

THE CASE OF BEDRICH ZATLOUKAL

BY PAUL TANAQUIL

I FIRST met him in the American Consulate in Rome. He was having some difficulties in connection with his passport, and as he spoke no English, he appealed to me to translate certain Italian subtleties that were Greek to my compatriots in the office. Just as I was leaving, he passed his papers to me, asking me to look them over: he wanted to be quite certain that they were in order. From them I learned that his name was Bedrich Zatloukal, that he had been born in Bohemia forty-four years ago at Drahowitz, that he was first soprano in the Sistine Chapel and that he was about to tour North and South America with three fellow-choristers.

I assured him everything was all right and we left the office together. He seemed elated that his difficulties should be at an end; for a round, stout man, he walked almost jauntily, rising on his toes as he stepped forward, rather like a dancer. We chatted of various things: I had unfortunately to confess how scant was my knowledge of music in general and more especially sacred music; so he began explaining to me how Greek music came to be adapted by Saint Ambrose and later perfected by Pope Gregory the Great.

"Ah! the Ambrosian chant! I have sung it in Milano often, but so often!" It would be impossible graphically to reproduce, even in the phonetic script dearly beloved of the philologist, just what a curious sound his Italian made. One must know the language at its very purest and then hear a Czech—with all the barbarity of that hideous tongue!—attempt to use it; though he speak ever so accurately and fluently, though none of the nuances escape him;

and then one must try to imagine the soft, fluting voice of a child of twelve coming from the rotund, sleek, full-moon face of a huge man shaped like a barrel, if one wishes to recreate for oneself something of the impression that Bedrich Zatloukal made upon me. I was immensely interested. For one thing I was learning about a fascinating subject that I had completely ignored, and I was being initiated into its historical and æsthetic details by a man whose whole life it was. I begged him to come with me to the café; we would drink a glass of *porto* or a *café-au-lait* and he would continue his explanation. Whether he was thirsty or gratified, I do not know; nevertheless he accompanied me.

As we sat down, I had more ample leisure to examine him. He was at least six feet tall and he must weigh something over two hundred pounds. His hair was very dark, which is not usual with a Czech, but thin: indeed, he had a bald spot in the back of his very large head. His eyes were blue-gray and shining, but not so much with expression as with the still, smooth, unalterable sheen of flint. He had a heavy, massive jaw, but a mouth like a baby's: small, practically round, and the lips very red and prominent. While he spoke he would sometimes moisten his lips with the end of his tongue, making a little glub-glub sound, like coffee boiling in a percolator. His skin was very white and sleek; one could just discern a thin blue veil over the surface, testimony of his shaving. His shoulders were powerful, yet his hands were diminutive and groomed like a woman's, the nails left long and cut almost to a triangle. His feet, too, were

extremely little; yet his thighs, legs and calves were big of bone and heavy with flesh. He wore black clothes, a white stock and black patent-leather shoes encasing white socks being particularly noticeable.

"Ah! Ambrose!" he said, "there was a man for you! One does not believe the *Schweinerei* about the bees, you know. But he was good and mild; and he gave Theodosius something to think about. And he saved choral music for Europe. . . ."

I must confess I was somewhat startled by his views of the Church. Everything that influenced the development of music, choral especially, was to him of the highest importance and praiseworthiness; and where incidentally he had to touch upon the character of a good man he paid a simple tribute; but anything short of either the ritual or mere kindness, he seemed to despise quite vehemently. His hearkening back to the foul Billingsgate of the Teutonic *plebs* of Drahowitz was comic, coming from so gentle a man, intercalated in an Italian phrase and breathed in the same sentence as so many sacred names. He was vehement as only a placid man can be at times.

"It's really Ambrose who wrote the *Te Deum*," insisted Bedrich, "they can say what they like about their Hilarys or Sissabuls: I know it was Ambrosius!"

At the third glass of wine, he asked me in my turn to accept a drink at his expense; and though I noticed he was quite flushed and particularly emphatic in all his statements, I was enjoying him too much not to wish to continue our conversation. He had almost finished his account of sacred music, being especially lyric about Palestrina's *missa papae Marcelli* and the *canto fermo*, so I was hoping for some rather more personal talk. I told him I had often been to Karlsbad: how I knew Drahowitz and all the adjacent country.

"I was born in the third house in the Velka Ulice," he told me. "The fifth as you come into the town. *Ma c'e un bordello adesso!*"

His intention was, if all went well, to return to Austria—or rather Czechoslovakia now—and buy a little house in the country. Into the village church he would introduce all manner of musical reform, which would keep him busy.

"Will you be in America soon?"

