

# THE ONCE AND FUTURE TURANDOT

A Comic Opera in Three Acts  
An Original Variation on the Turandot Story  
by Patricia Herzog

Characters, in order of appearance

Turandot, Princess of China  
Altoum-Khan, Emperor of China  
The Emperor's Guard  
Painter  
Eight Harem Women  
Eunuch  
Crowd of court dignitaries  
Lutenist  
Four Suitors  
Three Judges  
Fourteen Brothers  
Rashid, enemy spy disguised as fifth suitor  
Palace Guard  
Calaf, Prince of the Nogaïs, disguised as a minstrel and then a musician  
Wedding Officiant  
Rashid's Ten Men  
Court Musicians  
Crowd of wedding guests

13th Century  
The Imperial Palace, Peking

ACT I Scene 1

*Peking. In front of the elaborate imperial palace. Turandot is wailing as if she really is about to be tortured.*

TURANDOT

Torture! Torture!  
No more torture!  
Please! I beg you!  
No more torture!

ALTOUM

Bear up, my child!

TURANDOT

No more!  
Please! I beg you!

ALTOUM

You must endure ...  
Just one more sitting ...

TURANDOT

Enough!  
Send the painter away!

ALTOUM

Just one more sitting ...

TURANDOT

One more is too many!

ALTOUM

Darling daughter ...

TURANDOT

Let him set one foot in this place ...  
I'll wrestle him 'til he's blue in the face!  
Let him try to seize my charms ...  
I'll break his arms!  
He'll never paint again!

ALTOUM (*wringing his hands*)

Oh dear! Oh dear!

TURANDOT (*disgusted and angry*)

Lured by an image ...  
My would-be suitors come 'round.

ALTOUM

Oh dear! Oh Dear!

TURANDOT

Oh Father!  
Stop your bother.  
Can't you see ...  
I've better things to do ...  
Than be ruled by any man!

ALTOUM

Turandot, my jewel ...  
Affairs of state weigh heavy at my age.  
Brave you are ... and wise ...  
Would that you could rule ...  
I'd leave it all to you.  
But your brothers ...  
Tell *that* to those fools!

Turandot, my fair ...  
Beware!  
Never will your brothers bend ...  
To the will of a woman!  
A worthy prince must gain your hand ...  
By any means you choose.

Else I stand to lose ... everything!

*(The guard enters)*

GUARD

Oh great one!  
Oh most high!  
The painter is here ...  
To spread your daughter's beauty far and wide!

TURANDOT *(to the guard, disgusted)*

Tell him to get lost!

ALTOUM *(angrily, to Turandot)*

This ... I cannot abide!

TURANDOT *(defiant)*

Then I will hide.  
Or else erase my beautiful face.

*Altoum harrumphs and Turandot exits just before the painter enters.*

PAINTER

Oh great one!  
Oh most high!  
I am here to spread your daughter's glory.

GUARD

Here she is!

*Turandot re-enters wearing the face mask of a horribly ugly woman.*

TURANDOT

Here I am ...  
Paint me!

PAINTER (*not missing a beat*)

Very well, Princess!  
If you will be so kind as to sit down.

ALTOUM

And take off that horrible mask!

*Ignoring her father, Turandot arranges herself as if for an official court portrait. Going along with the farce, the painter gets out his materials and proceeds to paint. In stunned silence, Altoum watches as the painter goes about his work with what appears to be great assurance. In short order, the painting is done and revealed to Altoum.*

ALTOUM (*shocked and ecstatic*)

Magnificent!  
Best one yet!

*Altoum motions to the guard to come look.*

You think so, too, don't you?

*The guard nods in strenuous assent. Altoum turns to the painter.*

But how on earth?

PAINTER (*with great self-satisfaction*)

I paint not what I see.  
Only what agrees ...  
With my imagination.

*Furious, Turandot rips off her mask. Notwithstanding her angry face, her extraordinary beauty is revealed to the painter. He is struck dumb, finally recovers, then exclaims apologetically.*

Oh great one!  
Oh most high!  
Please forgive me!  
Nothing can compare ...

*He looks at Turandot, mesmerized, then back at the painting, disgusted. Utterly terrified, he sees Turandot move towards the painting.*

TURANDOT (*looks and yawns*)

Oh father ...  
Why bother?  
They're all much of a muchness.  
Besides ...

*She looks at the painting and laughs.*

Who could fall in love ...  
With such a likeness as this?

PAINTER (*mortified, pleading with Altoum*)

Oh great one!  
Oh most high!  
I am so ashamed!  
Let me take it away!

ALTOUM

Nothing doing!  
Go now ... and thank you.  
(*to the guard, pointing to the door*)  
See that he is handsomely paid.

*The guard escorts the painter out. Altoum turns to Turandot.*

Fair daughter ...  
A fairer likeness has ne'er been made.

TURANDOT

Fair is foul and foul is fair.<sup>1</sup>

*She points to the painting.*

Where is my courage?  
My wisdom? My strength?  
Where dignity?  
Loyalty and faith?

The portrait is untrue.  
Fair virtue ...

The soul's true beauty ...  
Is nowhere to be seen!

ALTOUM

Fair daughter ...  
Princess of China ...  
Need I remind you?

TURANDOT (*indignant*)

Am I no more than a means to an end?  
A tool to advance your rule?

ALTOUM

Princess ...  
Let us not pretend.

TURANDOT

What is my worth?  
Tell me!

ALTOUM

Precious daughter ...  
How well I know your worth.  
A great renown ...  
Not without foundation ...  
Prepares you for the crown.

Hundreds you have vanquished ...  
Your strength beyond compare ...  
Wrestling here ...wrestling there ...  
Has made you rich with steeds.

By rights you are most capable ...

TURANDOT

And yet you would not let me rule!

ALTOUM (*darkly*)

I dare not let you rule ... *alone*.  
A woman in your position ...  
Would ... I fear ...  
Be o'ertaken ...  
By stealth if not by strength.

TURANDOT

One of my brothers, then.

ALTOUM (*irritated*)

Useless beings ...  
All fourteen!

TURANDOT

Better led by one of them ...  
Than to have any man in my bed.

ALTOUM (*growing increasingly desperate*)

Fair daughter ...  
Need I remind you?  
The enemy lies in wait.  
Give half your crown ...  
To any man ... you can't ...  
Wrestle to the ground.

