

Chapter 52

Precious Jade Reveals His Nature

St Agatha Watches over the Dance of Three

Margaret's fury soon abated, settling into a cold determination to have nothing more to do with William Leung. She did not now feel any fear of him. Their brief reacquaintance had left her sure that he would do her no further harm. Her career, in any case, had been flung into orbit by the *Capuleti* success, and hardly a day went by without a call from Colman O'Toole to discuss an audition, an engagement, a recital, even—now, for the first time—the possibility of a recording contract.

“People want to hear your voice, young lady,” explained Colman. “It's a small world, this opera business we move in, and news travels fast. They are asking: Who is this girl that saved the Met in the flu epidemic of '85? Let's hear what she can do. I'm thinking a single studio CD—some selections from Bellini, Rossini, Mozart and so on—would enjoy a steady modest sale, and make some respectable pocket money for the both of us.”

The recording contract was still up in the air when Margaret finished her *Capuleti* engagement at the beginning of February. It was too late in the season to get new bookings in any of the big houses, but Colman sent her off on a five-city tour of recitals and concert performances that had been arranged the previous fall. On Margaret's first day back in New York after that, he called to tell her he had set up a South American tour for the summer, taking in Australia and New Zealand [the southern hemisphere's opera season is in its own winter, May to September], and had every hope

of a full European tour in the coming fall. Now all her fares and hotel bills would be paid.

Margaret felt dizzy from it all. There were three completely new roles to learn for the summer, all principals and one—Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*—a big, difficult, challenging part of the kind that can make a singer's name, or destroy it. But she sat down with Professor Shi and made a study plan, and once it was set out on paper in weeks and days the tasks confronting her did not seem so intimidating. Professor Shi was plainly sad at the thought of her coming absence.

"We shall not be seeing much of you for a while after the spring, then, Yuezhu."

"I wish I could take you with me, Old Shi."

Margaret felt a twinge of impiety at saying "Old Shi". It implied equality, or at most inconsequential inequality, and lacked the respect due to a teacher. But Professor Shi had been her friend and confidante as well as her teacher, and she thought the more democratic, American form would be better suited to their relationship, now that her career was properly embarked upon. Professor Shi, in any case, did not seem to mind. He laughed.

"Indeed, I should enjoy seeing these places. Perhaps I will take a tour of my own. But you hardly need me now. I have taught you all that I know."

"I shall always need you, Old Shi. 'With the mirror we correct our improper appearance.' You are my mirror, you are my Wei Zheng. You may think I'm ready, but I don't feel it. Who knows my voice as well as you, Old Shi? To whom can I go for honest criticism and suggestions?"

[Wei Zheng was a minister at the court of the second Tang emperor. When Wei Zheng died the emperor said: "With bronze as a mirror we correct our improper appearance; with history as a mirror we understand the rise and fall of nations; with wise men as a mirror we learn right from wrong."]

Old Shi chortled with delight at this erudite compliment. He got up from the piano stool and shook Margaret's hand with both of his, and told her she would be a fine Violetta—"but only after I have taken you through the difficult parts!"

More troublesome to Margaret's mind was Johnny Liu. Her success at the Met had done little to disturb their private routines, any more than had her various trips around the country. Now, however, she was to be away all summer; and if the European tour materialized, all fall and winter, too. It did not seem fair to continue the living arrangement with Johnny, leaving him alone so long, inhibited from entering into any other relationships.

She spoke frankly about this to Johnny, one evening over dinner at the table in the kitchen. She had cooked the dinner herself, to give her time to think and prepare what she would say, her hands busy but her mind free. At a suitable point she laid out her plans to Johnny. Johnny listened without expression.

"You are right, of course," he said at last. "I think you are going to be very successful, Yuezhu. I don't think you'll be sharing a room in Flushing ever again."

"It's been a real home to me, living here with you. If we hadn't done this, I don't know how I would have managed."

Johnny Liu chuckled, picking slowly at his food. "You didn't like the suggestion when I first made it, remember?"

"Yes, I remember. But you were right, Johnny. It was the proper thing for that time."

