Chapter 43

A Suitably Poetic Welcome to Shakespeare's Island
Diplomatic Skills on Display at a Royal Palace

The Royal Youth International Opera Company was headquartered at a place called Ealing, in the west part of London. The principals of the company numbered twenty-two. By design, they were from twenty-two different countries. This was not really enough to be properly described as a company. Not even enough for a proper chorus—most operas need a chorus—as Poppy, the director of the company, pointed out at their first assembly.

"And that" (she went on) "is not to mention such matters as wardrobe, stage design, lighting, makeup,. . . And, of course, we have no orchestra of our own. We must consider ourselves merely a troupe of traveling singers, dependent on the hospitality of those houses that engage us. I don't think we shall be wanting for anything. There are more orchestras in London—and choruses, too—than London knows what to do with."

Poppy was one of those sixtyish women who keep the performing arts on their feet. She had had a career of her own at some time in the past, had indeed been considered by many to be one of the finest female interpreters of Schumann's lieder in her generation. Her recording of Gluck's "Che farò senza Euridice" had for some months been "most requested classical recording" on a popular British radio program of the 1950s. In appearance she was small and birdlike, with a rather large, bony nose. Her silver hair was pulled back into a bun. She almost always wore

slacks and loose sweaters. Margaret's first impression was of another musical bohemian, like Professor Shi. However, Poppy soon showed steel as a disciplinarian. Twice in the first week of their meetings a company member was late arriving at the rehearsal rooms. On the first occasion Poppy gave them all a stern lecture. When the offender—a black girl from the West Indies with a rich mezzo voice—protested that she had never been in London before and had difficulty finding her way around, Poppy slapped her down briskly.

"When you go traveling you will often find yourself in strange cities, usually with a plane to catch. Will you miss the plane? Of course not. Nobody ever misses a plane. Planes are important, so we make sure we don't miss them. Nobody misses a plane, nobody drops a baby. Those things are too important. Well, this is important. As important as catching a plane, as important as holding a baby."

The second time Margaret herself was late. It was necessary to catch a bus to get to the rehearsal rooms. Margaret went to the bus stop at the time recommended by her landlady, but no bus arrived. More people came and stood waiting, but still there was no bus. Margaret carefully read the notice trapped beneath a perspex panel affixed to the bus stop post. *Every 10-12 minutes*, said the panel. After forty-five minutes the bus arrived, with two other identical buses a few yards behind. The first bus was completely full, the second half-full, the third empty.

"It's always like that," grumbled a fellow-passenger, an old lady in a knitted woolen hat. "Buggers'll keep you waitin' all day. *They* don't care."

When Margaret got to the rehearsal rooms at last Poppy turned on her at once.

"If you're not going to take this seriously, you had better leave the company at once. I have no room here for slackers."

Margaret tried to explain about the bus, but Poppy talked right over her. "You are athletes," she said, "athletes of the voice. You will train like athletes, suffer like athletes, groan and sweat like athletes. I am speaking about DISCIPLINE. If you can't endure that, get out." (Turning back to Margaret.) "Would you like to leave right now?"

"No," sobbed Margaret. "No, no."

"Then pull your socks up!"

Margaret had never encountered this idiom before. Such was the force of Poppy's personality that for the whole of the rest of their acquaintance Margaret could not come into Poppy's presence without having to suppress an impulse to bend down and tug at her socks, whether she was actually wearing any or not.

Poppy introduced herself to the company at their first assembly as their musical director, stage director, wardrobe manager, travel secretary, booking manager, agent, voice trainer, chorus master, *répétiteuse* and personal counselor. Also translator and interpreter: The company's level of spoken English varied from native fluency (Canada, New Zealand, England herself) through various kinds of dialect and patois (West Indian, Kenyan, Tongan) to studiously correct (Mehmet the Turk, a Malay, a German and two Scandinavians, Margaret), down to adequate (one Russian, two South Americans), passable (a Greek, a Romanian), atrocious (a French boy, a Bulgarian girl) to null and void (the lone Italian, oddly enough, and a youth from one of the Francophone African countries with skin so black it looked blue, and a short Japanese girl with a fine-as-silk, ethereal soprano voice). Poppy was fluent in French and Italian; the Bulgarian worked through her Russian colleague; and so the only member at a loss was the Japanese girl who, the whole time Margaret knew her, existed in a state of utter bewilderment at all that was going on. Margaret made some attempts with her, writing down things in Chinese characters (which educated Japanese can understand, more or less) but never really felt she had pierced the poor girl's veil of confusion.

