

## Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland

To Mr Brook, the head of the music department at Ryder College, was due all the credit for getting Madame Zilensky on the faculty. The college considered itself fortunate; her reputation was impressive, both as a composer and as a pedagogue. Mr Brook took on himself the responsibility of finding a house for Madame Zilensky, a comfortable place with a garden, which was convenient to the college and next to the apartment house where he himself lived.

No one in Westbridge had known Madame Zilensky before she came. Mr Brook had seen her pictures in musical journals, and once he had written to her about the authenticity of a certain Buxtehude manuscript. Also, when it was being settled that she was to join the faculty, they had exchanged a few cables and letters on practical affairs. She wrote in a clear, square hand, and the only thing out of the ordinary in these letters was the fact that they contained an occasional reference to objects and persons altogether unknown to Mr Brook, such as 'the yellow cat in Lisbon' or 'poor Heinrich'. These lapses Mr Brook put down to the confusion of getting herself and her family out of Europe.

Mr Brook was a somewhat pastel person; years of Mozart minuets, of explanations about diminished sevenths and minor triads, had given him a watchful vocational patience. For the most part, he kept to himself. He loathed academic fiddle-faddle and committees. Years before, when the music department had decided to gang together and spend the summer in Salzburg, Mr Brook sneaked out of the arrangement at the last moment and took a solitary trip to Peru. He had a few eccentricities himself and was tolerant of the peculiarities of others; indeed, he rather relished the ridiculous. Often, when confronted with some grave and incongruous situation, he would feel a little inside tickle, which stiffened his long, mild face and sharpened the light in his grey eyes.

Mr Brook met Madame Zilensky at the Westbridge station a week before the beginning of the fall semester. He recognized her instantly. She was a tall, straight woman with a pale and haggard face. Her eyes were deeply shadowed and she wore her dark, ragged hair pushed back from her forehead. She had large, delicate hands, which were very grubby. About her person as a whole there was something noble and abstract that made Mr Brook draw back for a moment and stand nervously undoing his cuff-links. In spite of her clothes — a long, black skirt and a broken-down old leather jacket — she made an impression of vague elegance. With Madame Zilensky were three children, boys between the ages of ten and six, all blond, blank-eyed, and beautiful. There was one other person, an old woman who turned out later to be the Finnish servant.

This was the group he found at the station. The only luggage they had with them was two immense boxes of manuscripts, the rest of their paraphernalia having been forgotten in the station at Springfield when they changed trains. This is the sort of thing that can happen to anyone.

When Mr Brook got them all into a taxi, he thought the worst difficulties were over, but Madame Zilensky suddenly tried to scramble over his knees and get out of the door.

'My God!' she said. 'I left my — how do you say? — my tick-tick-tick —'

'Your watch?' asked Mr Brook.

'Oh, no!' she said vehemently. 'You know, my tick-tick-tick,' and she waved her forefinger from side to side, pendulum fashion.

'Tick-tick,' said Mr Brook, putting his hands to his forehead and closing his eyes. 'Could you possibly mean a metronome?'

'Yes! Yes! I think I must have lost it there where we changed trains.'

Mr Brook managed to quiet her. He even said, with a kind of dazed gallantry, that he would get her another one the next day. But at the time he was bound to admit to himself that there was something curious about this panic over a metronome when there was all the rest of the lost luggage to consider.

The Zilensky ménage moved into the house next door, and on the surface everything was all right. The boys were quiet children. Their names were Sigmund, Boris, and Sammy. They were always together and they followed each other around Indian file, Sigmund usually the first. Among themselves they spoke a desperate-sounding family Esperanto made up of Russian, French, Finnish, German, and English; when other people were around, they were strangely silent. It was not any one thing that the Zilenskys did or said that made Mr Brook uneasy. There were just little incidents. For example, something about the Zilensky children subconsciously bothered him when they were in a house, and finally he realized that what troubled him was the fact that the Zilensky boys never walked on a rug; they skirted it single file on the bare floor, and if the room was carpeted, they stood in the doorway and did not go inside. Another thing was this: weeks passed and Madame Zilensky seemed to make no effort to get settled or to furnish the house with anything more than a table and some beds. The front door was left open day and night, and soon the house began to take on a queer, bleak look like that of a place abandoned for years.

The college had every reason to be satisfied with Madame Zilensky. She taught with a fierce insistence. She could become deeply indignant if some Mary Owens or Bernadine Smith would not clean up her Scarlatti trills. She got hold of four pianos for her college studio and set four dazed students to playing Bach fugues together. The racket that came from her end of the department was extraordinary, but Madame Zilensky did not seem to have a nerve in her, and if pure will and effort can get over a musical idea, then Ryder College could not have done better. At night Madame Zilensky worked on her twelfth symphony. She seemed never to sleep; no matter what time of night Mr Brook happened to look out of his sitting-room window, the light in her studio was always on. No, it was not because of any professional consideration that Mr Brook became so dubious.

