

Bel Mooney

STAGE DOOR

WAITING FOR
PLACIDO

Waiting For Placido by Bel Mooney



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WAITING FOR PLACIDO

The Fitzgeralds unpacked quickly. You need little for two days in Vienna, and nobody dresses formally for the opera anymore.

Jamie laid his suit on the bed, Sarah hung up her dress, and after that small bustle they gazed at each other with uncertainty, wondering what to do next. Sarah smoothed the black silk shift on its hanger.

Over lunch on the plane, flushed with the sudden high of champagne, they'd squabbled about the old subject. Now the trip was sullied by her husband's ill-humour - the indignation of a man used to getting his own way - when his little wife (once his Big Affair) holds out against him. Jamie sulked because her selfish intransigence (despite his many

sacrifices) was spoiling the little opera break he had booked to please her.

‘Shall we go for a walk?’ she asked, ‘Do a little shopping?’

He shrugged, opening his briefcase. ‘I’ve got this report to read - the new figures. Might as well do it now, to keep tomorrow free. Anyway, the performance starts at 6.30, so by the time we’ve changed and had a drink downstairs...’

Again, the wide shoulders rose and fell a fraction. He kept his eyes on the papers he held between them like a shield. Sarah felt his rejection with the mixture of sadness, fear and fury that was becoming familiar.

Fine...well, I won’t be long’, she said, as if nothing had happened. ‘Maybe I’ll find a little something for Amy’.

‘You can try’, he replied..

She passed the people sitting in front of the hotel, eating *Sachertorte* with little cups of coffee, turned left then left again along Karntner Strasse. It was warm; there was a slight aroma of beer and fried food, and Sarah noticed suddenly how many overweight people sauntered along the pedestrian street. Jamie was overweight too, although he denied it. He denied many things these days.

The thing that annoyed her most was his interpretation of what he called ‘treats’, as if she were a little girl to be placated. This weekend, for example was supposed to be his fourth anniversary present to her: two

nights at Sacher, with tickets for Domingo in Don Carlos at the Staatsoper. 'We'll go shopping, have wonderful meals, and he's so brilliant in the role', he had said, giving her the travel itinerary in a little china box. When they were first together, and unable to go out in case someone saw them, she'd imagined sweeping into Covent Garden on his arm, dazzling his peers with her beauty. Of course she had told him she loved the opera. When in love you lie.

She gazed at a window full of glittering hair ornaments and wondered what kind of woman wore such things. Discontentment itched. It was all very well, but by now he knew he had failed to convert her to his favourite art form, and so *whose* was this treat? Jamie was used to having his own way. That was why they were married. She too was a treat, picked out for himself at fortynine. The twenty year age difference and inconvenient existence of a wife, son and daughter, would not stop him. Even his business enemies said grudgingly that you had to hand it to Fitzgerald: he was a tough operator.

In their hotel room Sarah's husband took off all his clothes and sprawled on the side of the bed not taken up by his suit. He could smell *Diorissimo*, but the scent which used to turn him sick with desire now made his throat constrict with irritation. Once she would do anything for him - those nights when he was supposed to be away at conferences or

business trips and they spent the whole time in bed, even when she said, in mock- protest, that she was hungry and couldn't they go to a restaurant? Six months off fifty at the time, Jamie Fitzgerald saw this young woman as his salvation. Sex with her was a delirium he had never experienced - not with such intensity - and he loved the fact that Sarah's beauty was equalled by an intelligence which had already gained her a partnership.

'How can anyone so sexy be so clever?' he had asked her thickly one night, when his body sang from lovemaking and his head was light with hunger.

'How can anyone so clever be so sexy?', she returned, dazzling him equally with her smile and the curve of perfect small breasts glistening with sweat.

He knew with hindsight that his carelessness (never displayed earlier in passing passions) was due to the need for Maura to find out, so that the whole bloody untangling of the marriage became inevitable. He suffered months of recriminations from everyone - including Sarah, who was bitterly jealous every time he picked up the telephone to speak to his family, and constantly asked when he would 'sort things out'. His teenage children and some old friends refused to speak to him, and Maura's voice screamed and sobbed through his dreams. It was a black tunnel he walked through into the light, two years later, of his marriage to

Sarah Newton.

By refusing to come to the simple registry office ceremony followed by lunch, Sam and Belinda Fitzgerald offended their father almost to the point of tears.