TURNADOT (*laughs*)

No man has ever bested me ...  
Nor will there ever be!

ALTOUM

A prince to outwit the enemy, then ...

TURANDOT

I am cleverer by far ...  
Than any man I've met.  
What do I lack for leadership ...

Except my sex?

ALTOUM (*extremely exasperated*)

Daughter, please!  
With your objection to subjection ...  
You drive me to despair!  
Marry a worthy successor ...  
And let me die in peace!

TURANDOT (*seeing her father's despair, she quietly relents*)

Find someone to best my mind ...  
I will not be unkind.

End of Scene

ACT I Scene 2

*The harem in the emperor's palace. The women lie about, guarded by a eunuch. They form a chorus, gossiping about Turandot.*

WOMAN ONE

She doesn't own a slave.

WOMAN TWO

She won't own a slave.

WOMAN THREE

A prince wants a princess with a slave.

WOMAN FOUR

She doesn't want a prince.

WOMAN FIVE

Without a prince there'll be no heir.

WOMAN SIX

She doesn't want an heir.

WOMAN SEVEN

She must have an heir ...  
Or else we'll have no ruler!

WOMAN EIGHT

She must be made to own a slave ...

WOMAN TWO

She must be made to own a slave ...

WOMAN THREE

She must be made to own a slave ....

ALL

Or else we'll have no ruler!

Hahahaha!  
Hahahaha!

She must be made to own a slave ...  
Or else we'll have no ruler!

Hahahaha!  
Hahahaha!  
Hahahahahahaha!  
Etc.

WOMAN FOUR

She's stubborn ...

WOMAN SEVEN

She's cruel ...

WOMAN EIGHT

Why else would she refuse?

WOMAN SIX

They say that she's afraid.

WOMAN ONE

They say that she was raped.

*The women all exclaim.*

WOMAN THREE

That can't be true!  
No man gets near her – ever!

WOMAN FIVE

Maybe it was more than one ...

Looking for some fun!

ALL

Hahahaha!  
Hahahaha!  
Hahahahahahaha!

WOMAN TWO

I heard another story ...  
It's really kinda whorey ...

WOMAN SIX

I heard it, too ...

WOMAN FOUR

Tell us! Tell us!

WOMAN TWO

It's wicked ...

WOMAN SIX

Too wicked ...

WOMAN SEVEN

Too wicked do be true?

OTHER WOMEN

Tell us! Tell us!  
What are you waiting for?

EUNUCH (*breaks in sternly*)

Stop all this gossip!  
The Princess is high-minded.  
No man belongs to you or me ...  
Is her philosophy.

*They all laugh.*

WOMAN TWO

I dare not say ...

WOMAN SIX

I dare not, either ...

EUNUCH (*continuing*)

The Princess in enlightened ...

*They ignore him.*

OTHER WOMEN

Tell us! Tell us!  
Quickly or we'll kill you!

*Woman Two starts to speak and the others listen with rapt attention. The eunuch has a look of horror on his face.*

WOMAN TWO

I heard it said ...  
She goes to bed ...  
*(pauses, then blurts out)*  
With the Emperor her father!

OTHER WOMEN (*gasping*)

Her father!

WOMAN FIVE (*to Woman Six*)

Is that what you heard, too?

WOMAN SIX (*wringing her hands*)

What can I say ... it's true!

WOMAN FOUR

That's why she'll have no slave!

WOMAN EIGHT

She wants no one to guard her!

WOMEN FIVE

Oh dear! Oh dear!  
The explanation's clear!

WOMAN ONE

The Princess wants no prince.  
She only wants her father!

ALL WOMEN

The Princess wants no prince.  
She only wants her father!

EUNUCH (*breaks in*)

Foolish women!  
Stop this gossip!

*The women continue to ignore him. They are having too much fun.*

WOMAN EIGHT

Of all the men ...  
To give her hymen to!

*The women break into laughter.*

ALL WOMEN (*with much merriment*)

Hahahaha!  
Hahahaha!  
Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha!  
Etc.

End of Scene

### ACT I Scene 3

*The palace is decked out for a grand reception. There are four high stakes, each with a different portrait of Turandot's head impaled, as it were, on top. Altoum and his entourage, the guard and a panel of three judges, appear with great ceremony, accompanied by other court dignitaries, and also musicians and entertainers. Turandot's 14 brothers file in, remaining off to the side and forming a peanut gallery of sorts. There is great fanfare as the guard goes to a very imposing door and lets in four suitors, dressed in great finery. They spill out into the reception hall, practically falling over one another in their eagerness to vie for Turandot. Altoum ceremoniously welcomes them, but they are dumbstruck by Turandot's portraits and can't pay attention to anything else. (In the Persian tale and the plays by Gozzi and Schiller that influenced Puccini, although not in the opera itself, Calaf's fate is sealed as soon as he sees Turandot's portrait.) Each of the suitors worshipfully situates himself before a different portrait of Turandot.*

ALTOUM *(to the guard)*

Can they really be so foolish?

SUITOR ONE *(straining to look at Turandot's portrait way up high and addressing it as if it were real)*

Most exalted princess!  
Your looks are more than I can bear!  
Can't you see I'm dying?  
Please! I beg you!  
Let me win you fair!

SUITOR TWO *(same)*

Up above the world so high ...  
Fairest princess in the sky!  
Had I but wings ...  
Could I but bill and coo ...  
I would woo you like no other!  
Please! I beg you!  
Let me be your lover!

SUITOR THREE *(same)*

Yoo-hoo! Up there!  
Your beauty is beyond compare!  
Fly me up at once!

Or else come down.  
Please! I beg you!  
Give me half your crown!

SUITOR FOUR (*same*)

Lofty Princess!  
How cruel of you to stay up there ...  
While I'm pecking the ground down here!  
Please! I beg you!  
You're straining my neck!

*Turandot quietly enters through the same door. She is not noticed by the suitors, who continue trying to attract the attention of the portraits, their voices now blended in a chorus.*

ALL SUITORS

I You-hoo!  
I Don't be cruel!  
I Come down here!  
I Please! I beg you!

Etc.

