loved her.

Mr. Gregory was standing at the window, watching the students come to school. And as Linda entered the room he chuckled.

"Miss Greene," he began after he had seated her by his desk, "did you ever sing in public?"

"Linda saw her chance slipping away. "No, just at Sunday school, but," she added hurriedly, "I think I could."

"I do, too," he went on, as he noted the girl's mass of black, wavy hair, and the large, dark-gray eyes. "At least, we'll try. Now, you stand over by the window and forget me. Forget I'm here and sing some old song -- preferably some old hymn."

Linda went to the window. The tears were coming to her eyes, and her hands were cold as she gripped the window ledge and waited; then the song came, soft and uneven at first, and then Linda forgot Mr. Gregory, the Martins, the school -- forgot all but the frosty beauty of the trees on the school ground. She sang in the same quaint style as she did in the alley. When she had finished she turned to see Mr. Gregory with tear-filled eyes and heard him ask the wonderful question: "Do you think you could take the lead in the cantata?" And before she could answer he went on: "Your voice is lovely,

and I'll spend extra time on your speaking parts if necessary, but I must have you sing the lead in that dear, old-fashioned way."

Linda went through her classes that day as in a dream. It did not matter that she walked to class alone; nothing mattered, other than that she, Linda Greene, the milk-cart girl, was to have some beautiful part in the program.

At the last period in the afternoon, Mr. Gregory came into the assembly to announce the participants. All eyes were on him, except Linda's and Ellen's. Ellen blushed prettily and pretended interest in a book. Mr. Gregory went on explaining that he had found a voice of unusual quality and decidedly the type for the role. And when he mentioned Linda's name, a swarm of bees would have caused little more stir or buzzing had they been released in the room. Linda was thankful when they were dismissed, for some of the whispers reached her:

"Well, did you ever?"

"I never dreamed she could sing!"

Ellen flushed and said: "I certainly will take no part in the thing. Imagine giving me an unnoticeable part!"

Practice began and Linda soon proved herself capable of the speaking part also.

"You're a find," Mr. Gregory remarked one night. "Linda, you must keep up your voice training. I am going to try to arrange with Mrs. Sewall to give you lessons. Mrs. Sewall, before her marriage to the rich Frederick Sewall, had been Gladys Esterly, of musical fame.

Little did Mr. Gregory know how tired Linda was -- the late practicing, the early milk route, and lately Grandpa Greene had been quite ill, and she slept on a cot in his room to care for him. Some of the girls were friendly, but Ellen took every chance to be rude to her.

"I can't go on," Linda sobbed one night to her grandfather. "It isn't worth the heartache."

"Child, do it for me then. I'm not well, but I am going to hear you sing. Now read and sing for me, Linda, before I go to sleep."

Linda read. She was so sleepy her eyes burned. Suddenly she perked herself awake, and read on to the end of the chapter, then softly she sang her evening song. Seeing the old man asleep, she went to him and softly kissed his pale face, but there was something wrong. She shook him, and, calling to her mother, sank in her deep grief to the floor.

"Grandpa, you who alone understood and loved me, you leave me so all alone!"

The days drew on to the date of the program. Linda had at first thought she could not go on, but she remembered the old man's last words: "I'll be proud of my Linda." Grandfather had had little in life to make him happy other than his love for Linda. No, she must go on.

The big night came. Mrs. Greene would not go. "No sense wasting money on such foolishness -- school is bad enough, let alone some foolish program," she had told Linda.

The story was of a New England family in the early days -- a large, motherless family -- a sacrificing daughter, who reared the younger ones, guided them through their childhood, advised them in their loves, making herself happy by living through them. The last scene was short, hardly more than a pantomime. The daughter (Linda) now grown old, was nearing death with the faith and hope of those who have lived for others, and facing it all alone. Linda had requested Mr. Gregory not to ask her to sing the last song in practice, and he, understanding, had agreed.

The last scene came -- Linda, dressed in Quaker black with a touch of white at her slender throat, stood alone on the platform.

"I can't go on!" the thought raced through her mind, and then it seemed she saw her grandfather dimly before her, his dear white hair, his smile as he said, "I'll be proud of my Linda."

Linda had held her audience in the foregoing scenes as she sang to the babe in her arms, and the children around her chair, but now the crowd seemed to sense a difference. The pathos of her heart was in her voice. Her arms uplifted and her vision before her, she sang as she never knew she could sing:

"Angels to beckon me Nearer, my God, to Thee;
Nearer, my God to Thee; Nearer, to Thee."

The curtain fell and the people in front were too moved to applaud.

"Who was this pretty girl with the voice of an angel?"

Behind the scenes Linda sobbed: "I wish Grandfather were here."

"Yes," said Mr. Gregory, as he choked back a sob. Only he knew the fight that Linda had made, and he was amazed to see Ellen's arms around Linda, her bright curls against the dark head. Even cruel, proud Ellen was in tears as she cried: "O Linda, you were grand! I'm so ashamed of my hateful words! Can we be friends?"

Linda smiled through her tears, and putting her arm around Ellen, they left the platform.

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THE END