

# **Orchestral Vices**

**John Hackett**

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## CHAPTER 1

The blackboard at the top of the stationary escalator stated with stark simplicity “London Transport regrets any inconvenience to passengers”. This missive, written in a hand unused to the special skill required for chalk and blackboard, made no attempt to explain why the escalator was out of order. London Transport missed with blithe indifference the possibility of blaming the government for years of under-investment, or telling the great British public that the cleaning was a safety precaution to prevent another Kings Cross disaster.

James Wilde swore to himself as he carried his viola and brief-case down the iron clad steps: a hot, dusty July day was certainly no time to be going down into Tooting Bec tube station. His thighs ached after the long descent and his heart pumped a little faster than it should. He made a mental note to do more exercise as he sat down on one of the plastic chairs bolted into the tiled wall as protection against vandals. When was the last time he played squash or even went for a walk in the country? He couldn’t remember. Too long though, he knew that. He looked at the sign over the platform. “Edgware via Charing X 1mins” and “High Barnet via Bank 3mins” were steadily swapping places on the electronic score board for the trains.

He looked along the platform. It was empty except for a young black woman with two small boys dressed identically in bright yellow tee-shirts, blue track-suit trousers and white trainers. They were indolently kicking one another while the mother stood by looking at them indulgently. Finally the train - “Edgware via Charing X” - arrived, stopped and opened its doors. Wilde picked up his cases. No-one got off, the woman and her children stepped back as if to indicate that this was not their train and were giving it permission to move on. He stepped into the train and the door slid closed behind him.

The carriages looked depressingly dirty to Wilde; their floors littered with sweet papers, empty soft drink cans crushed and then tossed away, polystyrene hamburger cartons, beer bottles and crumpled newspapers. The only saving grace was that the carriage was almost empty and not packed full of hot, short tempered, sweating bodies as it would have been in the rush hour. The term “rush hour” struck Wilde as a singularly inappropriate one to use for a panic inducing crush which extended from seven o’clock in the morning to eleven with a short break for lunch until the build up began again at three.

The train clattered along between stations. He could smell the stale sweat of the morning rush and the stifling unchanged air. Even though all the windows were open he could feel no through-draught and soon beads of sweat

formed on his forehead; his back and the underside of his thighs prickled with the sticky heat of the grimy cloth covered seats.

Stockwell. He already felt hot, sweaty, lethargic and his day had only just begun. A rehearsal and concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall with some half-witted American conductor and an Argentinian pianist of stunning beauty but little musicianship lay ahead.

It was rumoured that she, Carmen-Maria Rodriquez, and the conductor, somewhat improbably named Dirk Englestein, were having an affair. It was certainly true that they shared the same artists' agent and had been on tour together for the last six months. Wilde knew - as he had been the main contact throughout the negotiations with their agent - that Englestein only agreed to do the forthcoming tour if she was booked to play Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24.

Oval. Wilde still could not quite believe that the orchestra's board really liked either the conductor or his protégée. They all purported to think he was the best young conductor around at the moment and that she was a fabulous new talent but surely they could hear the banality of their interpretations?

Kennington. He realised he was being unrealistic and naïve. He knew as well as they did that it was the recording company that called the shots. However much they might pretend otherwise they needed these two unmusical stars. They made a great looking couple. Good for record and CD covers. Good on the Wogan show, culture to the masses and all that. Besides, they had a good agent and an energetic publicist. The tour would be sold out, no problem.

Waterloo. The train came to a stop; Wilde picked up his cases again and stepped off as the doors opened. One forty-five. Plenty of time to amble over to the Hall and have a cup of strong coffee before the rehearsal began. With a bit of luck there wouldn't be any problems that required his immediate attention making him miss another rehearsal.

Wilde stood on the escalator - moving thank God - put his ticket through the automatic barrier and went out onto York Road. The heat outside was as oppressive as down in the station but at least the air was moving and a little cooling. He turned left under the railway, left again down the quaintly named Concert Hall Approach, across the rear of the Festival Hall past the artists' car park and finally under the canopy into the Artists' Entrance of the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

"Hello Ted, how are you today. Any messages for me?"

The doorman, a man of indeterminate, although considerable age and dishevelled appearance, looked up from 'The Sun' and smiled his toothless, nicotine stained smile. Wilde tried to remember whether he had ever seen Ted -

what was his second name? - without a cigarette in one hand and a mug of strong tea at his side. He decided he hadn't.

"No, Mr Wilde, Sir. No messages. Looking forward to your jaunt are you, sir," he replied.

Although perpetually engrossed in 'The Sun', a paper not known for the perspicacity of its cultural pronouncements, Ted always knew what orchestra was in which concert hall, city, or country with whom, for how long and how their box-office was doing. No one was better informed and nobody knew how he did it. The assumption was that he was a long time member of a secret guild of Master Doormen who provided intelligence to each other. Ted, as Wilde had discovered early in his role as player/administrator of the Classical Chamber Orchestra, was an invaluable source of inside information. He also discovered that every orchestral administrator worth his salt knew Ted and kept in with him. This usually meant a case of scotch at Christmas "compliments of the orchestra".