The company's only premises were some rehearsal rooms at a college in this place called Ealing. As a courtesy from the college to the company's august patron, members of the company were allowed to use the college facilities—restaurant, library, bar—and to conduct full stage rehearsals in the auditorium, subject to advance scheduling.

As a further courtesy the college held a party for the company when everyone had arrived. Since none of the company knew each other at this point, other than the Tongan boy and the New Zealand girl, who had struck up a friendship on the long flight from the Antipodes and appeared from the very first holding hands and exchanging urgent whispered privacies, the party was a spiritless affair, in spite of the best efforts of the

student committee that had organized it. The Principal of the college, a very short man with a face much too young for his gray hair and beard, read and then presented on parchment a poem of his own composition to Poppy. The poem went:

One World, One Song

New voices for peace resound
Dimming the throb of war,
The shrill screech of greed.
From forest and savannah,
From sand-fringed isle and mountain perch,
All races, all colors, coruscating—
A community of voices.
The kaleidoscope swirls.
Strange new patterns appear.
New voices for a new world of hope—
Voices raised for peace
In multicultural harmony.

Margaret could not understand it at all. She thought at first that this must be due to some deficiency in her English; but glancing at the furrowed brows of the native English-speakers, it seemed they were having the same difficulty as herself. Poppy's face was a study in self-control. Nor did the admirable sentiments implied (so far as could be made out) by the Principal's verses have any very elevating effect on the members of the company, to judge by later events at the party. The two South Americans, a bass and a tenor, discovered some point of difference in their countries' politics and got into a frenzied screaming match in Spanish; and the Russian soprano, who turned out to be in fact Armenian, had to be restrained by force from assaulting genial, mild-mannered Mehmet the Turk because of something she said his people had done to her people at some past time. Since the company had no program and no bookings that anybody knew of at this point, and neither Mr Cinelli nor the Heir to the Throne had been able to attend, the party dissolved early—yet

still not early enough, in everyone's silent opinion—in disappointment and rancor, and the members of the company scattered to their lodgings.

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The college had arranged accommodation for everyone. Colleges in England apparently had no dormitories. The students just went into rented rooms with families in the neighborhood who had registered with the college for this purpose. Margaret roomed with one Mrs Trott, who lived in a red-brick row house in one of the leafy quiet streets that stretched away endlessly in all directions around the college. Mrs Trott had misplaced her husband some three or four years before but held on to the family home and to her daughter Trevora, aged eight. Trevora, while (according to her mother) bright and sociable, possessed a pair of unnaturally large dark eyes behind which there seemed to be nothing at all, and was generally silent around the house except that once or twice a month she would indulge herself in a fit of uncontrollable screaming. Mrs Trott coped with these episodes by dragging her daughter to the bathroom and holding her head under the cold-water faucet.

There was another lodger in the house, an amiable big-boned gangling boy from Northern Ireland, a student in the college's Business department, of whose spoken English Margaret could understand not a single syllable. This boy lived in a tiny room behind the garage, on the first floor, which people in England apparently called "the ground floor". On the second floor, called "the first floor", were the kitchen, living and dining rooms, and on the third/second Margaret's room, bedrooms for Trott *mère* and *fille*, and the main bathroom. Paul, the Irish boy, had a closet-sized bathroom of his own next to his room.

Mrs Trott worked at an office in the West End. She divided her spare time equitably between two men, both from the company she worked for. One was called Graham, and was the very model of an English gentleman, as Margaret had imagined it. He was tall and slim, with white hair and a white mustache, perfect manners, and a voice like those she had heard sometimes on BBC World Service in China. Graham was Company

Secretary, which apparently was a very important position. However, Margaret could not help but think he was somewhat old for Mrs Trott, whom she estimated at no more than thirty-five.