I told him, no: I expected to be in Europe three more years.

"I shall be back by then and perhaps singing in France or Spain!" he said. "I hope you will come to see me."

I hastened to assure him I would do so. He invited me to a rehearsal of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*—"not the fine, old music, but good in its way"—but I had to refuse. By then I would be on my way to London.

He rose, waved his hand, turned on his heel. From the door, just as he moved off, he saluted me once more with a swift vibratiuncle of the left hand. As he passed by the open window, I heard him humming softly to himself a distinctly secular if not outright ribald Neapolitan song.

Suddenly I remembered distinctly as though I had just read it, a passage out of a book I had studied years ago at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau. It spoke of men who "mit weiblicher Weichheit und männlicher Kraft," says Hyrtl, "zur Ehre Gottes singen."

II

The next time I saw Bedrich Zatloukal was two years later. I happened at the time to be at Poitiers, collecting data on Rabelais' sojourn at the University there. Most of my work had to be done among the archives of the monasteries and convents, of which there are over forty in and about the town, so I grew to be quite friendly with the brothers. At that of Saint-René-des-Ilots-Fortunés, where lay most of my research, I used often to dine and chat with them. One day, one of them announced that the choristers of the Sistine Chapel were shortly to give a concert in the town. I asked after my friend; no one exactly knew how many

singers were coming: there had been no arrangements save the appointing of a date.

"Zatloukal?" The organist scratched his head, trying to recall some distant memory, "I don't think I remember . . ."

I strove to assist him:

"Tall—fat—sleek—a Czech—a lovely soprano!"

Yes, he seemed to remember him very vaguely. He had come to the Eternal City the year the Frenchman left; his voice had been hailed as capable of becoming unique among sopranos.

"And he has succeeded, eh?"

I told him what I knew of Zatloukal: how he had sung his way round the globe and how he was hoping eventually to retire.

"*Pourquoi faire?*" asked the organist.

I explained about the country-house Zatloukal cherished in his dreams.

The Frenchman shook his head ruminating.

"*Non,*" he delivered himself of his meditation, "*C'est tout de même drôle ces gens-là!*"

But it was a month or more before I actually saw the man who "all the same" was "comic." And I very nearly missed him altogether. The Cirque Darius Vollandin, the largest in the world, as its posters proclaimed it, was to play on the Place d'Armes. I decided to go to see its first night, dull as it would necessarily be, for I must have some sort of mild distraction. If the concern of Darius Vollandin failed to offer it, at least I should be vouchsafed a glimpse at *moeurs provinciales*, and who could tell but that I might see many Daumiers in the life? I passed down the Rue Carnot on my way to the town square. There was quite a crowd gathered round the theatre; I threaded my way through with difficulty. On the corner I met Captain Desgouttes, who told me he was off to hear the Sistine Choir. They were to sing tonight, at eight o'clock, in a quarter of an hour, to be precise, and not twenty yards

from the horrible circus. Wouldn't I come? Of course: well, then—

The posters bore Bedrich Zatloukal's name in large type; he was to sing with Signor Tomasso Giandomenici, Signor Enrico Spadella and Signor Arturo della Mallette a program of sacred and secular music. I gave my card to an usher, scrawling a few words about our short acquaintance in Rome and asking for his company to supper. As I entered the theatre the curtain rose.

III

Since my meeting with Zatloukal in Rome I had become interested in church ritual and music: while in Paris I had not failed to visit the Schola Cantorum and I had followed the career of my new hobby with eagerness. So that, beautiful as was the rendering of the part of Stradella's oratorio "San Giovanni Battista" and the "Pange, lingua, gloriosi" of St. Thomas Aquinas, it did not begin to please me so much as the secular portion of the program. Certainly not so much as the last song of the evening.

In Zatloukal, I had naturally expected to find a frankly superb voice. He was acknowledged to be as remarkable a soprano as had ever sung in Rome and had proved most valuable in drawing crowds to the theatre and dollars to the papal exchequer. Hearing him, one forgot the bulk and flesh of him; the fat face and the little hands folded over his pendulous belly (it was one of his mannerisms to stand so) vanished from one's sight as one followed the clear, sweet sound of his voice into the far, lovely places of vague, unutterable dreams.

One forgot, too, the ludicrous spectacle afforded by the contrasting appearance of the Signori Zatloukal and Giandomenici. The alto was a tiny man, little more than four feet eight in height, with an egg-shaped head devoid of the faintest suspicion of hair. As he stood beside the other man, the approximation was like nothing so much as Mutt-and-Jeff—but the Mutt-

and-Jeff of a polite and subtle civilization. Yet as they sang, nothing remained save the purity of their harmonious accord; that and that alone mattered.

