1912: A Helping Hand

A pastoral chamber opera in one act

Music – Robert Ely
Libretto – Peter Scott-Presland
Cast

Edward Carpenter/Narrator (Bass)

Aged 69, very fit and wiry, grey hair and beard. Loose clothing, sandals, broad brimmed hat. Socialist and mystic. Apt to daydream

EM Forster (tenor)

Aged 34, a townie, in uncomfortable suit, buttoned up and repressed. His moustache gives no sense of masculinity, rather heightens his hesitancy. He has a slight stammer, from being bullied in childhood. As Maurice he is similar, but a younger version of himself, an academic

George Merrill (Baritone)

Aged 47. Stocky, northern, blunt. A moustache. Self-educated but never stupid. Carpenter’s lover for 20 years, has lived with him for 15. He runs the household. As Maurice he is younger, sexier, idealised (nb. slight change in language) a gamekeeper.

Setting

The garden of the Carpenter/Merrill farmhouse at Millthorpe, just outside Sheffield. The action moves into the novel Maurice in Forster’s mind. The time is September 1913 – an Indian summer.

The action moves into the novel ‘Maurice’ as it takes shape in Forster’s mind

Orchestration

Flute and piano
Synopsis

The novelist EM Forster visits pioneer gay writer and activist Edward Carpenter and his lover – they live together openly; they motivate and inspire him sufficiently to clear his writer’s block and enable him to write 'Maurice', a courageous gay novel, which was not published until after Forster’s death, in 1971.

Carpenter is in his garden shelling peas and daydreaming. Merrill comes to consult him about practical domestic issues and reminds him of Forster’s visit.

Forster arrives shortly after, hot and bothered, having had a three mile walk from the nearest station. He voices his dislike of the countryside.

Carpenter questions Forster about hiding behind his initials, expounds his own interest in Hinduism (which Forster shares), criticises the timidity and aridity of Forster’s writings. He gets him to open up about his sexual orientation.

Carpenter and Merrill try to convince Forster that he does not have to believe the repugnant Victorian labels but should elevate gay feelings to an expression of eternal love.

The novel ‘Maurice’ begins to form in Forster’s mind, and they become characters in the novel, reflecting on never-ending love, and a happy ending,
[An old deckchair. Carpenter sitting, hat shading his face, a bowl of peas on his lap.]

CARPENTER: Light.
In the evening glow of the sun
All is light.
Look at those leaves
A halo surrounds each one
Look through the leaves
And see the veins
The leaves become translucent
And alive with light.

Great Krishna
Lord of life and death
Shiva the cobra
His bite will dissolve us
Vishnu will evolve us
Brahma the unfathomable
And infinite god

Take me, great Life,
When my time comes
Unloose these chains,
Unbind these clogs and fetters.
I will hear the call. I will come.

MERRILL: [Offstage] Ted! Ted!

[enters] I thought you’d be here

CARPENTER: My favourite place
The murmur of the stream
The water so soothing

MERRILL: Haven’t yer done them peas yet?

CARPENTER: I was thinking
MERRILL: Daydreaming more like
Get a move on
I haven’t got all day
And a pea risotto
Won’t make itsen
Do I have to do everything?

CARPENTER: Pea risotto? That’s a bit fancy

MERRILL: With turnip tops
I thought I’d do something fancy
With Mr Forster coming

CARPENTER: Forster! I almost forgot

MERRILL: Forget yer own name next

CARPENTER: What time is he coming?

MERRILL: His train were due over an hour ago
Get a move on with them peas
And don’t forget young Alec either

CARPENTER: Alec Brewster?

MERRILL: Aye.
Yer promised that you’d meet him in t’ pub
For a game of skittles
He’s after you, yer know
Wants to share yer bed

CARPENTER: Are you jealous?

MERRILL: Me? Jealous? Don’t make me laugh

CARPENTER: \[Teasing\] He’s a fine upstanding lad

MERRILL: But could he make yer tea?
I think not
[He kisses CARPENTER. They freeze. Lights fade on them, up on FORSTER opposite side of the stage. He is hot and sweaty in a three-piece suit, carrying a suitcase. Uncomfortable and irritated.]

FORSTER: I hate the country
It is so dirty – and noisy;
All those animals and birds
Sounding off for all they’re worth
Trust Carpenter to choose
Somewhere miles from anywhere
Apparently, he built his house himself
A stage for the drama of his sainthood.
[change] I must not be uncharitable
I’m only tired
I have waited so long for this meeting
Only fear has held me back
Fear of myself, and what I will find there

[MERRILL and CARPENTER unfreeze. MERRILL goes to greet FORSTER.]

MERRILL: Ah, Mr Forster you found us

FORSTER: There were no carriages for hire at Dronfield Station
It was a three-mile walk and more
And of course, the locals
Don’t know how to give directions
[imitates] 'Turn right at t’ hay barn’
Which hay barn? There are several

CARPENTER: [irritated] Don’t patronise the people, Forster

FORSTER: I’m sorry. Perhaps I’m tired

CARPENTER: They are your comrades and the future
Enough of that
Give me your hand
I am glad to see you

MERRILL: Give me yer case
I’ll put it in yer room
It’s all prepared
FORSTER: Thank you – er –
It’s Merrill, isn’t it?

