

Chapter 44

Mr Lubetsky Psychoanalyses a Voice

A Visit to the Land of Saints and Scholars is Mooted

Figaro was well received. Margaret sang the part of Cherubino for the second performance, and was in the chorus the other three nights. The choice role of the Countess, which she knew perfectly well, and which she also knew her voice was suited to, was rotated between the Armenian, the girl from New Zealand (the only one of the sopranos, according to Poppy, with a really well-developed top), the Bulgarian and one of the Scandinavians. The Armenian had a fine strong voice, though without much character, and coped decently well. The New Zealander got good applause while Margaret, watching from the wings, ticked off more than twenty clear faults. The Bulgarian was miscast, couldn't handle the tessitura and was croaking by the last act. Only the Scandinavian gave what Margaret judged to be a good account of the role. Yet still she knew she could have done better. She had reminded Poppy three or four times that she had sung the Countess in college, only to be brushed away with: "Everyone must wait his turn." Or: "I will take care of the casting, thank you, Margaret." That damn fool Dong! Margaret felt sure his absurd antics had poisoned Poppy's mind against her.

Poppy seemed, in fact, to have it fixed in her head that Margaret was a mezzo, which was news to Margaret. Her teachers at the Conservatory had never thought so, and neither had she herself. It was true that her voice had an unusual color, of the kind generally called "dark" and

associated with the mezzo range; but Margaret believed her top notes were quite serviceable enough for soprano roles, and resented being relegated to a voice category for which there were very few roles of real prominence—other than *Carmen*, for which she knew she was anyway unsuited by appearance and dramatic skills.

Vinnie Cinelli appeared in all four performances as the gardener, to much laughter and applause. He transposed the role into his own registers (it is normally sung bass) and made little impromptu ariosos out of the recitative. It was too tiny a role to steal the show, although Margaret thought he came close. Between entrances he waited with the others backstage or in the wings, joking with them, encouraging them. The Japanese girl, singing *Barbarina* in the first performance, had a bad attack of stage nerves and Vinnie spent most of his time with her, patting her hand, adjusting her makeup, soothing her in libretto-Italian in the hope she might understand some few words.

Vinnie always arrived early, and before costuming walked around the stage looking for bent nails. This was a superstition of his. The ancient Romans ran out of iron and had not enough to make weapons to defend the city against her enemies. Since that time the Italians have considered iron to be lucky. Thus Poppy's explanation; though why the nails had to be bent, she did not know. In any case, the producers and stagehands all knew of Vinnie's odd compulsion, and made sure he would find a bent nail somewhere.

After the first two performances Vinnie gave the whole company a debriefing, correcting the most egregious faults, pointing out aspects of the score they had not noticed, offering individual advice to every singer he had heard.

To Margaret he said: "Your voice is very beautiful, my little pearl, and capable of much more than the lyric roles. But you must improve your diction. It will not do for a professional performance."

He gave her the business card of a voice coach in the West End, a specialist in diction.

"Go to see this Lubetsky," he said. "Visit with 'im every chance you can find, and pay careful attention to everything 'e tells you. The company will pay the fees, don't worry, I will speak with 'im. Lubetsky is an

old friend of mine. 'E will find time for you, whenever you wish to go. Only—he laughed—do not be afraid 'is manner. 'E is rather fierce with young singers."

Back at Ealing, Poppy showed them press cuttings. They were from ordinary London newspapers, not the trade press, and most were very short. One asserted that Vinnie had indeed stolen the show, and scolded him on that account. Two praised the New Zealand girl, who yelped with pleasure and clapped her hands when Poppy read out these passages. None thought as highly of the Scandinavian girl as Margaret had. Only one mentioned Margaret's Cherubino.

"The pants role was sung this evening by Miss Margaret Hon of Peking, a large cold mezzo voice which will show much promise when it has mastered the difference between vowels and consonants."

"So cruel!" gasped Margaret in dismay. "Are they really allowed to write such things?"

"Never mind that," said Poppy. "You will read worse if you have a career in this business. The *really* bad thing is, they have misspelled your name."

Still Margaret was mortified. That very morning she called the number on the business card Vinnie had given her, and two days later presented herself at the studio of Mr Max Lubetsky, voice coach.

The studio was also, quite obviously, Lubetsky's home. It was on the fourth floor of a building in Soho, above a Greek restaurant. Though tiny the place somehow managed to be labyrinthine, the rooms on different levels connected by short flights of steps, everything dark, cluttered and smelling of food and dust. In the studio proper was an upright piano, an open-fronted bookcase, and a table, every horizontal surface covered with piles of books or sheets of paper. Among the papers on the table was a plate holding the remains of a taramasalata, and an opened can of beer.