The other man was younger and distinctly coarser. He was called Steve and spoke with the flat, glottal sounds Margaret was beginning to notice all around her in London. Steve was stocky and swarthy and his manners were perfunctory. In fact Margaret at first thought him rude. He had an odd sense of humor.

"From Red China, are you?" Steve remarked at their first introduction. "Not a mole, is she?" (inquiring this of Mrs Trott).

Margaret didn't understand this at all. She thought she knew that a mole was a small burrowing animal. Back in her room, checking with the English-Chinese dictionary, she confirmed this meaning and found another: a dark raised blemish on the skin. Margaret's skin was perfectly clear—she was somewhat vain on this point—and while it was indeed the case, according to Chinese folklore, that everyone resembled some particular animal, usually the one associated with one's birth sign, Margaret could not see any respect in which she might be thought talpine. Whatever the point of his joke, Steve seemed to like it. "Here comes our mole," he would say, sitting at the kitchen table reading his newspaper when she came in for breakfast.

Mrs Trott's arrangements with Graham and Steve were shocking to Margaret at first, though she knew from common talk in China that people in the West had loose morals. Most surprising to her was that Graham and Steve seemed to know about each other, were indeed occasionally present in the house together, yet were on friendly terms. Western people really seemed incapable of embarrassment under any circumstances.

Mrs Trott did not even take any pains to conceal her financial circumstances. Alone in the kitchen one evening, Margaret saw that day's mail all opened and scattered about on the table. The top sheet, in plain view, was a statement from a credit card company showing Mrs Trott as owing three thousand pounds. Margaret—once she had figured out the meaning of the statement—was embarrassed to have seen it. Three thousand pounds! Her entire allowance from the Royal Youth International Company was only three hundred a month. Yet the statement was still

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there two days later, undisturbed, though Mrs Trott must have sat at the table many times in the interim.

Margaret felt a little sorry for Mrs Trott. Her daughter was a trial to her, it was clear. Also her job, which kept her out of the house from eight in the morning to six at night. But Mrs Trott was always good-humored and even-tempered, and was unflaggingly helpful at filling in Margaret's many areas of ignorance. Until coming to England Margaret had never written a check or been to a hairdresser, had never seen a vacuum cleaner, an ironing board, a blender. Mrs Trott fielded it all with an amused tolerance.

"She's a poor lost soul," Mrs Trott said to Steve in private. "I don't know what they do with themselves all day long in China. She doesn't know *anything*."

"Needs a good poke if you ask me," replied Steve from the depths of his *Sporting Life*. "A poke from a bloke. The old beef injection, the old tube steak, the old vitamin P. Straighten her right out, that would."

Margaret liked Ealing very much. It even sounded nice: *Yiling* in Chinese, with connotations of benevolence and liveliness. In her spare time she often went walking at random through the streets, looking at the grand, solid brick houses and neat gardens. All so clean, so tidy, so spacious! There was a park nearby where you could walk freely, without paying any entrance fee. The park had a fine big church in it, and cultivated gardens with flowers the people somehow refrained from picking, and an aviary with scores of brilliant tiny birds in wire-mesh cages, and a peacock who would spread his tail if you waited very quietly for long enough. There were tennis courts, too; and from the time of Margaret's discovering the place all the way through into late October people played tennis there, batting away at smart yellow balls. Margaret found it very soothing to sit by the walkway opposite the tennis courts, in sound of the chattering budgerigars and cockatoos, listening to the tennis balls go *pock pock* back and forth under the dull English sky.

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Poppy was hard at work on their behalf. The company's first engagement was announced: four performances of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* to be given here in London in November. There were just enough of them in the company to cover principals and chorus, an orchestra had been engaged, and the theater where they were to perform would be available for rehearsals at certain stated dates and times. Everyone in the company was assigned a principal role, with multiple understudying. Actual performance roles would be selected only at the last minute, and would be rotated between performances as far as possible, so that everyone might have a chance to sing as a principal. Mr Cinelli himself would appear in a comprimario role in all four performances, for the sake of publicity.

