

# La's Orchestra Saves the World

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Extract

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## Part One



## *One*

Two men, who were brothers, went to Suffolk. One drove the car, an old Bristol drophead coupé in British racing green, while the other navigated, using an out-of-date linen-backed map. That the map was an old one did not matter too much: the roads they were following had been there for a long time and were clearly marked on their map – narrow lanes flanked by hedgerows following no logic other than ancient farm boundaries. The road-signs – promising short distances of four miles, two miles, even half a mile – were made of heavy cast-iron, forged to last for generations of travellers. Some conscientious hand had kept them freshly painted, their black lettering sharp and clear against chalk-white backgrounds, pointing to villages with names that meant something a long time ago but were now detached from the things to which they referred – the names of long-forgotten yeoman families, of mounds, of the crops they grew, of the wild flora of those parts. Garlic, cress, nettles, crosswort – all these featured in the place-names of the farms and villages that dotted the countryside – their comfortable names reminders of a gentle

country that once existed in these parts, England. It still survived, of course, tenacious here and there, revealed in a glimpse of a languorous cricket match on a green, of a trout pool under willow branches, of a man in a flat cap digging up potatoes; a country that still existed but was being driven into redoubts such as this. The heart might ache for that England, thought one of the brothers; might ache for what we have lost.

They almost missed the turning to the village, so quickly did it come upon them. There were oak trees at the edge of a field and immediately beyond these, meandering off to the left, was the road leading to the place they wanted. The man with the map shouted out, 'Whoa! Slow down,' and the driver reacted quickly, stamping on the brakes of the Bristol, bringing it to a halt with a faint smell of scorched rubber. They looked at the sign, which was a low one, almost obscured by the topmost leaves of nettles and clumps of cow parsley. It was the place.

It was a narrow road, barely wide enough for two vehicles. Here and there informal passing places had been established by local use – places where wheels had flattened the grass and pushed the hedgerows back a few inches. But you only needed these if there were other road-users, and there were none that Saturday afternoon. People were sleeping, or tending their gardens in the drowsy heat of summer, or perhaps just thinking.

'It's very quiet, isn't it?' remarked the driver when they stopped to check their bearings at the road end.

'That's what I like about it,' said the other man. 'This quietness. Do you remember that?'

'We would never have noticed it. We would have been too young.'

They drove on slowly to the edge of the village. The tower

of a Norman church rose above a stand of alders. In some inexplicable mood of Victorian architectural enthusiasm, a small stone bobble, rather like a large cannonball, had been added at each corner of the tower. These additions were too small to ruin the original proportions, too large to be ignored; Suffolk churches were used to such spoliation, although in the past it had been carried out in a harsh mood of Puritan iconoclasm rather than prettification. There was to be no idolatry here: Marian and other suspect imagery had been rooted out, gouged from the wood of pew-ends and reredoses, chipped from stone baptismal fonts; stained glass survived, as it did here, only because it would be too costly to replace with the clear glass of Puritanism.

Behind the church, the main street, a winding affair, was lined mostly by houses, joined to one another in the cheek-by-jowl democracy of a variegated terrace. Some of these were built of stone, flinted here and there in patterns – triangles, wavy lines; others, of wattle and daub, painted either in cream or in that soft pink which gives to parts of Suffolk its gentle glow. There were a couple of shops and an old pub where a blackboard proclaimed the weekend's fare: hotpot, fish stew, toad-in-the-hole; the stubborn cuisine of England.

'That post office,' said the driver. 'What's happened to it?'

The navigator had folded the map and tucked it away in the leather pocket in the side of the passenger door. He looked at his brother, and he nodded.

'Just beyond the end of the village,' said the driver. 'It's on the right. Just before . . .'

His brother looked at him. 'Just before Ingoldsby's Farm. Remember?'

The other man thought. A name came back to him, dredged up from a part of his memory he did not know he had. 'The Aggs,' he said. 'Mrs Agg.'

