

The GOLDEN SINGER

by MARTNA BELLINGER

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Agatha Redmond, opera singer, starting for an auto drive in New York, finds a stranger sent as her chauffeur. Leaving the car, she goes into the park to read the book she has left her mother. She is accosted by a stranger, who follows her to the auto, climbs in and chatters to her. James Hamilton of Lynn, Mass., witnesses the abduction of Agatha Redmond. Hamilton sees Agatha forcibly taken aboard a yacht. He secures a tug and when near the yacht drops anchor. Boarding the yacht, he finds Agatha Redmond. He clothes and money belt have been taken from him. He meets a man who introduces himself as Monsieur Chateaufort, who is Agatha's captor. They fight, but are interrupted by the sinking of the vessel. Jimmy and Agatha are both abandoned by the crew, who take to the boats. Jimmy and Agatha swim for hours and finally reach shore. He is thoroughly exhausted. Recovering slightly, the pair find Hamlet, the chauffeur who assisted in the abduction. He agrees to help them. Jim is furious and on the verge of death. Hamlet goes for help. He returns with Dr. Thayer, who revives Jim, and the party is conveyed to Chateaufort, where Agatha's property is located. Dr. Thayer is the brother of Agatha's benefactor, Van Camp, and his assistant, Dr. Gull, reach Chateaufort and get tidings of the wreck of the Jeanne d'Arc. Aleck finds Jim on the verge of death and Agatha in despair.

CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

"I can't go in—I can't bear to see him so ill," she whispered; and as Aleck looked at her before entering the sick-room, he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

Agatha went back to her couch, feeling that the heavens had opened. Here was a friend come to her from she knew not where, whose right it was to assume responsibility for the sick man. He was kind and good, and he loved her rescuer with the boyish devotion of their school-days. He would surely help; he would work with her to keep death away. What- ever love and professional skill could do, should be done; there had been no question as to that, of course, from the beginning. But here was some one who would double, yes, more than double her own efforts; some one who was strong and well, and capable. Her heart was thankful.

Before Aleck returned from the sick-room, Doctor Thayer's step sounded on the stairs, followed by the mildly complaining voice of Sallie Kingsbury. Presently the two men were in a low-voiced conference in the hall. Agatha waited while they talked, feeling grateful afresh that Doctor Thayer's grim professional nod was to be reinforced by Mr. Van Camp's presence. When the doctor entered Agatha's room, her face had almost the natural flush of health.

"Ah, Miss Agatha Redmond," the doctor continued frequently to address her by her full name, half in affectionate deference and half with some dry sense of humor peculiar to himself—"Miss Agatha Redmond, so you're beginning to pick up! A good thing, too; for I don't want two patients in this country like you, one yonder. He's a very sick man, Miss Agatha."

"I know, doctor. I have seen him grow worse, hour by hour, even since we came. What can be done?"

"He needs special nursing now, and your man in there will be worn out presently."

"Oh, that can be managed. Send to Portland, to Boston, or somewhere. We can get a nurse here soon. Do not spare any trouble, doctor. I can arrange."

Doctor Thayer squared himself and passed slowly up and down Agatha's room. He did not reply at once, and when he did, it was with one of his characteristic turns toward an apparently irrelevant topic.

"Have you seen Sister Susan?" he inquired, stopping by the side of Agatha's couch and looking down on her with his shrewd gaze. It was a needless question, for he knew that Agatha had not seen Mrs. Stoddard. She had been too weak and ill to see anybody. Agatha shook her head.

"Well, Miss Agatha Redmond, Susan's the nurse we need for that young gentleman over there. It's constant care he must have now, day and night; and if he gets well, it will be good nursing that does it. There isn't a nurse in this country like Susan, when she once takes hold of a case. That Mr. Hand in there is all right, but he can't sit up much longer night and day, as he has been doing. And he isn't a woman. Don't know why it is, but the Lord seems bent on throwing sick men into women's hands—as if they weren't more than a match for us when we're well!"