Johnny Liu looked up and nodded. "Yes. And this is the proper thing for this time."

"So I believe. I hope you won't miss me."

"Of course I shall miss you. Especially our bicycle rides in the park."

"Yes. I shall miss that, too. Perhaps you can find someone else to ride with you."

"Mm. I'm sure I shall. But not immediately. I shall live by myself a few months first. It's not good to go too quickly from one girl to another. I might call her by your name in error." Johnny Liu laughed—not altogether whole-heartedly, Margaret thought.

"I wish you could establish yourself properly here. Why don't you find an American girl and marry her? You'd get a Green Card right away."

"No. I want a Chinese wife. I don't believe there can be understanding between two people from different countries. A Shanghai girl, I hope."

“The sooner the better. You can’t go on doing odd jobs all your life.”
Johnny shrugged. “When the hunter is ready, the prey will appear.”

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It seemed for a time that the southern tour might be a complete fiasco.

The first truth about modern opera production is that all opera companies and opera houses, everywhere in the world, are chronically hard up. A visiting singer—even a minor sensation like Margaret—will be lodged in cheap accommodation and left to fend for herself in matters of food, clothing, taxi fares and so on. A succession of Holiday Inns and Econolodges and their antipodean equivalents can be mighty wearying to the spirit; a regular diet of cheap food cooked by strangers—strangers who, in some cases, have learned the elements of hygiene in clearings deep in the matto grosso, or huddled around dung fires on the pampas—can play havoc with the metabolism. Margaret picked up a nasty stomach infection somewhere east of the Andes, and by the time she got to Sydney was so weakened she could barely struggle through her daily exercises. Fortunately there was a good lead time before the first performance of *Traviata* at Sydney, interrupted only by a recital at Melbourne. Knowing that, from the point of view of advancing her career, the *Traviata* outweighed the recital by a factor of a hundred, Margaret bit her lip and canceled Melbourne. She called Colman to explain. Colman was entirely supportive.

“*Traviata* is the prize, my dear. Cancel everything if you have to. Sure every pub in Melbourne can supply an opera singer, you’ll not be missed.”

Carefully husbanding her voice and strength, Margaret devoted long hours to silent study of the *Traviata* score, which she had already sung through with Professor Shi. The crux of her role was the grand aria “Ah, fors’è lui”—the very one whose opening words had so vexed her in Nakri four years before. Then she had merely been acquainted with it, as a famous piece by a great composer; now she had to master it. “Ah, fors’è lui” was a huge glowering behemoth 252 measures long, in four sections and fifteen subsections, artfully seeded with every kind of land mine

known to the soprano voice: optional rubatos, tenutos and portamentos, trills over the orchestra, a truly sadistic refusal to allow the singer to take breaths when she most needs to, and three separate occurrences of the soprano's worst nightmare—the “ee” vowel on a high note.

By piano rehearsal Margaret was steady on her feet; by stage rehearsal she could feel the firm, satisfying strength returning to the muscles of her chest and stomach; by piano dress rehearsal she could use her top without undue effort; by orchestra dress she was in full voice. The virus, not quite conquered, fought a rearguard action through the first night's performance, giving her a terrifying attack of hot diarrhea pain during the brindisi, but by sheer force of will Margaret kept to her score till the end of the first act, executing “Fors' è lui” without any major fault, and after that all was well.

At the last performance she was on her best form, had internalized the role thoroughly and satisfied herself and the conductor that her interpretation of “Fors' è lui” was the best possible for her voice and stage manner. When, with her hands crossed on her breast, she opened her throat for the great aria, the sound came out unbidden. Margaret lost all sense of herself even while declaiming the introductory scena; as the andantino kicked in, the music rose under her, lifting her off her feet, and she *flew*, she soared like an eagle, through scena, cantabile, recitative and cabaletta, returning to the knowledge of her own trifling existence only in Alfredo's arms at the end, the curtain coming down, her partner whispering *Bravissima! Oh, bravissima!* in her ear, the audience on their feet, the roar of their approval coming up over the footlights like a tsunami.