"It is not, as you very well know, a jaunt, Ted. It is a long hard slog around sixteen European cities in three weeks with no time for sightseeing. The only sights I'm liable to see are clouds from the plane and the hotel telephones."

"It's a hard life, Mr Wilde," he motioned at the visitors book: "Don't forget to sign in please."

Wilde scanned the recent additions to the book.

"Most of us are here already I see," he said picking up the biro which was hanging by a piece of string half way to the floor. "Any sign of the Maestro yet," he heard the slight sarcastic tone in his voice and hoped Ted had not noticed.

"No, he hasn't come in through here. But I've heard the lovely Carmen-Maria practising on the stage so he can't be too far away." He tapped his hawk-like nose with a rough, yellow fingertip and winked conspiratorially. Wilde smiled briefly and turned to go. Ted settled back down to his paper, his cigarette and his mug of tea.

Two o'clock. Half hour to kick-off he thought. He went to the end of the corridor then turned left to the changing rooms and artists' bar. He ordered a cup of coffee and exchanged pleasantries with some of the musicians there. Then made his way back to the hall, through the small curtain draped entrance to the stage and into the auditorium.

Most of the orchestra were already there. Milling around talking, drinking coffee or something stronger, some warming up and making varying degrees of noise. The familiar cacophony was just beginning. He had heard this sound for ten years and could almost tell how long there was before the start of the rehearsal by the volume and type of noise. First you would hear scales and arpeggios or long notes. Later more intricate patterns would merge as the

musicians' muscles gradually became more flexible. Finally there would be snatches of orchestral pieces or phrases from concertos.

At two twenty-five the pre-rehearsal noise was reaching a peak: the two trumpet players were seeing who could play highest, the clarinetists were finally settling on which reed to use and the oboist was giving the final touches to hers with small, delicate movements of a razor sharp tool taking very fine shavings off the end.

Dirk Englestein and Carmen-Maria Rodriguez entered the hall together. Wilde, who had seated himself at the back of the viola section since taking over as administrator, looked at them with some distaste. It was his duty to be polite and courteous but he could not make himself like them. Englestein was just a shade over six feet tall, slim and tanned with blond hair which fell rather uncontrollably over his face when he conducted. There was no doubt that he was a very handsome man who exuded good health and vitality: he had a face suitable for putting on large posters in record shops or adolescent girls' bedrooms with his deep blue eyes staring at them as they slept. He was wearing a pale blue track-suit and, rather pretentiously Wilde thought, a towel draped around his neck.

The lovely Carmen-Maria, Wilde couldn't for some reason think of her otherwise, came up the steps behind Englestein and sat down at the piano. He watched her as she adjusted the piano-stool's height and distance from the keyboard. Wilde could feel the rest of the orchestra looking at her. She was quite small, only five feet five, with long black hair gleaming in the stage lights surrounding her strong Latin-America face, high cheekbones accentuating the perfection of her features and deep brown eyes.

Englestein finished rehearsing the concerto at three forty-five. His tracksuit darkened by sweat he grabbed the towel which had been draped over the brass rail behind him and went over to Carmen-Maria, put his arm round her shoulder, whispered a few words and disappeared into his dressing room. The rest of the orchestra made a dash for the bar in an effort to avoid the inevitable queue for drinks and the stage manager and his team moved the large Steinway off the stage with a precision born of thousands of concerts.

Wilde went back to see Ted.

"Anything come in while we were rehearsing, Ted," he said to the shape still crouched over 'The Sun' with cigarette and tea at the ready.

"Yes, Sandra called. She says she has some news for you. But she's not sure if you'll appreciate it though."

"OK, can I use your phone? - I may as well find out the worst now."

"Sure, be my guest. Want some tea?"

Wilde knew about Ted's tea. It had a tendency to stick to the teeth but as he probably wouldn't have time to get one from the bar he accepted. In

answer to his nod a steaming hot mug of deep brown liquid appeared. He dialled the office number and after a few rings it was answered.

“Classical Chamber Orchestra, Kerry speaking. How can I help you?” came the thin, high pitched, though not entirely unpleasant, voice of the receptionist.

“Hi Kerry. It's James Wilde. Is Sandra there? I gather she rang here earlier.”

“Yes, Mr Wilde, putting you through.”

“Hello James, how's it going with the beautiful people.” Sandra, Wilde's assistant, was the only person who kept him sane. She managed to keep cool, calm and collected in the most trying circumstances. Her efficiency was what kept the orchestra going: her efficiency was what kept Wilde going. And he knew it.

“Not too bad I suppose. Everybody seems to be staying together - more or less. We've a full house which is something to be grateful for. Anyway, enough of this, I'm supposed to be back on stage in a few minutes. What's the news I won't like?”