TURANDOT

Idolaters!  
Stop this at once!  
Love looks not with the eyes ...  
But with the mind!<sup>ii</sup>

*At the sound of her voice they turn and see her in the flesh. Shocked and utterly confused, they start trembling uncontrollably. They look up at the portraits and back down at Turandot, muttering and shaking their heads as they try to make sense of it all.*

*(to the guard, sternly)*

Silence them!

*(to the judges, sternly)*

Instruct them!

GUARD *(with authority)*

You will shut up at once!

*Their mumbling is reduced to a whimper. The eldest and most distinguished judge steps forward, takes out an elaborate scroll and reads it to the suitors.*

JUDGE ONE

Fools!  
Here are the rules:  
You pose the Princess a riddle ...  
Accompanied by this fiddle ...

*He gestures to a musician with a pipa, a Chinese lute-like instrument.*

Should the Princess guess...  
You'll don this tunic ...  
And forfeit your sex.

*A second judge steps forward and shows the suitors a very simple tunic. The first judge coughs uncomfortably.*

SUITORS *(aghast)*

The tunic of a eunuch!

*They shudder and stutter and twist themselves around. They try to leave but cannot. So transfixed are they by the sight of Turandot that it is as if they were stuck to the ground.*

TURANDOT

Cowards!  
Didn't you listen?  
Go!  
Be gone!  
Or I'll sick my vicious dogs ...

SUITOR ONE *(trembling)*

My legs won't move!

SUITOR TWO (*same*)

I can't feel my feet!

SUITOR THREE (*same*)

They're glued to the ground!

SUITOR FOUR (*aroused*)

Bring on your hounds!

TURANDOT (*with a disgusted look she claps her hands twice*)

Quick! Guard!  
Remove them!  
Let them re-enter ...  
One by one ...  
Would that this were done!

*The guard shoves all but one of them out the door. The lutenist approaches and starts to play. Suitor One turns meekly towards Turandot and clears his throat.*

SUITOR ONE

What rises and shines during the day ...  
Only to hide at night?

*The lutenist stops playing. Altoum shakes his head in amazed disappointment. The brothers quietly laugh.*

BROTHER TWO (*whispers to the others*)

Another one for the harem!

JUDGE TWO (*not sensing the absurdity*)

Princess ...  
Give us your answer!

TURANDOT (*with mock seriousness*)

Hmm ... let me see ...  
What rises and shines during the day ...

Only to hide at night?  
Why, it's the sun!  
Did I get that right?

*Suitor One shudders in horror.*

JUDGE THREE *(with great ceremony)*

The Princess is correct.

*Suitor One is stunned into silence. The judge turns to the guard.*

Take him away!

*The guard shackles Suitor One and leads him away, shoving him through the door from which Suitor Two then enters. The lutenist starts playing again.*

SUITOR TWO *(turning to face Turandot)*

I ... I ... I ...

TURANDOT

Speak!  
I haven't got all day!

SUITOR TWO

I ... I... I ...

TURANDOT *(to the guard)*

Take him away ...  
Let him go free.  
With his stutter ...  
He'll scare off the others.

*Altoum is visibly relieved. The guard leads away Suitor Two, who continues mindlessly to mutter "I ... I ...I ...," and shoves him out the door. A dull thud is heard off-stage and the guard disappears behind the door. The lutenist confusedly approaches and starts to play.*

*(to the lutenist)*  
Stop that!

*The lutenist is mortified, stops playing and retreats. Turandot impatiently calls to the guard on the other side of the door.*

Why are you wasting my time?

*The guard returns, dragging behind him the limp body of Suitor Three.*

GUARD

Just like that ....  
Right on the spot ...  
Dead as a doorknob!

*The brothers laugh, less audibly this time. Altoum is visibly pained.*

TURANDOT

Bring in the last ...  
Let me get past this!

*The guard drags the body back out the door and leads in Suitor Four. The lutenist cautiously approaches but the irritated Turandot waves him away.*

SUITOR FOUR *(walks boldly up to Turandot)*

Without a doubt ...  
I'll stump you!

TURANDOT

Let's get this done!

BROTHER SEVEN *(laughing, whispering to the others)*

She'll stump *him* all right!

SUITOR FOUR

What rises and shines during the day ...

TURANDOT *(laughs)*

Only to rise at night!

SUITOR FOUR (*shocked*)

That's right!

TURANDOT (*to the guard*)

Take him away!  
Do with him what you will!

*The guard shackles Suitor Four, who is still shocked that Turandot could have anticipated his question. He leads his prisoner away and closes the door behind him.*

*(turning to Altoum)*  
There! You see?  
It wasn't meant to be!  
Let that be enough!

*(to herself)*  
Only four?  
Why no more, I wonder?

ALTOUM (*to himself*)

Why no more?  
Why not made of finer stuff?

*Altoum makes as if to leave when the door reopens and an unanticipated suitor appears, followed by the guard. He is incomparably more suave, self-confident, handsome, refined in appearance, beautifully attired. Even Turandot is struck by his appearance and princely demeanor. There is muted but intense whispering throughout the crowd and an anonymous wolf whistle or two. The brothers are stunned into silence and look on apprehensively.*

ALTOUM

A princely young man!  
And who might you be?

RASHID (*kowtowing with great ceremony, then rising*)

Rashid Ibn Rashid ...  
Your Majesty!

ALTOUM

Why have you come?

BROTHER ONE (*in distress, under his breath*)

What's this ... a fifth?  
How did he slip my grip?

RASHID

I, too, wish to woo the Princess.  
I would win her hand ...  
(*looks at Turandot with exaggerated tenderness*)  
And her love.

*Turandot exhibits none of the contempt she had for the previous four suitors. A look of fear flashes across her face, then she composes herself again.*

ALTOUM

You know the rules?

RASHID

I do.  
But if it please Your Majesty ...  
No music.

ALTOUM

Granted.

*The lutenist retreats, looking crushed.*

You may proceed.

RASHID

Most fair Princess, answer me this:

A liar says "I'm a liar" ...  
Does he speak true or false?

*Genuinely puzzled, Turandot pauses, then speaks.*

TURANDOT

Again, if you will.

RASHID (*sensing his triumph*)

As many times as you like, Princess!

A liar says "I'm a liar" ...  
Does he speak true or false?

TURANDOT (*thinking hard, repeating the question slowly*)

A liar says "I am a liar" ...  
Does he speak true or false?

In saying he lies ...  
He speaks the truth ...