Everyone was pleased. It was an opera they all knew. Margaret's class at the Conservatory had actually performed it, though without costumes, in their second year. She had sung the Countess, and made this known to Poppy.

"Well, we must wait and see, my dear," said Poppy, who had not yet heard everybody sing. "I cannot make decisions at this point."

When rehearsals had already been under way for two weeks, Poppy brought sensational news. The Heir to the Throne, who was patron of the company, would attend the first performance; and there would be a banquet for them all the evening before, at Buckingham Palace.

"As a diplomatic courtesy your embassies will be notified, and invited to send along their cultural attachés, or the equivalent, added Poppy."

The members of the company were all thrilled—all except, oddly, the English girl, who declared royalty to be "parasites" and the banquet "a waste of time". Everyone else assumed they would be meeting the Princess of Wales, whose gracious image had at various times adorned all their home newspapers, from Winnipeg to Ouagadougou. Margaret explained about the banquet to the Japanese girl, writing in Chinese characters on the back of some sheet music, and the girl made lovely cooing sounds of delight and surprise, and clapped her pale tiny hands.

For Margaret the main effect of the news was to induce an attack of sartorial anxiety. The loose slacks and blouses she had brought from China were adequate for voice rehearsal and the little minor socializing the members of the company had so far engaged in, but would not do for

Buckingham Palace. In an embarrassing expedition along Ealing High Street with Mrs Trott, she discovered that she couldn't afford to buy any kind of decent outfit. Seeing her distress, Mrs Trott took over, and they spent the weekend taking in one of that lady's dresses. Mrs Trott was the same height as Margaret, but considerably plumper—indeed, when Margaret saw how much they were taking in, she marveled at her landlady's skill in presentation, never having thought her more than slightly overweight.

"Bought this for the office party last year," explained Mrs Trott, wielding her scissors. "Never thought it would get presented to Princess Di. Blimey, me clothes are going up in the world if I'm not."

On the appointed day the whole company mustered at the Palace, where an equerry in a disappointing charcoal-gray lounge suit—they had all been expecting livery—led them across acres of bare asphalt to a small side door, thence through long high corridors to a reception room.

"The diplomatic persons are to be received separately," murmured the equerry. "His Royal Highness particularly wanted to greet you each personally."

"What about Princess Di?" asked irrepressible Mehmet the Turk. "She'll be coming too, won't she?"

"Her Royal Highness will not be joining us today," said the equerry. Then he looked at his watch. "Excuse me." He went out.

Everyone was disappointed. "Wouldn't have bothered if I'd known," said the Canadian boy. "Trouble in Paradise," said the New Zealand girl.

The equerry returned, clearing his throat to get their attention. "His Royal Highness will be with us in just a moment," he said. "The first time you speak to His Royal Highness, you must use 'Your Royal Highness' as the form of address. On second and subsequent occasions you should use 'Sir'. Please try to remember this. 'Your Royal Highness' only on first address. Subsequently, 'Sir'."

"I wonder if we have to kneel down and bang our heads on the floor," whispered Mehmet the Turk, standing next to Margaret. Mehmet was the Company's lead tenor, and had also established himself as their resident comedian. Margaret smiled, putting a hand over her mouth to hide the smile.

"The ladies will make a small curtsey, like this." The equerry did a quick bobbing motion, bending his knee and lowering his head all at once. "I suggest you try it beforehand."

With some self-consciousness and a certain amount of tittering, the girls genuflected, the equerry sweeping his practiced eye along their line to see that it was done properly.

"Yes," he said, when the bobbing and tittering had ceased. "Just keep the hands straight down by the side, that's all right. Now the gentlemen, just bow slightly from the waist, so."