MERRILL: Call me George. Everyone does [*Exits with the case, and the peas*]

CARPENTER: And what of you, Mr *Eee Emm* Forster?
So many with initials
EF Benson, GK Chesterton
O Henry, JM Barrie
MR James, RD Blackmoor
HG Wells
All hiding something of themselves
Bottled up in initials

FORSTER: Come now; Herbert Wells
Never bottles up anything
That is part of his problem

CARPENTER: Ee Em?

FORSTER: All my family call me Morgan
My mother and my aunts

CARPENTER: And shall I call you by your matriarchal name?

FORSTER: It is simplest.
Mother’s in Harrogate for the cure
Of her rheumatism
I’d rather she did not know of this visit.

CARPENTER: Am I that notorious?

FORSTER: You are well known through your writings
They are what made me long to meet you
But I held back
Afraid of the experience
And maybe the emotion
I shrink from contact
CARPENTER: What is your feeling on nudity?
Most days I swim naked in the stream
I find it clears the mind and body

FORSTER: I have never been a great one
For physical exercise

CARPENTER: I can see that. What size are your feet?

FORSTER: I am size seven. Why?

CARPENTER: I’d like to make you a pair of sandals.
Here!

[He beckons FORSTER to him, that FORSTER should put his foot in his lap. FORSTER hesitates, then does it reluctantly. CARPENTER removes his shoe; measures, then massages his foot.]

CARPENTER: You see. So many of your chakras are blocked.
There is no energy in your feet
They cannot connect with the good earth
And so, you have no roots.

[FORSTER gives an enormous yawn.]

FORSTER: I’m sorry

CARPENTER: No, it is healthy. You are opening yourself
As the flower opens to the sun
It is Vishnu working through you

FORSTER: Ah yes, Vishnu. I was in India last year.
I learnt to meditate in Aligarh
Troubles always drag on my coat tails
Unless I can meditate on love,
Love is the only thing can keep thought out
I love Krishna
I meditate on Krishna
I don’t know if he is a God
But I love Love and Beauty and Wisdom
I find them in his history
CARPENTER: I have written much on love
On homogenic love
The love of comrades
Are you cut from the same cloth?
Do you have a special friend?

FORSTER: I do not like to say
My mother would not like it

CARPENTER: Beethoven would have written nothing
If he wrote to please his mother
Look at the arietta of his last sonata
Like the unfolding of a child’s face
Like the carol of a lark
Like the sunlight on the sea
You can be sure Maria von Beethoven
Would neither understand it
Nor like it
Perhaps I shall play it for you
After dinner

MORGAN: [shyly] I play piano too
Perhaps we can duet, what do you think?
The Grosse Fugue, maybe…

CARPENTER: But would you give it passion
Technique is nothing without feeling
Oh Morgan, all this inhibition
Will be the death of you
The death of your soul
It is already destroying you as an artist

FORSTER: How do you know that?

CARPENTER: You have written nothing for three years
And before then you ploughed old furrows
Because you will not feel

FORSTER: I cannot –
CARPENTER: Cannot? Not even to yourself?

[A long pause.]

FORSTER: I am an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort

CARPENTER: Again. [louder]

FORSTER: I am an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort

CARPENTER: Wilde. What a dreadful influence! I could publish nothing then. He set the cause of homogenic love back a generation, maybe longer. A shallow, stupid man. There was no comradeship in him.

FORSTER: I was sixteen when he was put to trial. A boy at Tumbridge School. Much despised for hating games and being effeminate. I became as quiet as I could. Not to attract attention. And I dreamt of my ideal friend.

[MERRILL re-enters.]

MERRILL: Right, the peas are set to cook. The rice to boil.

FORSTER: You work so hard, George.

MERRILL: I have to. I’m a servant. He pays the servant tax for me. Fifteen bob a year. So I must earn my keep.

CARPENTER: Come now, George, you know. It’s just for form’s sake. To stop the wagging tongues.
MERRILL: Who’s he think he’s fooling? Everybody knows, love – and why not?

FORSTER: The words are so unpleasant Sodomite, catamite, pederast Even the pleasant words are not quite nice Mary Jane, Uranian¹

MERRILL: I just² call it pleasant A labour of love

FORSTER: A love you do³ not hide at all

MERRILL: Why should I? It suits me fine

FORSTER: I wish I had a friend like you Someone to stand by me To go through life together

MERRILL: Yer will have, Morgan Trust in me Trust in yersen Believe you are worthy to receive love

[He puts his hand on FORSTER’s back and pats it. His pat turns into a gentle stroke, and he works his hand down FORSTER’s back, onto the top of his buttocks. This becomes slow-motion, unreal. FORSTER turns towards the audience, addresses them – spoken – while the music describes the internal process FORSTER is going through.]

