

Chapter 57

Money Can Move the Gods

An Ironically-Named Heroine Comes to Grief

“A strange business to be sure,” said Colman, shaking his head. “What, are we back in the primo ottocento, with rival singers hiring claques to disrupt our performances?” He leaned back in his big leather chair, shaking his head slowly and frowning across the desk at the tale Margaret had been telling.

“I don’t have any rival singers. It’s William Leung, I know it is.”

Margaret told Colman about William. She gave him the edited version, the one she had given Jake. The truth was too complicated for foreigners to understand, too Chinese. And she did not say anything about her last encounter with William, only that there was an ancient family grievance on his part, a vendetta, driving all his actions against her.

“Saints bless us,” said Colman, “you have a powerful enemy indeed. Powerful indeed, if he can organize claques from three thousand miles away.”

“He has a billion dollars,” said Margaret, exaggerating for simplicity. “What can’t be done, with a billion dollars?”

“Just so, just so. However, I do not think we need fear such activities here. There is no tradition of claques in America, even friendly ones. You should put it from your mind, my dear.”

“That’s all very well, Colman, but I can’t just restrict my career to America. I have to sing in Europe too, you know that.”

“Indeed you do. But you have no foreign engagements till, let me see . . .” Colman consulted his diary. “. . .February 24th, Covent Garden. Plenty of time for your man Mr, what is it? yes, Mr Leung—plenty of time for him to tire of his sport.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

“Let us be optimistic, my dear. Sufficient unto the day the evil thereof.”

“He won’t tire of it. He’s Chinese, I understand him. He won’t, he won’t ever.”

“If he does not, then, dear girl, you will just have to rise above it.”

“*Rise above it?* But he’s destroying my performances! At Bregenz and Verona they stopped the show!”

Colman shook his head and tapped impatiently on his desk with four fat fingers.

“Oh, these summer festivals, Margaret. Tourist spectacles, you know. I am sure you will not see such things in the proper season, not at all.”

“Then I can work no more summer festivals?”

Colman frowned at her across the desk. “Young lady, such things happen. Every stage performer must face them at some time or other. Those who attend your performances have paid their ticket prices, they are entitled to express their opinions. There is a rich and ancient tradition of opera-goers expressing their opinions with the utmost vigor. You must accustom yourself to it. As a matter of actual fact, the world of opera is quite genteel as these things go. At one time, you know, I represented comedians touring the working men’s clubs in England.” Colman chuckled. “Now there were performers with nerves of steel. Why, you could let a bomb off on stage, they would not miss a line, bless them. And the best of them could give as good as they got. As you did, my dear, at Verona. People will be talking of that for years. *Crudele!*” He laughed his wide, merry laugh, the many chins vibrating in harmony. “Now that’s the way to deal with a claque! *Oderint dum metuant!*”

This last was Latin, Colman explained at Margaret’s request, something one of the Roman Emperors had said: Let them hate me, so long as they fear me.

“Then there’s nothing more I can do?”

“Short of asking the managements to eject the worst trouble-mak-

ers—and I'll be making representations in the appropriate quarters—no, there is nothing. These people are not breaking any law. If you will forgive my saying so, Margaret, you are up against cultural fundamentals here. Our society is more disorderly, perhaps, than yours. What is democracy, after all, but legitimized disorder? When you are confronted with this disorder, you must meet it face to face, come to terms with it.”

“Stare them down?”

“Precisely. As you did so well at Verona. Remember your mood at that time, remember your response. That must be your benchmark.”

Margaret sighed. “Verona was a fluke. My response was right there in the libretto.”

Colman laughed. “You'll not be telling me you have come this far in your career without being able to fake a libretto. Now . . .” he returned to his multidimensional diary and began browsing. “. . .let us discuss your schedule for next season.”

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At first it seemed that Colman was right.

There was a concert performance of *I Capuleti* at Philadelphia, and a recital at Carnegie Hall. *Capuleti* was so thoroughly internalized by now that Margaret thought she might *fly* through the romanza again. She had not experienced *flying* since *La sonnambula* the previous season, and after the stress and discord of her European experiences she yearned for that serene dissolution. Besides, she was curious to know if she could *fly* at a concert performance, or whether stage set and costumes were a prerequisite. *Flying*, however, belonged to that class of phenomena that vanish when sought, and though she acquitted herself well at Philadelphia, Margaret did not *fly*. Still, both appearances went off without disturbance, and Margaret went to her first *Lucia* at the Met full of confidence and on excellent form. William's box was empty, and she thought this a good sign. Then, in the cavatina, which is difficult and is supposed to be very atmospheric, the calling started.