Margaret took sixteen curtain calls. Her local reviews were ecstatic, and just before she left the country Colman called to tell her there had been an excellent one in *Opera Weekly* which would do well for her in the States, this being a New York paper which ran an “Opera round the world” page. There must have been notices in Europe, too: Vinnie Cinelli sent a cable of congratulations from his home in Italy.

The local people took her to their heart. They were very proud of their opera house, and keenly interested in all that took place there. In the three weeks before taking her *Traviata* to New Zealand, Margaret did two TV interviews, an impromptu recital—at a colossal fee, negotiated by

Colman via long distance phone—that was also televised, gave further interviews for newspapers and the radio, and attended four grand parties, at one of which she had to fight off—literally, physically fight off—advances from one of the country’s cabinet ministers, much the worse for drink. It was all very gratifying and pleasurable in its own way, though not to be compared with the joy of *flying* through two hundred and fifty bars of prime Verdi.

Following the last of the three concert performances in New Zealand—which was also the last of their winter season—the house held a small party. Here, somewhat at a loss among people she knew only from having rehearsed with them, Margaret was turning from the buffet table with a plate of small dry crackers and cheese—still not altogether trusting her stomach—when she found herself looking into the smooth, regular features of William Leung.

To see him here, at the furthest end of the planet, took Margaret’s breath away. For a moment she stood speechless. Perceiving her condition, William smiled and made a little bow.

“A wonderful performance,” he said in Chinese.

“I have nothing to say to you,” said Margaret when she had recovered her breath. “You’re a bad egg. Go away.”

“Oh, come on, Yuezhu. You know me better than that. You know my character’s not so bad.”

“Your character! What character? You make a fortune gambling on the stock market. Then you use it to launch dark plots against people, or stash it away in Swiss bank accounts.”

“All my accounts are with American banks. I have never gambled with stocks. I’m a bond man. I got rich developing new kinds of bonds, so that companies could raise money more easily, for the benefit of all society. And the only people I’ve made plots against were those who took a hand in murdering my father and mother. Who would blame me for that?”

He spoke calmly but firmly, using the simplest words and constructions. This had its effect on Margaret, taking the wind out of her sails somewhat. She wanted to turn away from him but this was not easy, with the buffet table behind her, the wall to her left and a crowd of buffeteers

to her right. She looked at William with some resignation. There was justice in what he had said, after all.

“Besides,” William continued, “*Opera Weekly* said the unusual quality of your voice may have its origins in those two years in Tibet, up in that thin dry air. In which case, you have me to thank for your career.”

“What are you doing in New Zealand?” asked Margaret, ignoring this last hypothesis, which she had also heard from Old Shi.

“Why, I came to hear you sing. ‘Concert performance’—I wasn’t sure what it meant. So you just stand there on stage with no costumes or acting, and sing the words.”

“It’s much cheaper than a full production. We singers like it—nothing to think about but your voice.”

“Your voice is really very beautiful, Han Yuezhu. I noticed it even when we were small. It’s a gift.”

“I hope I will use it wisely.”

“I’m sure you will.”

There was a little uncomfortable pause. To break it, Margaret asked how he had come to be at the party.

William shrugged. “I gave them some money. It’s a nice hall, but they told me it needs some repairs. So I gave them fifty thousand dollars.” William laughed. “They wanted to put me on the board, but I said no, I spend all my time in New York.”

“Fifty thousand! Wa! You really spend money like water, Weilin!”

“Is it really so much? I sometimes think I’ve lost my sense of proportion. How much was your fee?”

“Three thousand. But that’s New Zealand dollars, it’s less in American, I’m not sure how much. Plus expenses, which is probably more than three.”

“Do they put you up in a nice hotel?”

“No. Guest room at a local conservatory. You have to be a superstar to get a good hotel.”

“You can move to my hotel if you like. It’s the best in the country. I’ll pick up the tab. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“No, no, absolutely not.” Margaret shook her head firmly, feeling a little of the rage coming back. “I won’t take anything from you.”

William smiled, but it was easy to see that he felt the rebuff. “Do you know this is one of the world’s most beautiful countries?” he said. “South Island especially. Steep mountains covered with forest, high waterfalls—like a Song Dynasty painting. A person could set up a hut in the mountains and live like a Taoist hermit, ‘eating the air and drinking the dew.’”

