

MARGARET KENNEDY

# The Constant Nymph

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
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# 1

At the time of his death the name of Albert Sanger was barely known to the musical public of Great Britain. Among the very few who had heard of him there were even some who called him Sanjé, in the French manner, being disinclined to suppose that great men are occasionally born in Hammersmith.

That, however, is where he was born, of lower middle class parents, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The whole world knew of it as soon as he was dead and buried. Englishmen, discovering a new belonging, became excited; it appeared that Sanger had been very much heard of everywhere else. His claims to immortality were canvassed eagerly by people who hoped soon to have an opportunity of hearing his work. His idiom, which was demonstrably neither Latin nor Gothic nor yet Slav, was discovered to be Anglo-Saxon. Obituary columns talked of the gay simplicity of his rhythms, an unmistakably national feature, which, they declared, took one back to Chaucer. They lamented that yet another prophet had passed without honour in his own country.

But for this the British public was not entirely to blame; few people can sincerely admire a piece of music which they have not heard. During Sanger's lifetime his work was

never performed in England. It was partly his own fault since he composed nothing but operas and these on a particularly grandiose scale. Their production was a risky enterprise, under the most promising conditions; and in England the conditions attending the production of an opera are never promising. The press suggested that other British composers had been heard in London repeatedly while Sanger languished in a little limbo of neglect. This was not quite the case. The limbo has never been as little as that.

Sanger, moreover, hated England, left it at an early age, never went back, and seldom spoke of it without some strong qualification.

Appreciation, though tardy, was generous when it came. A special effort was made, about a year after Sanger's death, and the Nine Muses, an enterprising repertory theatre south of the river, undertook the production of 'Prester John', the shortest and simplest of the operas. The success of the piece was unqualified. All the intelligentsia and some others flocked to hear, and proved by their applause how ready they were to appreciate English music as soon as ever they got the chance. There were no howls of rage such as had arisen when 'Prester John' was produced in Paris; no free fights in the gallery between the partizans and foes of the composer. The whole thing was as decorous as possible and the respectful ardour of the audience, their prolonged cheers at the end, left no doubt as to Sanger's posthumous position in his own country. They were not unlike the ovation accorded to a guest of honour who arrives a little late.

Having renounced his native land, Sanger adopted no other. He roved about from one European capital to another, never settling anywhere for long, driven forwards by his strange, restless fancy. Usually he quartered himself upon his

friends, who were accustomed to endure a great deal from him. He would stay with them for weeks, composing third acts in their spare bedrooms, producing operas which always failed financially, falling in love with their wives, conducting their symphonies, and borrowing money from them. His preposterous family generally accompanied him. Few people could recollect quite how many children Sanger was supposed to have got, but there always seemed to be a good many and they were most shockingly brought up. They were, in their own orbit, known collectively as 'Sanger's Circus', a nickname earned for them by their wandering existence, their vulgarity, their conspicuous brilliance, the noise they made, and the kind of naphtha-flare genius which illuminated everything they said or did. Their father had given them a good, sound musical training and nothing else. They had received no sort of regular education, but, in the course of their travels, had picked up a good deal of mental furniture and could abuse each other most profanely in the *argot* of four languages.

They seldom remained more than three months consecutively in the same place, but they had, as a matter of fact, one home of their own, an overgrown chalet in the Austrian Tyrol, where they were accustomed to spend the Spring and early Summer. Sanger liked Alpine scenery of a moderate kind and chose to have some place where he could entertain his friends. He invited all the world to come and stay with him, disregarding grandly his poverty and the want of proper sleeping accommodation in his house. His habitual sociability was unbounded; he was constantly picking up new acquaintances and these always got an invitation to the Karindehütte. The chalet was often full to overflowing and, to make room for the swarming guests,

the children were sent out to sleep at neighbouring farms. Odd strangers of all classes and nationalities, people whose very names had been forgotten by Sanger, would turn up unexpectedly. No visitor could be sure what queer companion might be thrust into his room, or, indeed, into his very bed. Everybody was welcome.