“Well, you know we've been trying to get Channel 4 interested in a programme ...,” there was a pause that required filling in.

“Yes, well?” Wilde said

“Well,” she said “they have just telephoned to say that with this new report on the South Bank Residency due out soon they would like to make a programme on the orchestral way of life. And, as we are just about to go on tour, they would like to come too. Reporter, sound-man, camera. Three people. That's all.”

“Shit! Why couldn't they have thought about this earlier. Its all very well them saying just three more people, but what about flights, coaches, hotels? What about Englestein and Rodriquez? What about their agent!?”

“Calm down, James. One, flights are OK, I've checked. Two, we don't have to worry about coaches - they'll travel in a hire car so they can be more mobile. Three, hotels are OK so far, I've checked with eleven of them and they all have enough space. They may have to share one room but that's their problem. Four, the agent is OK. It was him and his publicist that persuaded them to do it. Its great coverage for them. Five, and best of all, we get a fee. OK now?”. She enjoyed giving the news in a way that would make Wilde's hair stand on end and then calmly dispose of the organisational problems for him. She was good at it.

“OK. Fine. When do they want to start?”

“They'll meet us at the airport on Tuesday, ready for the eleven o'clock flight,” she said.

“Anything else - as if that wasn't enough?”

“Only that you have a meeting with Lord Pleydell-Bouverie tomorrow morning here at ten. Sorry about it being Saturday but he wants to see the whole board before you leave and he’s out of town Monday.”

“OK. See you at the office Monday,” he rung off just as everybody was making their way back to the stage. “Thanks for the tea, Ted.”. He gulped it down, put the mug with ‘Musicians do it together’ emblazoned over it in gold lettering down on the counter and went back for the second half of the rehearsal. The track-suited conductor was already on the rostrum looking, Wilde thought, rather pleased with himself.

The other pieces on the programme - Stravinsky’s ‘Pulcinella Suite’ and a Haydn Symphony caused no major problems. The orchestra had played them many times before and could have played it for a tone deaf gorilla.

At exactly five thirty the rehearsal stopped. Dirk Englestein thanked the orchestra, made a few comments, wished everybody good luck and retreated to his dressing room.

When he reappeared at seven twenty-five most of the orchestra was already assembled on the stage. A few stragglers were sitting in the artists’ bar surrounded by the remains of drinks, sandwiches and biscuits. Stephen Powell, the orchestral manager, came through to check everyone was on stage.

“Time gentlemen please, we’re under starter’s orders,” he said to nobody in particular. The leader was playing scales near the stage entrance as the few remaining players wandered on. The conductor stood quietly near the curtain: his hand holding the baton unconsciously beating the opening few bars of the Stravinsky.

The noise of the orchestra suddenly ceased only to be broken again by the oboe ‘A’. After a few seconds tuning the pattern of sounds changed again. A general silence broken by coughs from the audience and odd notes from the orchestra.

“OK Richard, you’re on,” Powell said turning to the leader and pulling back the curtain to let him through. As he passed Powell let the curtain drop and gave a few loud claps. “Some audiences are pretty slow off the mark,” he whispered to the conductor standing beside him. The noises died down again. The sound of the leader tuning up drifted through the curtain and then silence fell.

“Off you go then,” Powell said as he again pulled back the curtain and Dirk Englestein, Maestro, in white tuxedo, white tie and wing collar, black silk trousers and patent leather shoes glinting in the spotlights almost ran onto the platform. No need to start the applause for him Powell thought. Englestein turned to the audience, bowed and turning back to the orchestra, tossed his hair from his face.

The concert went well. Carmen-Maria Rodriguez stunned everybody, audience and orchestra, by wearing a fine silk dress which seemed almost invisible. It was all black with a few silver threads to make it shimmer under the stage lighting, low cut at the front and with almost no back at all. It was a dress to make a man's hair curl.

The interpretation of the symphony was bland but, on the whole, well played. It may not have been the best concert we've ever done Wilde thought to himself on the tube afterwards, but is certainly wasn't the worst. Perhaps he'd misjudged them - but on balance though he thought not.

The walk back from the tube station was always a bore. As he trudged along with his viola and briefcase he thought about the meeting tomorrow. What was the urgency? He preferred not to think about it. Urgency usually meant that he would be asked to do something he didn't particularly want to do.

He put the key in the door and opened it calling up to see if his wife was back yet. The flat was silent and dark. Wilde put the light on in the kitchen, took a cold lager out of the fridge and went through to the lounge. He put on the television, lay down on the sofa to wait for her and fell asleep half way through an episode of "Kojak".

