

The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

Act I

A salon in the house of Magda de Civry in Paris during the Second Empire.

A late afternoon reception is in progress, with sparkling conversation, impertinences and amiable repartee exchanged among discreetly shaded lights. Through the windows of a veranda gleams a reddish sunset over the Tuileries. The poet Prunier entertains the guests with such frivolous topics as the fashion currently raging in high society Paris for romantic and sentimental love. This is affably derided by Magda's friends Yvette, Bianca and Suzy, and even by the maid Lisette, who express their preference for brief infatuations. In advocating the reasons for true love, the poet improvises on the piano a song he has composed. A girl named Doretta refuses the offers of a king, who promises to make her rich if she will yield to his desires. But he leaves the tale unfinished and it is ended by Magda, who sits in her turn at the piano. In her version the passionate kiss of a student reveals to Doretta the true joys of life. Greeted with applause, she concludes, though almost talking to herself: what do riches matter if in the end happiness has reblossomed? Rambaldo, her wealthy protector, also congratulates her, offering her a magnificent pearl necklace which arouses the admiration of her lady friends. Magda accepts the gift rather coldly. As Rambaldo goes out, she nostalgically reminisces to her friends, who envy her fortune, on the good times of her early youth. It was then that she ran away from home and spent a carefree life at Bullier's, accepting

amid furtive kisses and declarations of love the modest refreshments that a penniless student could afford to offer her. Her heart still aches when she thinks of him. Meanwhile Prunier comes up to her. Nagged by the spoiled ladies around him, he reads Magda's hand and tells her that, like a swallow, she will migrate beyond the sea, to a dreamland and to Love. But he does not elaborate on this prophecy. Lisette now shows in a young provincial named Ruggero Lastouc, the son of a dear friend of Rambaldo's. Rambaldo gives him a warm welcome and asks Prunier where should a young man be sent to spend his first evening merrily in Paris. «To bed», replies Prunier, maintaining that Paris by night is a legend to be exploded. But his young lady friends and Lisette rise up, proposing a whole string of places to Ruggero. Having then decided that the most amusing of them all is Bullier's, they write the address on a piece of paper. To one side, Magda listens while conversing with Prunier. Evening has fallen, and all the guests take their leave while Lisette, left alone with Magda, asks permission to go out. Magda consents, saying that she herself will stay at home. Going up to the table at which Ruggero had been sitting, however, she catches sight of the piece of paper with Bullier's address on it. Making a sudden decision, she goes to her room and closes the door. Meanwhile Prunier and Lisette meet and go out together. When they have left, Magda reappears, dressed and combed with great simplicity, in the style of a grisette. «Who would recognize me?»,

she wonders, looking at herself in the mirror. Draping a shawl over her shoulders, she quickly goes out.

Act II

At Bullier's, with a flight of steps leading to the entrance.

Merriment, confusion, a mixed crowd of students, artists, grisettes, loose women, soldiers, ladies and gentlemen, a bustle of customers, waiters and flower-girls. In the background are an illuminated garden and people dancing. Ruggero is seated at a table, besieged by girls who try to attract his interest. They make fun of him with stifled laughter when he tires of their insistence. On the steps appears Magda, who inevitably catches the eyes of several young men, who assiduously court her and gallantly invite her to join them. To avoid their attentions she timidly says she already has an engagement. With some embarrassment, she takes a seat at Ruggero's table, apologizing for this rudeness. Ruggero is flattered and begs her to stay, expressing his affectionate admiration for her simple beauty and bashfulness which remind him of quiet country girls. He invites her to dance and at once a deep understanding is formed between them which quickly turns to tenderness and then to mutual declarations of irresistible love that flares into passion. In the meantime Prunier and Lisette come past, and the maid utters a cry of amazement upon recognizing her mistress. Magda imploringly gazes at Prunier, who realizes at once who she is but convincingly assures Lisette that she

is mistaken, that there is probably only a vague likeness to her mistress. He only concedes that Ruggero, it is true, could be the young man met in the afternoon at Magda's house, but the young lady with him is certainly not Magda. Indeed Ruggero immediately introduces her as his friend Paulette (the name given him by Magda just before). The two couples become friends at once and exchange affectionate talk, admired and fêted by the crowd of young seamstresses and students. Suddenly Rambaldo appears on the steps. Prunier is the first to notice his presence and begs Ruggero, without too many explanations, to escort Lisette off the premises as if she were a friend of his. Then he goes up to Rambaldo almost as if to hide Magda who, without listening to his exhortations to leave, remains seated at the table, looking defiant. The explanation between the two is brief and to the point: Rambaldo says he is prepared to forgive a light escapade, a passing infatuation. Magda retorts that she has found true love and genuine passion, which a man like him would not be able to understand. Rambaldo bows and goes off without turning, to join the last customers leaving the establishment. Ruggero returns and Magda, as if waking from a dream, embraces him passionately.

Act III

The terrace of a hotel on a hillside in the Côte d'Azur.

Magda and Ruggero are living happily, far from the social whirl of Paris, albeit with a few small unpaid

bills to worry about. Ruggero confides to Magda that he has written home to ask his family to send him some money and for their consent to his marriage. Magda is deeply upset. In this idyllic state she had not really thought of marriage. How can she now confess her past to Ruggero and risk losing him, yet how can she not tell him without deceiving the man she loves? Meanwhile Prunier and Lisette have appeared on the hillside, looking for their old friends. Lisette has been roundly booed at Nice, where the poet had unwisely persuaded her to appear for a few evenings as a singer of popular songs. Now Lisette is anxious to return to service as Magda's maid. Magda consents and welcomes her back very cordially. Prunier takes advantage of the situation to tell Magda that everyone in Paris has been asking after her and that they are all waiting for her return. Ruggero radiantly shows Magda a letter that he has just received from his mother. She approves of their marriage, sends her blessing and begs her son to give a kiss on her behalf to the sweet girl who is to be his bride. Magda is deeply moved and desperate. She can no longer deceive Ruggero and enter his house as his wife. She knows she must confess her past and part from him. But Ruggero cannot bear the thought of losing her. Convulsively he implores her to stay with him, he points out to Magda the lovely sunset and the toll of the bells, and begs her not to break his heart. But Magda is irremovable. With one last, deeply tender glance at her

grief-stricken Ruggero, she drags herself away in tears towards the slope, fondly aided by Lisette.