The claque was up in the gods somewhere. The rest of the audience seemed to ignore them, and there was pointedly over-enthusiastic ap-

plause at the end of the cavatina—the audience giving her their support against the claque. While the applause was going on there was shouting from the upper levels. A woman up there screamed; more shouting from several voices; murmurs of curiosity in the lower levels, heads turning in the stalls. It was impossible to figure out what was going on through the glare of the stage lights, however, and the orchestra resumed as usual after the applause died down.

Margaret was on stage for all the rest of the long first act, with two important duets to perform. There was no trouble with the first; then, in the second, the claque started up again. Their hissing and calling was relentless, and Margaret lost concentration and tempo towards the end and was happy to see the curtain come down.

Backstage everyone was talking about it. Fischel, the conductor, came to her dressing room, with the stage manager in tow.

“Fot on *erd* is goink on here?” demanded Fischel, the Hungarian accent out of control. “Zese people are ruinink our performance!”

“Don’t blame me!” Margaret shouted at him, close to tears. “Do you think I organized this? Do you think they are my *friends*?”

“Is it not you zey are hissink?”

“Of course it is! What do you suggest I do about it?”

“Do apout it? Fy, you must find out who is organizink it and PAY ZEMTO STOP!”

“Your husband’s approach, in any case, is quite the wrong one,” added the stage manager, looking disapproving.

“My husband? What approach?” Jake had been in the audience this evening, Margaret knew—had been with her in her dressing room before the performance, in fact.

“When the disturbance started, your husband went up to the third level and started fighting with one of those involved. There was a general melée, I’m afraid, and several people were ejected. Including your husband.”

“WELL, THANK GOD SOMEBODY IS STANDING UP FOR ME!” Margaret screamed; and got up, and pushed them out, and slammed the door. Afterwards she sat at her dressing table trembling. Dear old Jake! She wished he could be with her; and thought he would be if he could.

But having thrown him out through the lobby, they were not likely to let him in by the stage entrance. Margaret could not quite, not altogether say that she had forgiven Jake his infidelities. It was more a case of having put them out of her mind under the press of study and rehearsals. But he had been continuously tender and solicitous to her since her unfortunate discovery, had given up long hours to sit at the piano accompanying her through voice practice, bought her small gifts, soothed and caressed her. Margaret had been telling herself she was too busy to think about her marriage problems; beneath that thought—under cover of it, as it were—she had been quietly acquiescing in Jake's efforts to mend things.

The claque kept up their barracking all through the opera, wrecking the famous mad scene with hooting and laughing. Margaret sang on fiercely, in a rage; a state of mind not altogether opposed to the musical expression of betrayal and madness. But at the end the curtain calls were perfunctory, the audience disgruntled.

She had been home at the Fifth Avenue apartment half an hour when Jake came in. He had actually been arrested, taken to a police station and given an appearance ticket for the Manhattan Criminal Court the following Sunday. In addition to which, he sported a dull black bruise on the right side of his face.

"Thank you, dear Jake, thank you," sobbed Margaret, falling into his arms.

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Jake consulted attorneys, but the attorneys were unanimous that there was no legal action they could take. On this point Colman had been correct: there is no law against hooting at a stage performer, nor any civil wrong that can be tried, except possibly by the house. Jake spoke to the house. Their counsel had told them there might be injunctions that could be issued, if a definite conspiracy could be identified, or a deliberate attempt to disrupt shown; but they chose not to act at this point.

Jake decided that he would go and confront William, but could not get past the bodyguard. He camped out at the entrance to the Pierre for a whole day, from six in the morning till ten thirty at night; no William.

“He’s not going in to the office any more,” Jake reported back after some inquiries. “The Feds are on his case over some insider trading stuff they’re investigating. I understand he’s suspended his business activities. He’s just holed up in there. Nobody sees him. He doesn’t pick up his phone.”

Margaret wondered if this was the whole story. She had not told Jake anything about her last meeting with William, and had heard nothing to indicate that his condition might be publicly known. It was the kind of thing the *New York Post* would have reported, but there was nothing.

