

PLACE: Peking, China

TIME: In the Mythic Past

ACT I

Outside the Imperial Palace, a mandarin reads an edict to the crowd: Any prince seeking to marry Princess Turandot must answer three riddles. If he fails, he will die. The most recent suitor, the Prince of Persia, is to be executed at the moon's rising. Among the onlookers are the slave girl Liù, her aged master, and the young Calàf, who recognizes the old man as his long-lost father, Timur, vanquished King of Tartary. Only Liù has remained faithful to him, and when Calàf asks her why, she replies that once, long ago, Calàf smiled at her. The mob cries for blood but greets the rising moon with a sudden fearful silence. As the Prince of Persia goes to his death, the crowd calls upon the princess to spare him. Turandot appears in her palace and signals for the execution to proceed. Calàf is transfixed by the beauty of the unattainable princess, to the horror of Liù and Timur. The three ministers of state, Ping, Pang, and Pong, appear and try to discourage him, but Calàf is unmoved. Timur and the tearful Liù also beg him not to risk his life. Calàf reassures Liù, then strikes the gong that announces a new suitor.

ACT II

Inside the palace, Ping, Pang, and Pong lament Turandot's bloody reign, hoping that love will conquer her and restore peace. Their thoughts wander to happier times, but the noise of the crowd gathering to witness the riddle challenge calls them back to reality.

In the royal throne room, the old emperor asks Calàf to reconsider, but the young man will not be dissuaded. Turandot arrives. She recounts the story of her beautiful ancestor, Princess Lou-Ling, who was abducted and killed by a conquering prince. In revenge, Turandot has turned against men and determined that none shall ever possess her. Trumpets then herald the beginning of the riddles. Turandot poses her first question to Calàf: What is born each night and dies each dawn? "Hope," Calàf answers correctly. Turandot continues: What flickers red and warm like a flame, yet is not a flame? "Blood," Calàf replies after a moment's thought. Shaken, Turandot delivers the third riddle: What is like ice but burns, and if it accepts you as a slave, makes you a king? Tense silence prevails until Calàf triumphantly cries "Turandot!" The crowd erupts in joy, and the princess vainly begs her father not to give her to the stranger. Hoping to win her love, Calàf offers Turandot a challenge of his own: If she can learn his name by dawn, he will forfeit his life.

ACT III

At night in the Imperial Gardens, Calàf hears a proclamation: On pain of death, no one in Peking shall sleep until Turandot learns the stranger's name. Calàf is certain of his victory, but Ping, Pang, and Pong try to bribe him to leave the city. As the fearful mob threatens him to learn his name, soldiers drag in Liù and Timur. Calàf tries to convince the crowd that neither of them knows his secret. When Turandot appears, commanding Timur to speak, Liù replies that she alone knows the stranger's identity and will never reveal it. Soldiers torture her, but she remains silent. Impressed by her fortitude, Turandot asks what gives Liù the strength to resist. It is love, she replies. When the torture intensifies, Liù tells Turandot that she, too, will know the joys of love. Then she snatches a dagger and kills herself. The crowd forms a funeral procession, and Timur follows as they take away her body. Turandot remains alone to confront Calàf, who impetuously kisses her. Knowing emotion for the first time, Turandot weeps. Calàf, now sure of winning her, reveals his identity. Once again before the emperor's throne, Turandot declares she knows the stranger's name: It is Love.