## CHAPTER 2

Lord Quentin Pleydell-Bouverie QC looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He stood there resplendent in maroon and dark-blue striped dressing gown with slightly frayed cuffs and soiled collar carelessly slung over pale blue monogrammed pyjamas crumpled after a fitful nights sleep. The familiar fifty-five year old lines topped by thinning grey hair were still there but the sparkle in his deep blue eyes had dimmed. He bent forward over the sink and looked deeper into his own eyes to see if they really were as bloodshot as they looked from a distance. He pulled gently on the sagging skin under them and told himself that at his time of life late night drinking sessions at the “Wig and Pen” were not, perhaps, such a good idea.

The bathroom was not large but, following the modern custom, had the wash-basin, bath, shower (with proper frosted perspex doors and not a just flimsy plastic curtain strung around the bath), toilet and bidet all strategically and carefully packed into the one room. The entire bathroom was decorated in pale pink - the suite slightly darker than the walls which were tiled with so-called “pink champagne” complete with a pattern of studied effervescence. Even the shower glass had a suggestion of pink in the frosting. Everything was impressively tidy, there were no half empty bottles of shampoo littering its gleaming surfaces, the soap trays in the bath and by the wash-basin hot tap were free of the soapy slime which usually accumulated and the soap itself was, at least until he washed his hands, dry.

As Pleydell-Bouverie took in all this familiar order he had to admit, as he did every time he stayed at his London flat and retreat from Lady Agatha Pleydell-Bouverie, that its tidiness was absolutely nothing to do with him. It was kept in this pristine state by the diminutive Mrs Jones who came in every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning to clean up after him.

A single room in the spacious Eaton Square flat betrayed his congenital incapacity for tidiness: the study. The only room Mrs Jones was not allowed to enter. The inner sanctum.

The study was, originally, painted pale blue but little blueness remained as three of the walls were covered from floor to ceiling with book-shelves. A large window opposite the door looked out into the small, secluded courtyard ablaze with potted plants and ivy climbing vigorously up the high far wall as if trying to escape. He knew nothing of plants and assumed that Mrs Jones worked her wonders there as well. The book shelves flowed over the doorway and Pleydell-Bouverie’s huge roll-top desk on the right hand wall. The only other furniture was an old, deep, cloth covered settee on the wall facing the

window and, tucked inconspicuously into the corner to the left of the window, a television set and video recorder. The desk was piled high with papers, magazines, newspapers, half empty ball point pens and notes on the back of old envelopes stuffed into every available drawer and storage space. Even the six secret compartments were full of paper clips, drawing pins and old brass pen nibs. Piles of old magazines also littered the floor; some in boxes against the wall, others left open at a place of long-forgotten interest. Next to the television was another cardboard box: this one full of videos with self explanatory titles like "Party Climax", "Portrait of Seduction", "True Blue" and "The Vampire Comes".

Lord Pleydell-Bouverie heard the chimes of the grandfather clock in the hall through the bathroom door. Eight thirty. He shaved, showered, went back into the bedroom where he threw his pyjamas and dressing gown on the large double bed and dressed in whatever came to hand: cream shirt, dark blue tie with large white spots, greenish-brown tweed suit with matching waistcoat and brown brogues. It was Saturday and not, therefore, a day for white shirt, blue pin-stripe and black shoes - this was the full extent of his sartorial awareness.

He realised with some satisfaction that he was going to enjoy this morning's meeting. Being asked to chair a committee reporting on the possibility of giving one of London's chamber orchestras a residency for six years at the South Bank Centre had appeared, initially, like a poisoned chalice. There was no way of winning. Whatever the decision of the committee he foresaw that there were bound to be recriminations from one side or the other - and probably both. The artistic establishment would call for more cash whatever the outcome. If they recommended that such a residency be given the prestige associated with it would ensure that the knives would be out and no quarter spared to the orchestra selected. A recommendation not to go ahead would bring forth cries "the market rules OK!" from the left wing.

Still, he thought as he picked up the fob watch from the bedside table and threaded it into his waistcoat, today's informal meeting should put the cat among the pigeons. He flicked through the post, saw there was nothing of interest or urgency, opened the front door of the flat, closed it noisily behind him and forgot, as usual, to double lock it.

He walked up the stairs into the entrance hall, through the large double doors and out into Eaton Square. He stood for a moment at the top of the steps down to the pavement and looked up and down the road. He only half noticed the row of white Georgian three storey houses that had for the most part been divided, like his own, into four spacious and luxurious flats. Some were still being converted; scaffolding and rubbish skips filling up valuable parking places. He spotted his black Daimler - he could never remember where he left it -

about a hundred yards up the road and walked towards it. He eased himself in and pulled the door closed with a satisfying thud. He turned on the radio which was, as always, tuned to Radio Three and, as the car filled with music, Lord Quentin Pleydell-Bouverie QC checked the mirror, pulled out into the road and made his way to the meeting.