These tumults and discomforts were endured by the guests for Sanger's sake. In his prime the enchantment of his convivial presence drew them to the house in the mountains as often as ever they were asked. The place had a spell which no one who had been there could forget. In after years it became a legend. It was the nearest approach to a home built by this wandering star, and, dying there, he was buried under the gentians and primulas in the pleasant alp before his door.

Visitors to the Karindethal were generally obliged to spend the night at a little town in the valley of the Inn, for the last stage of the journey was long and slow. Persons coming from a distance usually arrived at this place late in the evening, and, if they could afford it, went to the Station Hotel. Not that the Station Hotel was costly, being, indeed, quite a humble little public-house; but Sanger's guests were sometimes very poor and travelled fourth-class, all among the mothers and babies and market baskets.

Among them and under them. Lewis Dodd, travelling up the Innthal one night late in May, got so far buried beneath the other fourth-class passengers that he found it difficult to leave the train at the right station and was very nearly carried on to Innsbruck. Disengaging himself in the nick of time, he got stiffly down on to a waste of railway lines, shouldered his knapsack and made for the Station Hotel,

following an elderly porter who carried two large, beautiful leather suitcases. These belonged to a first-class passenger who had left the train without difficulty some five minutes earlier and was already established at the inn.

They crossed the station yard, a small gravelled enclosure surrounded by chestnuts all in bloom, like Christmas trees, with their thick spiky candles. Tall arc lamps among the tree trunks splashed the darkness here and there with pools of white light, and pointed inky shadows among the brilliant leaves. Hidden in the night, all round the little town, were the mountains. The air of the snowfields, sharp and cool, came in puffs through the warm, heavy smell of chestnut blossoms. The first-class passenger, remarking it, had taken off his hat and wiped his forehead and murmured something about the heavenly-beautiful *bergluft*, before going in to his supper. Lewis also lifted up his face to the hidden ranges which, on clear nights, shut out the stars from the valley towns. He was very glad to be going back again to the lovely mountain Spring and to his friend Sanger.

Both these travellers were on their way to the Karindehütte, but they did not discover each other until next morning, when they breakfasted at adjoining tables in the bare little coffee-room. Here they waited for the eggs they had ordered and observed one another suspiciously. Their mutual impressions were so little favourable that for some minutes they hesitated glumly on the brink of conversation.

The first-class passenger was a fat fellow who spoke fluent German with a French accent. He was probably a great deal younger than he looked. His clothes were impressive. He wore a magnificent suit, cut very square on the shoulders and a trifle too big for him. There was a good deal of unobtrusive but valuable jewellery about him, and a soft

black hat lay on the table at his elbow. His figure was heavy and unagile. He had thick white hands, much manicured, and wore his dark hair *en brosse*, a style which ill-suited the full, fleshy curves of his pale face. His eyes, which should have been bold and greedy, were strangely unhappy and disclosed, in their direct gaze, an unexpected diffidence, an ingenuous modesty, entirely out of keeping with the rest of him. Of this he was aware; he seldom looked full at those people whom he wished to impress, but sometimes in his eagerness he forgot himself. His general air was excessively urbane, and he looked oddly out of place in the Bahnhof coffee-room.

Lewis Dodd, on the other hand, was a lean youth, clothed in garments so nondescript as to merit no attention. He wore several waistcoats and had a yellow muffler round his neck. He, too, was pale with the kind of pallor that goes with ginger hair. Loose locks straggled across his bony forehead and hung in a sort of fringe over the muffler at the back of his neck. His young face was deeply furrowed, nor was there any reassurance to be found in his thin, rather cruel mouth, or in light, observant eyes, so intent that they rarely betrayed him. His companion, distrusting his countenance, found, nevertheless, a wonderful beauty in his hands, which gave a look of extreme intelligence to everything that he did, as though an extra brain was lodged in each finger. Their strength and delicacy contradicted the harsh lines of his face, and it was this contrast which determined the stranger to make a conversational plunge. He observed, as a cock crowed boastfully in the garden outside:

‘An egg has been laid. It is, perhaps, the event for which we wait.’

Lewis made an abrupt statement in such execrable German that he was not understood. He repeated it in French:

‘Cocks don’t lay eggs.’

‘*Tiens!*’ exclaimed the other in surprise. ‘One never supposed that they did.’

‘Hens,’ pursued Lewis, ‘don’t crow.’