She had been waiting for them, they thought, because she opened the door immediately after they rang the bell. She smiled, and gestured for them to come in, with the warmth, the eagerness of one who gets few callers.

'I just remember this house,' the driver said, looking about him. 'Not very well, but just. Because when we were boys,' and he looked at his brother, 'when we were boys we lived here. Until I was twelve. But you forget.'

His brother nodded in agreement. 'Yes. You know how things look different when you're young. They look much bigger.'

She laughed. 'Because at that age one is looking at things from down there. Looking up. I was taken to see the Houses of Parliament when I was a little girl. I remember thinking that the tower of Big Ben was quite the biggest thing I had ever seen in my life – and it might have been, I suppose. But when I went back much later on, it seemed so much smaller. Rather disappointing, in fact.'

She ushered them through the hall into a sanctum beyond, a drawing room into which French windows let copious amounts of light. Beyond these windows, an expanse of grass stretched out to a high yew hedge, a dark-green backdrop for the herbaceous beds lining the lawn. There was a hedge of lavender, too, grown woody through age.

'That was hers,' said the woman, pointing to the lavender hedge. 'It needs cutting back, but I love it so much I can't bring myself to do it.'

'La planted that?'

'I believe so,' said the woman.

'We played there,' said one of the brothers, looking out into the garden. 'It's odd to think that. But we played there. For hours and hours. Day after day.'

She left them and went to prepare tea. The brothers stood in front of the window.

'What I said about things looking bigger,' one said. 'One might say the same about a person's life, don't you think? A life may look bigger when you're a child, and then later on . . .'

'Narrower? Less impressive?'

'I think so.'

But the other thought that the opposite might be true, at least on occasion. 'A friend told me about a teacher at school,' he said. 'He was a very shy man. Timid. Ineffectual. And children mocked him – you know how quick they are to scent blood in the water. Then, later on, when he met him as an adult, he found out that this same teacher had been a well-known mountaineer and a difficult route had been named after him.'

'And La's life?'

'I suspect that it was a very big one. A very big life led here . . .'

'In this out of the way place.'

'Yes, in this sleepy little village.' He paused. 'I suspect that our La was a real heroine.'

Their hostess had come back into the room, carrying a tray. She put it down on a table and gestured to the circle of chintzy sofa and chairs. She had heard the last remark, and agreed. 'Yes. La was a heroine. Definitely a heroine.'

She poured the tea. 'I assume that you know all about La. After all . . .'

 She hesitated. 'But then she became ill, didn't she,



not so long after you all left this place. You can't have been all that old when La died.'

One of the men stared out of the window. The other replied, 'I was seventeen and my brother was nineteen. She was a big part of our lives. We remember her with . . .'

The older man, still looking out of the window, supplied, 'Love. We remember her with love. And pride, too, I suppose. But you know how people fade. We wanted to hear what people here thought. That's why we've come.'

'Of course.'

She looked at them over the rim of her tea-cup. 'By the time I came to this part of the world you had all gone,' she said. 'I lived over on the other side of the village. You might have seen the house as you came in. A bit of a Victorian mistake, now fortunately mostly covered with ivy. It hides such a multitude of sins, ivy. So forgiving.'

'I don't remember . . .'

'Look for it on your way out. The person who bought this house from La – it was a Mrs Dart – came to see me in that house when I first moved to Suffolk. She welcomed me to the village. Of course La's orchestra was already a thing of the past then, but people still talked about it. It was something the village had done, and they were proud of it.'

'I bought this house from Mrs Dart's estate. They hadn't put it on the market, and I went to the solicitor who handled her affairs. He was in Newmarket, so I went there to speak to him about it. I remember it very well, going into town that morning when they were exercising the race-horses, a long line of them, and their breath . . . was like little white clouds. It's a very clear memory, which has stayed with me.'

'I still think of this as La's house, you know. And that's what some people in the village still call it – even people who never met La. It's still La's house to them.'

'And her garden,' said the driver.