*(greatly perplexed)*

But a liar lies...  
So in speaking the truth ...  
He speaks false.

If true, then false ...  
If false, then true ...

RASHID

Dear Princess ...  
Give me your answer.

TURANDOT (*looking like a trapped animal*)

If true, then false ...  
If false, then true ...  
Oh! I don't know!

*She looks at Altoum in great distress.*

Father! Save me!  
Make him go away!

ALTOUM

Dearest daughter ....  
What more fitting prince than this?

TURANDOT (*to Rashid*)

You'll not come near my bed!

*She turns again to Altoum.*

Father! Save me!  
Make him go away!

*Altoum remains silent. Turandot emits a piercing cry.*

I am lost!

END OF ACT

ACT II Scene 1

*The interior of the palace. Altoum's private quarters.*

TURANDOT (*furious*)

A wedding in less than a week!  
How could you?

ALTOUM

Dearest daughter ...  
He won you fair and square.  
Besides ...  
Is he not fair himself?

TURANDOT

Fair is foul and foul is fair.

*A knock on the door.*

ALTOUM

Enter!

*The guard enters and addresses Altoum.*

GUARD

Most gracious sire ...  
The prince is here to see you.

ALTOUM

By all means let him in!

TURANDOT

No don't!

*The guard looks at Altoum, who signals his consent to admit Rashid. Rashid promptly enters and the guard exits.*

RASHID (*feigning delight*)

Princess ...  
What a delightful surprise!  
(*addressing Altoum*)  
Great Imperial Sire!  
I desire ... to plan our wedding.

TURANDOT

Nothing doing!

ALTOUM (*sternly*)

Participate ...  
Or leave the planning to us.  
Which one is it?  
Choose!

TURANDOT

Either way I lose!

*She exits abruptly. Slamming the door behind her.*

ALTOUM

I apologize for my daughter's rudeness.

RASHID

The Princess is overcome ...

ALTOUM

She's not the only one.

RASHID

What mean you?

ALTOUM (*looking very perturbed*)

To a man ...  
Her brothers oppose the plan of her marriage.

They would not be ruled by their sister.  
*(trying not to put him off)*  
Nor would they be ruled by you.

RASHID

I would speak with them, then ...  
Alone ...  
I will earn their trust.

ALTOUM *(looking for assurance)*

You really think so?

RASHID *(with great self-confidence)*

I do.

ALTOUM *(calling to the guard)*

Guard!

*The guard enters.*

GUARD

Most gracious sire!

ALTOUM

Bring me my sons at once!

*The guard exits and Altoum again asks Rashid for assurance.*

You really think so?

RASHID *(exceedingly self-confident)*

Without a doubt ...  
Once they hear me out.

*Before Rashid can answer, the door opens and the fourteen sons file in.*

ALTOUM

You are to hear ...  
What Prince Rashid has to say ...  
Without interference from me.

*Altoum signals the guard to open the door and they both exit.*

RASHID

Dear brothers ...  
You have nothing to fear ...  
From me ... at least.  
To rule is not my design.

BROTHER ONE (*skeptical*)

Why have you come, then?

RASHID

For what I've won ...  
The ravishing Princess, your sister!  
My desire is only for her!

BROTHER ONE

As soon as she's wed ...  
The empire's hers ...  
That's what our father said.

RASHID

Yes ... unless ...  
She's distracted with love.  
I would much prefer we spend our days ...  
That way...  
And leave the ruling to you.

BROTHER ONE (*skeptical*)

You would let us take the reins?

RASHID

Why yes!  
You are capable men ...  
Are you not?

*All the brothers nod in vigorous assent.*

BROTHER TWO

Oh yes!

BROTHER THREE

Oh yes!

BROTHER FOUR

Oh yes, indeed!

BROTHER FIVE

Let us take the reins!

BROTHER SIX

Leave the pain of ruling to us!

ALL BROTHERS (*squealing with delight*)

To us! To us! To us! To us!  
To us entrust the reins!  
To us! To us! To us! To us!  
The pain of ruling ...  
Entrust to us!

Etc.

RASHID

Very well, then ...  
I leave you now ...  
*(undetectably sarcastic)*  
And the empire, too, I see ...  
In very good hands!

*Rashid exits graciously. The brothers try to make sense of what just happened.*

BROTHER THREE

You really think he'd let us rule?

BROTHER SIX

I bet she won't let him near her.

BROTHER TWELVE

I bet he's not for real.

BROTHER ONE

Now you're talking!

*They all shudder.*

BROTHER ELEVEN

Good grief!  
A wedding in less than a week!

ALL BROTHERS

A wedding in less than a week!

BROTHER FIVE

And still no plan!

BROTHER TWO

We haven't a clue what to do!

BROTHER TEN

Quick! Quick!  
Let's make a plan!

BROTHER FIVE

We've got to stop them from joining hands!

ALL BROTHERS

Quick! Quick!  
Let's make a plan ...  
We've got to stop them from joining hands!

BROTHER THREE

Wait!  
What if it's like he said ...  
And all he wants is to bed our sister?

BROTHER FOUR

What if she wants him, too?

BROTHER THIRTEEN

You can't deny he's a handsome guy.

BROTHER TEN

A lusty couple!

BROTHER FIVE

A lucky stroke for us!

BROTHER EIGHT

Too good to be true?

*The brothers pause briefly to ponder the question. They look at one another, trying to gauge each other's response.*

ALL BROTHERS

Too good to be true!  
Quick! Quick!  
Let's make a plan!

*Frightened, in dead earnest but not knowing what to do, the brothers all cluck like hens.*

|Quick!!Quick!

|Quick! Quick!  
|Quick! Quick!  
|Quick! Quick!  
|Quick! Quick!  
|Quick! Let us make a plan!  
|Quick! Quick!  
|Quick! Quick!  
|Quick! Let us make a plan!  
Etc.

End of Scene

ACT II Scene 2

*A starry sky in the dead of the night on the eve of Turandot's wedding. Outside the palace. All is quiet, except for the faint strains of a minstrel (Calaf in disguise) from afar. A guard, stationed beside the palace door, is fast asleep and hears nothing.*

MINSTREL/CALAF

A damsel with a dulcimer ...  
In a vision I once saw ...  
She played her symphony and song ...  
With music loud and long ...  
To such delight that was I wont ...  
To build a stately pleasure-dome ...  
In Xanadu.<sup>iii</sup>

TURANDOT (*in flowing night clothes, softly exiting the palace door and speaking softly*)

What delightful strains do I hear?  
Singer wondrous strange ...  
There's no need to fear ...  
Come near to me ...  
Approach!