Margaret was going to say: *Why don’t you do that? To atone for your sins.* But something about the way he said it, something wistful, caught her and silenced her. He wasn’t just fantasizing, he really had it in mind to do that. For a moment she glimpsed something in him she had not seen before—something yearning, yearning for stillness and peace. It was odd and a little creepy.

“Wouldn’t you like to go for a trip to see the southern mountains?” William asked.

“No. Not if it comes from you, no. I told you, I won’t take anything from you.”

There was a gap to her right now and Margaret stepped away with no valediction, turning from him and walking straight off to the ladies’ room. She sat on the couch in there for a while, then came back out. William was still in the room, talking with a group of men at one side, but he made no further approach to her and gave no more acknowledgment of her existence. The next day Margaret took a plane for New York, richer than she had left but with no place to live.

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Margaret camped out in Old Shi’s studio for a week. It was at this point that she grasped the nature of the relationship between Old Shi and the boy she had thought so much like Baoyu, who had been in the apartment so often when she went for lessons. He actually lived there, and slept in Old Shi’s bedroom. Having grown up under Maoist puritanism, Margaret still, even after three years in the West, found these things hard to accept, or even to believe. Her affection for Old Shi was only just strong enough to overcome her instinctive reaction of disgust and revulsion, and once

she understood the situation she was painfully ill at ease with the two of them.

Sitting with them one evening around a phoned-in banquet of Chinese food in tidy foil cartons, she responded to Old Shi's: "Help yourself, Yuezhu—what will you have?" by saying, in Chinese: "Mmm, why don't I have some chicken?" But her chronic unease betrayed her. "Chicken" is *ji* in Chinese, and "why don't I" . . . is signified by a *ba* at the end of the phrase; so the last two syllables of this sentence, as she spoke it, were . . . *ji, ba*. But Margaret got the emphasis wrong, and her utterance sounded like "I'll take a *jiba!*" Old Shi squealed with laughter, Margaret blushed purple, and the boy insisted on being told the joke. Once told it, he blushed too, and Margaret got up early next morning, walked down to Canal Street for a Chinese newspaper, and by five p.m. had secured herself a room in Elmhurst for two hundred and fifty dollars a month.

That fall of 1986 Margaret became a recording artist. Colman had set up a contract with one of the record companies for her to produce a CD of arias from popular operas. This involved six weeks in a recording studio in White Plains. Studio recording, Margaret discovered, involved a very small amount of time spent singing and a very large amount of time watching young men in beards, dungarees and earphones making adjustments to their machines and conversing in technical jargon.

After the studio work Margaret went on European tour for the winter. The recording had consumed more of her time than she had planned, and she set off for London feeling ill-prepared. Only when she came out of the arrivals door at Heathrow and saw Baoyu waving at her did her spirits lift.

It was not a surprise. She and Baoyu had settled into a regular correspondence, three letters each a year, and when she got travel details for the London engagement Margaret had written to tell him. Baoyu was a principal with Sadlers Wells now, an international star; but too much ballet is danced in the off-season for opera, and the two of them had never managed to be in the same city at the same time since her days with Royal Youth International.

"I can't wait for your CD to come out," said Baoyu, driving her into the city in a tiny British automobile. "That's the advantage singers have over dancers. What would be the use of *my* making a CD?"

“You could make a video.”

“I have, I’ve made several in fact, but there’s no money in it. People can’t watch a video driving their car. They can’t watch a video while jogging. They don’t put a video on to make love to.” Baoyu laughed. “Which reminds me. There’s something I should tell you, since you’ll be staying with us.”

In his letter, Baoyu had said he shared a flat with a friend, but that they had a spare room she was welcome to make use of. Primed by her experience with Old Shi in the summer, Margaret guessed the revelation before Baoyu made it.

“I didn’t tell you before,” Baoyu explained, “because a lot of fellow-countrymen still find it too shocking. I didn’t know what your reaction would be. I suppose I should have mentioned it, since you’ll be staying with us.”