‘*Tiens!*’

Lewis, inspired, began suddenly and with skill to demonstrate the noise of a hen who has laid an egg. His companion started violently. The landlady, hearing the din in the kitchen and understanding it as a reproach, put her head in at the door and declared that the eggs ordered by the highly well-born gentlemen were already in the frying-pan. Whereat Lewis left off clucking and began to play spillikens with the wooden toothpicks on the table.

His companion, who had never seen toothpicks put to so paltry a use before, raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. From the leather portfolio beside him he took a fountain-pen, very much mounted in gold, a small notebook and a roll of manuscript music. This he began to cover with annotations and strange hieroglyphics, referring occasionally to the notebook. As he worked his large mobile features writhed continuously; he frowned, blinked, snorted, smiled and raised his eyebrows in a kind of frenzy.

His activities were observed with melancholy attention. Lewis abandoned the toothpicks and regarded him closely, seized by the unpleasant idea that they were to be fellow-guests at the Karindehütte. This fat person must be going to stay with Sanger; there was no other explanation for him. For the rest of the journey they would be compelled to travel together. They might even have to share the spare

room unless Kate could be persuaded otherwise. Kate, the eldest of Sanger's daughters, was the only person in the household who ever wrestled with the problem of guests and beds. She was kind and thoughtful.

The odious possibilities before him depressed Lewis very much. He was too easily persuaded that he should not like people. His own appearance was not conspicuously prepossessing and he had no business to be so critical. While he sat wondering how long it would be before they were betrayed to each other, the landlady, bringing in the eggs, did the deed. She knew him well for an intimate of the Sangers and lingered genially to enquire after his health and send her compliments to the family, for whom she had a great liking since they brought so many guests to her house. They had only been up in the Karindethal a fortnight, she told him, and she believed that they had come from Italy. One of the young gentlemen had got lost on the way. Getting out of the train at a wayside station in the middle of the night, he had been left behind. His loss was not discovered for some hours as his family were all asleep. They had arrived in a great way about it. Fräulein Kate had wanted to go back, but Herr Sanger said that the child was old enough to look after itself. Fräulein Kate had wept and said that the poor little one had no money and no ticket. Gnädige Frau said that it served him right. They had argued most of the night about it, in this very room, sometimes in one language and sometimes in another, but in the end they decided to let the affair alone and went on to the Karindethal next day. The boy had turned up later.

Lewis listened and mumbled indistinct comments, aware that she had given him away. His fellow-traveller was listening eagerly, and enquired when they were alone:

'You are going to visit Mr Sanger?'

'Yes.'

'Ach! I also!' The gentleman observed Lewis afresh from his yellow muffler to his ragged socks. 'My name,' he said, 'is Trigorin. Kiril Trigorin.'

He made a sort of little bow in his place where he sat. Lewis made another exactly like it. The name awoke vague echoes but he could not place it. Kiril Trigorin! The man had a box-office look, and his jewellery was of the presentation order. Possibly an operatic tenor. He became aware that the situation required something from him. He said hurriedly:

'My name is Dodd.'

'Dodd? You are English?'

'Yes.'

'Dodd! Is it possible that you are Mr Lewis Dodd?'

Trigorin became radiant and turned full upon Lewis his innocent, humble gaze, crying:

'Can it be . . . can it be that I am at last to have the pleasure, the privilege, of meeting so gifted a composer? One for whose genius I have always . . . ?'

'Yes, my name's Lewis.'

Trigorin got up, clicked his heels, and made a really deferential bow. Lewis nervously did the same but was unable to avert a flood of polite felicitations upon his work, talents and future. He learnt that Mr Trigorin had watched his career with attention; that he was, of all the younger men, the most promising and the most likely to stand by Sanger's side; that his least popular work, the 'Revolutionary Songs' for choir and orchestra, was indisputably the finest and showed a great advance upon his better-known Symphony in Three Keys; and that he must not be depressed because

the public was taking a long time to discover him. With all original work, said Mr Trigorin, this must be the case. The critics have always persecuted young genius. The plaudits of the herd are as nothing to the discerning appreciation of a small circle. Lewis found that his hand was seized and that he was being tearfully besought to rise above his own unpopularity.