*The minstrel slowly comes into view, cautiously approaching the palace and singing very softly so as not wake the guard. Dressed in tatters, he is handsome but not dashing, shortish and of strong build (more in the mold of Douglas Fairbanks than Errol Flynn).*

The shadow of the dome of pleasure ...  
Floated midway on the waves ...

TURANDOT (*shocked by his appearance*)

Who are you?

MINSTREL/CALAF

A wandering minstrel I ...  
A thing of shreds and patches.<sup>iv</sup>

TURANDOT

Why have you come?

MINSTREL/CALAF

The starry sky bids me sing.

TURANDOT (*enchanted*)

Your singing is too lovely by far ...  
Even for the stars!

MINSTREL/CALAF

Thank you, kind Lady ...  
I did not think to be heard ...  
Much less cheered ...  
At this late hour.  
What keeps you up?

TURANDOT

My dreadful wedding tomorrow.

MINSTREL/CALAF

A union so sacred ought not to be dreaded.

TURANDOT

I loathe to be lorded.  
I long to be free.

MINSTREL/CALAF

Why marry, then?

TURANDOT

I am Turandot, daughter of Altoum-Khan.  
I stand to inherit my father's crown.  
But not without a prince.

I pledged my hand to any man ...

Who could outwit me ...  
And one did.

A man so fiendishly clever ...  
That ... I fear ... he'll wrest control ...  
And rule over us all!

MINSTREL/CALAF

Worthy Lady ...  
Will no one protect you?

TURANDOT

My father is taken in ...  
And my brothers ...  
Well ... they are dim.

My fate is sealed.  
The gods have willed it ...  
Apparently.

But you ... lovely man ...  
Will you not spend the night ...  
*(gestures towards the palace door)*  
Here ... inside the palace walls?

MINSTREL/CALAF

Kind Lady ...  
A bed of leaves will serve for me ...

*He gestures to a spot beneath a tree not far from the palace door, then up to the heavens.*

And what better blanket than this?

TURANDOT

The night is mild ...  
I leave you to your sleep.

MINSTREL/CALAF

Fair Lady ... do not despair ...

There is hope for the morrow!

*Turandot looks at the minstrel sweetly, as if he were benighted, then steps back towards the palace door. The palace guard is still fast asleep.*

TURANDOT *(to the guard)*

Useless sot!

*Turandot disappears behind the palace door. Calaf prepares his bed of leaves. No sooner does he settle down than he hears a man speaking to himself in a low voice, headed in the direction of the palace. Quietly and quickly, Calaf moves to the other side of the tree, where he cannot be seen.*

RASHID *(musing to himself darkly)*

Tomorrow after we tie the knot ...  
The royal house of Altoum-Khan ...  
Will be no more.  
All of them slain ...  
With dagger, knife and sword.

But enough of this gruesome talk!  
Tonight I'll have some fun!  
She will be wooed ...  
Or else subdued ...  
If all else fails ... I'll rape her!

*Rashid chuckles softly as he approaches the door. The he hears someone singing and turns around. Calaf appears from behind the tree.*

MINSTREL/CALAF *(pretending to be an innocent fool)*

A damsel with a dulcimer ...  
In a vision once I saw ...

RASHID *(annoyed)*

Stop!  
Silly man!  
Get out of the way!

*MINSTREL/CALAF (ignoring Rashid and still singing as though he were unaware of his intentions, the minstrel steps in front of the door so as to impede his progress)*

And all who heard should see them there ...  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

RASHID (*angry*)

Step aside!  
Can't you see I mean business?

MINSTREL/CALAF (*continuing to play the fool*)

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice ...  
And close your eyes with holy dread ...<sup>v</sup>

*Rashid rushes towards Calaf, who, in close proximity under the light of the door lantern, recognizes him. They tussle. Rashid tries to force Calaf to the ground, but Calaf is very strong and resists. They are still tussling when they hear muffled voices behind the palace door (the guard is still passed out). Rashid tries to flee but Calaf won't let go of him. Finally, he manages to run off, leaving behind shreds of his princely tunic and a medallion bearing the official seal of Carizma, sworn enemy of Altoum. Hearing the heavy latch of the palace door, he picks up the shredded shirt pieces and medallion, evens out the dirt to erase any trace of a scene, and hurries to the back of the tree so as not to be seen. The palace door opens and the brothers file out, one by one. Greatly distressed, they bicker and interrupt each other.*

BROTHER FOUR

A whole week wasted!

BROTHER EIGHT

Without a plan ...

BROTHER TEN

Or one too many ...

BROTHER TWELVE

What should we do?

BROTHER FOURTEEN

Better to wait ...

BROTHER TWO

Better act now ...

BROTHER SEVEN

Better by night ...

BROTHER NINE

Better by day ...

BROTHER THREE

Better at dawn ...

BROTHER TEN

Better at dusk ...

BROTHER ELEVEN

On horseback ...

BROTHER THIRTEEN

On foot ...

BROTHER ONE

Poor sister!

BROTHER FIVE

How did we let this happen to her?

ALL BROTHERS

How did we let this happen to *us*?

*A rustling of leaves. Calaf steps out from behind the tree, looking as tattered and harmless as could be.*

MINSTREL/CALAF

Don't be alarmed ...  
I mean you no harm.

BROTHER ONE (*relieved*)

Minstrel ...  
What brings you here ...  
At this late hour?

MINSTREL/CALAF (*bearing himself with dignity*)

I am no minstrel.

*The brothers all laugh.*

My costume deceives.  
I am Calaf ...  
Prince of the Tartar Nogaïs.  
My father is Timurtasch.

BROTHER ONE (*contemptuously*)

No way!  
The royal house of Timurtasch ...  
Is no more.  
All of them were slain ...  
By the man who would slay us, too ...  
The Sultan Carizma!

CALAF

All but me!  
I secretly fled.  
The others met with a watery death ...  
Their bodies now repose ... decomposing ...  
In the depths of the Volga.

BROTHER ONE

So we were told.

CALAF

Much to my horror ...  
Carizma's spy ...  
Plans to marry your sister!