Lubetsky himself was sixty at least, wearing an old V-necked jumper over a blue flannel shirt and ill-knotted tie. His manner was gruff and impatient, his natural expression a scowl. He held Margaret with his eyes, head on one side, as she made answers to his brief interrogation.

"You're the one Vinnie was raving about, hah? Voice of the century, but you can't enunciate, hah? Is that it?"

"Mr Cinelli thinks I should improve my diction."

“Does he? Does he? Yet you speak very well. English almost flawless. Parla con me in Italiano. Come si chiama? Quanti anni hai? Di dove sei?”

“Mi chiamo Margherita Han. Io ho, um, venticinque anni. Sono Cinese. Or should it be ‘Cinesa’? I’m sorry, my . . .”

“Auf Deutsch. Noch einmal: Ihre name, wie alt, von wo kommen.”

“Meine name. . . Oh, I’m sorry, I really can’t speak German at all. I just memorize the words and sing them.”

“Hm. French?”

“Same as German. Worse, I think.”

“You have studied phonetics before?”

“My first teacher of English used a phonetic approach.”

“Yes. Your spoken diction is excellent. So it must be that only the singing voice is a problem. You have been thinking too much about your diaphragm, your posture, your intercostals, your throat. Not enough about—Lubetsky tapped his cheek—the speech apparatus. Lips, teeth, tongue, palate. Without them you are merely an organ pipe. Poppy, I know her of old. An excellent person. Certainly a good voice coach, for the right voice. Not for yours, I think.”

“She’s convinced I’m a mezzo. She’ll only give me mezzo parts. But I have a good top—a strong C.”

The old man chuckled. “And I could lift this table over my head without much difficulty.” (He rapped it with the knuckle of his forefinger.) “Still I should not care to carry it around on stage for two hours. Poppy may be wiser than you. We shall see. Or possibly your voice is in transition from soprano to mezzo, as often happens. People make too much of these ironclad categories, in my opinion. There was no such thing as a mezzo before 1830—Malibran was the first. If Mozart and Rossini coped without this word, perhaps we should not give it too much weight. Let us see, without prejudice, what things your voice can do, and see if we can help it do those things better. Shall we begin? My studio is small, but” —he waved a hand around at the cheap pegboard with which his walls were covered— “acoustically acceptable.”

“Don’t the people in the restaurant mind?”

Lubetsky chuckled again. “They like to hear my singers. It gives them some bohemian atmosphere. And when it is a soprano, I tell the

management I am training the next Callas, and they forgive me everything.” [Maria Callas was Greek-American.] “They even feed me.” He indicated the taramasalata debris.

Lubetsky’s method was simple but grueling. He had listed every possible syllable in each language required to be taught: every possible combination of consonant plus vowel, vowel plus consonant, consonant plus vowel plus consonant. He had Margaret sing each syllable in scales across her entire working range, omitting only the top and bottom notes. (In common with many voice professionals of the older generation, Lubetsky clove to the superstition that each singer is foreordained to perform only a fixed number of difficult notes, and that these notes must therefore be husbanded with care.) When satisfied with the simpler syllables, he advanced to more complex ones: diphthongs, clusters of consonants, at last complete words.

Margaret had been cut deep by that offhand review (whose author had, of course, already forgotten what he wrote) and threw herself into this new training with a dogged application Max Lubetsky had rarely seen. He responded by clearing the decks for her, canceling other pupils at short notice, rousing himself early, shifting his mealtimes. Even so, it was not easy to accommodate her. The Royal Youth International was well booked that winter and spring, taking their *Figaro* on the road, working up a *Magic Flute* and a *Pelléas and Mélisande*, and of course with their own schedule of rehearsals and voice training.

Still, weeks later, that first review still rankled. The hard work Margaret was now putting into diction was clearing the last clause from her mind slowly, and she found herself dwelling on what had gone before. She raised the matter with Lubetsky.

“Max, why would someone describe my voice as cold?”

“Has someone so described it?”

“Yes. ‘A large cold mezzo voice.’ It was a reviewer in one of the newspapers.”

Lubetsky laughed. “Have you got any idea how badly it is paid, doing opera reviews for the newspapers? It was probably a moonlighting student of thermodynamics. Pay no attention.”

“But is it a cold voice? The reviewer was right about my diction.”

