

1985

# The Victor Book of the Opera

Louis Simpson

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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.