Agatha's humorous smile rewarded the doctor's grim comments, if that was what he wanted.

"No, doctor," she said, with a feeling touch of her old lightness, "we're never a match for you. We may entertain you or nurse you or feed you, or possibly once in a century or two inspire you; but we're never a match for you."

"For which Heaven be praised!" ejaculated the doctor fervently.

Agatha watched him as he fumbled nervously about the room or clasped his hands behind him under his long coat-tails. The greenish-black frock-coat hung untidy upon him, and his white fringe of hair was anything but smooth. She perceived that something other than medical problems troubled him.

"Would your sister—would Mrs. Stoddard—be willing to come here to take care of Mr. Hamilton?" she ventured.

"Ask me that," snapped the doctor, "when no man on earth could tell whether she'll come or not. She says she won't. She's hurt and she's out-raged; or at least she thinks she is. But if you could get her to think that it was her duty to take care of that poor boy in there, she'd come fast enough."

Agatha was puzzled. She felt as if there were a dozen ways to turn and only one way that would lead her right; and she could not find the clue to that one right way. At last she attacked the doctor boldly.

"Tell me, Doctor Thayer," she said earnestly, "just what it is that causes Mrs. Stoddard to feel hurt and out-raged. Is it simply because I have inherited the money and the house? She can't possibly know anything about me personally."

The old doctor thrust his under jaw out more belligerently than ever, while turning his answer over in his mind. He took two lengths of the room before stopping again by Agatha's side and looking down on her.

"She says it isn't the money, but that it's the slight Hercules put upon her for leaving the place, our old home, out of the family. That's one thing; but that isn't the worst. Susan's orthodox, you know, very orthodox; and she has a prejudice against your profession—serving Satan, she calls it. She thinks that's what actresses and opera singers do, though how she knows anything about it, I don't see."

The grim smile shone in the doctor's eyes even while he looked, half anxiously, to see how Agatha was taking his explanation of Mrs. Stoddard's attitude. Agatha meditated a moment.

"If it's merely a prejudice in the abstract against my being an opera singer, I think she will overcome that. Besides, Mr. Hamilton is neither an actor nor an opera singer; he isn't 'serving Satan.'"

"Well," the doctor hesitated, and then went on hastily, with a great show of irritation, "Susan's a little set in her views. She disapproves of the way you came here; says you shouldn't have been out in a boat with two men, and that it's a judgment for sin, your being drowned, or next door to it. I'm only saying this, my dear Miss Agatha, to explain to you why Susan—"

But Agatha was enlightened at last, and roused sufficient to cause two red spots, brighter than they had ever been, in health, to burn on her cheeks. She sat up very straight, facing Doctor Thayer's worried gaze, and interrupted him in tones ringing with anger.

"Do you mean to tell me, Doctor Thayer, that your sister, the sister of my mother's lifelong friend, sits in her house and imagines scandalous stories about me when I was nothing at all about the facts or about me? That she thinks I was out in a boat alone with two men? That she is mean enough to condemn me without knowing the first thing about this awful accident? Oh, I have no words!" And Agatha covered her burning face with her hands, unable, by mere speech, to express her outraged feelings. Doctor Thayer edged uneasily about Agatha's couch in a manner resembling that of a whipped dog.

Why, my dear Miss Agatha, Susan will come round in time. She's not so bad, really. She'll come round in time, only just now we haven't any time to spare. Don't feel so badly; Susan is too set in her views—"

"Set!" cried Agatha. "She's a horrid, unchristian woman!"

"Oh, no," remonstrated the doctor. "Susan's all right, when you once get used to her. She's a trifle old-fashioned in her views—"

But Agatha was not listening to the doctor's feeble justification of Susan. She was thinking hard.