FORSTER [spoken] George Merrill made a profound impression on me, to touch a creative spring. He touched my backside. Gently and just above the buttocks. Nothing suggestive, but still subversive. I believe he touched most people’s.

¹ I’m not sure about the musical gap after ‘not quite nice’ – It’s not clear that Mary Jane and Uranian follow as examples. Better a gap after.
² Need the ‘just’ to follow the argument/rejoinder
³ It’s a choice
Carpenter: He was like a cat  
Always rubbing up against all and sundry

Forster: The sensation was unusual, and I still remember it, as I remember the position of a long-vanished tooth. It was as if he were taking ownership of me. No, not of me, exactly, but of my psyche, and my fear.

Merrill: This is what it feels like  
To have a lover

Forster: I felt the heat of it.  
The playfulness

Carpenter: It was Krishna playing  
As he played with the milkmaids  
And stole their clothes  
While they were bathing

Merrill: Whoever heard of Jesus playing?  
Jesus never played, and  
That’s why I can’t take a Christian God

Carpenter: Krishna must destroy  
To build you up and make you new

Forster: *spoken* It was as much psychological as physical. It seemed to go straight through the small of my back, into my ideas, without involving my thoughts. If it really did this, it was an example of Yogic mystic thought, the like of which Carpenter believed; it showed that this was that exact moment when I conceived. I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it, for the eternity that fiction allows.

Carpenter: The wall between subject, object  
Falls away with higher consciousness  
It touches, hears, sees, is  
All that it perceives  
Without motion, change or effort
But with the vast unprecedented joy
To cosmic and universal parts of man

MERRILL/CARPENTER: Tell us a story, Forster
Tell us a story, Morgan

MERRILL: A story full of hope
CARPENTER: A story full of light
BOTH: A story full of love and rapture
MERRILL: It has to have a happy ending
CARPENTER: Yes, it has to have a happy ending
FORSTER: A happy ending is imperative

[FORSTER puts his arms around MERRILL: They have become MAURICE and ALEC in Maurice. CARPENTER is the narrator. A church clock chimes four.]

NARRATOR: His heart leapt alive and shook him to pieces.
It cried, ‘You love and are loved’
He stood for a moment entranced,
And laying his hand very gently on the pillows
Answered
They kissed, scarcely wishing it.

MAURICE: I think you’re beautiful,
The only thing of beauty I’ve ever seen
I love your voice and everything about you,
Down to your clothes
And the room you are sitting in.
I adore you.

[They embrace]

NARRATOR: They slept apart at first
As if it worried them being near
Towards the morning they began
To creep so gently to each other
And woke so deeply in each other’s arms

ALEC: Sir, the church has gone past four

MAURICE: Not sir, I am Maurice. Maurice

ALEC: But the church has –

MAURICE: Damn the church. Did you ever dream
Of some fine strong, imperishable friend
Someone who will last your whole life through
And you through his life too? I suppose it cannot happen outside sleep
If truth be told

ALEC/NARR: A happy ending is imperative

ALEC: I do so long to talk with my arms around you
And share with you everything
It now seems sweeter to me
Than words can say

CARPENTER: Alec snuggled closer
More awake than he pretended
Warm, sinewy, happy
Happiness enfolded Maurice too

MAURICE: Time to get up, boy. Morning.

ALEC: You get up then

MAURICE: How can I move, the way you’re holding me?

ALEC: Aren’t yer the fidget?
I’ll teach yer to fidget

[Kisses MAURICE]

[You have a repetition of ‘his?’ at Bar 44, which doesn’t make sense. Does this help?]
You alright, love? You comfy there?
Rest your head against me there
The way you like it – that’s it, more.
And don’t you worry
You’re with me, don’t worry

CARPENTER: A happy ending is imperative

MAURICE: I’ll work. I’ll get work with you

ALEC: What work?

MAURICE: We’ll find out

ALEC: Find out and starve out
Ruin of us both

CARPENTER: Happy ending

MAURICE: I don’t care
I’ll see anyone, face anything
It’s a start of getting free

CARPENTER: Maurice knew what the call was
And what his answer was
They must live outside the law
Outside class, or family or money
They must move to France or Italy
Where men unite, and do not go to prison
For England never will accept
The twists and turns of human nature

ALL: It has to have a happy ending

CARPENTER: Maurice had confirmed his spirit
In its perversion, cut himself away
From all the ruck of normal social man

MAURICE: We must work
ALEC: Yes, work

BOTH: And stick together hand in hand till death

CARPENTER: Krishna has spoken
Broken and restored
Destruction and creation

MAURICE: The timorous millions own their stuffy boxes
But never their own souls

BOTH: But we will own the earth, the sky
Each other

ALEC: And now we shan’t be parted never

MAURICE: Ever, and that’s the end of it

ALEC: The end of it

CARPENTER: There has to be a happy ending

ALL: Happy ending [ad lib]

BLACKOUT