

STREAKS OF LIFE

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Streaks of life by Ethel Smyth

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ETHEL SMYTH

STREAKS OF LIFE

Susan White

Dame Ethel Smyth

celebrates her eightieth birthday today, and will broadcast a special birthday talk at 8.0 this evening. Later, at 9.25, the Spencer Dyke String Quartet will give a concert of her chamber music. The picture shows Dame Ethel as she faced the television cameras only a few months ago.



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BY

ETHEL SMYTH

MUS. DOC.

AUTHOR OF 'IMPRESSIONS THAT REMAINED'



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STREAKS OF LIFE

CONCERNING THIS BOOK

I CALL this collection of papers 'Streaks of Life' because although most of them are autobiographical there is no attempt at a connected story. Dealing with modern times, continuity is impossible unless you are prepared either to hurt feelings, or to dip your pen in purest solution of rose-coloured amiability. And without wishing to incur the imputation of treachery, I can imagine nothing more tiresome than always to speak of people as if they were listening at the door.

I should like to say a word about one or two articles of a different class that appear in this volume—the review of 'Mount Music,' for instance, which is included because I think no modern book gives such a faithful picture of Ireland. True, it is the Ireland of yesterday—of the very end, that is, of last century—but what a masterly analysis of the soil in which Sinn Fein has struck root! As our two islands are irrevocably bound together, the more we know of the other island the better, particularly since we need not expect to be studied and understood ourselves. We have to be, *we must be*, intelligent and sympathetic enough for two, and if anyone can help us to this

admirable state of mind it is E. C. Somerville and Martin Ross.

As for the two articles dealing with musical topics, the first, 'The Opera Fiasco,' was written before the disappearance from the operatic scene (only for a while, we hope) of Sir Thomas Beecham. I want to say that although obliged elsewhere to criticise his methods and in some ways deprecate his influence, the feelings of gratitude, indebtedness, and, if I may say so, affection there expressed remain unaltered.

When Goethe was endeavouring to teach his young friend Eckermann to see, he began by showing him none but the choicest engravings of supreme masterpieces. 'Thus alone can *taste* be acquired,' he said, 'after which you are fit to deal adequately with the second-best, neither over- nor under-rating it. *But there must be a standard of reference to start with.*'

The creation of this standard is one of the duties the State owes to the nation, or rather the nation to herself, for who but we ourselves have created, under enlightened guidance, our great art collections? But this principle, as I show in both my musical articles, is not acknowledged in music—with consequences that are dealt with in detail in 'The Opera Fiasco.' The arguments there used are unanswerable, and will have as much effect as a puff of smoke! I know my England—what she really cares about, and what she considers it necessary to her self-respect to *pretend* to care about.

As for the part of 'An Open Secret' that refers to women, if I had time and strength I would travel all England holding up the mirror to those who are still at the stage of King Canute's courtiers, and believe that a far more irresistible tide than the one he used as text can be arrested by the action of Trades Unions. None

but bread-winners know the cruelty of that action ; Dr. Flora Murray's wonderful book 'Women as Army Surgeons' dispels the illusion that the medical fight is won ; the male medical students at University College are now trying to squash female competition ; the Hallé Orchestra has sacked its women members, *none of whom replaced fighting men*, and so on. In the same article I quote Sir Henry Wood's recent remarks about women in orchestras. But without that I know, and we all know, that the root of the matter is selfishness and fear ; 'ca' canny'—a system which would drive women crazy—*versus* what Mr. Chesterton calls 'the terrible conscientiousness of women.'

That amiable philosopher used to soothe harassed wage-earners by calling them 'uncrowned Queens,' and entreating them, as such, to keep out of the labour market. Some day there may be Doles for Uncrowned Queens. It will be charming. But at present we need all the hard workers we can get, and I fancy England will not cut off her nose by way of improving her face.

Women must stand firm against tyranny, and not meet it with any description of smile—whether hypocritical, philosophical, or diplomatic. Meanwhile, to show there is no ill-feeling, let us borrow the finest of battle-cries—a cry brave men have given us :

'Are we downhearted? . . . NO !'

COIGN. December 1920.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE EMPRESS EUGÉNIE

' . . . celle à qui Dieu donna tant de choses, et à qui il a enleva, un par un, tout ce qu'il avait donné . . . !'

*From a letter written by the Empress to M. Pietri,
Maritzburg, 3rd May, 1880.*

I

STRANGE that the death of a woman of ninety-five should seem to those who knew her the one incredible thing. Yet this, I am certain, was the feeling with which, on July 12, hundreds of people read the news that the Empress Eugénie's long life had come to a close. There seemed no reason why she should not live on indefinitely—nor any for wishing it might be otherwise, since the one shadow that darkened her later years (though she herself never believed it could not be dissipated), the dread of total blindness, had passed away.

There are two conditions, I think, which determine fitness to survive : your own interest in life must be unimpaired, and further, you must possess the certainty that your company is still eagerly desired by your friends. Such was more emphatically the Empress's case, surely, than that of other mortals who have reached so great an age. One felt convinced, too, that as she had been, so she would be to the end ; that there would be no gradual failing—no sad period of death in life, which is the fate one most dreads for the old.

And so it turned out. Well in health, back in Spain again, after years of absence, and among her own people ; her sight painlessly and, as it seemed, miracu-