'Yes. That was so important. And he was responsible for that, you know. During the war, La dug up the lawn and planted whatever it was that she grew. Potatoes, I suppose. Beans. All of that formal garden was taken up, except for a small bit round the side of the house. She kept that as an ornamental garden. Feliks helped.

'And afterwards, when all the fuss was over and people didn't have to grow so many vegetables, she put that lawn back in, and replaced all the shrubs that she had taken up. She put them all back, in their original spots, working from memory and from photographs.'

They talked. Then, when they had finished their tea, she suggested that they walk the short distance to the church hall.

'It's a tin hall,' she said, as they approached it. 'Made entirely of corrugated tin. You occasionally get that in this county – little tin halls that have withstood the weather, and the years. It was a way of making something reasonably durable on the cheap.'

They stood still for a few minutes and admired the modest building from the end of its path. The walls of tin had been painted in a colour somewhere between ochre and cream, and the roof was rust-red. At one end of the building – the one facing them – there was a small veranda, dominated by a green door. The door, the thin casements of the windows, and the supports under the eaves, were the only wood on the outer surface of the building.

'I have a key,' she said, reaching into a pocket. 'It's a privilege of being on the parish council. We can look inside – not that there's much to see.'

They walked down the path. The lock, an old-fashioned one, was stiff, and had to be coaxed into turning, but at last the door was pushed open and they found themselves standing in a vestibule. There was a notice-board, a square of faded baize, criss-crossed with tape, but no notices; a boot-scraper with bristles and a metal bar. That was all.

She pushed open the inner door, which was unlocked. The air inside was cool, but with a slight musty smell. Light filtered in through small windows that needed cleaning, bars of weak sunlight slanting across the benches stacked along the side of the wall.

'Nowadays,' she said, 'it's used for the school play and the occasional dance. We still have a village dance, you know, in spite of everything. And everybody goes.'

'And the orchestra?'

She gestured about her. 'Under this very roof. Right here. This is where the orchestra played – so I'm told.' She pointed at the windows. 'They were covered, of course. Black-out curtains.'

The driver detached himself and walked to the far end of the hall. The floor underfoot was red-polished concrete of a sort that for some reason he associated with hospitals in foreign countries. He had become sick once as a student, travelling in India, and the hospital ward, with its red concrete floor, had been a little like this.

She spoke to him from the other end of the hall. 'I met somebody who had played here,' she said. 'The orchestra sat over there, where you are now, and when they gave a concert the audience

sat at this end. It would have been the whole village, then. Everybody would have come to listen. Everybody.'

He turned round. He looked up at the ceiling, which was made of large expanses of white board nailed on to the roof-beams. The board was discoloured here and there from leaks, brown rings spreading out in concentric circles. He did not think that anything had been painted recently, perhaps not since La's time.

'If you've seen enough,' she said, 'perhaps we should go back.'

She locked the door behind them, and they walked back in silence, until they had almost reached the house.

'Could you tell me more?' the driver asked. 'About the orchestra?'

He looked up at the sky, which was wide and empty. High above them a line of stratus moved quickly in the air-stream. She followed his gaze. She loved the skies of East Anglia; she loved this flat landscape, which she thought of, in a curious way, as a holy place.

'A bit. Not very much. If you don't mind my being a bit vague.'

'Not at all.' He paused. 'If you have the time.'

She smiled at him. 'In this village, there's not a great deal to do. But remembering is something we're rather good at in these places. Have you noticed that? Go to any small village anywhere in the world, and see what they remember. Everything. It's all there – passed on like a precious piece of information, some secret imparted from one who knew to one who yearns to know. Taken good care of.'

They walked towards the house. The driver touched the Bristol as he passed it, let his fingers brush against the cool of the metal, in a gesture of appreciation that came close, he

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thought, to talismanic. He had rebuilt the Bristol, part by part, and now he loved it with that very intensity a man might feel for a machine he created himself out of metal, and the things that bind metal.