My friend was in no wise changed, even to the patent-leather shoes and the white socks. His bow was indeed a pantomime of the words he had spoken to me two years before: "I am nothing. Blessed be Saint Ambrose, for verily he saved church music!"

Zatloukal seemed to pay no attention to the applause; he just came on with the others, bowed, sang, bowed and left the stage. His features were mobile only in so much as singing demanded it; otherwise the expression of his face was blank. But his voice! What a reach! What a crystalline clearness! What magnificence it gave to what he sang! It seemed so sheerly lyric, so spontaneous for him to be singing so, and yet he was a man! The contradiction of it, and the triumph of his art over the contradiction! Here was pure, unadulterated beauty of sound in its essence.

During the intermission the usher returned with a note for me. Of course Zatloukal remembered his friend with pleasure, he would be delighted to see him after the concert but only alas! for a short time. He must beg his indulgence; a previous engagement prevented his presence at supper. My friend Captain Desgouttes was most interested in Zatloukal and very keen to meet him. He was an entertaining fellow, a dilettante and a man of considerable native humor. He never let anything interfere with it, either; a thing which I prized very highly in him. He could sit through a concert in indisputably rapt admiration; yet afterward, at the café, he never failed to joke about the ankles or petticoat of the lady-violinist or the absurd whiskers of the pianist.

The secular part of the program was interesting indeed; but the last number was a chef d'œuvre. It purported to be a modern Greek folk-song, very popular with the gipsies. The mere mention of it on the printed page arrested my attention;

but I was never prepared for anything like my reaction to the song when it came to be performed.

Zatloukal folded his arms and rocked very gently as he sang; he gazed straight ahead into space, uttering the melody *pianissimo*, faint as a sigh, fugitive and light as the flight of a swallow. It was a weird, wailing sort of piece, passing from minor into minor; to my mind it brought nothing so much as the phrase "the wailing of the daughters of Jerusalem" in the full significance of the hopelessness of grief. It swelled, then, and grew, as the others took it up, into a sound of anguish more than human; it was symbolic of all pain imaginable, shot through with desolation. From time to time came a hush, while basso and tenor reiterated the motif of the song. Finally the entire scheme of the composition was taken up again, passing to a lull of uncertainty, with faint suggestion of possible release, and finally the triumph of recovery and its consequent sense of calm, sure peace. And, just as the poem seemed at an end on this still, serene harmony, as I was getting ready to clap, Zatloukal burst into a cry of exultation, a tremendous shout of beatification. I have never heard such a note in my life; he struck the high C. It was a revelation.

Then a second or two later, tearing myself out of my mood, I observed him bowing perfunctorily and vicariously for Ambrose.

I was particularly glad that they sang no encore, it must necessarily have blotted out the impression I had had of the moment out of which I had of a sudden been taken; indeed, when I saw Zatloukal in the lobby of the theatre a few moments later I was annoyed, and more annoyed because I did not know just what was vexing me. I felt, I suppose, that I could never express to him the thoughts and feelings that had surged in me; they were too urgently potent and recent for me even to analyze them myself. And what else, after all, was this Zatloukal except a fat Czech with little hands and feet, with absurd

white cotton socks encased in tiny patent-leather shoes, with a maxillary strong as an ox's and a mouth red and drooping forward like a baby's? What else than a necessarily extraordinary man—*vide* Hyrtl—a man who when he did not happen to be singing might just as well be part of the world-famous circus of Darius Vollandin out on the square there!

"My friend! My friend!"

He was welcoming me boisterously, delighted to see me. He would have loved to have had supper with me—"oh! just loved it so!"—but he had another engagement.

"Well, you must at least come to the café for a drink!"

"Certainly, my dear fellow, of course. My engagement is not till . . . much later!"

Desgouttes winked and Zatloukal saw him.

"Ha! you military! You always think of *aventures galantes!*"

We adjourned to the Café de la Comédie. Over a *fine* Zatloukal narrated his experiences in the Americas and more recently in the Balkans. They had been there on a concert tour last year, and it was in Athens that Zatloukal had come by the Greek piece they did to-night. I continued to speak about music with him until I noticed my French friend was preoccupied and silent. This with him was always a bad sign; I feared he might be meditating some embarrassing situation. He was examining Zatloukal very critically. The soprano broke the pause.

"It is so lucky to meet you again!" he said, addressing me solely. "I cannot express to you how happy I am! Ah! these meetings! they are so funny! Listen; I will tell you of a strange *rencontre!*"

Desgouttes leaned forward. I gave Zatloukal my attention.