“Oh,” said Margaret, “I’m quite sophisticated about these things now. I just found out my voice coach is a same-sexer, too. But I must say, to tell you the truth, I think it’s against nature.”

“So is dancing *en point*. So is wandering round a stage singing high Cs. Where do you see those things in nature? We are human beings. We are above nature.”

Margaret looked away, embarrassed though she did not want to be. The part of London they were driving through looked familiar. Perhaps it was Ealing. Oddly, she found herself thinking of William. What a variety of people there were in the world! Education really didn’t prepare you for this. Her own education had presented humanity in two categories: Good People, who struggled to promote the interest of the masses, and Bad People, who opposed them. Obviously there were more things in the world of human affairs than ever were dreamed of in Chairman Mao’s philosophy.

“Perhaps,” she said to Baoyu at last, “we human beings can’t really understand nature. We are part of it, we come from it, but still we rise above it. Then sometimes we fall below it. Where do you see wars and murder in nature? Where do you see plotting and revenge? I guess you’re right, Baoyu. I shouldn’t have spoken so glibly about what is natural and what isn’t. This guy you share with. Does he care about you?”

“Oh, yes, Elder Sister. We care about each other very much.”

“Then you have my blessing,” said Margaret, and laughed to show she was not really so arrogant as to think Baoyu was in need of blessings from her. Baoyu took it seriously though.

“Oh, Elder Sister, I’m so glad to hear you say that. You of all people I didn’t want to think less of me. You’ll like Jan, I know.”

In spite of which, Margaret did not like Jan, mainly because of a powerful impression that Jan did not like her. Probably, she surmised, after a few days’ acquaintance, Jan did not like anyone who had known Baoyu before him, or been close to Baoyu in any way. Somewhat older than Baoyu—close to forty, perhaps—and a choreographer with England’s Royal Ballet, Jan was dark and brooding, with few words, though his English was excellent. He was Danish by origin—the beginning of Baoyu’s career at the Royal Danish Ballet had overlapped with the end of his—and he sometimes spoke to Baoyu in that language when Margaret was present, as if in deliberate assertion of an intimacy she could not share.

Baoyu clearly adored Jan, however, and Margaret struggled to like him for Baoyu’s sake. Jan was famous in the ballet world, Baoyu told her proudly, and was spoken of everywhere as one of the finest in his art. Margaret, who had quite lost touch with the world of ballet, did not doubt the truth of this, but the respect it added to her knowledge of Jan could not overcome her discomfort at his jealousy. She saw Baoyu dance in a production of *Manon* entirely choreographed by Jan; he, but not Jan, came to see her sing *Gilda* at Covent Garden. When her engagement was over, Baoyu drove her to the airport, another airport this time.

“I shall be in New York in January, he told her, Guest appearance with the American Ballet Theater.”

“I shall be in Italy,” said Margaret. “Ai! We are like birds, migrating with the seasons. So difficult to keep up relationships. No wonder the married singers all seem to have problems.”

“The same with us,” said Baoyu. “Yes, it’s difficult. But I truly believe Jan is faithful to me when I’m away.”

“Yes. I can see he adores you. How about you, Baoyu? Are you faithful to him?”

Baoyu laughed. “Mostly. Our way of life. . . Look, Elder Sister, I

know in your heart you can't approve of it. I can see how uncomfortable you are when you're together with me and Jan. I can understand. The way we were brought up. . . same-sex wasn't even disgusting, it was beyond disgusting. It was unthinkable. It was unthinkable to *me* till I came to the West—and I've got it in my nature! In China when we were growing up, it didn't exist. If you did that, they put you in jail. I think they still do. In the Cultural Revolution, they killed you. So I understand how hard it is for you to accept. Perhaps you can never accept it, really. Perhaps your knowing this about me will put a barrier between us for always. For me myself, to accept that this was my nature, that this was what I wanted—it was a terrible struggle. But now I have accepted it, and I can tell you for sure, I wouldn't wish to be any other way."