'They're old enough to be more sophisticated about it,' he said, shaking his head in bewilderment. Sarah made noises of sympathy, though she had no desire for the spotty sixteen year old boy and fourteen year old girl to glower on her wedding day.

'They'll learn to accept me', she said, but did nothing to encourage them.

When she gave birth to Amy one year later, she could not see why her husband still felt any need to stay in contact with the family that treated him so badly.

She walked as far as the Cathedral, and stood for a long time contemplating it from the outside. How gaunt and grey it was, massively there in the midst of the city swirl, the finger of its tower raised to Heaven in admonition. Jamie was like that too: large, demanding, and constantly making her feel guilty. He told her she worked too hard, that Amy needed her, that Maura had given up her career for their children and that it was time she did too. He held out the alternative that was his new ideal: a wonderful house in the country for them, and commuting for him.

As he showered, Jamie brooded on his wife's

stubbornness. The sweetness with which she pleaded for time to think about such a momentous decision did not disguise her reluctance. Now fifty five, he was restless, chafing at the presence of the nanny, resenting the evenings Sarah brought work home and the simple fact that she loved the law firm, her colleagues, her life away from him. He could not acknowledge her terror at what he proposed - the vision of being alone with Amy, amongst dripping trees, miles from anywhere; days filled with the desire for evening, waiting for the sound of his car on the drive - unless the train was late or he had to stay in town. What would it be like?

‘Wonderful’, he told her in that flat voice with the slightest edge of menace, which dared his colleagues to take him on. They rarely did.

Sarah walked through the great west door of St Stephen’s, and caught her breath at the softness of the light, the grace of the gothic arches. It was warm and golden: a place where you would gladly seek sanctuary, soothed by the voice of heaven. She stopped before reaching the nave, taken aback at the oddness of her own response, and at the tears which suddenly made the distant altar blur and shimmer. When I was a child I believed in God, she thought. It was safe and comforting to be wrapped up, just as my father used to tuck me in tightly at night. Why don’t things

stay as they were?

She turned abruptly and retraced her steps, unable to bear the demands of the place. Tomorrow they would come here together, after the shopping. They would find a present for Amy, then explore the cathedral in detail, and she would make Jamie like it - he who always said he hated peering at old buildings. People could change, she told herself, as she strode back to the hotel. As you get older, surely you can tackle different challenges? Maybe she could learn to love solitude and domesticity, if it would please him. They could both push out their boundaries to mingle once again, like before. And wait for it to be as wonderful as he promised.

When Jamie heard her knock at the door he too had decided something. Sarah was met by a long embrace, and deep kiss, and felt herself melting into her husband. He led her to the bed, and undressed her very slowly, taking charge in the way they both liked. She allowed the process to run its course, as she was bent this way and that, and sensed (as so often nowadays) the absolute power of this big man who filled her, and drove her onwards, onwards - to the release that was also capitulation.

‘Oh, darling Jamie’, she sighed.

‘There’, he said.

Later, they sat outside the hotel, watching the traffic and drinking champagne. It was warm. Sarah needed no stole to cover her bare arms, and knew that the starkness of the dress, leavened only by a single row of pearls, was a perfect foil for her fragile beauty. Jamie said so. He touched her creamy cheek with one finger.

‘But you’ll look so healthy when we move to the country. Amy too.’

‘Don’t I look healthy now?’

‘OK - healthier. You’ll be all golden.’

Sarah ducked her head. Jamie did not notice. He was staring at the occupant of the taxi which had just pulled up near them. She was standing on the pavement, searching for change in her tiny evening bag - a statuesque woman in her late forties, dressed in a billowing evening gown of pale green satin, with matching shoes, and a light cream stole. Her severe chignon was held in place by a sparkling comb decorated with a pale silk flower.

‘Oh my God’, Sarah said, ‘It’s a ship in full sail’.

Simultaneously Jamie exclaimed, ‘It’s Karen Edwards!’

‘Who’s Karen Edwards?’, Sarah hissed, as the woman thanked the driver in flawless German.

‘Years ago she went out with Adrian Sullivan - you may have heard me mention him. We started in the bank together. She was a secretary then, but now she runs her own small

literary agency. I don't think she ever married, but she's nice.'

'Oh God - she's seen us...' Sarah began, but Jamie was already on his feet, striding towards the woman - charm and mastery in equal proportions, sure of their effect. Horrified, she heard him invite her to join them for a drink. And then the woman was towering over her, the preposterous dress rustling as she shook Sarah's hand, stole lifted slightly by a sudden breeze. The introductions done, Jamie pulled over a chair and she sat down, billowing like a spinnaker.