"Doctor Thayer," she urged, "do you want that woman to come here to take care of Mr. Hamilton? Isn't there any one else in this countryside who can nurse a sick man? Why, I can do it myself; or Mr. Van Camp, his cousin, could do it. Why should you want her, of all people, when she feels so toward us?"

The moment his professional judgment came into question Doctor Thayer slipped out from the cloud of embarrassment which had engulfed him in his recent conversation, and assumed the authoritative voice that Agatha had first heard.

"My dear Miss Agatha Redmond, that is foolish talk. You are half sick, even now; and it requires a strong person, with no nerves, to do what I desire done. Mr. Van Camp may be his cousin, but the chances are that he wouldn't know a bromide from a blister; and good nurses don't grow on bushes in Ilion, nor in Charleston, either. There isn't one to be had, so far as I know, and we can't wait to send to Augusta or Portland. The next few days, especially the next twenty-four hours, are critical."

Agatha listened intently, and a growing resolution shone in her eyes.

"Would Mrs. Stoddard come, if it were not for what you said—about me?" she asked.

"The Lord only knows, but I think she would," replied the poor, harassed doctor. "She's always been a regular Dorcas in this neighborhood."

"Dorcas!" cried Agatha, her anger again flaring up. "I should say Sapphira."

"Oh, now, Susan isn't so bad, when you once know her," urged the doctor.

Agatha got up and went to the window, trailing her traveling rug after her. "She shall come—I'll bring her. And sometime she shall mend her words about me—but that can wait. If she will only help to save James Hamilton's life now! Where does she live?" Suddenly, as she stood at the window, she saw an opportunity.

"There's Little Simon down there now under the trees; and his buggy must be somewhere near. Will you stay here, Doctor Thayer, with Mr. Hamilton, while I go to see your sister?"

"Hadm't I better drive you over to see Susan myself?" feebly suggested the doctor.

"No, I'll go alone." There was anger, determination, gunpowder in Agatha's voice.

"But mind you, don't offer her any money," the doctor warned, as he watched her go down the hall and disappear for an instant in the bedroom where James Hamilton lay. She came out almost immediately and without a word descended the wide stairway, opened the dining-room door, and called softly to Sallie Kingsbury.

Doctor Thayer returned to the sick-room. Ten minutes later he heard the wheels of Little Simon's buggy rolling rapidly up the road in the direction of Susan Stoddard's place.

CHAPTER XIV.

Susan Stoddard's Prayer.

There was a wide porch, spotlessly scrubbed, along the front of the house, and two hydrangeas blooming gorgeously in tubs, one on either side of the walk. The house looked new and modern, shiny with paint and furnished with all the conveniences of day by the relentless progress of our times.

Little Simon had informed Agatha, during their short drive, that Deacon Stoddard had achieved this "residence" shortly before his death; and his tone implied that it was the pride of the town, its real treasure. Even to Agatha's absorbed and preoccupied mind it presented a striking contrast to the old red house, which had received her so graciously into its spacious comfort. She marveled that anything so fresh and modish as the house before her could have come into being in the old town. It was next to a certainty that there was a model laundry with set tubs beyond the kitchen, and equally sure that no old horsehair lounge subtly invited the weary traveler to rest.

A cool draft came through the screen door. Within, it was cleaner than anything Agatha had ever seen. The stair-rail glistened, the polished floors shone. A neat bouquet of sweet peas stood exactly in the center of a snow-white dolly, which was exactly in the middle of a shiny, round table. The very door-mat was brand new; Agatha would never have thought of wiping her shoes on it.

Agatha's ring was answered by a half-grown girl, who looked scared when she saw a stranger at the door. Agatha walked into the parlor, in spite of the girl's hesitation in inviting her, and directed her to say to Mrs. Stoddard that Miss Redmond, from the old red house, wished particularly to see her. The girl's face assumed an

expression of intelligent and ecstatic curiosity.