While the gentlemen bowed, Margaret looked round the reception room. It was huge—all the rooms in Buckingham Palace seemed to be huge—and looked bigger for being bare. There were only a few very tall, straight-backed old chairs set along the walls, and a little table beside the door the equerry had entered through. No other furniture, no pictures on the walls, a single large window looking out over an interior courtyard in which two men were waxing an enormous limousine. The light was failing outside under a glum November sky, and the room's large glass chandelier was lit. The glass elements of the chandelier looked rather dusty, Margaret thought. As if her vision had been sharpened by noticing this, she at once perceived that the peach-colored paint on the walls was cracked and peeling high up in one corner, that the carpet was quite distinctly worn, and that there was the dark shadow of a cobweb half-way along where the far wall met the ceiling.

"If anyone has any questions you may ask me now," the equerry was saying.

"What's for dinner?" asked the English girl. Everybody laughed. The equerry waited out the laughter, then calmly read off the evening's menu from memory. This display of professionalism hushed them all; then the double doors were opened from outside and the Heir to the Throne came in, accompanied by Vinnie Cinelli and Poppy.

The Heir to the Throne was taller and handsomer than Margaret had expected. He was much more at ease, too, than her race memory of China's twenty-four Imperial dynasties had prepared her for, strolling down the line with one hand in the side pocket of his jacket, smiling all the time and cracking small jokes. Poppy interpreted for the Italian boy, the Heir

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himself spoke French with Toubé, the West African, and only Chi-e, the Japanese soprano, was quite at a loss as usual, fluttering her hands before her face in panic and striking everyone simultaneously with dread that she was about to swoon, before the Heir tactfully executed a fine Japanese bow and passed on to Margaret. He told her his parents were to visit China the next year, which was news to Margaret, and asked intelligent questions about her home province. In his look and manner was something Margaret recognized, something men very often showed to her, but in this case oddly attenuated and ultimately indifferent. Only after he had passed on did she realize she had quite forgotten to curtsey.

They all went in to dinner. The diplomats were brought in from another door, and two equerries bustled around seating everyone. The Heir to the Throne sat at the center of the table on one side, flanked by Cinelli and a dapper spinsterish man Poppy described as the government official in charge of culture. Beyond that the seating seemed to be random, Poppy herself sitting among her charges, with Margaret on one side of her and the Romanian girl on the other. She began speaking to the Romanian girl in French as the soup was served. Diagonally across from Margaret was her own embassy's cultural attaché, who introduced himself as Dong Shu. Cultural Attaché Dong looked like every other cultural attaché in the world, which is to say like a disappointed schoolmaster. He asked about her home province, her family, her education, then lapsed into silence to tackle his main course, and the wine that was served with it.

It soon became clear that Cultural Attaché Dong shared with Margaret and some tens of millions of their countrymen that unfortunate peculiarity of constitution that reacts to alcohol with fierce blushing. He had just begun to display the symptoms of this condition when he leaned across the table to Margaret and said, in their own language: "What pig swill this is! How can we bear to eat this filth? It's really not suitable for us Chinese."

"It's not bad," said Margaret. "And I think, to be polite, we should speak English."

"Right." Then, in English, to Poppy: "I am sure our Miss Han will be the star of your company."

"There will be no stars in the company," said Poppy, rather sharply. "We shall all work together on our productions."

"Ah. Of course. Esprit de corp. All equal together. Ha ha ha! So different from the past, when we Chinese were slaves."

Poppy seemed to feel this did not call for an answer. She turned back to the Romanian girl and resumed speaking French.

Ten minutes later, glowing like a lighthouse now, Attaché Dong addressed himself to Margaret in loud English.

"You must uphold the honor of our country, ha ha ha. We are not slaves now, as we once were. 'No dogs or Chinese', that's how they used to exclude us from our own parks and beaches. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"I have always thought that story was nonsense," said Poppy. "I should like to see some hard evidence for it."

"Oh, but it is true!" said Margaret. "There really was such a sign, at the entrance to the waterfront park in Shanghai."

"Did you see this sign with your own eyes?"

"No, of course not. Everybody knows."

"Ah, 'everybody knows'. Just as everybody once knew the earth was flat."

"Miss Han is right," glowed Attaché Dong. "At that time, we were the slaves of you British. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Why, how did that happen?" Poppy had her chin up, combative, talking right across the table at Attaché Dong. "We are a tiny country with few natural resources. China is a vast self-sufficient empire with five thousand years of history. How could it be that we were able to enslave you?"