Margaret had begun reading the *Post* when she was in town, on Johnny Liu’s recommendation, when Johnny had come visiting at the Southampton house one day in June. The *Times* (said Johnny) was just too much if English was your second language—it would take you all day to read even if you did nothing else. The *Post* had all the essential news, and besides—Johnny Liu chuckled and nodded his approval—took a strong line against the communists in China. Margaret couldn’t have cared less about the paper’s editorial line, but found the gossip columns and show-business features very useful for keeping herself up to date on those topics that filled the air at parties. William’s name had appeared a couple of times that summer and fall in the business pages in connection with these Wall Street scandals, whose details she could not understand at all; but there was never anything about his private life—not in Liz Smith, not in Cindy Adams, not in the titbits scattered around the cartoon on page six, and of course not in the show-business pages.

So far as the *Post* was concerned, in fact, Margaret herself was more newsworthy than William. The incident at the *Lucia* premiere made a story of its own: FISTICUFFS AT THE MET, with a mostly-accurate account of Jake taking on someone for booing at his wife’s performance and being arrested for his trouble. The story was slanted humorously, poking fun at this lapse into street behavior on the part of the opera-going classes, not a very significant proportion of whom, it seemed, were *Post* readers.

By the time Margaret completed her fourth performance of *Lucia* the *Post* had DIVA PLAGUED BY HOSTILE CLAQUES set permanently in type. Someone had gone through the notices of her European appearances that summer and learned of those earlier troubles.

The claque had appeared again at the second, third and fourth *Lucias*; and as in Europe Margaret thought she could see an improvement in their skills—they were learning just how much annoyance they could cause her without actually stopping the show. It was as if a new claque had been hired for the American season, and had had to find its way into the role. Probably (she thought) that was what had happened.

Most hurtful to Margaret was the attitude of her colleagues. It was not that anyone actually blamed her, only that they treated her as one might the carrier of a painful and highly contagious illness: with sympathy, but with a proper concern for one's own well-being. A singer who brought trouble into her performances, however unwillingly, was bringing trouble for everyone concerned. Matters were not improved by the fact that by her third *Lucia* everyone—including Margaret herself—knew that her voice was suffering under the strain.

“He is your *xiaoren*,” said Old Shi, at a coaching session in his new loft—still in the village, but twice as big as the other. “Bellini is your *guiren*, this Liang Weilin is your *xiaoren*.” [A *xiaoren* is a personal demon, the opposite of a *guiren*.] “You must find out how to neutralize his power.”

“To neutralize a billion dollars I shall need a billion dollars,” said Margaret in despair.

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Vinnie Cinelli was in town in early November, to sing Rodolfo at the Met. Margaret learned of his arrival from Colman, and at once called him at his hotel to invite him to dinner. She took the opportunity to swear him to secrecy, as she had Johnny Liu before his visit to Southampton, on the matter of her engagement to William. There had never been any public announcement, and so far as she knew the only people in the world who knew of it, other than William and herself, were Johnny Liu, Old Shi and Vinnie. She had never told Jake about it. Even the three who knew she and William had planned to marry did not know why the engagement had been so abruptly broken. “We had a disagreement,” was all Margaret had said to any of them.

Vinnie came to dinner accompanied by the lugubrious Rocco, looking more than ever like an unsuccessful mortician. Nella rarely traveled with Vinnie on tour. Vinnie was full of sympathy for Margaret's difficulties—disinterested sympathy, as they were not scheduled to sing together until the following season.

"'E is a swine to take 'is revenge so," said Vinnie. "We should go to his 'ouse, we men, and 'orse-whip 'im!"

"He doesn't live in a house, he lives in a hotel," said Margaret glumly. "And he has bodyguards."

"Does the Met not discipline these hooligans?" asked Rocco.

"If people complain, ushers will come and eject them. But getting somebody out from the middle of a row is disruptive in itself," explained Jake. "And there seems to be a good supply of these characters. Twenty or thirty at each performance, I think. And they have it down to an art, I must say. They know just how far to push the audience and the management."

"But who actually are they?" asked Rocco, who had a way of getting to the heart of things. "You, Signor Robbins, you have actually tangled with one of these claqueurs, these hired loggionisti. What kind of person was it?"

"A student, I should say. Young, well-dressed. Nothing you would notice in a crowd of opera-goers. I guess that's the point. He wants them to blend in."

"As our friend been attending the performances 'imself?" asked Vinnie.