'You must be going to the opera', Sarah smiled, indicating, by the lifting of an eyebrow, her judgement on the evening clothes. She paused to raise a hand for a second to her own shoulder, although her dress was perfect in its simplicity and needed no adjustment. Then she added, 'So are we.'

'It'll be sublime', gushed Karen Edwards, nodding when Jamie offered champagne,

'Don Carlos is my favourite. Though to tell you the truth, I go anywhere to hear Placido in anything!'

'A real fan, eh?' said Jamie, 'Just like Adrian always was. Do you ever see him now, by the way?

She looked surprised. 'Yes I do from time to time - don't you? I thought you were the greatest of friends? I seem

to remember....’

Sarah saw Jamie colour slightly, and knew why. There were certain friends who, believing he had behaved badly to his wife, drifted away - nothing dramatic, just a judgement made by a silent phone, or the nod across a crowded room where once there would have been a warm greeting. That’s what happened with Adrian Sullivan.

That’s one of the prices you pay, Jamie thought - one of the many prices. The bills keep coming in, because the gods are just. He said, ‘Oh...things got complicated when...Well, life changes, doesn’t it?’

Karen Edwards glanced at the beautiful young women opposite her, and suddenly recalled all the gossip. Embarrassed, she fiddled with her sequinned evening bag. Years ago Adrian used to say that Fitzgerald pretended to be tough, but was an emotional fool. That was why he loved opera so much.

‘Are you actually saying you follow Placido Domingo all over the world?’ Sarah asked. Her tone was light, as if this could not possibly be true.

‘Well... more or less. Tokyo’s a bit of a problem, although I went once. But there was a magnificent *Andre Chenier* at the Met, and his Calvarodossi was marvellous there too. La Scala...Paris...Rome...Yes, I have followed him about a bit. As far as I’m concerned nobody comes near

him.'

'A groupie!', said Sarah gaily, oblivious to the Jamie's warning look. But the woman did not seem to mind, and laughed too.

'If you like - except that as I understand it the aim of the groupie is to go to bed with the star, but me - I'm happy just to watch Placido on stage!'

'Dressed for a gala....and so beautifully' , Sarah smiled.

'Oh, I think it's a pity people don't dress up any more', said Karen, 'it makes it more special for me.'

'Mmm - of *course*,' Sarah said, inclining her head.

Jamie saw, and spoke more loudly than was necessary. 'Well, quite apart from the fact that you look absolutely wonderful...it just strikes me it must get very expensive - the tickets, the flights, the hotels. How do you do it?

Karen Edwards shrugged, 'The point is - this is my hobby. I live alone, the agency's doing well, so why not? I book cheapish seats, stay in small places - but when you get to my age you tell yourself you've a right to be self-indulgent. You have to go for what you want.'

'Why not indeed', nodded Jamie, looking at Sarah. 'That's exactly how I feel. You've worked for it, so enjoy the fruits, eh? Maybe I'm showing my age, but I don't want to hang around any more, waiting for a bit of peace.'

'What sort of peace?', asked Karen, puzzled at the shift.

‘He means he wants to move out of town to the heart of the country, and I’m not sure about it’, said Sarah lightly.

‘Yes, you are darling’, said Jamie, ‘I thought we’d decided?’

‘Ah, but there’s so many ways of making a decision,’ Sarah said.

Karen Edwards looked from one to the other. She envied Jamie Fitzgerald’s new wife, whose slim body in the stark dress made her feel large and overdressed in one of the four gowns she rotated for Placido. Yet the woman was on edge - turning the champagne glass round and round in her fingers. Now she tossed back that wonderful hair.

‘I’m a lawyer’, you see’, Sarah added.

‘That’s a non-sequitor, if ever I heard one!’, Jamie boomed.

‘And are there as many ways of reaching a decision in law?’ smiled Karen.

‘No, and I suppose that’s the contrast’, Sarah said thoughtfully, ‘You have a few options and choose the most sensible one. All the textbooks are there. But in real life.....nothing’s so clear cut, is it? How do you know what to do?’

‘No option for poor Elisabetta and Carlo’, said Karen.

‘Or Philip, really,’ Jamie added.

Sarah said, ‘I’m not with you’.