All BROTHERS (*gasping*)

Carizma's spy!

CALAF

Tomorrow ... at the wedding ...  
The house of Altoum-Khan ...  
Will also be gone!

BROTHER ONE

How do we know you don't lie?

*Calaf steps behind the tree and retrieves Rashid's tattered tunic and the medallion with the broken chain. On the medallion is the insignia of the ruler Carizma.*

No doubt about the tunic.

*Calaf hands the medallion to Brother One, who looks at it and shrieks.*

Carizma's seal!

*The medallion is passed from brother to brother, accompanied by horrified gasps.*

ALL BROTHERS (*to Calaf in great distress*)

But we have no plan!

CALAF

Listen to me, then:  
Carizma's men –  
No more than ten ...  
Else they'll be under suspicion --  
Will attend the wedding ...  
Pretending to be his kin.

I'll be there, too ...  
Dressed as a court musician.  
*(to Brother One)*  
You alone will observe me.  
Watch for my signal ...  
*(raises right arm)*  
Withdraw your sword ...

*(to the others)*  
Then all the brothers ...  
Kill them ...  
Maim them ...  
Reduce them to eunuchs ...  
Do with the men what you will.  
Only be sure to reveal ...  
The seal of Carizma ...  
Concealed beneath their tunics.

BROTHER FOUR *(apprehensively)*

A wedding ending in bloodshed!

CALAF

Well?

BROTHER ONE

We lacked a plan ...  
Not courage, strength or cunning.  
Now we lack for nothing!

OTHER BROTHERS *(in vigorous assent)*

We have a plan!  
Now we lack for nothing!

CALAF *(with authority)*

We are resolved, then ...

ALL BROTHERS

Resolved!

*The brothers file back into the palace, shaking their heads in wonder and muttering to themselves about what has just happened. Calaf remains outside, awake and alert. He looks at the guard, still passed out, then settles down on the heap of leaves by the tree, shaking his head in disbelief.*  
CALAF

Dimwits! Fools!  
What if the seal weren't real ...  
Worse still ...  
What if it were mine?

*(growing alarmed)*  
I must not sleep ...  
Lest the spy try again!

END OF ACT

ACT III Scene 1

*Altoum's chamber. Turandot is dressed for the wedding. She is exquisite but miserable.*

TURANDOT (*drying her tears*)

Dearest father ...  
Pardon these tears!  
Forgive my sadness ...  
I would turn to you in gladness ...  
Were my heart not filled with grief.

ALTOUM

My child ...  
Your tears deeply trouble me.

TURANDOT

You praise me to the skies ...  
Raise me above the others ... my bothers ...  
Yet would not let me rule!

ALTOUM

Rule, my child, rule!  
Rule with him ...  
Your husband!

TURANDOT

I fear he would contain me ...  
Seize the crown and take the reins!

ALTOUM

Let him rule, then!  
You've better things to do.  
He's a strong man ...  
He'll protect us!

TURANDOT (*laughs disdainfully*)

No man is stronger than I!

ALTOUM

How well I know it.

TURANDOT

Besides ...  
Who is he ... really?  
To what do we owe his loyalty?

ALTOUM

Why, to you, Princess! You!  
He, too, is under your spell!

TURANDOT

You forget my brothers.  
Chafing under his thumb ...  
They'll surely do him in!

ALTOUM

He's a strong man, I tell you!

TURANDOT

You would enslave me to a despot, then?

ALTOUM *(revealing a fierceness and determination we haven't seen before)*

And so I would ...  
But you ...  
You Princess ... you!  
In refusing to marry Rashid ...  
You would enslave us all!

*(in hushed tones)*  
Ten men lurk about.  
My spies spotted them yesterday ...  
Near the palace gate.

TURANDOT

What foul business is this?

Did you tell the others?  
Oh, what am I saying?  
Would that my brothers were not such fools.

ALTOUM (*in sympathy, ruefully*)

Would that your brothers were not such fools.

TURANDOT

Cruel fate!  
The gods decree I am unfree ...  
A sacrifice to marriage!

ALTOUM (*deeply pained*)

Precious daughter ...  
To see you dread your wedding so ...  
Your beautiful face contorted in anguish ...  
Breaks my heart!

TURANDOT (*withdrawing her hands, drying her tears*)

For you, Father ...  
For you alone will I submit ...  
And let that foul man marry me.

End of Scene

## ACT III Scene 2

*The wedding in the inner courtyard of the palace. The guests are assembled: all manner of important people from Peking and the surrounding provinces, court officials, foreign dignitaries, royal guests, and all in elaborate dress. The officiant, an old man with a beard sweeping the ground and wearing a flowing white robe, stands opposite the entrance to the courtyard. Off to one side is the lutenist. Standing next to him are Calaf and the other musicians, singers and instrumentalists, all dressed in the same court attire. The officiant nods in the direction of the musicians and the lutenist starts playing a traditional Yuan melody accompanying the most important ceremonial occasions.*

*The guests and other participants all kneel to show their respect as the wedding party starts filing in: first Altoum, accompanied by the guard, then Turandot's fourteen brothers, then Rashid followed by his ten men. Rashid and his men are wearing similar colors to signify their relation, although Rashid is much more elaborately dressed. They arrange themselves besides the officiant, with the brothers and Rashid's men facing each other. The musicians are stationed across the room within view of the brothers and behind Rashid and his men. As soon as everyone is settled, they stop playing. Turandot's entrance is awaited with great expectation.*

*Turandot enters all by herself. The lutenist starts playing again. Slowly and steadily, the veiled, magnificently dressed and ravishingly beautiful Turandot walks towards the altar. Everyone in the room is struck by her beauty, grace and noble mien--Calaf especially, who stifles a gasp so as not to draw attention to himself.*

*Turandot continues to move slowly towards the altar. She stops and the music stops with her. Everyone is alarmed, but then she proceeds and the music starts up again. This happens three times before she arrives at her appointed place beside Rashid. Calaf discreetly raises his right hand just as the officiant opens his mouth to speak, but Brother One's eyes are elsewhere: instead of looking at Calaf, his eyes are fixed with great apprehension on Rashid. The other brothers' eyes are fixed on Brother One, awaiting his signal.*

*Greatly alarmed, Calaf raises both arms and starts to gesticulate wildly. Looking very silly, he succeeds in drawing the alarmed attention of the entire room. Altoum's guard starts towards him. Finally, Brother One sees the signal and withdraws his sword. The other brothers follow suit. All eyes are now on the brothers. They waste no time in attacking Rashid's men. The dignified guests become hysterical. They crowd towards the exit, falling on top of one another, their elaborate tunics, headdresses and masses of jewelry becoming inextricably entangled. Turandot, meanwhile, has ripped off her veil and is*

*joining her brothers in battle. She has no weapon and needs none. Her strength and skill as a wrestler are enough.*

RASHID (*pretending to be greatly indignant, pointing to his 'brothers'*)

Who are these men?  
What are they doing here?  
(*to no one in particular*)  
Dispatch them immediately!

