

Dearly Ransomed Soul

I sat there with the bottle of scotch on one side of my uneaten breakfast and the paracetamol on the other. It was Thursday morning. After another sleepless night, I'd decided enough was enough. I'd tried so hard to reason the pain away. I felt tired and helpless and lonely. I'd like to say that my hesitation was due to some higher form of consciousness about the sanctity of life and all that, but in reality it was lethargy and the telephone ringing. Habit made me pick it up.

'Hey there, Georgy-girl. How's tricks?'

'Hi Melanie. It's not a good time right now.'

'Rubbish. It's the perfect time. Linda Sharpe has pulled out of Temingham and I need an early music soprano to do the Mozart Requiem, Vivaldi's "Gloria" and a song recital. How are you fixed?'

Temingham. A late starter as music festivals go, but one gaining ground fast. I liked the Peak District, too, what little I'd seen of it. Melanie heard the cogs going round. She knows which buttons to press for each client.

'All the dailies will be there. This could put you well and truly on the map, George.' She paused. 'George? Are you still there? What are you doing?'

'Thinking.'

Could I be bothered, that's what I was really thinking. Singing was my life but just now, life had raised its ugly head and struck me what old fashioned lady authors used to call a mortal blow.

'George. I need you to think quicker.' Her voice sharpened. 'What's the matter?'

I came clean. 'Mike.'

'Damn him.' She paused again. 'Look, George, I can't tell you to forget him, but it's been over a month now and it's about time you rejoined the human race. It would be far better for you to go to Temingham and

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sing than vegetate in that dingy little basement of yours. I've negotiated a good fee.'

I bet she had, seeing that she would get ten percent of it.

'Besides, isn't your old flatmate the Temingham conductor's wife now?'

Now how on earth did Melanie know that?

'So instead of feeling sorry for yourself, shift your arse, get in the car and head south. Go via Bakewell and have a tart on me.'

Which is how I came to find myself the next evening in the Maddox Hotel's conference room, glass of Pouilly-Fumé in hand, standing next to Caroline Gardiner at the Temingham pre-festival bash. Her husband, Neil was glad handing round all the guest soloists and the VIPs. I felt her stiffen as Ariana Staithes sashayed through the door wearing a silver sheath dress which left nothing to the imagination. No change there, then. Neil went red, then white and hurried over to greet her as if she was the Queen.

'Met her before?' I muttered to Caroline.

'No. You?'

'Oh, yes. I worship the ground she slithers on.'

'So does Neil all except for the slithering bit, unless it's slithering all over her, of course.'

'Ah.'

We both shut up when Neil brought Ariana over to meet us. He'd got guts, I'll give him that. Ariana shook Caroline's hand politely enough, but I knew her and her eyes were issuing a challenge. I dare not look at Carrie, so I had no idea if the challenge was acknowledged or accepted.

'Neil tells me you used to dance a little.'

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'Neil is understating it, Ariana,' I interrupted. 'Carrie was with the English National Ballet. I'm sure you've heard of them, even in the wilds of Canada.'

The fixed smile grew a little more rigid. 'Georgia Pattison, isn't it? Do I remember you from the Academy?'

'Possibly. Weren't you in the running for the early music prize the year I won it?'

'I'd already decided to give my soul to opera and oratorio. It sits better with my voice.'
She turned to Neil as I muttered 'And your tits' in Carrie's ear. Her mouth twitched.

'Ariana is singing the angel in "Dream of Gerontius" tomorrow night,' said Neil to me, unaware that he was pouring oil on troubled fires.

'How lovely. I'll check my diary to see if I'm free.'

Ariana was about to make some sort of riposte, one of her failings being never to know when to put up and shut up, but just then there was another kerfuffle at the doorway of the room. We all turned. Merlina Meredith was making her entrance, as the song says, with her usual flair. I saw Ariana's lips tighten. They enjoyed an acrimonious relationship and more so since the upstart Canadian had been offered Gerontius' guardian angel. I liked Merlina. More than that, I admired her. Nothing ever appeared to disrupt her outward serenity. I wished I was more like her. The thought of Ariana Staithes singing a part Merlina had made her own for more than twenty years must have set her back almost as much as Mike's defection had me. She swept over to our little group.

'Neil, darling, how lovely to see you. I am so looking forward to the Blount. Georgia. I didn't realise you were joining us.'

'Linda Sharpe has bronchitis, Merlina.'

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'Then we are lucky to get you instead, darling. Now,' she said looking round and managing not to see Ariana, 'where does one get a drink?'