'I should not mind it if I were you,' ended Mr Trigorin with great simplicity,

Lewis was not as grateful for this encouragement as he should have been. He disengaged his hand with a venomous look. It was not for the appreciation of people like this fat Slav that he had written the 'Revolutionary Songs'.

'In future,' went on his friend, 'we shall speak English. It is more better practice for me.'

'All right,' said Lewis.

'You have stayed at the Karindehütte before? But that is natural. You are the dear friend of Mr Sanger.'

'Am I?'

'It is well known. And what a privilege . . .'

And he was off again, undaunted by the limitations of his English. How great a genius was Sanger! Colossal! Nobody like him in the world! Lewis scarcely listened, for he had begun to remember who the fellow was. Surely his name suggested a famous ballerina. Irina Zhigalova! Of course! This was her husband, and a person of some ability if it was true that he designed all her ballets. But what on earth was he doing here?

From Trigorin's conversation an explanation of sorts was emerging. It seemed that he had arranged a ballet in the Autumn for Sanger's opera 'Akbar', and had got this invitation on the strength of it.

‘Never before have I visited here,’ he ended confidentially.

This was evident; the odd thing was that he should have been invited now.

‘This moment, you can imagine, my dear sir, is for me a very great one. I go to visit Mr Sanger; I meet Mr Dodd. I find myself in the company of two most distinguished men all in the one time. I am amazed.’

Lewis thought that he would be more amazed when he got to the Karindehütte. But he said nothing.

‘Of what,’ demanded the innocent creature, ‘does the family consist?’

‘Who? The Sangers? You’ve not met them all?’

‘Only Mr Sanger. At Prague he was alone. I think it is a large family.’

‘Oh . . . well . . . yes . . . pretty big.’

Trigorin wished for more details which Lewis was most reluctant to give. At last he said:

‘Well, there’s Madame.’

‘Madame?’ said Trigorin dubiously. ‘You would say . . . Mrs Sanger?’

‘Yes,’ exclaimed Lewis, as though he had suddenly discovered a relieving explanation for Madame. ‘And then there are the children.’

‘Many children?’

‘Oh, yes. A lot of children.’ After a pause for thought he stated: ‘Seven!’

‘Seven! And all the children of Madame?’

‘Oh, no! Not all.’ There was another pause and then Mr Dodd repeated: ‘Not all. Only one.’

‘Ach! Then the other six . . . they have had another mother?’

‘Mothers.’

'Mothers?'

'He's been married several times.'

'So!'

'The first wife,' said Lewis very glibly, 'had two; the second four; and the third one. That makes seven.'

'Please? Not so quick!'

Even when it was repeated more slowly Trigorin took some minutes to assimilate it. Then he said:

'And this Karindethal? How do we come there? By the road?'

'By the mountain railway,' said Lewis. 'It takes us up to the lake, where we get the little steamer across to Weissau. From there we drive four or five miles up the Karindethal to the foot of the pass. Then we get out and climb.'

'Climb!' cried Trigorin, sweating a little at the mere thought of it. Lewis grinned and said with energy:

'Oh, yes. It's quite steep; several hundred feet. Too rough for driving.'

'Ach! And our gepacks? We must carry them?'

'Quite so. I hope you travel light, for your own sake.'

'And the train? When does it go, Mr Dodd?'

'Oh, in about an hour. I'll meet you at the station. I have to go into the town to buy a . . . a razor . . .'

And Lewis made his escape, rather pleased to have got off so easily. Trigorin finished his breakfast and strolled out into the garden which was full of little tables under the chestnut trees. He sat down at one of them and began a letter to his wife, writing in French which was most commonly used in his household. He described his journey, as far as it had gone and observed:

I sit here amid the most exquisite scenery. Spring has already come to this charming valley, and the meadows round me are full of . . .

He had a look at the meadows round him, but could not determine what it was that filled them. There were a lot of blue flowers and some yellow, but as these were neither camellias nor gardenias he could not put a name to them. He compromised:

. . . full of a thousand blossoms of every colour.

With an oath he brushed a chestnut flower off his page. They drifted down everywhere, settling on his straight, upstanding hair and on the backs of the hens pecking about in the grass. They were a plague. He continued to write.