Margaret was touched by this little apologia. They drove in silence for some minutes while she tried to sort it all out in her mind. It was true what Baoyu had said: she could not really accept it, and perhaps never would be able to. Yet Baoyu was still Baoyu, her old classmate. He wasn't a different person.

"I don't think there's a barrier," Margaret said cautiously at last, "so long as it's just the two of us together. But when you're with your. . . your friend—yes, then there's a barrier."

"Jan's very jealous. I'm sorry, it's just his character."

"Mm, I think it would be the same with anybody. It's just. . . well, as you said, it's hard for me to accept. But you, dear Baoyu, you'll always be my old classmate. I'll never hold it against you. You must be careful, though. This new disease that's come up. Same-sexers are very susceptible, so it's said."

"Of course. We all know that. Don't worry, Elder Sister, I'll take good care of myself."

After London Margaret sang Santuzza at the Paris Opera, seeing—and ascending—the Eiffel Tower at last; then she was one of the three ladies in *Magic Flute* at the Staatsoper in Vienna, the best German role Colman had been able to get for her this season. From Vienna Margaret crossed the Alps to Italy.

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This was not the Italy Margaret knew from Royal Youth International's brief visit, bunk beds in ill-lit cheap travelers' hostels and college auditoriums. She was now a known singer, her impromptu *Giulietta* already a minor legend among the art's closest followers, her *Violetta* favorably reviewed, if only for the benefit of those non-Australians who read the international summaries in their fan magazines. Now she sang at the great historic houses: La Scala in Milan, the Regio in Parma, La Fenice in Venice, and Teatro Bellini in Catania, the composer's birthplace.

Singing at these big old Italian houses was quite different from any previous experience Margaret had had. Each place had its own traditions and cherished eccentricities; and at the same time all shared in the fractious, disorderly quality of modern Italian life. Everybody had warned her about the strikes, and she duly encountered two: one by the chorus at Rome's Teatro dell'Opera, one by the stagehands at the Regio in Parma. Both were settled quite briskly; neither affected her own performance. Other Italian customs were less easy to adjust to.

Backstage at La Scala after the second act of *Don Carlo* with Vinnie Cinelli himself, she was accosted by a small fat man who stuck out his hand to her.

"Sono dal claque," said the man.

Margaret did not grasp the meaning at first. She supposed it must be someone involved with the production, some Signor (or possibly Conte—for a Republic, Italy has a prodigious quantity of aristocrats) with a name like Antonio dal Claque. She had started to extend her own hand with a *Piacere*. . . when Vinnie appeared out of nowhere, stepped between them, put a mighty arm across the little man's shoulders and bore him away with a cheery *Eh! Amico mio*. . . Margaret saw them arguing off behind a large mock fountain in the offstage clutter of discarded scenery, with much Italian hand-talk. At last some bank notes passed from Vinnie to Signor dal Claque, the latter bowed and left, and Vinnie stood frowning at the bills left in his hand.

"Who was it?" asked Margaret, baffled by the whole thing.

"Just as 'e hintroduced 'imself. 'E is from the claque."

“The claque? Such a thing really exists?”

Vinnie shrugged, putting away the bills in an inner pocket of his costume. “At some of the ’ouses, yes. We must still pay for our happlause.”

“What ’appens, I mean what *happens*, if you don’t pay? Will they boo instead of applauding?”

“Per’aps. Nowadays, per’aps not. They ’ave not such power as before. Per’aps nothing will ’appen. But it is a custom, and we must honor our customs.”

Other peculiarities were even more unsettling. At that same La Scala the occupants of one box seemed to be holding a riotous party all through the second performance of *Don Carlo*—talking at the tops of their voices, laughing, clinking glasses, paying little attention to proceedings on stage. Nobody seemed to mind this, or find it unusual. At Naples things were even more informal, with people strolling in and out calling to their friends, having meals served in their boxes all through—though they paid attention when a major aria was being sung, as indeed did the revelers at La Scala.

“This is ’ow it was in old times,” explained Vinnie after the La Scala incident. “People go to the opera to meet their friends. Is why so many of the bel canto operas ’ave no overture. Waste of the composer’s time—nobody would be able to ’ear it above the greetings. Rossini used the same overture for three different works. Is probable nobody noticed.”