After the party, Caroline and I walked back to "Vox Celeste" the corny name of the cathedral organist's house, arm in arm, giggling from the effects of the booze. My first reaction to the house she and Neil lived in was that, if that was the sort of tied house cathedral organists were given, perhaps I ought to bag myself one. It sat on the banks of the River Teming with a view over the moors in one direction and looking into the cathedral close on the other. I think Carrie would have preferred a new detached des-res somewhere out of town, but Neil had to be close to the job. He had stayed behind to see the last of the party-goers out and he came in just as we were finishing our nightcaps. His tie was undone.

'Hi, Neil. You look as if you've been mauled by a tiger.'

He blushed. 'Not a great party person, Georgia. By the way, I have an enormous favour to ask.'

'Ask away. I've had a few so you might be in luck.'

'This flu bug has hit the choir. I'm three sopranos down in the semi-chorus. Don't suppose you'd do a stiffen for me tomorrow night, would you?'

'Not sung Gerontius since I was at college, Neil.'

'They just need a bit of boosting. Please, Georgia. This is my first concert in my first festival and I really need it to go well.'

'You'll have to pay me.'

'I can fix that.'

'In my hand and not a word to Melanie Southall?'

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I thought for all of five seconds. 'Actually it might be fun. OK, Neil.'

The next afternoon, we had the usual ripples running through the choir sopranos at the threat posed by a professional singing in their midst. Roughly speaking they fall into two groups, the Fawners and the Footlight Fannies. The former are easy to deal with; you just smile and are meekly modest. The Footlight Fannies can cut up as rough as any seasoned diva and with far less reason. The woman asked to move back to the second row of the semi-chorus to make room for me was a fully fledged Footlight Fanny and did everything bar walk out at the insult of being shifted from the front row. The rehearsal was so-so. The men were horrible at the beginning of the Demons Chorus but then they always are, even in big professional choirs. When we were almost finished, Jamie Topcliffe and Kevin Dace, the bass and tenor soloists slid onto the platform, so Neil did the usual topping and tailing of the crossover bits between solos and choir. It was almost four-thirty before Ariana made her entry. Neil stopped the rehearsal specifically to introduce her to the choir and then introduced Jamie and Kevin as an afterthought. I did not even rate an after-afterthought. When the choir was finally told it could go, I made a point of walking round the edge of the orchestra to speak to Jamie and Kevin.

'Georgia, where did you spring from?' said Jamie, grinning from ear to ear, giving me a hug and bruising my collar bone in the process.'

'Flick Jamie, what have you got in your inside pocket?'

He laughed and pulled out a massive and ornate gold fountain pen. 'Mum's last present. I always carry it for luck. Sorry darling, have I bruised you? What are you doing here?'

'Playing super-sub for Linda Sharpe and stiffening the semi-chorus for tonight.'

'Great. We must get together. You know Kevin, of course.'

'Yes. Hi, Georgia. Darling, what on earth are you singing in the choir for?'

'Favour to Neil, well Caroline actually.'

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Neil was making ostentatious consultations of his watch, so I smiled at the guys and tip-toed off the platform.

The time between final rehearsal and performance is always fractured. I spent a good half hour walking round the cathedral looking at the flower displays. I wish I knew how to get them looking like that. The scent of them at close range was unbelievably cloying after a few minutes exposure and reminded me of all the churches in the days after Princess Diana's death. I was a new girl on the block then and singing Monteverdi in Hull, of all places. Everyone wanted to leave a floral tribute to the people's princess. It didn't matter where I stood to sing. That heavy fragrance was everywhere. It was a toss-up as to whether I passed out or threw up.

There weren't that many displays in Temingham, thank God. As I watched, one of the women caught her foot in the base of the stand and the arrangement they were just finishing off crashed to the floor accompanied by the involuntary scream of the woman who got splashed with water and oasis. Nice acoustics, I thought listening to the echo. I heard Ariana on a long top A falter to silence and then Neil's voice demanding to know what the hell was happening. A blonde woman who had been working on another display went halfway up the aisle and explained. Neil grunted and turned back to the orchestra. The woman came back and shot a look at the one who had knocked over the display. I wish I could do it like that. The culprit looked as if she had been caught stealing the family silver.

'I am so sorry, Lady Barbara,' she babbled. 'My foot caught in the curly bit at the bottom.'

'All right, Sarah. I'll repair this.'

I walked back down the nave, listening to Ariana and confirming my opinion of the acoustics. Wonderful. More like Worcester than Westminster where all the lumps of marble take five seconds to send you back the notes you've just sung, by which time, you aren't singing them anymore. Lincoln can be a bit like that, too, but the end of the "Praise to the Holiest" in Gerontius sounds wonderful there because the echoes take about ten seconds to stop chasing each other. One of my Elgar enthusiast friends

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likens it to the heavenly host joining in and forgetting to watch the conductor to know when to stop singing.