The offices of the Classical Chamber Orchestra were only a few miles away in the new Chelsea dock redevelopment. Pleydell-Bouverie made his way through the familiar side streets to Sloane Square. He tried, as always, to avoid stopping at the zebra crossings - once stopped there was always a continuous flow of pedestrians wanting to cross and today, another gloriously sunny one, Sloane Square would inevitably be packed with camera laden tourists looking for bargains in Peter Jones, or walking up to Harrods to get a photograph for 'the folks back home' and a green and gold plastic bag. Others, of course, would be aiming for higher things, to see Buckingham Palace - perhaps even The Queen - or at the very least a be-bushied guard.

He swung the Daimler down Lower Sloane Street, then right at the traffic lights into Royal Hospital Road and past the imposing glory and immaculately manicured lawns of the Chelsea Royal Hospital: home of the red-coated and black-capped Chelsea pensioners. Coming to the end of the road he slowed down and stopped at the traffic lights.

While waiting for them to change he idly looked at the rather tatty Ford Escort in front of him. It was a dingy red with, around the wheel arches and the edges of the tailgate, the tell-tale grey of anti-rust paint. It didn't look as if it had been cleaned since last summer and in the back window he saw a bright yellow and black sticker - 'Musicians' Union - Keep music live'.

The lights changed to green and the Escort pulled slowly away onto the Chelsea embankment leaving behind a haze of blue smoke. Pleydell-Bouverie put his foot down hard and, while still on the turn into the main road, all twelve cylinders responded as one propelling the Daimler past the old Escort with consummate ease. He enjoyed the pleasurable sensation of being pushed back into the driving seat as it sped past, through the still green lights by the Albert Bridge and into Cheyne Walk. He could see the lights were red by Battersea Bridge so he took his foot off the accelerator and let the car slow naturally. They changed as he approached. He put his foot down hard, the Daimler surged into action passing the stationary cars waiting at the lights. He slowed for the small turn-off into Lots Road, eased between the parked cars and a large van coming the other way, powered down to the end of the road, then left into the new complex of half built offices, flats, shops and industrial units. He made the left-right-left as directed when the meeting had been arranged and parked the Daimler in the only vacant space outside. Painted on the wall in front of him he read 'Reserved for the Administrator'.

Lord Pleydell-Bouverie plucked his case off the passenger seat, locked the door, walked through the large glass swing doors and took the lift up to the third floor offices of the Classical Chamber Orchestra.

James Wilde had not had a good morning: his wife, Jacqui, had come in very late, waking him up half way through an old black and white science fiction film about invisible aliens who sucked the life force from those actors unfortunate enough to have a part in it. She had become engrossed in this improbable tale so they didn't get to bed until nearly three o'clock. The alarm went off at seven. He dragged himself out of bed, dressed, shaved, made and drank a cup of strong coffee to help wake himself up and left to collect some publicity proofs from a printer in north London. He was not feeling at his best.

Wilde turned the now familiar left-right-left and "Shit!".

He slammed on the brakes and the battered Ford Escort shuddered to a stop.

"Fuck!" he shouted inside the car unhitching the seat belt and jumping out. His heel caught in the hanging belt and he tripped forward onto the tarmac. His hands stung from breaking his fall: the palms grazed and a few tarmacadamed fragments still stuck in little pits near the thumbs.

Wilde regained his composure, brushed himself down and looked at the car. A Black Daimler. The same jerk that cut me up he thought. He also guessed that it must belong to Lord Quentin Pleydell-Bouverie QC. The Escort had stopped just a few inches short of the other's pristine rear bumper. He got back into his own car, reversed away and drove further down the road until he found a free meter. He took two fifty pence pieces out of the plastic bag in the glove compartment and pushed them in - two hours. He looked at his watch. Nine fifty.

He grabbed his case and walked quickly back to the office, through the swing doors and up to the third floor.

As he arrived he saw Kerry sitting behind the reception desk.

"Hello Kerry. Are we making you work overtime for this shindig?"

"Hello Mr Wilde. It's OK. I wasn't doin' anythin' else today. I don't mind getting paid to sit here and make coffee for you all. What's all the fuss and who's Pleydle-Boovri when he's at home."

"He, dear Kerry, is a top criminal lawyer. Defender of the establishment, protector of all that is good and true in this fair society of ours. He is also, and more to the point, the Chairman of the 'Pleydell-Bouverie Report on the South Bank Centre Residency Committee'. And his name, by the way, is pronounced Play-dell Boo-veree.

"Is everybody here?" he added.

"Yes sir. You're the last," she replied.

“Don’t say it, I know. As usual.”

Wilde went past the desk, along the short corridor past his office on the left and through the door directly ahead into the boardroom. As he entered he glanced around. He knew every face except the grey haired man in the greenish-brown tweeds and clashing blue spotted tie on the other side of the room.

That, Wilde thought, must be Lord PB QC. He was talking to Sir Lawrence, the orchestra’s Chairman, Chairman of Bessborough Holdings plc and of its subsidiaries too numerous to mention. Sir Lawrence saw Wilde come in and beckoned to him to come over. Wilde walked across saying hello to the other, familiar faces.