Parma caused Margaret much foreboding, that city having cherished for a century and a half its reputation as home to the toughest opera audience in Italy (and therefore in the world). Her role was one she knew well—it was the Countess in *Marriage of Figaro*—and Margaret knew she had been on top form all through her European trip, but still it was daunting to look out through the stage lights at a thousand silent loggionisti, knowing that their disapproval had more than once closed down an opera in the first act and that at least one singer who disappointed them had had to be escorted to the railroad station by the town police. In the event they treated her well, calling out good-naturedly *Brava la Cinesa!* after “Porgi, amor”.

But it was at Catania in Sicily that Margaret got her warmest wel-

come, and an instance of how opera, instead of being something apart from the life of a place, could be integral to it.

Catania, a gray, smoggy, traffic-strangled little town looking out through gray drizzle across the gray Ionian Sea, was the birthplace of Bellini, and the citizens nursed a fierce pride in their native son. Margaret seemed to be known to everyone here as the *Cinesa* who had stepped in to rescue *Capuleti* at New York. She was interviewed for the newspaper on her arrival, and again on the radio. People called out to her in the streets above the traffic din. But most magical was the last performance of her opera—*Il Pirata*, by Bellini himself, a new role for Margaret, but one which she had mastered as easily as everything else by the Sicilian she had taken on. Sitting in her dressing room in the interval between the two acts, she became aware of hurrying feet and shouted voices. Margaret's first reaction was alarm—it sounded as if there were a fire. This indeed proved to be the case, though not in the sense that had alarmed her. Stepping out into the little lobby from which the dressing rooms led off, she encountered the baritone, a native Sicilian, as tall and almost as large around as Vinnie, striding towards the exit with a huge smile on his face.

“Fuochi!” he sang out. “La festa! La festa di Sant’ Agata!”

Margaret did not understand this at all; but since her colleague had not a word of either English or Chinese he could not explain further except by making a dramatic exploding gesture with his arms, hands and fingers, and saying, in his thick Sicilian accent: “Oggi è la festa di Sant’ Agata. C’è un spettacolo di fuochi artificiale nel centro. Vieni!”

Not quite getting it, Margaret followed him out. People were streaming down toward the piazza. The whole theater had emptied, and apparently all the surrounding houses. She could see colleagues in stage costume among the crowd, and musicians from the orchestra in tail-coats. One violinist actually had his instrument with him.

The reason for the exodus became clear at once: a huge balloon of white fire exploded in the air above, then a cluster of twinkling red stars appeared, swelled and burst, then a whole fusillade of fireworks, blue and yellow and green, lighting up the sky above them, the people calling out in approval, even shouting *Bravo!* Little children—of which the city, and even the opera audience, seemed to have an unnaturally large supply—

were lifted up by their elders to see. It was a gloriously happy, convivial scene, quintessentially Italian in its spontaneous sociability. All around the pillar at the center of the piazza were stacked clusters of huge model candles—one of the emblems of Saint Agatha, the patron of the town and of this particular festival—carved from wood. Up in front was a glorious garish statuette of the Saint herself, holding out a silver platter with her severed breasts on it (her martyrdom was exceptionally gruesome).

It was some minutes before the absurdity of her situation struck Margaret: herself and the other performers standing out there in full stage costume and makeup. Realizing it, she felt suddenly conspicuous—a feeling which quickly turned out to be well justified, for someone was calling to her across the crowd, calling her name in Chinese: “Han Yuezhu! Han Yuezhu!” Margaret was too short and hemmed in to see who it was. It must, she supposed, have been her tall jeweled headdress that revealed her to whoever it was, now calling from closer at hand.

It was William, pushing through the crowd, waving to get her attention.

“Yuezhu,” he said as he came up to her. He stopped abruptly, startled by her face. “Wa! Your makeup really looks dramatic close up. Like a temple god. Is it really you?” And he laughed.

“If not, why would you be here? Wherever I go, there you must be, it seems.”