*Turandot turns on Rashid, deftly wrestling him to the ground, then holding him there with her foot. Brother One rushes up, thinking to aid her, but sees that she has complete control of the situation.*

TURANDOT (*to Brother One*)

Who is he?

*He hands her the chain and seal. Turandot, her foot still firmly planted on Rashid's chest, is aghast.*

Carizma!  
Who gave you this?

BROTHER ONE

The minstrel.

TURANDOT (*incredulous*)

The minstrel?

RASHID (*still pinned down, crying out*)

My seal!  
My seal!

TURANDOT (*looking down at Rashid*)

I'll seal you all right!

*She takes the dagger from Brother One and lifts her arm as if to strike. Emerging from the crowd, Calaf approaches.*

CALAF

Fair Princess ...  
Let the honor be mine.

TURANDOT (*stunned*)

Of all the nerve ...  
A musician ...  
(*she gasps in sudden recognition*)  
The minstrel!

CALAF (*bowing respectfully*)

Prince Calaf ...  
Son of Timurtasch.

TURANDOT (*to Calaf, utterly confused*)

But you're dead!

CALAF

No, I fled.  
(*pointing to Rashid*)  
Carizma's spy lies under your foot.

TURANDOT (*to Brother One, skeptical*)

Surely we can't take his word!

CALAF (*looking down at Rashid with utter contempt*)

You'll vouch for me ...  
Won't you?

RASHID (*looking straight at Calaf, choking on his words*)

Most exalted Prince ...  
Spare me!

CALAF

Princess ... the dagger!

*Turandot hands Calaf the dagger.*

RASHID

Spare me ... I beg you!  
Let me be your slave!

CALAF

Never!

RASHID

Noble Prince ...  
Merciful Prince ...  
Spare me!

CALAF

I will spare you ...  
Here ...  
*(tosses him the dagger)*  
Spill your own blood!

RASHID

Merciful Prince!

*Rashid, still under Turandot's foot, seizes the dagger and without delay plunges it into his heart. The other brothers have subdued all of Rashid's men. They are disposed in various positions around the courtyard, all at knife point with their tunics split open to reveal the medallions with Carizma's seal.*

TURANDOT *(to all the brothers)*

Away!  
Away with them all!  
Do with them what you will.

*Rashid's body is dragged away, leaving a trail of blood. The brothers, except for Brother One, exit the courtyard together with their heavily-guarded prisoners. Altoum joins Calaf, Turandot and Brother One.*

CALAF (*bowing and kneeling to the ground in deep respect*)

Your Majesty!  
Prince Calaf ...  
Son of Timurtasch!

ALTOUM

But you're dead!

TURANDOT AND BROTHER ONE

No! He fled!

ALTOUM (*to Calaf*)

To you ...  
The court of Altoum ...  
Is eternally indebted.  
Please ... ask me anything!

*Altoum sees Turandot looking at Calaf with admiration.*

If only ...  
Instead of that horrible man ...  
It were you who ruled.  
If only ...  
You had won my daughter's hand!

CALAF

Your Gracious Majesty ...  
I would not rule.  
I came here seeking peace ...  
All I ask is asylum.

ALTOUM (*wanting to comfort*)

Slaves, then ...  
A harem ...

CALAF

Gracious Sire ...  
I must decline your generous offer.

Precious freedom bids me not enslave ... any man.

TURANDOT

A noble mind!

ALTOUM

But a harem ... surely!

CALAF

Gracious Sire ...  
My heart is too full with love.

TURANDOT

Fortunate woman!  
Who is she?

*Calaf looks at her with intensely passionate feeling, which he tries to disguise.  
The Guard agitatedly bursts into the courtyard.*

GUARD *(to Altoum)*

Beg pardon, Sire!  
Your guests are about to expire.  
They came for a feast.  
They're expecting to eat.  
What shall I do?

ALTOUM

Why, see that they're fed!

GUARD

Beg pardon, Sire.  
About the wedding ...  
What shall I tell them?

ALTOUM *(reckoning out loud what has happened)*

They came to see my daughter wed ...  
And now the prince ...

The spy, I mean ...  
Is dead!

*He looks slyly at Turandot and then at Calaf.*

*(to Calaf)*  
Pardon my absence, noble Prince.  
*(to the guard)*  
Quick! Let's go!

*Altoum and the guard exit.*

TURANDOT *(resuming)*

Tell me ...  
Who is that fortunate woman?

CALAF *(trying to hide his true feelings)*

Fairest Princess ...  
With all due respect ...  
I dare not discover my love.

TURANDOT *(annoyed)*

Why on earth not?

CALAF

In truth she is pledged to another.

TURANDOT

Unfortunate man!  
Would you not woo her?  
Try to pry her away?

CALAF *(hesitating, in low tones)*

A bond so unnatural I cannot abide.

TURANDOT *(extremely perplexed)*

Unnatural?  
What do you mean?

CALAF

I dare not say.

TURANDOT

Will you pledge yourself to no other, then?

CALAF (*awkwardly*)

To none but you, Princess ...  
In friendship and devotion.

TURANDOT (*looks at Calaf suspiciously*)

Are you not a man?

CALAF (*with self-assurance*)

I am!

TURANDOT (*pouring on the charm*)

Am I not a woman?

CALAF (*nervously*)

Indeed, Princess, you are!

TURANDOT (*seductively*)

Then where do I stand with Calaf, the man?

CALAF

No one cares more!

TURANDOT

And yet ... you don't adore me?

CALAF (*starting to come undone*)

Oh yes, Princess! Yes!  
I adore you ...

