

## An Afternoon at the Opera

by Rosalyn Hurst

It's a typical English summer afternoon. The early promise of sunshine direct some women and Melissa too, although against her better judgement, to search out flimsy dresses and those scrappy high heels. Men also tentatively seek bright waistcoats confident that jackets would be abandoned, and yet nervous that the embroidered fabric is stretching across bellies that have bulged far more than anticipated.

If it isn't bad enough to leave the comforting sounds of traffic, the security of the streets of Kensington, his plan is to journey by train.

Train!

When the new Mercedes is sitting in the garage, when the chauffeur is given the day off and both, as you would expect, have a daily cost that soars at every budget announcement.

Melissa has never been in a train, though she is familiar with the underground and once took a bus. Horrified, she is led, or pulled, through the masses at Victoria Station to the train, no special carriage, no waiter service, not the Pullman she recalls her parents boarding on trip to the southern lands beyond Clapham Junction. There is a subtle signal of recognition from those in bow ties in adjacent seats, but looks of curiosity from others returning laden with shopping or worse children who barge their way through First Class.

Trees loom far too near the track for safety, fields flash by, with cattle and numerous sheep, signalling worse to come. Lewes, and with some relief not a journey in some dubious alleged taxi, (where are the black cabs?) and onto a bus.

A bus, yes a real double decker.

It is the jollity of the others that is depressing, and the mood is matched by the slow and sinister disappearance of the sun as dark clouds sweep in.

'What a way to go the opera when Covent Garden is on the doorstep', she had complained.

'When will you understand?' he had roared, 'Its not the bloody opera, who cares about that. It's the two hour interval. It's to be seen! It's to walk about. It's a parade. Everyone will be there, so put a smile on your face for once.'

A picnic hamper had been ordered with a table by the rose garden, a butler to open the champagne. A glass or two is served before the performance begins.

She is surprised. The opera is very, very funny, even though she has to put on her glasses to read the subtitles that run across the top of the stage. 'Why couldn't they sing in English even though it was written by a German.' Still she laughs and even claps with genuine delight.

And then the interval.

It is an ominous sign that the staff are handing out thick blankets to those on the lawn while looking anxiously at the darkening sky. Melissa sits in stiff splendour hardly aware of the salads, the terrine, the poached fish so lovingly prepared by chefs of international reputation. He hoping all the time to be seen, to be recognised.

A dreadful moment.

Three women sitting on the grass nearby with sandwiches extracted from a battered Tesco's plastic carrier bag ventures

'Enjoying the opera then?'

He turns his back on them but Melissa gives a sympathetic smile.

'My boy is the conductor, would you believe it, got a great ovation even before the music started.'

He turns around. She continues

'We are all going to the party afterwards, are you? I heard all the sponsors will be there.'

Her friend adds,

'And that Duke, can't remember his title now the one with the glamorous wife.'

He chokes.

The bell sounds for the second part. As they walk back occasionally greeting those whom he had hoped to impress, their eyes constantly watchful, she feels nothing but a longing to return to the safety of London. She looks around one final time.

How she hates the countryside.

The distant horizon stretching to those sinister Downs, the silence shattered by the noise of lambs in the fields, screaming from hidden birds, (crows, gulls, eagles, who knows) in trees, and the unknown smells or stench of those weeds growing and rotting around the lake.

During the second half of the performance Melissa has the added extra pleasure at looking at the vigorous and most attractive conductor. But then looms the prospect of the return journey and she considers how much she was beginning to hate, perhaps more than the countryside, her obese husband sleeping with such little grace beside her.