Lubetsky considered. He was sitting at the piano in his studio. He fingered some piano keys thoughtfully.

“It is not a good description,” he said at last. “However, I understand his meaning. Your voice is very beautiful, but it is an abstract beauty, like the beauty of a mathematical theorem. There are few points of contact with the world of humanity. Are you a virgin?”

The question shocked her, coming so unexpectedly in the midst of what she had intended to be—believed to be—a technical discussion. Margaret blushed furiously. “Yes,” she said, when she had gathered herself. “Yes, I am. In China we have not had this. . . this sexual revolution. We consider these things very private, suitable only for married couples.”

Lubetsky nodded, his customary scowl softened by a thin smile. “Yes, yes. Notions we in the West have discarded, for better or worse. As an old fogey, naturally I believe for worse. But history will determine. These things must run their course. Matters of brute carnality aside, have you ever experienced the tender passion?”

“You mean love?”

“Of course.”

“I . . . yes, I . . . Yes. Once. Briefly.”

“Unhappily, I perceive. Still, I do not think this is the problem. I am not a psychologist, Margaret, and as a matter of fact I am deeply suspicious of all mechanical theories about our human nature. ‘This knotted wood, from which nothing straight will ever be made’—the sage of Königsberg, was it not? However, I will say this. There is something in you that is restraining your voice. No, not restraining—only leaving your voice in some sense *empty*. Some kind of unfinished business. I have no idea what it might be. This love affair, perhaps—but I do not think so. I believe it is older, deeper. Your family circumstances—as a child, I mean. Were they happy?”

“Yes. Very happy.”

“Hm. Well, as I said, I am not a psychologist. I suggest only this: that you give some time to reflecting on your personal history. Your early life. Not too much, of course—I should not want you to become like an American, endlessly obsessed with your own misfortunes, blaming every ache and pimple on the misjudgments of your ancestors or the malice of your

neighbors. Just a little time, when you are quiet, preferably near to the sound of moving water. That is most conducive to calm reflection. If there is something grave that you have left undone, do what you can to resolve it. That is all.”

Lubetsky straightened and turned back to the piano with an abruptness that seemed already to regret his brief foray into the springs of human motivation. “Now, the consonant cluster ‘s-v’. . .”

At the time, and in the following days and weeks, Margaret thought very little of what Lubetsky had said. It was only later, months and years later, that she began to understand it.

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In the summer of that year the Royal Youth International went on a European tour. They took their *Figaro*, their *Magic Flute* and their *Pelléas and Mélisande* to small houses in Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, France. Travel was by bus at what seemed to Margaret at first and last—she never got used to it—breakneck speed on autoroutes, autostrada and Autobahnen, often singing through their parts as they barreled along the highways, a practice Poppy encouraged. The venues were small and often not well-attended, with battered props and rickety scenery. In Karlsruhe the monster provided for their *Magic Flute* stank of mildew, and was in fact so far gone in dilapidation its head fell off before Mehmet the Turk could slay it. Mehmet fell into his scheduled swoon with his features barely under control, and Chi-e the Japanese girl, who with Margaret and the Armenian formed the party of Queen’s ladies who found him, while bending over him caught a fit of giggles which she transmitted to the other two, and thence to the whole company for the whole of the first act.

The inevitable pairings-off became more obvious on the road. The boy from Tonga and the girl from New Zealand had by this time fused into a single biological entity, and nobody was surprised when they announced that they were to marry on returning to London. The English mezzo had taken up with Mehmet. The Italian boy and Chi-e, united spiritually perhaps by their utter failure to learn more than a hundred words of English between them, retreated into each other, communicating no-one

knew how. The West African boy seduced plump, blowsy Ionia from Romania with no difficulty at all that anyone could make out. The French bass with the Malaysian contralto, Canada with Armenia, the Scandinavians with each other (relative to the other couplings, this seemed practically incestuous to the rest of the company) and the South Americans in turn, and then jointly, with Dulcinia the West Indian mezzo. “Coruscating” was their joke word for all this among themselves, lifted of course from the college principal’s absurd poem; and when any of the corresponding parties took advantage of the rough-and-ready sleeping arrangements—in vacant college dormitories, mostly—to give physical expression to the spirit of international friendship, lateness to breakfast or signs of excessive fatigue would be greeted with good-natured taunts of “Too much coruscating!”

Margaret kept herself at a distance from all this, not always without difficulty. Mehmet had made one clear and deliberate pass at her when they were rehearsing *Figaro* in the fall, shrugging away the rebuff good-naturedly and turning to the English girl. Both the South American boys had tried their luck, so had the Canadian and the male Scandinavian before settling down with more accessible spirits.