"Oh!" she breathed. "Then, 'She's putting up plans, but she can come out in a few minutes.' She could not get a few minutes to look at Agatha, her wide-eyed gaze taking note of her hair, her dress, her hands, her face. As Agatha became conscious of the ingenious inspection to which she was subjected, she smiled at the girl—one of her old, radiant, friendly smiles."

"Run now, and tell Mrs. Stoddard, there's a good child! And sometime you must come to see me at the red house; will you?"

The girl's face lighted up as if the sun had come through a cloud. She smiled at Agatha in return, with a "Yes" under her breath. Thus are slaves made.

Left alone in the cool, dim parlor, so orderly and spotless, Agatha had a presentiment of the prejudice of class and of religion against which she was about to throw herself. Susan Stoddard's fanaticism was not merely that of an individual; it represented the stored-up strength of hardy, conscience-driven generations. The Stoddards might build themselves houses with model laundries, but they did not thereby transfer their real treasure from the incorruptible kingdom. If they were not ruled by aesthetic ideals, neither were they governed by thoughts of worldly display. This fragrant, clean room bespoke character and family history. Agatha found herself absent looking down at a white wax cross, entwined with wax flowers, standing under a glass on the center-table. It was a strange piece of handicraft. Its whiteness was suggestive of death, not life, and the curving leaves and petals, through which the vital sap once flowed, were beautiful no longer, now that their day of tender freshness was so inappropriately prolonged. As Agatha, with mind aloof, wondered vaguely at the laborious patience exhibited in the work, her eyes caught sight of an inlaid mold in the wax pedestal.

"Brother!" Her mind was sharply brought back from the impersonal region of speculation. What she saw was not merely a sentimental, misguided attempt at art; it was Susan Stoddard's memorial of her brother, Hercules Thayer—the man who had so unexpectedly influenced Agatha's own life. To Susan Stoddard this wax cross was the symbol of the companionship of childhood, and of all the sweet and bitter involved in the irrevocable bond of blood relationship. Agatha felt more kindly toward her because of this mute, fantastic memorial. She looked up almost with her characteristic friendly smile as she heard slow, steady steps coming down the hall.

The eyes that returned Agatha's look were not smiling, though they did not look unkind. They gazed, without embarrassment, as without pride, into Agatha's face, as if they would probe at once to the covered springs of action. Mrs. Stoddard was a thick-set woman, rather short, looking toward sixty, with iron-gray hair parted in the middle and drawn back in an old-fashioned, pretty way.

It was to the credit of Mrs. Stoddard's breeding that she took no notice of Agatha's peculiar dress, unsuited as it was to any place but the bedroom, even in the morning. Mrs. Stoddard herself was neat as a pin in a cotton gown made for utility, not beauty. She stood for an instant with her clear, untroubled gaze full upon Agatha, then drew forward a chair from its mathematical position against the wall. When she spoke, her voice was a surprise, it was so low and deep, with a resonance like that of the cello. It was not the voice of a young woman; it was, rather, a rare gift of age, telling how beautiful an old woman's speech could be. Moreover, it carried refinement of birth and culture, a beauty of phrase and enunciation which would have marked her with distinction anywhere.

"How do you do, Miss Redmond?"

Agatha, standing by the table with the cross, made no movement toward the chair. She was not come face to face with Mrs. Stoddard for the purpose of social visitation, but because, in the warfare of life, she had been set to the enemy with a message. That, at least, was Agatha's point of view. Officially, she was come to plead with Mrs. Stoddard; personally, she was bored and resentful at her unjust words, which would have marked her with distinction anywhere.

"I have come to ask you, Mrs. Stoddard," Agatha began, though to her chagrin, she found her voice was steady—"I have come personally to ask you, Mrs. Stoddard, if you will help us in caring for our friend, who is ill. Your brother, Doctor Thayer, wishes it. It is a case of life and death, maybe, and skilful nursing is difficult to find."