‘The characters in the opera, my little sweetheart’, said Jamie. He patted her hand, smiling with his mouth - and

suddenly she imagined him sprawling across the table, a bullet in his back.

It was 6.15: time to cross the road to the opera house. Jamie walked in the middle, talking to Karen about the first act, restored in this version. Without it, they agreed, the opera made no sense. You have to see the young Don Carlos meet the woman he is politically betrothed to, Elizabeth of France, to understand their love at first sight - and grief when the peace treaty suddenly changes, bestowing the princess on his father Philip instead. They agreed that the scene lays the foundation of the triangular personal conflict which frames the double intellectual conflict within the opera. They talked and talked.

Sarah walked half a pace behind. There would be no time now for her to study the synopsis, as she needed and liked to do, to make sense of the convoluted plots of her husband's preferred form of entertainment. Yet how to deconstruct the rest of this 'treat'? Not so much a bribe but an assertion of strength; there would no choice about the future, because their own peace depended on her capitulation. And there had been too much blood split already. She remembered the day Jamie's son had telephoned her, screaming abuse, calling her a 'filthy bitch', whilst all the time in the background she could hear the mother weeping, but still protesting, 'Don't, Sam...Just put

the phone down, Sam, please....’

And when at last the teenager did slam down the receiver, Sarah held it for a long time, hearing the dialling tone like electric wires in her head.

The curtain rose on a dark stage. Jamie leaned forward, narrowing his eyes, irritated immediately by what seemed to him to be unnecessary gloom. Yet the music carried him along, as it always did. When tenor and soprano soared in celebration of their sudden love, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Unbidden came remembrance of his first sight of Sarah and the way she bent towards him as they were introduced, the marvellous curtain falling in front of her face, so he was consumed by an urge to rip the veil aside. That majestic room in the city was full of light, and talk, and promise; the false forest of this stage was gloomy, reinforcing the feeling of dissatisfaction that did not go away. He waited for the lighting to become stronger, but it did not. In this production the doomed love would be sung out beneath a pall.

Just before the lights went down Sarah decided the chandelier looked like something from a chain store. The darkness suffocated her. She surveyed the great Domingo and

heard his voice singing ecstatically of love (it had to be love), but thought of Amy, the little golden daughter, who tore herself out of Tracey's arms and ran crying, 'Mummy, mummy', as if it was an age since she had last seen her. Jamie pointed out that a day at the office was an age to a small child, therefore the nanny's influence would surely soon outweigh her own. He was good at watering the seeds of her guilt. But maybe he was right. The other evening she'd waited quietly in the hall, but no child came running at the sound of her key. Then, from the playroom, she heard Tracey chuckle, and Amy giggle in response, the intimate sounds increasing in volume until a waterfall of laughter cascaded around Sarah's head, and trickled down her cheeks. She listened for a long time, then crept to glance around the door. In the mess of toys, her daughter lolled in the nanny's arms, caught at the end of a game. The anecdote did not reach Jamie's ears, of course. A couple of days later Sarah told a friend that it would have been far worse had she come in and heard Amy crying. But would it?

Grief - such grief, thought Jamie, who knew the opera well, and understood much of the Italian. The suffering of the people in war and want, and now the pain of those two, Carlo and Elizabeth, who sing that they will never know happiness or peace. Never! The melancholy horn sounded through the darkness, announcing that peace is only bought

through sacrifice....the price that must always be paid. He waited in the darkness for the second Act, and heard the monk warn the hapless Carlos that peace is found only with God. Everything within him rebelled against this dark philosophy, surely contradicted by the glory of the music itself, which stirred him to mutiny.

Sarah heard the distant chorus of monks with revulsion. Now Don Carlos tells his friend Posa of his grief, Domingo down on one knee, Nucci standing behind. Their voices rose. Although she had no idea of the content, her eyes filled with tears. It was so beautiful; the duet of tenor and baritone seemed to encapsulate the purest human love, and make her own isolation complete. Now the two men were singing emotionally of ... what? It must be freedom: ‘...*liberta... tu dei di liberta..*’. Unmistakable - like the desperate exhortation, ‘*Coraggio!*’ It seemed that the rest of the audience faded like ghosts, leaving her alone in the vast echoing darkness, where a small bird fluttered bravely, smashing its fragile form against the walls as it sought the way out, beyond help. Freedom, she thought - no, it can’t exist, not for any of us. Real courage requires you to face your imprisonment, when the world reduces to the tiniest square of sky, and somewhere in the distance a lost soul is crying, *Liberta!*

Oh, but it was barely tolerable.

