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The Victor Book of the Opera

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The Victor Book of the Opera · *Louis Simpson*

Elbows planted on the floor, he gazes
at the Wolf's Glen where Max meets Caspar
and "amid a scene of supernatural horror"
they summon Zamiel
and cast the magic bullets.

There is a picture of Enrico Caruso
in a cone-shaped hat and white suit
with large white buttons, as Canio.

He puts a record on the gramophone
and winds it, creaking. In the distance
a tinny orchestra begins the prologue.
Then comes the chorus of villagers,
Chorus of the Bells, "a charming melody,"
and the aria, heart-rending pathos
as Canio tells what it is to laugh
and make others laugh while your heart is breaking.
He moves slowly toward the theater, sobbing.

A famous actor will appear again
in several different parts—
with ruff and beard . . . the Duke of Mantua;
helmet and sword . . . Don José—
and in each seem to be sincere.

There is a drawing of three women
in a pool. Apparently they live there
naked. They are conversing
with a man who stands on the bank.
He is clad in a shirt of armor
and winged helmet, holding a spear.

On another page
a woman is dancing with her shadow.

Through doors that open on a veranda
night is falling. A lizard
hops onto the railing . . .
the first member of the orchestra
to arrive.

Bright stars are swarming
and the queen of night takes her place.

* * *

This was before real life
with its multiple stages, changes of scene,
themes that begin and swell
and just peter out . . .
a composer who doesn't believe
in melody, or dissonance either . . .
a plot you can't make head or tail of.

God knows, he's often walked out
and stood outside, feeling the night air
and feeling sorry for himself,

and then gone back in.