Most of the others were players in the orchestra - as was usual with the larger London orchestras the CCO was self governing. The orchestral players elected seven members of the Board every two years to run the orchestra. This covered everything from publicity, booking halls, arranging tours, all travel arrangements, programming, negotiating with record companies, plying for film work, hiring conductors and soloists, etc., etc., etc. The orchestral manager was engaged on a salary and given a non-voting place on the board so he was kept fully informed of any impending requirement and could point up any logistical problems at an early stage.

The other member of the Board was Eric Westwood. He was standing not far from Sir Lawrence and Pleydell-Bouverie dressed in a dark-blue suit with thin pin-stripe and razor sharp creases, red and white striped shirt, red tie and red braces. Eric was an accountant. Eric was THE accountant. It was Eric who made sure money was not wasted. It was Eric who came to all meetings to do with money. Eric liked money. In his forty-two years Eric had made a lot of money - both for himself and the orchestra.

“Hello, James,” Sir Lawrence said as Wilde reached them “I would like you to meet Lord Pleydell-Bouverie.”

“Good Morning, My Lord,” he said shaking the hand which had been extended from the sleeve of the tweed suit. He felt, against his will as he was not by any means a socialist, slightly embarrassed at using the term ‘My Lord’. It struck him as archaic and made him feel like a medieval serf.

“I hope you found our offices without any trouble.”

“Yes, fine thank you. It’s very convenient from Eaton Square,” he replied.

“Right, we’re all here I think. Perhaps we can get going now,” Sir Lawrence’s authoritative tone silenced the babble and everybody sat at the long boardroom table already laid with A4 size pads and pens with “CCO” along the side.

At the top of the table Sir Lawrence sat with Pleydell-Bouverie to his left and Eric to his right. The others sat wherever there was a seat. Wilde was opposite Sir Lawrence at the far end.

Sir Lawrence placed his CCO pen to one side, took out his own gold Parker and put his wrist watch on the table in front of him.

“I do not intend this meeting to be very long. One hour should be quite sufficient. This is an informal meeting and no minutes will be taken. Lord Pleydell-Bouverie has asked me to convene this meeting before the orchestra goes away on Tuesday so that he can talk to the board before the report is released to the press.

“So, without further ado, let me hand you over to Lord Pleydell-Bouverie.”

Sir Lawrence sat back and half turned to Pleydell-Bouverie who edged forward in his chair, put both hands on the table and looked directly at each face before speaking.

“I have asked you all here to let you know in advance, and in confidence, the general drift of the thinking of the Report Committee.” He looked quickly around the table again then continued, “We have, I must say, looked very carefully into the idea of the residency and it appears sound.”

He paused for the hum of anticipation to die down.

“We have also looked in detail at the various proposals put forward by the possible contenders for the residency of which you are, of course, one. Of the six proposals that the committee received two stood out. It is unfortunate that right at the very beginning of our deliberations a time limit was set for our report to be published. This now means that we must have the final report with our definitive recommendations ready for publication in two weeks time. Which is, unfortunately, while you are on tour and why I asked for this meeting.

“The committee is as yet undecided as to which orchestra to award the residency. We, the committee, will require the financial and administrative representatives of the management and both orchestra chairmen to appear before us in person Monday week. I hope this will not cause too much of a problem. I have a meeting with the ‘Players’ Chamber Orchestra’ this afternoon at which I will tell them exactly what I’ve told you.

“Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I must leave as I have another appointment at eleven.” and so saying he stood, picked up his case, said a few words to Sir Lawrence and left.

There was silence in the board room. It was broken first by John Davis a Double Bass player elected to the board. “Blast! Now what do we do?”

Eric Westwood said “That sounds to me a very good epithet followed by an equally good question. I would suggest that there is little the board as a whole can do. I would further suggest that James, Sir Lawrence and I see what

we can cook up. James can fill the rest of you in on Monday or Tuesday. Is that all right?"

Wilde groaned inwardly. He shouted to himself: I knew it. When the shit hits the fan I'm the poor sucker who's left trying to clear it up.

Everybody else nodded agreement. It was decided. As the others left Sir Lawrence and Eric stood up from the table, walked around and sat, one on each corner, to the left and right of Wilde.

Eric spoke first. "I think as Administrator this one falls to you. I'm only an accountant but any help I can give I'll do my best. But I must stress that this is a golden opportunity for the orchestra. It is a very important residency and I am sure you will do everything you can," he paused slightly and then, emphasising each word - "Everything you can to secure this residency for us."

"I know that this is a challenge but I am sure you can do it," said Sir Lawrence in his most silken tongue. He put his hand on Wilde's shoulder and looked straight into his eyes. "Any help, anything, just call. You have my home number. I will help in any way I can but you are in complete control, I'll back you to the hilt."