At last he lights went up for the first interval. Sarah turned and scanned the rows above for a glimpse of Karen Edwards. In the front row of the highest tier she glimpsed a flutter of green and cream.

‘Wonderful!’, said Jamie as he rose, ‘Didn’t you think?’

‘I loved the part in the garden,’ she said. ‘That song was so pretty - but why is the page played by a woman? I don’t...’

‘One of the conventions’, he said, with that little smile, ‘The same in *Rosencavalier*. Do me a favour, angel, and don’t ask Karen a question like that!’

‘But how can you find out about things if you don’t ask?’, she asked, ‘How can you get to know what someone cares about, or thinks? What it’s all about?’

The question was directed at his back. Words buzzed about her head like flies as her neighbours discussed the opera in German. Sarah guessed they contained intelligent judgements, not foolish questions.

They met Karen Edwards in the bar, as Jamie had arranged, and immediately conversation resumed between the two of them, as Sarah sipped white wine and wondered how to participate. Karen judged Zampieri’s debut as Elizabeth to be uneasy; Jamie disagreed, identifying a strength in her voice the role needed.

‘She isn’t just a victim’, he said, ‘She does what she knows is right’.

‘But she has to sacrifice everything’, said Karen.

Jamie decided that Nesterenko’s Philip lacked something he could not identify, ‘But let’s face it, who can ever follow Ghiaurov?’

‘Oh, that ‘78 production in Salzburg!’, Karen exclaimed.

‘You weren’t there?’

‘I certainly was! It was amazing - Freni, Capuccilli, Gruberova, Ghiarov - and Carreras, of course. Unforgettable.’

‘I’ve got the recording’, Jamie said, in awe.

‘Who played Don Carlos then?’ asked Sarah.

‘That would be the tenor, wouldn’t it?’ Jamie replied.

‘Carreras was magnificent’, Karen said quickly, ‘though he was relatively young at the time.’

She smiled encouragingly at Sarah, who tried again. ‘So tell me, who do you think’s better - him or Domingo?’

‘I don’t think it’s quite the way to express it’, said Jamie to Karen, ‘Truth is, my wife would be more at home at a pop concert - just like poor old Princess Diana was. Be honest, darling!’

‘Well, she and I had got a lot in common,’ Sarah snapped.

‘We both married boring older men who think it’s fun to tramp around the fields in wet green wellingtons! But at least she’s well out of it.’

Karen Edwards looked at them both, wondering what

to say. Normally she would spend the intervals alone, reading the programme, making notes, and waiting for afterwards, when she would see Placido. She loved her solitude; this marital tension had nothing to do with her life - although she felt sorry for the woman. Jamie Fitzgerald had always been a patronising bastard. Now he was looking at his beautiful wife with distaste, God help her. Something had to be said.

Karen decided to laugh warmly as if Sarah had just made a joke. 'I'd better let you into my deep dark secret. When I'm in the bath I'm usually to be found listening to the Beatles, rather than Boheme!'

Sarah's cheeks were burning, but she gave the older woman a grateful look.

'I don't know anybody who doesn't like the Beatles', she mumbled.

Would he make her suffer later for that sudden burst of rage? This marriage would not survive unless she gave in to him. She remembered the look of hatred the soprano gave to the King, as she put her hand in his and swept out, crimson train following behind like a smear of blood.

'Do you remember buying each of their albums as they came out?' Jamie asked, his eyes fixed on Karen as if Sarah did not exist.

'Can I forget? It was so thrilling...' said Karen, embracing them with a smile that defied the chasm between them.

'They're valuable now', Sarah said.

'Collectors' items,' nodded Jamie.

So the ground was pulled together as the warning bell rang through the crowded halls, and people gulped the last of their wine.

Sarah thought, 'How can I get through this?'

Jamie was asking Karen to join them for a drink in the next interval and for dinner afterwards. She knew he wanted a buffer between them. And now so did she. From a great distance she heard the older woman explain that dinner would have been lovely, but it was her custom to go to the stage door after the performance and 'wait for Placido'.

She wrapped the stole around her as she said it and in that instant the eyes of husband and wife met and they were united once more, this time in pity for the large middle-aged woman in green satin who imagined she could wait outside the Vienna Staatsoper for one of the world's greatest singers, and that he would come.