She thought often of the natural instinct she seemed once to have possessed for passionless friendship with men—Mustache, Johnny Liu, Mr Powell. Now that instinct seemed to have left her; or perhaps such things just were not possible in the freer atmosphere of the West. Margaret thought often of Norbu, and fretted with schemes to get in touch with him, but pursued none of them. It seemed so hopeless, all so hopeless. Her fate was to sing, that was all. With such a gift, what right had she to expect anything more from life? So she reasoned to herself.

The great disappointment of the European trip for Margaret was that she was unable to go to France. She never found out the reason for this and in dark moments, on no evidence at all, at first suspected spite by Poppy.

The French (Poppy explained) more than any other nation preferred to hear opera in their own language, so the company had prepared Debussy’s *Pelléas and Mélisande*, *Carmen* (said Poppy) being too predictable and an opera notoriously difficult to cast and for which the company lacked a suitable lead. France was the last country on their tour;

but somehow Margaret's Chinese passport, or British visa, or both, were unacceptable to the French authorities, and the tangle could not be untied in time, and the company went to Paris without her. Before leaving China Margaret's sole visual impression of continental Europe had been the Eiffel Tower, and it was a bitter blow to her not to be able to see it in actuality.

She went back to London and occupied her time with Mr Lubetsky, working up and down his syllable lists. When the company returned to London in August Poppy announced that the Royal Ballet had yielded up Covent Garden to them for a single out-of-season performance, and they did their *Pelléas and Mélisande* with house costumes and equipment, and Poppy, perhaps from sympathy for the visa muddle in France, cast Margaret as Mélisande herself, the only time in that whole year she had sung prima donna.

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It was September, and back in London, when Margaret saw Vinnie Cinelli again. There was a slack period in late summer when the company had no bookings. Poppy had gone to her house in France for a vacation and several other members of the company had taken the opportunity to go sightseeing or home to visit their families. Having no money, Margaret could afford neither option. The company's next engagement was a *Fidelio* at a town in the north of England in October, and Margaret thought she should put in some work on her German, so far tested on stage only in the *Magic Flute*. She accordingly resumed lessons with Lubetsky, who seemed never to take vacations. And there one day, when she walked in to the cluttered little studio, was Cinelli. He beamed to see her, and rose from his chair and embraced her.

"My little pearl, my Perlinetta! My friend Max 'as been telling me about you. Such a good student!"

Lubetsky smiled a greeting, nodding in acknowledgment.

"I'm afraid I haven't had much opportunity for lessons," said Margaret. "We have been traveling a lot."

"Yes, yes. You were very well received in Vienna. A difficult city for

singers, even for German singers. They take their music so seriously. So how is the Royal Youth International company? Is our friend Poppy taking good care of you? Eh?”

“I wish I could say so,” sighed Margaret. “I really feel she won’t give me the opportunities I need.”

Cinelli raised his eyebrows. “So? You are dissatisfied?”

At once Margaret was ashamed, fearful that Cinelli might feel slighted in some way.

“Oh, Mr Cinelli, I didn’t mean to be critical. Of course, it’s been a marvelous opening for me, to sing with Royal Youth International. It’s just that. . . oh, I sometimes feel Poppy doesn’t like me.”

Cinelli pursed his lips and frowned. “Eh, women with women. There can never be peace.” He turned to Lubetsky. “Now, what do you say, old friend? Is our Perlina ’ere ready to take on a full repertoire—Italian, German, French?”

Lubetsky scowled and shook his head. “Italian, possibly. German, needs more work. French I would not recommend. She sang *Mélisande* at the Garden, against my strong advice.” He shook his head, as if the result had been a disaster—in fact, Margaret’s *Mélisande* had been well received, the word “promising” appearing in every notice of her performance.

Cinelli laughed. “This is ’igh praise I am ’earing! ’E is rarely so enthusiastic. Perlina, come to see me. Come to my ’otel this evening—ah, seven o’clock. We shall dine together. The Savoy in the Strand, do you know? And we shall discuss your future. Max, I leave ’er in your ’ands! Take care with ’er—she ’as a priceless voice.”

When he had gone, Lubetsky said: “You are a very lucky young lady. For such a great man to take an interest in you.”

“He has helped me a lot,” agreed Margaret. “But every piece of good luck in my life seems to come with a lump of stone attached.”