I looked at the stage set-up. The whole of the west end of the cathedral had been blocked off and the central section made into tiered seating which stretched halfway up the boarded west window and was for the choir. The orchestra were in front of the seating on a stage a couple of metres above the main floor of the cathedral. There were panels from the stage to the floor across the entire width of the building, with swing doors in the north and south aisles for people to come from the backstage area into the cathedral and vice-versa. I pushed through the door in the north aisle.

The backstage area had a little curtained off dressing room for the soloists and conductor. At ground level underneath the tiered seating, a passage and been constructed in the scaffolding, joining the north and south aisles in a T-shape, the stem of the T leading to the west door. The areas at each end of the passage were big enough for the orchestra and choir to congregate before going up steps at either side onto the staging above. At the moment both areas were strewn with the orchestra's discarded instrument cases.

There was also a huge marble statue of a former bishop, sitting with one arm outstretched as if teaching his flock. Some wit had hung his dress trousers over the bishop's arm and his shirt on the pointing finger. The whole place looked clean and there was none of the dirt and mustiness I sometimes find in churches. I walked through the passage under the seating to the south aisle area and through the swing door into the cathedral proper. Time to get back to Carrie's house.

I went through the cloisters. I saw Lady Barbara, the flower lady, talking to a stooped elderly guy and it was not until they turned the corner near the chapter house that I realised it was Sir Robert Fielding. He had been one of my piano tutors at the Academy and was an absolute sweetheart. I almost went and interrupted them, but thought better of it and went back to the house. I was glad it was so close to the cathedral because our usual English summer was in full swing, with the liquid sunshine hitting the road so hard the water bubbled as if in a cauldron. Carrie was talk-

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ing to a big guy who looked as if he would have been more at home on a rugby field than anywhere else.

'Georgia. This is Scott Wiley.'

I held out my hand. 'Delighted to meet you. I came to hear you at the Wigmore last February. Are you playing during the Festival?' His eyes were the most intense blue I had ever seen. So blue they were almost purple. On any other occasion, I might have let myself drown a little, but the shock of Mike's treachery was armour against anything.

'I'm playing the Mozart twenty one and the Rachmaninov two. Not on the same night, of course.' He paused a moment still holding my hand and giving me the full benefit of eye contact. 'Excuse me,' he smiled and turned back to Carrie. 'Neil said I could borrow his music room for practising. Is that OK?'

He followed Carrie through to the room next to the dining room. I sped upstairs to change for the concert thinking how beguiling an Australian accent could be, especially when teamed with a voice like wood smoke.

I have to admit that the concert was outstanding and much as I hate to say it, the difference between good and fabulous was solely down to Ariana. The Gerontius angel is a strenuous sing, but she made it sound effortless. Her alleluias were so full of tone but never shrill. They floated round the cathedral. It was a night when you could say in truth that a star was born.

Of course, the audience went wild at the end. Neil, Jamie, Kevin and Ariana bowed and then went down the steps to the back of the platform. There was the usual pause to let everyone catch their breath. Neil came back up the stairs first and took his bow. Bloody well earned it was, too. Then Kevin came up and did his showman bit. Jamie followed him and they both stood there acknowledging the crowd, the choir, the orchestra. It made me wonder if I'm like that after a performance. Had the cathedral cat been there, it would have been acknowledged as well.

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So, there we were waiting for the star turn to come up and take her bow. I could tell the audience thought everyone else was a bit of an also-ran. So we waited. And waited. I caught Neil's eye and he jerked his head to one side. I slipped down the steps. I wish I hadn't.

Ariana was lying on her back on the floor with her feet inside the makeshift dressing room, its curtain pulled back. I could see the gold sandals on her feet and the skirt of the gold dress was moving. It took me a couple of seconds to realise there was a draught from somewhere. The upper part of her was grotesque. I stopped short and had to hang on to the stair rail with both hands.

She looked a bit like a pig that's just been put on the spit roast. The lower part of her face was black mixed with red and her shoulders were beginning to char. Low blue flames were licking along the bodice of her dress. Some of her hair was singed but it hadn't begun burning properly yet because she had worn it off her face. Just starting to make itself felt was the nauseating sweet smell of melting fat and barbecued pork mixed with burned hair.

I caught my breath and put my hand up to my nose to try and ward off the stench. I knew I had to move, to get help. I wanted to go and help her, but I stood there like Lot's wife. I could still hear the applause - her applause, but she would never hear it again. It seemed to take forever to make my feet move, but eventually I ran back up the steps and fainted into the arms of a Footlight Fanny.