*(trying to recover himself)*  
In friendship and respect.

TURANDOT

Fool!  
Can't you see I woo you?

CALAF *(practically shaking)*

Princess, I do!  
I ... I ...  
I would woo you, too ...  
*(hesitates)*  
But for that unholy pledge!

TURANDOT *(furious at being thwarted)*

What is it?  
Tell me! Tell me!

TURANDOT *(turning to Brother One, frantic)*

What is he saying?  
Tell me! Tell me!

*Brother One is silent.*

Go now and inquire ...  
No one sleeps until I find out!<sup>vi</sup>

*Brother One is frozen with fear and can neither speak nor move. Turandot speaks to him angrily*

What is it?  
What are you waiting for?

BROTHER ONE *(with great remorse)*

Sister ...  
I am to blame ...  
For the sinister rumor that stops Calaf ...  
From wooing you.

TURANDOT (*extremely bewildered*)

What are you saying?

BROTHER ONE

Desiring to rule ...  
I told a cruel lie ...  
Designed to keep your suitors at bay.

I ... I ... I ...  
I ... I ... I ...

TURANDOT

Out with it!

BROTHER ONE (*blurts it out*)

I said you were bedding our father!

CALAF (*stunned*)

Cruel, indeed!  
(*to himself*)  
And yet ...  
Kinder words I've never heard.

*There is a rather long pause, causing great suspense, while Turandot stops to reflect on what her brother has said. Then she bursts into laughter.*

TURANDOT

No harm, no foul!  
What could be fouler than marriage?

BROTHER ONE (*turning to Calaf*)

It was your fate to rule ...  
I see it now.

TURANDOT (*to Calaf*)

I see it, too.

*Altoum rushes back in. Immediately he senses what has happened.*

ALTOUM

The guests are growing restive ...  
What shall I say?  
May I tell them to stay?

TURANDOT (*to Brother One*)

Quick now!  
The Prince needs some clothes!  
(*looks around*)  
Where is my veil?

*Calaf retrieves the veil which Turandot had tossed to the ground. He dusts it off, arranges it neatly and gallantly hands it back to her. Then he hurries off with Brother One to get changed.*

*The guests re-enter. They are a drunken disorderly bunch. The musicians, too, re-enter and start to play in a drunken sort of way.*

*So intent is everyone on celebrating after such a long wait, and so drunk, that they think the wedding has already taken place. Turandot retreats to a corner and arranges her torn and bloodstained dress. She inspects the sad-looking veil and tosses it back on the ground. Altoum and the guard enter, followed by Prince Calaf, now regally attired, and the neatened-up brothers. Only the bride herself remains in tatters. No matter: the crowd barely notices as they continue with their drunken celebration.*

CROWD

Hats off!  
Cheers!  
Here's to the royal couple!  
Etc.

*Seeing Calaf, Turandot steps out of the corner, looking rather apologetic about her appearance. Tenderly and eagerly, Calaf steps towards her.*

CALAF (*taking both her hands, full of affection*)

My tattered bride!

TURANDOT *(returning his affection)*

My minstrel prince!

BROTHER ONE *(looking for the officiant)*

Where is that silly old man with the beard?

*The guard spies him. He is so drunk that he is practically passed out.*

GUARD *(disgusted)*

There he is ... he's drunk!

ALTOUM *(calling the bride and groom to come and stand before him)*

Never mind ...  
Stand here before me.

*Amid the still-celebrating crowd, Calaf and Turandot come and stand before Altoum. Assuming the role of officiant, Altoum addresses them both.*

By the power vested in me ...  
As Emperor of China ...  
I declare you officially wed!

*Turandot and Calaf stand there awkwardly, not knowing what to do next. Altoum sees the need to drive the point home.*

*(to Turandot)*  
He's yours ... you're his.

TURANDOT *(to Calaf)*

I'm yours ... your mine.

ALTOUM *(to Calaf)*

She's yours ... your hers.

CALAF *(tenderly, to Turandot)*

I'm yours ... you're mine.

*The crowd finally realizes what's happening and starts to cheer the royal couple.*

CROWD

Cheers!  
Hats off!  
Here's to the royal couple!  
Etc.

ALTOUM (*profoundly relieved and happy*)

There ... it's settled!  
My willful daughter willfully wed!  
Her brothers finally led!

CROWD

Cheers!  
Hats off!  
Here's to the royal couple!  
Etc.

TURANDOT (*wanting to escape the crowd, tugging at Calaf's sleeve*)

Quick!  
Let's leave!

CALAF (*tenderly restraining her*)

Turandot ... my dear ...

TURANDOT (*continuing to tug*)

Hurry!  
Let's get out of here!

CALAF (*gently persisting*)

Turandot ... my dear ...  
Aren't you going to kiss me?

*The brothers bear witness to this exchange and audibly gasp. The noise of the crowd dies down. All eyes are now on Turandot and Calaf, who are so absorbed in each other that it's as if no one else were there. Turandot lets go*

*of Calaf's sleeve and looks at him with great stillness for what seems like a very long time. The brothers softly exclaim.*

BROTHER FOUR

A first!

BROTHER TEN

This I've got to see!

BROTHER NINE

What's holding them up?

*Turandot reaches out her arms and beckons to Calaf. He moves towards her quickly. They passionately embrace. The guests audibly emote and exclaim. Calaf showers Turandot with kisses. They remain in passionate embrace, oblivious to all else, as the opera ends.*

CROWD

Cheers!  
Hats off!  
Here's to the royal couple!  
Etc.

*The brothers join them now.*

CROWD AND BROTHERS

Cheers!  
Hats off!  
Here's to the royal couple!  
Etc.

ALTOUM

There ... it's settled!  
With fate's decree I quite agree!

END OF OPERA

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<sup>i</sup> *Macbeth*, Act I Scene 1

<sup>ii</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act I, Scene 1

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*. Kublai Khan was the first Mongolian Emperor to conquer and rule all of China. He established the Yuan Dynasty and moved his chief residence from Xanadu, which remained his summer palace, to Peking, which became and remains China's capital city of Beijing.

<sup>iv</sup> From the *Mikado*.

<sup>v</sup> Adapted from *Kubla Khan*, loc. cit.

<sup>vi</sup> A reference to the great "Nessun Dorma" aria in Act III of Puccini's *Turandot*.