Wilde groaned again. "OK," he said, "I suppose it's mine. I'll see everything is all right in Paris then come back on Wednesday or Thursday to start lobbying. I'll let Sandra know all the details and she can brief the rest of the staff."

He heaved himself wearily out of the chair, picked up his case and left. He went down the three flights of stairs, out into the hot July air full of the noise and dust of construction and swore.

## CHAPTER 3

Pleydell-Bouverie had enjoyed his day. The two meetings with the orchestras had certainly given them something to think about over the next week. Personal appearances concentrate the mind wonderfully he thought. No doubt they would both do their best to rubbish the opposition, without appearing to do so of course, and demonstrate their own commitment to, and suitability for, the South Bank residency.

He had had a fine dinner at Henry's Place: the eponymous chef being the star of a new cuisine called, not without humour he thought, 'Green cuisine'. The essential tenet being that only the purest and most eco-friendly of ingredients are used: in this context 'untouched by human hands' is a presumption of mechanical harvesting, intensive farming, polluting fertilisers and powerful insecticides. Leaving Henry's Place as late as possible he started the familiar two hour drive home to Kentleigh Manor and Lady Agatha: he could already feel his previous good humour ebbing, slowly away.

Lady Agatha Pleydell-Bouverie, only beloved daughter of the Late Colonel Sir Henry Cuthbert Pleydell (1905-1981), was a powerful woman. She was of above average height with slightly greying chestnut coloured hair which she invariably kept pulled tight against her skull and tied into a pony-tail. He often thought that this was, in some way, to affirm her affinity with the six horses stabled in the grounds of the Manor and which she exercised incessantly. Lady Agatha was not, by any conventional measure, beautiful but the strength of generations of land-owning gentry could be seen flowing through her veins.

Unbidden, the improbable details of their first meeting flooded back to Lord Pleydell-Bouverie as the Daimler turned onto the A3 and headed for Guildford. Their families had known each other for generations: indeed Henry Cuthbert Pleydell and his own father, John Bouverie, had been to Eton and Oxford together. After Oxford his father had been accepted into the foreign office and, in 1927, was posted to the far east. Four years later, much to his grandfather's disappointment and Henry Pleydell's disgust, John Bouverie was back in England: a senior Foreign Office official had discovered him in a compromising position sandwiched between two soapy Thai masseuses in a notorious Bangkok nightspot. What the senior Foreign Office official had been doing there was never fully explained but John Bouverie's diplomatic career came to an abrupt, and ignominious, end.

John Bouverie was never the same again. In 1934 he married a good woman of temperate Christianity and vast wealth who tried, in vain, to reform him for the sake of their son, Quentin, born a year later. All was to no avail,

however, and he continued to gamble and drink his way through both his wife's and, after his father's death in 1945, his own fortune. Thirteen years later both John Bouverie and his wife perished in a fire at the Bouverie family home of one hundred and fifty years standing.

The Bouveries' debts were so large that the estate had to be sold to a leisure company - which converted it into a luxury golf course and hotel complex - leaving Quentin with barely enough money to support himself while making his name as a barrister.

The letter, when it came, was as unexpected as it was brief: "Colonel Sir Henry Cuthbert Pleydell requests the pleasure of the company of Mr Quentin Bouverie at Kentleigh Manor on 23rd April at 2.30pm". There was no explanation of what the meeting was to be about but under the almost illegible signature was a hand written post-scrip: "My sincere condolences on your recent tragic losses".

Quentin Bouverie had not aspired to the luxury of a car as his earnings from the Bar were still minimal but, by alternately badgering and cajoling a more affluent colleague, he was finally able to borrow a brand new white, open-top MGB.

As the Daimler turned off the A3 and onto the A286 at Milford he thought of that first drive to Kentleigh Manor: the cool, spring air rushing through his then black and still thick hair as the MG sped down the winding country roads. Four miles before Haslemere he spotted the sign for East Elvington almost hidden in the trees growing close to the roadside. He turned left into the narrow single track road. After half a mile the trees thinned and he remembered seeing Kentleigh Manor standing alone in its vast estate. Behind the house the formal gardens were already a splash of bright colour against the lush, emerald green of the surrounding grassland. Further back from the house and to the west the U-shaped stable block stood linked to the house by a fine thread of gravel. Away to the east there was a large, blue lake with a tree covered island and, on the farthest side of this lake, the white, slowly turning sails of a windmill.

Sweeping down before him the road passed the large gatehouse and continued away into the distance towards the village of East Elvington. The road was deserted as the MG picked up speed down the hill and round the smooth left hand bend just before the gatehouse with "Kentleigh Manor" engraved in granite above the two enormous wrought iron gates which had been opened in anticipation of his arrival.