"He hasn't been seen anywhere for months," said Jake. "Retreated deep into his shell, up there in the Pierre. God knows how he's been organizing it all. People come and go, but no-one knows who they are. The front desk, the doormen—he's got them all conscripted. Probably tips a thousand bucks a time—*they're* not going to say anything."

"Ave you been to see 'im, Perlina?" asked Vinnie, turning his dark, searching eyes on her face. Margaret looked down.

"No. No, I won't. I'd rather face the claque."

"I suggested she write him, but she won't even do that."

"It's old business. Chinese business. You can't understand." Margaret could feel Vinnie's eyes still on her. "You westerners can't understand."

She looked up, into Vinnie's eyes; and could not meet them, and looked over to Jake. Jake gave her a tender smile.

"To write to him," said Jake, "what can happen? The worst is, he won't read it."

Margaret forked at her food in silence.

"When I was a child in Modena," said Vinnie out of the blue, "I 'eard three things of your Chinese civilization: that it was old, wise and cruel. Of the first two I know nothing and cannot speak, but the cruelty is *happarent*."

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In the second week of November Margaret went to Chicago for *La Gioconda*. It was a new opera for her, and a new production for the house, so for several days she had not a moment to herself. She was to play the soprano role, *La Gioconda* herself, "the joyful woman"—a very ironic appellation, as the character endures unrelieved misfortune throughout the opera, eventually sacrificing her life to save that of her lover, only to see him go off with her rival, and preserving her own honor at last by an act of suicide. It is a long and complex opera which needs the singers' full attention, especially on a first performance.

The claque, with a sensitivity to the structure of the opera that seemed to Margaret, the more she thought about it afterwards, to be truly sadistic, was silent until the last of the four acts. They started up in her great tragic aria, the *Suicidio*, at the beginning of that act, and systematically destroyed her performance. The audience was spineless, letting the claque do their work with almost none of the angry counter-calling there had been at the Met, and even some laughter at the absurd deflating sallies hurled down from the loge at the most dramatic moments. *Poke 'er while she's warm!* urged a distinctly British voice, as the villain stood over *La Gioconda*'s lifeless body at the very end. When the curtain fell, and Margaret rose, she saw that the villain himself was smiling at this specimen of loggionisti wit.

"How can you think that's funny?" she screamed at him, in tones that must have been heard through the curtain and over the tepid applause

halfway up the stalls. “They’re destroying our opera, and you’re laughing with them!”

“Oh, come on. Don’t we sometimes take ourselves too seriously?” said the offending baritone.

“It’s *supposed* to be serious! IT’S A *TRAGIC OPERA*, YOU DAMN FOOL TURTLE EGG DOG FUCKER!” shrieked Margaret, lapsing into Chinese under the stress. She marched off the stage, refusing to take curtain calls to an audience which, she felt, had failed her.

The second performance was not as bad as the first. The house management had apparently been less indulgent than their audience. Ushers had identified some of the troublemakers and refused to admit them for the second performance. There were still enough, though, to break the opera’s dramatic spell and throw Margaret off her carefully-rehearsed notes, and she returned to New York with her nerves frayed and her voice off form.

“You should not become so upset,” said Old Shi. “Until modern times, audiences were always this way. At Mr Shakespeare’s plays young noblemen sat on the stage itself and threw nuts at the players.”

“It’s not the disturbance so much,” said Margaret. “It’s knowing it’s him. I wronged him, wronged him terribly, and this is his revenge. If it were a random thing, without reason, I could endure it. But it’s not without reason.”

She stopped there, having already said more than she really wanted Old Shi to know; and Old Shi, who was sensitive to such things, only looked at her a long moment from his position on the piano stool, and nodded silently, and turned back to his score.

At the two further *Lucias* in New York the claque was subdued, though still enough of a nuisance to rattle her and displease the audience. In mid-December Margaret flew back to Chicago for two more *Giocondas*; and here they were loud and obnoxious, coming in now in the first act duet and maintaining a drizzle of distraction all through. The audiences lost patience both times, and there were many empty seats by Act Four. Between the two performances Margaret was called to a conference with the house management, where she got the definite impression they were scolding her for having subjected them to these indignities. Margaret

first lost her temper, telling them if they had any idea about running an opera house they would not allow such disturbances. Then she began crying uncontrollably, and the conference broke up in an atmosphere of inconclusive embarrassment.