"You attacked us when we were weak. At that time the Chinese people were ruled by the Manchus. The Manchus were very corrupt and stupid."

"I see. So the reason you were enslaved by a few wooden ships sent from a tiny, distant island covered in fog is that you had been previously enslaved by a tribe of illiterate Siberian aborigines shooting arrows from horseback. Apparently it is rather easy to make slaves of you Chinese. Seems that anyone can do it."

Attaché Dong was shocked, but not angry. No Chinese person ever really cares what a foreigner thinks or says about his country's affairs. How could it possibly be important? Foreigners understand nothing about China. But he felt it his duty to enlighten this particular barbarian. With

an air of infinite patience, his face incandescent beneath a sheen of sweat, he proceeded.

"You weakened our people by forcing opium on them. Surely you have heard of the Opium Wars?"

"Indeed I have. One of my maternal great-grandfathers was a midshipman on the *Andromache*. He could tell you, anybody who has read a little history could tell you, the Opium Wars were fought to open China to normal commerce. The traders all knew the opium game was up. Parliament had reformed the poor laws, passed the Factory Acts, abolished slavery. It was only a matter of time before the reformers went for the opium trade, and the traders knew it. They wanted to bring in textiles and manufactured goods; but that your government would not allow. A filthy lawless drug trade was quite acceptable—it proved the inferiority of the foreigners that they would deal in such stuff. But to open China to the products of European technology—that would be a disaster for the imperial system, as indeed it eventually was. As for forcing opium on your people—that is rubbish. The supply could never match the demand. Opium was freely available in England, too, but it did not destroy us."

Listening to this exchange, Margaret was astonished and confused. She had not heard such heresies since Norbu's tall tales about the liberation of Tibet. Now, as then, it was disturbing to her to hear them. Not having much interest in history or current affairs, she had always accepted without question the accounts given by her teachers and their texts, or by Half Brother in the long idle days of confinement in Seven Kill Stele, while the closing phases of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution were being enacted beyond the barracks' perimeter wall. Even if, like Mustache, she had been of a temper to reject official explanations instinctively, there were no others available. Under a despotic government the choice is always between conformity and nihilism. Now her instinctual reaction was the same as Attaché Dong's: she sought to soothe and enlighten the barbarian.

"No, Poppy, you don't understand. Foreigners don't know these things, but we Chinese all know them. Your people were very cruel to us in the past. You burned our emperor's Summer Palace, you know. And . . ."

"The Summer Palace was burned for the reason we gave at the time: to punish the court, not the people. If Lord Elgin had been a Chinese commander leading a Chinese army, they would have burned Peking, and everyone in it."

Attaché Dong was losing patience with this intractable savage. Stern now, his complexion radiating in heretofore unknown wavelengths, he wagged a finger across the table at Poppy.

"Your people had no business in China! It is our country, not yours! You should apologize for the wrongs you committed against our people!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort. Don't take me for one of your guilt-addled puling liberals. I'm British, and proud of it. Our empire was the greatest civilizing force of its age. You cannot name a place that we left worse off than we found it. Or less healthy, less well educated, less ready for the twentieth century. The authorities in Hong Kong have had to build a fence across the border with China to stop your countrymen flooding into our colony. And you call us slave masters? What, do people risk their lives to run from freedom into slavery? If not, why did we have to build that fence?"

At this point all three of them became aware that everyone else was looking at them, and that their conversation was the only one going on. Even the Heir to the Throne was looking, wearing the slightly amused expression of one long practiced at coping with this kind of minor unpleasantness.

"If you are really intent on re-enacting the Opium Wars, I suppose I could get the navy to lend you a couple of frigates," he observed. Everybody laughed. When they had stopped laughing, Poppy said very clearly and firmly: "I beg your pardon, Sir." She said nothing further to Attaché Dong, however, and occupied herself with the Romanian girl for the rest of the meal.

Margaret was never completely sure whether this incident was the cause of it, or whether the problem stemmed from some original prejudice on Poppy's part; but it was from this point that she began to feel at a disadvantage with Poppy.

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