'Lucky old Domingo!', said Jamie.

'Can't say I blame you!' said Sarah.

Karen Edwards heard the identical tone, just as she had seen their glance, and marvelled at the miracle of collusion between this husband and wife. It would surely see them through. Glad to say goodbye, she ascended to her seat high above the stalls and waited for the rest of the

opera, needing no more drinks, or conversation. Unwittingly she sat with her head bowed for a few seconds before the next act, and the next, as if in prayer. She knew the form to be superior to all the human chaos it expressed.

Leaning forward slightly in her seat, oblivious to the strangers around her, she heard the many duets in this, her favourite work, as expressions of individual isolation. She waited for the anguish of Philip alone in his dark room, singing '*Ella giammai m'amo*' which would lead inexorably into the great confrontation between King and Grand Inquisitor - the two basses in a terrible toneless dialogue, while exquisite fragments of earlier melodies given to the orchestra alone, are a wistful, ironic counterpoint to the hideous corruption of church and state. Two opposing forces, yet the bitter monarch still yearns for peace between them..... As foolish as the longing for liberty, Karen thought - gazing at the stage with dry-eyed concentration. The implacable priest knows peace cannot exist this side of heaven, while the heaven of the righteous is a place beyond the notion of peace. '*La pace?*' he asks, as if in contempt for the vanity of human wishes. Then in an extraordinary two octave span, from top to bottom F, Philip asks the sterile air

within his room if the throne must always bow to the altar. Oh, it was magnificent!

Secure in the knowledge that all would unfold, Karen Edwards settled back in her seat, waiting for more - her own transformation.

‘When it came to *Ella giammai m’amo*’ Sarah knew what to expect too, because she sat by her husband’s empty seat in the second interval, studying the brief synopsis in English. There was no compassion in her heart for the aging king as he sang of his isolation; she thought it just punishment for what he had done. ‘She never loved me’ - of course not! How could he expect the love of a wife he bullied? How could love be possible when he had forced himself on her, banished her lady-in waiting, and been cruel to his son, the young man she truly loved? Sarah was outraged. What right had he to demand love? She cared only for the hapless Queen falsely accused, wrongly used by her tyrannical husband, doomed to misery - and when the Queen collapsed at last under the tirade of her husband, Sarah shivered as if her own body lay stretched on the vast stage floor.

But Jamie Fitzgerald sweated with the effort to control tears. Surely anyone would pity the King, powerless as he was? How could you fight the fate which Don Carlos laments right at the beginning? How can you control your

destiny, whom you meet, whom you love? He wanted to reach out for the hand of the young woman next to him, but in a terrifying second she became a stranger.

When they were young they'd queued for cheap seats at the Coliseum, and Maura was excited when once, for a birthday gift, he had given her a Friends membership for Covent Garden. She was so Irish, so emotional - with her short red curly hair and the blue eyes that filled at the first sound of a consumptive cough. He used to tease her about her love of Puccini - slosh, slosh, slosh, he would say, and she grinned in reply, 'What's wrong with a bit of slosh?' They were good days. Now - '*Amor per me non ha!*' - the majestic bass boomed out, yearning for companionship, Philip of Spain grieving so bitterly that he lacks the love of the young wife who was repelled at the first sight of his white hair.. '*I can still see her sad-faced, gazing...*'. And Jamie could see Maura, exhausted after months of waiting for him to change his mind, gazing with eyes beyond weeping as he finally moved his things from the family home to be with Sarah. Yes, he had been as cruel as Philip once. Sometimes there is no choice.

Afterwards there was no sign of Karen Edwards. The Fitzgeralds ate dinner back at the hotel - a curious reserve between them/ It wasn't resentment, it contained the timidity of a foot slid out on the edge of a frozen lake. Jamie asked if she had enjoyed 'Don Carlos.'

'I did actually', Sarah replied, surprised at herself, 'I'd prefer it in English, but....the point is, you understand it.... without understanding it, don't you?' Halfway through the sentence she faltered, afraid of mockery again. But he smiled encouragement.

'Exactly', he said.

'But it's all so sad', she said, thoughtfully.

'Oh yes.'

'I thought the ending a bit strange. Why did that monk take Carlos away? And where to? It lost me....'

'It's left as a mystery. But I guess it's still some sort of resolution...'

'I suppose the music has to end some time or other. Maybe Verdi ran out of ideas!'