“That’s not very fair. It’s only been twice in over a year. I like opera, I like your voice, and I can afford to travel anywhere I please in great comfort. The wonder is you don’t meet me more often.”

“So much for your open movements. Meanwhile, what are you organizing in secret? Planning to have me exiled again?”

“Oh, Yuezhu, don’t say that. You’re really unfair to me.”

In fact, Margaret was not displeased to see him. The more she had reflected on their recent exchanges, the more she felt she had been harsh to him. In any case, the cheerful crowd all around made it impossible to feel ill-will to anyone at this moment. She favored William with a smile.

“How much money did you give the Teatro Bellini?” she asked, pointing back down the street at it.

“The opera house? Nothing. I got scalped for my ticket, I only found

out about your performance at the last minute. Two hundred dollars! I don't follow the opera press as well as I should."

"I think you should give something," said Margaret, mocking him with her smile. "A hundred thousand at least."

"If you tell me to, I will."

"Don't be silly. It's up to you what you do with your money. No business of mine."

"I've decided to anyway. Yes, a hundred thousand. It's a fine old theater. And I like the music very much. It's the same composer that wrote your, what? I can't remember the Italian name. *Luomiu yu Zhuliye*." [Saying the name of Shakespeare's play in Chinese.]

"Bellini, yes. This is his birthplace. They do a lot of his operas here. Elsewhere he's not much performed."

"I think his music suits your voice very well."

"You're very perceptive, Weilin. The experts say the same thing. I consider Bellini to be my *guiren*."

"Then I'll certainly give them a donation. It'll be a terrific sum in Italian. What is it, a thousand lire to the dollar?"

Margaret laughed at him again, at his childlike delight in numbers and in his wealth. "Now," she added, "it's time you offered to take me on a tour of the island."

"Oh, of course! Would you really like to, Yuezhu? Oh, yes! We could . . ."

"No, no! Never! I was just kidding."

Margaret saw his disappointment, but did not savor it this time. She could see his loneliness clearly for a moment, and felt a little sorry for him. But the fireworks had ended; the theater crowd and the singers in their brilliant costumes were beginning to drift back towards the Teatro.

"I must go back. I have some weeping and wailing to do."

"You will do it very beautifully." William turned with her and started back. "This is the last performance, isn't it?"

"Yes. Back to New York next week."

"I hope we can meet in New York."

Margaret laughed. "Somehow I feel sure we shall."

"I think you've forgiven me for Tibet, haven't you?"

“Mm, maybe. But I really don’t want anything to do with you, Weilin. And it was Qinghai Province, not Tibet. You should pay more attention to the consequences of your crimes.”

“Where do you live in New York?”

“Nowhere. I have a friend I must call tomorrow. He’ll find a room for me.”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll book you into the Pierre. Or the Carlyle, or the Waldorf. Or the Plaza, with all the rich cattle barons from Texas, if you like.”

“No thanks, Weilin. Not interested. I shall manage somehow.”

“I offer you these things—they mean nothing to me, it can be done so easily—but it seems you’re not willing to accept anything from me.”

Margaret stopped and confronted him, there in the street with the people streaming past them back to the Teatro.

“Look, Weilin. Please don’t misunderstand me. It’s not that I really hate you, or nurse resentment against you. What you did to me was very bad. I’m not going to forget it. On the other hand, you had a rough time in China, I know, and my family—yes, I myself—played a part in that. Perhaps we can say we are even. Let’s just leave it at that, shall we? I am an opera singer and you’re a big opera supporter. It’s inevitable that we shall meet from time to time. For those purposes, we can consider ourselves friends. Otherwise, there is nothing between us.”

“Nothing, Yuezhu? What about the bamboo grove?”

“What bamboo grove? What are you talking about? Oh, yes—but that was when we were children.”

“The child is the father of the man.”

“And the child must leave the father to go out into the world. We have our separate lives to live, our separate careers to make. I don’t think there is anything we can do together.”

William looked at her without speaking for a moment, then made a little smile and held out his hand. “Just as you say, Yuezhu.” Then, in English: “Break a leg.”

“You shouldn’t say that in the middle of a performance. But thank you anyway.”