The gravel drive up to the house was unexpectedly steep with lush grass growing to either side and a line of trees beyond. Bouverie had changed down into second gear and pressed hard on the accelerator; the MG spat gravel from the spinning rear tyres before regaining grip and shooting almost out of

control up the slope. Then he noticed the horse. It was as surprised to see the car as he was to see it. It did what most horses would do in the circumstances: it reared up. Unfortunately the girl leading the horse back to the stable was also taken unawares: by both the small, white MG and the reaction to it of the large, black horse. She was lifted clear of the ground when it reared but, true to the long tradition of which Bouverie was as yet unaware, she did not let go that easily. The horse let her back to the ground with a thud and, losing her balance, she fell, seat first, into the long wet grass and was dragged some twenty yards before finally letting go of the reins. She was propelled forward by her own, now considerable, momentum and disappeared from Bouverie's view down the bank into the small brook which gurgled its way beside the drive.

He smiled to himself as he remembered looking down the bank and seeing this well-built twenty year old girl sitting in the middle of the muddy brook. As she stood he remembered seeing the mud on her jodhpurs and red riding jacket, the weeds trailing from the top of her boots and the tight pony-tailed hair under a black riding helmet which had been knocked to one side by the circuitous route taken to her current, ungainly position.

That had been one of the very few times he had seen her at a disadvantage. She had stormed off without saying a word and had reappeared immaculately attired for tea in the conservatory half an hour later.

As Pleydell-Bouverie turned into the narrow road off the A286 his mood continued to deepen. He could still visualise the meeting with her father, it was engraved on his memory: word for word.

Firkin, the family retainer, had showed him into the library: a large room at the rear of the Manor with old, crumbling, leather bound books on all four walls from polished wooden floor to the high, intricately plastered ceiling. The only relief being two large windows which looked out over the terrace to the gardens and fields beyond. Firkin had guided him to the two red leather armchairs and indicated that he should wait in the one furthest from the window. The other, he noticed, was more worn with a deep indentation in the seat and a dark, oily stain at the top where the occupant's head rested.

Col Sir Henry entered the room: a tall, lean man with large moustache and sideburns but otherwise balding and dressed as befitted a country squire. He was followed at a discreet distance by Firkin carrying a silver tray with two large glasses of neat whisky. The Colonel sat in the other chair and Firkin placed the tray on the small, green leather topped table between them.

"Help, yourself my boy." he said "Know I haven't kept in touch with you or your late parents but we were quite close once." he continued. His manner didn't seem to need reply.

"Got much work?" he said abruptly.

“Some, Sir. But briefs are always hard to come by when you start out,” Bouverie had replied.

“Want to help out. Old times sake and all that. Come down for the weekend. I have friends who may be able to help. Recommendations you know, get the name about. Your father was a good sort at Oxford. Bright. Quick witted. I like that. Shame about the flousies in Bangkok though.

“Met my daughter Agatha yet? She should be back from her ride soon,” he said looking intently at Bouverie.

“I think we may have passed each other on the drive. Does she have a rather beautiful black horse?”

“Yes. That’s her. More interested in horses than men that one. Still, she must marry soon. Need some new blood in the line. She’s the only one you know. Mother died in childbirth. Still a bit of a tom-boy.”

He realised then that he had nearly run over an heiress. Well fancy that, he had thought. I must have as good a chance as anybody of marrying her? As a way of restoring the family fortune marrying Agatha was something that had to be considered.

He stopped the Daimler in front of the wrought iron gates and pressed the button on his remote control. The old man had been as good as his word. He was asked for by important men. Made a QC in 1975 and a life peer in 1982.

The gates opened, he drove through the archway of the gatehouse under the granite sign “Kentleigh Manor” and up the steep gravel drive where, thirty-two years ago, he had first met his future wife.

It had taken two years of compliments, demonstrations of competence, protestations of true love and finally a water-tight marriage contract that left all the money in trust and under the control of Agatha and the family solicitors (Harvey, Harvey, and Higginbotham) that finally persuaded the colonel to let him marry his daughter. How he ever persuaded her he would never know. But the thought of a fortune in land, old masters, antiques and shares certainly provided an incentive to flattery and charm. And the Bouveries have never been short of charm, he thought, as the Daimler’s headlights illuminated the impressive facade of the house. Even grandfather, Sir John Bouverie, had been known as something of a lecher with the chambermaids.

The wedding, in 1960, took place at the local church in East Elvington. A very select group came to the tiny, little used church in this picture-postcard village. From the top of the tower all that could be seen was Kentleigh Manor, the windmill, fields and a few small farmhouses. A view essentially unchanged for hundreds of years.

He stopped the car on the far side of the house, switched off the engine and headlights, eased himself out, closed and locked the door and, stepping

noisily on the gravel, walked to the front door. The only light in the Manor was behind the top left hand window. Good, she's already in bed, he thought. He opened the large oak door and crept up the long flight of stairs, turned right at the top into the corridor and went into the second bedroom on the right.

It was a relief not to have to deal with her until morning. Sunday - day of rest. He undressed, took a very hot bath, slipped between the antiseptically clean white sheets and quickly fell asleep.