"I told you I had an engagement, hein?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I have met here in Poitiers a person whom I had not seen since I left my country. I knew her in Drahowitz years ago: her name is Andulka Slama!"

Captain Desgouttes asked what she

happened to be doing in Poitiers. The soprano smiled shyly:

"She is in the circus!"

We looked at him and he continued,

"As a girl Andulka was always very daring . . . She could do anything on a horse and she climbed trees that we boys were afraid of trying!" He smiled at the memory. "Well, today, before the concert she appeared in my *loge*, told me her name and—" his voice rose to a squeak in his excitement, he licked his lips as he spoke, "we are to meet tonight, after the circus is finished."

Captain Desgouttes spoke of a romance, circus-rider and soprano.

"*Ma no!* we are as brother and sister! I remember the first time I cried she consoled me! Ah! you military! Always scandal!"

We chatted on for a while, Zatloukal and I reminiscing about Rome and the circumstances of our meeting; I told him, too, how I had become interested in church music.

Suddenly Desgouttes emerged from his silence:

"Monsieur, a question that I hope not indiscreet . . . but—is it that your throat is shaped absolutely like that of no matter whom?"

The soprano nodded; Captain Desgouttes pondered a moment, then:

"But—how shall I say it?—is it that you are . . . I mean are you, as other people in the respect . . ."

He searched vainly for the right words. Zatloukal looked at the clock and rose.

"I must go now: it is late!" He shook us by the hand, bid us good-by, and turning to me: "You, *mio caro*, when shall I see you again?"

I smiled: "Perhaps in Drahowitz!"

He moved to the door; once there, a swift bow, a vibratiuncle of the left hand.

"*Ab ça, mon cher,*" Desgouttes said when he was gone, "*ab ça! crois-tu que ces types-là sont comme nous ou que dans leur jeunesse, on . . .*"

I shrugged my shoulders.

IV

When, in Poitiers, I had jestingly told Zatloukal that perhaps—who knows?—our next meeting would be in Drahowitz, I little guessed that such indeed was the event fate held in store for us. The prophecy did not come true literally in every detail. It was in Karlsbad, to be exact, that we saw each other, some fifteen months after I had said farewell to him at the Café de la Comédie in Poitiers.

Early in the Autumn I went to Karlsbad less to take the cure than to have a much-needed rest. I was staying up at the Imperial, on the hill; and about all we did that year was to play tennis and dance in the evening. It was a delightfully lazy life. In the long run, however, it began to pall somewhat. The over-pompous dance-hour twice a week in the ballroom got on one's nerves; the grill was all right once or twice a week, but as a steady diet it was most unsatisfactory. We tried several places in the town: the Goldene Schild, Zum Elefant and Petters'. Each furnished its quota of amusement—for a short time. But during the last week of my stay, I must say we had a hard time of it finding something to do in the evenings.

One afternoon in the bar, Arthur Rummage told us he had discovered a new place: it was called the Metropole and was in Fischern, adjoining the Fair Grounds. Did we care to go?

"I don't suppose it's frightfully exciting," he told us. "In fact, I heard it was quite a dump!"

"Thank God!" I said, "for a place that is not trying to imitate the *boîte* of Montmartre. . ."

"Or the Munich imitation of the *boîte*!" Rummage added.

Anyhow, the Fair was going on, and if we were bored at the Metropole, we could try that. So we decided to go that night.

The Metropole, I must say, was pretty bad. We stayed there only long enough to down some champagne with a French

label, made in Germany from apples exported from Brittany. Rummage had discovered the reason for the shortage of cider in France; he had seen carload after carload of apples go out. So we left the Metropole and made for the fair.

It was the annual town-fair, which takes place two weeks every year. It is situated on the left bank of the Eger, just under the bridge that unites the suburb of Fischern with Karlsbad proper. There are merry-go-rounds, booths of every description, a beer-garden, a rickety scenic-railway, a great many stands, and, in the midst of it all, the Deutschböhmisches Zirkusgesellschaft. Reading the huge placard outside the tent, I noted that it called itself the finest circus in old Austria; I remembered the Poitiers circus and its flaming legend and I compared the two of them. These Austrians were, after all, a moderate and modest people, I thought. We entered, just as the clowns had finished an act. They were followed by a tall, thin Bavarian—called Miss Betsy from Manchester. Then came a comic juggler, then the clowns once more, then Andulka Slama, Queen of the Air. She disported herself on a tight-rope for twenty minutes, risking her own life ten and mine (I sat right under her) three times. Having, at the end of her stunt, been presented with a bouquet by a fat, sleek man in evening clothes, she submitted to the kissing of her hand by the adipose gentleman and retired. The last act—Innominato: Cantor Italiano—appeared. He wore a red-velvet Tuxedo and a straw hat which he placed on the back of his head, the front being as a halo, in the manner of a New York theatrical man. I looked at him. He opened his mouth, began to sing . . . ZATLOUKAL!