Around me, on every side, rise the mountains, still crowned with Winter. Behind these grim ramparts, nursing his genius in solitary grandeur, dwells The Master. I go to him by the train in an hour's time.

He knew that his wife would not really find this very interesting. But he was suffering from such an *épanchement de cœur* that he had to write it all to somebody and there was no one else. He described his meeting with young Dodd:

Need I tell you that something in the air of this savage youth immediately attracted my attention? I studied him secretly, as yet unaware of his identity. Here, I said, is genius! I divine it in every gesture. Presently he introduces himself in his simple English way. He is Lewis Dodd!

At that moment the savage youth himself strolled round the corner of the house. Catching sight of Trigorin he retreated hastily and went to talk to a man who was watching a cow graze in a field. He was less afraid of this kind of person than of any other, and was almost affable to it. The conversation lasted until it was time to catch the train.

Trigorin was a little surprised that any gentleman should desert him for a cow-herd, but he was not resentful, since this was Lewis Dodd and The Great have queer ways. He wrote:

Lewis Dodd travels like one of the people, his knapsack on his back. He is even now talking to a poor peasant with the greatest cordiality. With me, I must confess, he was a little abrupt (*un peu bourru*), but I set it down to nervous sensibility. I did not let it trouble me.

This was a good thing since Lewis was not the first of his kind to snub Mr Trigorin. They often did. But he did not deserve it. Indeed, he merited their pity, if all were known.

He had entertained in his early youth an ardent desire to compose music. He could imagine no keener joy. But his gifts were not upon a scale with his ambitions. He could write nothing that was at all worth listening to, and, being cursed with unusual intelligence, he knew it. So he gave it up and took to arranging ballets, a business at which, almost against his will, he was eminently successful. He had a choreographic talent which hardly fell short of genius, and which was at first something of a consolation to him; though it was poignant work interpreting the music of other men. Falling in with La Zhigalova he designed for her a series

of surpassingly beautiful ballets. She was a fine dancer, but no artist, and it was he who discovered to her the full possibilities of her own person and talents. Out of gratitude she married him, a little to his astonishment, and secured his services for life.

While thus saddled with a profession which he had not entirely chosen, Trigorin still thought sadly sometimes of his dead hopes, worshipped his flame in secret, revered deeply all composers who came in his way and persisted in seeking the company of musicianly people. Unfortunately they seldom took to him, regarding him as something of a mountebank and undeniably vulgar. They were deceived by his air of metropolitan prosperity; he looked too much like the proprietor of an Opera House. They could not see into the humble, disappointed heart beneath his magnificent waistcoats, or guess how sacred was the very name of music in his ears. Moreover, he was never at his best in their company; he lost all his impressive urbanity in his eagerness to be liked, talked too much, and, betrayed by his ardent heart, often appeared ridiculous.

Sanger, however, had reason to be grateful to him. They had met in Prague, in the preceding Autumn, while the composer was staging his opera 'Akbar' and driven to the verge of insanity by the stupidity of producers. He confided his difficulties to Trigorin. He had intended to present the dawn of Eastern history, young, primitive and heroic, in contrast to the splendour of its mysterious decay. Nobody could be made to see this; the ballets were languid and decadent with a stale aroma of the Arabian Nights. Conventional odalisques were introduced everywhere, even into his spirited hunting scenes. Could Trigorin help him? Trigorin could. He designed dances and a *décor* which caught

that inflection of buoyancy suggested by the music. Sanger was charmed. He borrowed fifty pounds from his new friend and invited him to the Karindethal next Spring.

The delight of Trigorin was unbounded. This was the first advance ever made to him by a composer of importance. He accepted in a passion of gratitude. When the Spring came he had some difficulty in persuading his wife that he must be allowed to go, for she rated musicians a little lower than dressmakers. She would only permit it on condition that he would make Sanger write a ballet for her. Though doubtful of his ability to make such a request, he was so anxious to go that he was really ready to promise anything. He now added a postscript to his letter:

Rest assured, my angel, that I am not forgetting your ballet. But it is better that I do not immediately importune Mr Sanger with these requests. It is not that I forget but that I am tactful.