The Savoy was a grand place, the entrance hidden away in a little street behind the Strand. Cinelli came down a few minutes late, wearing slacks and a loose English sweater. “We shall eat *Henglish*,” he announced, placing her arm on his and heading for the street door.

“English” was a restaurant called Simpson’s, a short distance along the Strand. People turned to look at them as they walked in the street, and

a young man on the other side called out: “Vinnie! Vinnie!” and clapped his hands, raising them over his head. Cinelli waved back.

“Wonderful people, the English,” said Cinelli. “They stare *un poco*, but they do not impose themselves. In America, they will not let you breathe. And in Italy—ah! I should ’ave been kidnapped by now.”

I am walking along the Strand in London (Margaret was thinking), arm in arm with Vincenzo Cinelli. She thought life might have very little more to offer.

Simpson’s was a dim, old-fashioned place serving heavy English food very much like Mrs Trott’s. Margaret thought it odd that Cinelli would deliberately choose this kind of food, when there must surely have been fine Italian restaurants nearby. Not to mention the lovely dining room of the Savoy itself, which she had glimpsed while waiting for him, its big picture windows looking out on the river.

“I am a *Hanglophile*.” Cinelli explained, tucking into his roast potatoes and cabbage. “Is my favorite country. The food”—he pointed at it with his fork—“properly done, is nourishing and ’ealthful.”

“But not much taste,” objected Margaret.

Cinelli laughed. “Every nation takes its pleasures in a different way. We should not be too critical. For my people and yours, the pleasures of the table are at the top of the list. For the English, not so. They cherish their language—talk, books, plays. And then their games and ’obbies. Do you know, every Englishman ’as an ’obby? This one breeds pigeons, that one collects stamps, the third one makes *catedrali* from matchsticks. And their games—do you know that every sport in the world was invented by these English? Football, tennis, *bigliardo*, every one. No, each nation has its special genius.”

“For Italians, I suppose it is singing.”

Cinelli shrugged. “What is all your training? It is only to learn ’ow to sing like an Italian.” He laughed. “Even when you sing in German.”

“Poppy won’t be pleased to hear you say that. She thinks the German music is superior.”

“And she is quite right. They are the musicians of the world. But their language does not lend itself to singing so well as ours. Mozart was at ’is

best writing for the Italian voice. Who will deny it? But tell me of your troubles with Miss Poppy.”

“Oh, I just feel she is prejudiced against me.”

Margaret told the story of Attaché Dong. Cinelli laughed.

“Such a diplomat! If your country ’as many more like ’im, there is an end of world peace.”

“I wish I had just kept my mouth shut. I didn’t think she would be so touchy.”

“Hm. Our Miss Poppy is, what? sixty years and something. This means ’er thinking was developed before the war, when the English still ’ad their hempire. For such a one, it is natural to be on the defense a little.”

“It’s not only that. She just won’t consider me for the bigger roles. She casts by physical type. The big girls sing the big roles. Because I’m rather small, she thinks I can only do lyric parts. And she’s got it fixed in her mind that I can only sing mezzo. When we did our *Figaro* with you last year, do you remember? My only appearance was as Cherubino. I told her I could sing the Countess, I’d sung it in college. I love to sing coloratura. She might have let me sing it for one performance. You know my voice, Mr Cinelli. It’s big enough for the Countess, isn’t it? Even Susanna, I wouldn’t have minded. But Cherubino! It’s been like that the whole year. When I got a leading role at last, it was in French, which she knows is my worst language . . .”

Cinelli was listening attentively, taking his eyes off her only to raise his tankard of dark English beer. When Margaret was done, he reached across the table and patted her hand.

“First, Perlinetta, you should call me Vinnie, as all the others do. Don’t be so formal. In the world of opera, we are a family. We shall use your last name only when you are dead. Second, let me remind you of your good fortune.”

“Oh, Mr Cinelli. *Vinnie*. I know, I know. I’m lucky to have had the opportunities I’ve had. Don’t think I’m ungrateful. Without Royal Youth International I’d still be in Tibet. But I started my career late, and wasted two years in that place . . .”

She began to weep, and covered her face with her hands. This was only partly by calculation; quite unaccountably, Norbu had come into

her thoughts—all of him, complete with cocky swagger and insolent white grin.

“I’m sorry. . . Vinnie. Sorry.”

Cinelli got up and came round the table to her. He put his arm round her shoulder and offered a vast white handkerchief.

“All right, Perlina, I understand. Do you want me to speak to Miss Poppy?”