V

"Of course, my dear fellow, I am happier in my life than ever I was before," he told me in the artists' tent. "I am director of this circus, I earn money and keep what I have earned, and I am married. . ."

"Married?" I gasped.

". . . to the most charming of ladies; I have bought back my old home in Drahowitz which continues as before save that I own it; Andulka and I travel in the Summer and rest in the Winter; I keep up my singing. . . ."

"But how did you ever do it?" I begged him. "And when—"

He laughed at my amazement. He had never liked the old profession, it was the music he enjoyed. Well, he could still enjoy it. And Andulka would not hear of leaving the life she loved. So—what else was there to do? Anyhow, he was radiantly happy.

"She is so good to me, we are so happy! We love each other as much as the first day. Our son—"

"You have a son?"

"My wife's—he's grown-up—but I adopted him. I, of course, have no children.

The fellow is doing very well at Heidelberg. We stay with him in Winter."

Gradually the story came out. The circus of Darius Vollandin had been at Lyon and at Marseille at the same time as the Papal Choir; Zatloukal had seen Andulka frequently; finally he had realized that she was the most congenial person in the world.

"The happiest marriages are as ours—platonic, my boy! Sometimes, naturally, Andulka has moments of ardor in which I cannot share, but what does that matter, after all. *Satrazeni!* She and I eliminate the one feature that spoils most marriages! Ah! but you should see us! We are so happy . . . so happy . . ."

From the way he spoke, I knew it was true. I could not help reflecting how strange it was that true felicity should rise from so unnatural a relation; vaguely, I wondered what Desgouttes would have thought of the business.

Ah! *celui-là* . . . !

EDITORIAL

THE osteopaths, as they grow in prosperity and pretensions, greatly improve the technic of their propaganda. There was a time, and it was not so many years ago, when the publication of anything unfavorable to them in a newspaper—say the report of a practitioner landed in the hoosegow for attempting to treat smallpox by thumping the spine—brought a husky ex-wheelwright or former piano-mover to the office, hot to defend with his fists the science he had lately begun to adorn. But now they run to far more seemly and subtle devices. Dr. Fishbein's article in these pages last February was followed by no such invasion of Sandows and Jack Dempseys. Instead, there came a terrific avalanche of letters from literary osteopaths in all parts of the Republic, many of them very well written, and all of them denouncing Fishbein as an agent of the Medical Trust and demanding space to answer his slanders and to expose the crimes of that octopus. No reply being made to these indignant but usually very polite protests, there followed Round 2. Its technic was borrowed, not from the International Union of Stevedores and Longshoremen, but from the Church of Christ Scientist, an organization highly adept at alarming and working the public prints. It took the form of a second avalanche—this time from persons who represented themselves to be non-believers in the osteopathic sorcery, but who nevertheless loved justice and fair play so fondly that they could not see the osteopaths laboring without going to their defence. These mysterious correspondents, like the first set, demanded that THE AMERICAN MERCURY be thrown open to the osteopaths, and that they be given a free license to expound their gospel at length. A con-

nection between the two waves of attack being suspected, the second went without reply like the first, and so the matter rests.

A trivial episode, but not, perhaps, without its significance, for I incline to think that it explains the politeness with which the osteopaths have been treated of late in most of the daily newspapers. That politeness, in brief, is the result of good press work, and the good press work, as I have hinted, seems to have been borrowed from the Christian Scientists. In every city wherein Christian Science flourishes its high priests and medicine men maintain a suave and persistent gentleman whose job it is to see that the local newspapers print nothing in contempt of the Eddyian magic. He is on watch day and night, seven days a week, and most of the managing editors of the land, having tasted his big stick at one time or another, are now exceedingly reluctant to stir him up. Within twelve hours after any reference to Christian Science gets into print that did not emanate from official quarters, he presents himself with a long typewritten rectification of its errors, and demands that it be printed. If the demand is refused, then the fun begins. The next day arrive several protests from writers who represent themselves to be old subscribers. The day following there are half a dozen telephone calls from local Babbitts, often eminent, all of whom explain carefully that they are not Eddyites themselves, but that it amazes and shocks them to see a reputable paper attacking and misrepresenting religion. The third day the managing editor is summoned to the office of the owner, and greeted with something like this:

In God's name, what have you been putting into the paper? My telephone has been ringing day and night for two whole days, and now my wife's