Agatha's hand, that rested on the table, was trembling by the time she finished her speech; she was vividly conscious of the panic that had come upon her nerves at a fresh realization of the wall of defense and resistance which she was attempting to assail. It spoke to her from Mrs. Stoddard's

calm, other-worldly eyes, from her serene, deep voice.

"No, Miss Redmond, that work is not for me."

"But please, Mrs. Stoddard, will you not reconsider your decision? It is not for myself I ask, but for another—one who is suffering."

Mrs. Stoddard's gaze went past Agatha and rested on the white cross with the inscription, "Brother." She slowly shook her head, saying again, "No, that work is not for me. The Lord does not call me there."

As the two women stood there, with the funeral cross between them, each with her heart's burden of griefs, convictions and resentments, each recoiled, sensitively, from the other's touch. But life and the burden life imposes were too strong.

"How can you say, Mrs. Stoddard, 'that work is not for me,' when there is suffering you can relieve, sickness that you can cure? I am asking a hard thing, I know; but we will help to make it as easy as possible for you, and we are in great need."

"Should the servants of the Lord falter in doing his work?" Mrs. Stoddard's voice intoned reverently, while she looked at Agatha with her sincere eyes. "No. He gives strength to perform his commands. But sickness and sorrow and death are on every hand, to some it is appointed for a moment's trial, to others it is the wages of sin. We can not alter the Lord's decrees."

Agatha stared at the rapt speaker with amazed eyes, and presently the anger she had felt at Doctor Thayer's words rose again within her breast, doubly strong. The doctor had given but a feeble version of the judgment; here was the real voice hurling anathema, as did the prophets of old. But even as she listened, she gathered all her force to combat this sword of the spirit which had so suddenly risen against her.

"You are a hard and unjust woman, to talk of the 'wages of sin.' What do you know of my life, or of him who is sick over at the red house? Who are you, to sit in judgment upon us?"

"I am the humblest of his servants," replied Susan Stoddard, and there was no shadow of hypocrisy in her tones. She went on, almost sorrowfully: "But we are sent to serve and obey. 'Keep ye separate and apart from the children of this world,' is his commandment, and I have no choice but to obey. Besides," and she looked up fearlessly into Agatha's face, "we do know about you. It is spoken of by all how you follow a wicked and worldly profession. You can't touch pitch and not be defiled. The temple must be purged and emptied of worldliness before Christ can come in."

Agatha was baffled by the very simplicity and directness of Mrs. Stoddard's words, even though she felt her own texts might easily be turned against her. But she had no heart for argument, even if it would lead her to verbal triumph over her companion. Instinctively she felt that not thus was Mrs. Stoddard to be won. "Whatever you say I think about me or about my profession, Mrs. Stoddard," she said, "you must believe me when I say that Mr. Hamilton is free from your censure and worthy of your sincerest praise. He is not an opera singer—that I am convinced—"

Susan Stoddard here interpolated a stern "Don't you know?"

"Listen, Mrs. Stoddard," cried Agatha in desperation. "When the Jeanne d'Arc, began to sink, there was panic and fear everywhere. While I was climbing down, into one of the smaller boats, the rope broke, and I fell into the water. I should have drowned, then and there, if it had not been for this man; for all the rest of the ship's load jumped into the boats and rowed away to save themselves. He helped me to come ashore, after I had become exhausted by swimming. He is ill and near to death, because he risked his life to save mine. Is not that a heaven-inspired act?"

Mrs. Stoddard's eyes glistened at Agatha's tale, which had at last got behind the older woman's armor. But her next attack took a form that Agatha had not foreseen. In her reverent voice, so suited to exhortation, she demanded:

"And what will you do with your life, now that you have been saved by the hand of God? Will you dedicate it to him, whose child you are?"

Agatha, chafing in her heart, paused a moment before she answered:

"My life has not been without its tests of faith and of conscience, Mrs. Stoddard; and who of us does not wish, with the deepest yearning, to know the right and to do it?"