“No. No, I don’t think. . . Perhaps it would make her worse.” Margaret dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief, feeling a little guilty for the element of calculation. “I’m all right,” she said. “Thank you, Vinnie.” She turned to look up at him, and smiled. He patted her shoulder and went back to his chair.

For a few moments they ate in silence. Margaret wondered if she had offended him by seeming so ungrateful. She knew his own early years as a singer had been more difficult than hers, with more discouragements. Still she could think of nothing to say. It was Cinelli who broke the silence at last.

“If I say ‘Barbara’, do you know of whom it is that I am speaking?”

“Of course. Barbara Bacon. Who doesn’t know her?”

Even in China Margaret had known of the great Australian soprano Barbara Bacon. Her name and Cinelli’s were the first she had heard in the world of opera, and their many collaborations in the performance of nineteenth-century Italian operas had been among the earliest tapes the Conservatory had acquired when building up its library of opera recordings.

“In precise, should be *Dame* Barbara Bacon. That is ’er full title.”

“What does ‘Dame’ mean?”

“Is like ‘Sir’, only for a woman. The Queen of England ’as ’onored her, ’as *knighthed* her. Knight a gentleman, he becomes a Sir; knight a lady, she becomes a Dame. This is their custom. Would you like to sing with ’er?”

He said it very casually, lifting his eyes from the plate to look at her, just a faint smile to spring the surprise with, then back to his food.

Margaret put a hand over her mouth. “Oh! I couldn’t dream of it!”

Cinelli nodded. “You can. ’Ave you ’eard of the Wexford festival?” (Margaret had not.) “It takes place in Ireland every autumn. Just a few

days, and a small theater”—he shrugged—“but wonderful *hatmosphere*, just such as must ’ave been in the primo ottocènto, in the small towns of Italy. Their tradition is to do works unfamiliar. Not modern, all old masters, but works not well known. Barbara and I are to sing there this year, next month. Bellini.” He nodded, smiling at her. “You should sing Bellini, little pearl. You ’ave a Bellini voice.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried. But aren’t the singers all engaged already?”

Cinelli shrugged. “Not definitely. I ’ad the idea to leave open a role for one of my youngsters.” He laughed. “No trouble to fill such a position.”

“To sing with you and Miss. . . with Barbara? *Dame* Barbara? I should think not! Do you really think I can do it? Oh, Mr Cinelli! I would love to do it, of course! But is it really possible? What about the role? Do you really think I’m suitable? Oh! I don’t know what to say! And I’m supposed to be doing *Fidelio*. . . when? I forget. Oh, Mr. . . I mean, Vinnie . . .”

Cinelli was beaming at her now, pleased with the reception his offer had got. He reached across the table and patted her hand.

“Don’t worry about *Fidelio*. Royal Youth International will manage without you if necessary. In any case, it is an opera nobody loves. We do it from respect to the composer. As for Wexford: it is not a big role, but is not comprimario, either. You ’ave one lovely aria to sing, and then a lot of weeping. I would describe it as lyric mezzo with a strong dramatic color. But if you ’ave any ideas about the role we will incorporate them. We are all very informal at Wexford. That is the joy of these small festivals. We ’ave fun. It is not a *seminario* in industrial relations, like singing La Scala, nor a test of wills with the conductor, like an American engagement. It is fun.”

Still Margaret could not believe it. She had heard these small festivals spoken of in opera circles. Small they might be, and in out-of-the-way places; but they drew real opera lovers—wealthy people who traveled the world to hear the best opera, fanatical loggionisti who skimped on food and clothing to go where the finest singers were, critics, agents, directors of big houses. To sing with Cinelli and Dame Barbara Bacon!

And a real role, not mere comprimario! It was the break of a lifetime, and she knew it.

At once caution asserted itself. She looked across the table at Mr Cinelli, at *Vinnie*. He was sipping at his beer, looking at her over the tankard. Seeing only his eyes like that, she noticed how deep and clear the eyes were, and how they seemed, all by themselves, to be laughing mischievously all the time. *It is fun*. This man, this elephantine imp—could it be that he was really her old companion, the demon Hope, in disguise? This wonderful thing he had offered—would it disappear in a puff of smoke as soon as she had embraced it? Like her dancing career, like her graduation ceremony, like Father, like Marshal Ho, like Norbu? What could go wrong? The visa, of course.

“Ireland is another country, isn’t it? Won’t I need a visa? Shall I have the problem I had with France?”

Cinelli reached over and took her hand again, this time covering it with his. “Don’t worry about anything, little Perlinetta. We shall get you to Wexford.”