He laughed and leaned forward with that concentration she remembered from their first days, when everything she said fascinated him. 'Anyway, darling, do you think you could get to like opera now?'

She answered slowly, 'I could try...Yes, I think I could.'

Jamie sat back, pleased, and surveyed his wife. She

was beautiful. When they walked into the room, men looked at her, as they always did. Women too. It was the power of intense fragility, contained in high cheekbones, luminous blue eyes, legs and arms so slender you could snap them easily....

He asked, 'What do you think old Karen's doing now?'

'Oh dear - it's a bit sad, isn't it?' smiled Sarah, 'Her trailing round Europe on her own, like a teenager after a pop band!'

'What about hanging around the stage door, waiting for Placido?' he said, shaking his head.

'Imagine!' laughed Sarah.

'Well, if her little fantasies make her happy, so what?' he said.

The waiter brought their first course, and they ate in silence for a few minutes, each pleased that intimacy had returned.

Jamie sipped Chateau Giscourx, then put his glass down deliberately. 'We simply can't go on getting cross with each other, Sarah. And you know why we do, don't you?'

Her eyes widened, but she did not speak.

'This weekend's crucial,' he said, 'We have to come to a decision, don't we?'

She nodded, but still said nothing.

'Please say you will - you know how happy it will make me. Amy too. All of us!'

‘You’re so impatient, Jamie’, she murmured, ‘What’s the rush? Why can’t we wait until the time feels right?’

‘Look darling...I... I’m not getting any younger and...oh, I want this so much! It’s the next stage, you know? Please say you’ll move house. I know you’re nervous; everybody’s afraid of change. But when you think of all we’ve been through, darling. Doesn’t that prove what you can do if you only have a bit of courage? You know we’ll all be much happier....’

She looked at him.

‘Say you’ll do it for me’, he insisted.

Her pale eyes closed briefly, then returned to their unfathomable gaze. ‘Yes.... I will’, she said very slowly, ‘I’ll do it for you’.

‘It’ll be perfect - you wait and see!’, he said, reaching forward for the slender fingers which he entwined within his own. But he could not see her face.

The night air was chilly. Karen Edwards waited. There had been one or two others at the stage door, holding autograph books, but they were gone now, too impatient to wait, though pleased to have ‘got’ Zampieri and Nucci. Karen had spoken briefly to them in German, just to be polite, although she sought no conversation with her fellow human beings.

She was on another plane; the exquisite last duet between Elizabeth and Carlos filled her soul and she closed her eyes against the chill darkness, still hearing the prayer for peace, the certainty of reconciliation within the grave.

Imagine being the instrument of such glory! She imagined Domingo now, with a glass of wine, taking off the makeup, perhaps telephoning home, sorting out the fan mail that reached him from all over the world...You would wait forever for someone like him. She always did.

There were voices - then the tenor strode out of the stage door, calling something over his shoulder to the man inside. And at last he was there. He stopped suddenly at the sight of the woman in the old-fashioned green silk dress, topped with a cream stole, and a jewelled flower that nodded in the night breeze as she stepped forward. Placido Domingo recognised her, and smiled.

‘Kaaaren!’, he said, drawing out her name with delicious grace.

‘Hallo again, Placido’, she said.

‘Kaaren, you are so wonderful! So faithful! Always, you are there...waiting. And now, tell me - what did you think of tonight? I had a little.....you know, here...’ He tapped his throat, looking anxious, ‘But maybe you did not notice?’

Karen Edwards assured him that there had been no sign of a problem with the voice that was as glorious as ever.

Then she told the singer what she thought of the performance, its strengths and weaknesses. He listened carefully, and nodded agreement, respecting her opinion. 'Each time I hear new things in it - such a brilliance of invention', she concluded. He asked if she knew that when Theophile Gautier reviewed it for a Parisien newspaper he commented that an opera which would last into the future must be inspired by the newest forms of art, and so keep old age at bay. She knew the story, but looked as if she did not. 'That is the phrase he used - really! So, Kaaren, you and me - we need Don Carlos to keep us young', he smiled.

They exchanged a few more pleasantries. Then Karen Edwards looked at her watch, knowing that Domingo would be too polite to do so. 'I know the first performance was over five hours long, but it's still getting late. You must be tired,' she said.

'We say goodnight then, Kaaren - until the next time. Will I see you in Milan?' Courtly as ever, he bent to kiss her hand. Joyful, she told him she'd be waiting.

Because, after all, this was as true a love as any.



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