"Knowledge comes from the Lord," came Mrs. Stoddard's words, like an antiphonal response in the litany. "My way has been different from yours, and it is a way that would be difficult for you to understand, possibly. But you shall not condemn me without reason."

"Are you going to marry that man you have been living with these many days?" was the next stern inquiry. (TO BE CONTINUED.)

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"How can you say, Mrs. Stoddard, 'that work is not for me,' when there is suffering you can relieve, sickness that you can cure? I am asking a hard thing, I know; but we will help to make it as easy as possible for you, and we are in great need."

"Should the servants of the Lord falter in doing his work?" Mrs. Stoddard's voice intoned reverently, while she looked at Agatha with her sincere eyes. "No. He gives strength to perform his commands. But sickness and sorrow and death are on every hand, to some it is appointed for a moment's trial, to others it is the wages of sin. We can not alter the Lord's decrees."

Agatha stared at the rapt speaker with amazed eyes, and presently the anger she had felt at Doctor Thayer's words rose again within her breast, doubly strong. The doctor had given but a feeble version of the judgment; here was the real voice hurling anathema, as did the prophets of old. But even as she listened, she gathered all her force to combat this sword of the spirit which had so suddenly risen against her.

"You are a hard and unjust woman, to talk of the 'wages of sin.' What do you know of my life, or of him who is sick over at the red house? Who are you, to sit in judgment upon us?"

"I am the humblest of his servants," replied Susan Stoddard, and there was no shadow of hypocrisy in her tones. She went on, almost sorrowfully: "But we are sent to serve and obey. 'Keep ye separate and apart from the children of this world,' is his commandment, and I have no choice but to obey. Besides," and she looked up fearlessly into Agatha's face, "we do know about you. It is spoken of by all how you follow a wicked and worldly profession. You can't touch pitch and not be defiled. The temple must be purged and emptied of worldliness before Christ can come in."

Agatha was baffled by the very simplicity and directness of Mrs. Stoddard's words, even though she felt her own texts might easily be turned against her. But she had no heart for argument, even if it would lead her to verbal triumph over her companion. Instinctively she felt that not thus was Mrs. Stoddard to be won. "Whatever you say I think about me or about my profession, Mrs. Stoddard," she said, "you must believe me when I say that Mr. Hamilton is free from your censure and worthy of your sincerest praise. He is not an opera singer—that I am convinced—"

Susan Stoddard here interpolated a stern "Don't you know?"

"Listen, Mrs. Stoddard," cried Agatha in desperation. "When the Jeanne d'Arc, began to sink, there was panic and fear everywhere. While I was climbing down, into one of the smaller boats, the rope broke, and I fell into the water. I should have drowned, then and there, if it had not been for this man; for all the rest of the ship's load jumped into the boats and rowed away to save themselves. He helped me to come ashore, after I had become exhausted by swimming. He is ill and near to death, because he risked his life to save mine. Is not that a heaven-inspired act?"

Mrs. Stoddard's eyes glistened at Agatha's tale, which had at last got behind the older woman's armor. But her next attack took a form that Agatha had not foreseen. In her reverent voice, so suited to exhortation, she demanded:

"And what will you do with your life, now that you have been saved by the hand of God? Will you dedicate it to him, whose child you are?"

Agatha, chafing in her heart, paused a moment before she answered:

"My life has not been without its tests of faith and of conscience, Mrs. Stoddard; and who of us does not wish, with the deepest yearning, to know the right and to do it?"

"Knowledge comes from the Lord," came Mrs. Stoddard's words, like an antiphonal response in the litany. "My way has been different from yours, and it is a way that would be difficult for you to understand, possibly. But you shall not condemn me without reason."

calm, other-worldly eyes, from her serene, deep voice.

"No, Miss Redmond, that work is not for me."

"But please, Mrs. Stoddard, will you not reconsider your decision? It is not for myself I ask, but for another—one who is suffering."

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