It was in late October when he felt for the first time that something was unmistakably wrong. He had

lunched with Madame Zilensky and had enjoyed himself, as she had given him a very detailed account of an African safari she had made in 1928. Later in the afternoon she stopped in at his office and stood rather abstractly in the doorway.

Mr Brook looked up from his desk and asked, 'Is there anything you want?'

'No, thank you,' said Madame Zilensky. She had a low, beautiful, sombre voice. 'I was only just wondering. You recall the metronome. Do you think perhaps that I might have left it with that French?'

'Who?' asked Mr Brook.

'Why, that French I was married to,' she answered.

'Frenchman,' Mr Brook said mildly. He tried to imagine the husband of Madame Zilensky, but his mind refused. He muttered half to himself, 'The father of the children.'

'But no,' said Madame Zilensky with decision. 'The father of Sammy.'

Mr Brook had a swift prescience. His deepest instincts warned him to say nothing further. Still, his respect for order, his conscience, demanded that he ask, 'And the father of the other two?'

Madame Zilensky put her hand to the back of her head and ruffled up her short, cropped hair. Her face was dreamy, and for several moments she did not answer. Then she said gently, 'Boris is of a Pole who played the piccolo.'

'And Sigmund?' he asked. Mr Brook looked over his orderly desk, with the stack of corrected papers, the three sharpened pencils, the ivory-elephant paperweight. When he glanced up at Madame Zilensky, she was obviously thinking hard. She gazed around at the corners of the room, her brows lowered and her jaw moving from side to side. At last she said, 'We were discussing the father of Sigmund?'

'Why, no,' said Mr Brook. 'There is no need to do that.'

Madame Zilensky answered in a voice both dignified and final. 'He was a fellow-countryman.'

Mr Brook really did not care one way or the other. He had no prejudices; people could marry seventeen times and have Chinese children so far as he was concerned. But there was something about this conversation with Madame Zilensky that bothered him. Suddenly he understood. The children didn't look at all like Madame Zilensky, but they looked exactly like each other, and as they all had different fathers, Mr Brook thought the resemblance astonishing.

But Madame Zilensky had finished with the subject. She zipped up her leather jacket and turned away.

'That is exactly where I left it,' she said, with a quick nod. 'Chez that French.'

Affairs in the music department were running smoothly. Mr Brook did not have any serious embarrassments to deal with, such as the harp teacher last year who had finally eloped with a garage mechanic. There was only this nagging apprehension about Madame Zilensky. He could not make out what was wrong in his relations with her or why his feelings were so mixed. To begin with, she was a great globe-trotter, and her conversations were incongruously seasoned with references to far-fetched places. She would go along for days without

opening her mouth, prowling through the corridor with her hands in the pockets of her jacket and her face locked in meditation. Then suddenly she would buttonhole Mr Brook and launch out on a long, volatile monologue, her eyes reckless and bright and her voice warm with eagerness. She would talk about anything or nothing at all. Yet, without exception, there was something queer, in a slanted sort of way, about every episode she ever mentioned. If she spoke of taking Sammy to the barbershop, the impression she created was just as foreign as if she were telling of an afternoon in Baghdad. Mr Brook could not make it out.

The truth came to him very suddenly, and the truth made everything perfectly clear, or at least clarified the situation. Mr Brook had come home early and lighted

a fire in the little grate in his sitting-room. He felt comfortable and at peace that evening. He sat before the fire in his stockinged feet, with a volume of William Blake on the table by his side, and he had poured himself a half-glass of apricot brandy. At ten o'clock he was drowsing cosily before the fire, his mind full of cloudy phrases of Mahler and floating half-thoughts. Then all at once, out of this delicate stupor, four words came to his mind:

'The King of Finland.' The words seemed familiar, but for the first moment he could not place them. Then all at once he tracked them down. He had been walking across the campus that afternoon when Madame Zilensky stopped him and began some preposterous rigmarole, to which he had only half listened; he was thinking about the stack of canons turned in by his counterpoint class. Now the words, the inflections of her voice, came back to him with insidious exactitude. Madame Zilensky had started off with the following remark: 'One day, when I was standing in front of a pâtisserie, the King of Finland came by in a sled.'

Mr Brook jerked himself up straight in his chair and put down his glass of brandy. The woman was a pathological liar. Almost every word she uttered outside of class was an untruth. If she worked all night, she would go out of her way to tell you she spent the evening at the cinema. If she ate lunch at the Old Tavern, she would be sure to mention that she had lunched with her children at home. The woman was simply a pathological liar, and that accounted for everything.

Mr Brook cracked his knuckles and got up from his chair. His first reaction was one of exasperation. That day after day Madame Zilensky would have the gall to sit there in his office and deluge him with her outrageous falsehoods! Mr Brook was intensely provoked. He

walked up and down the room, then he went into his kitchenette and made himself a sardine sandwich.

An hour later, as he sat before the fire, his irritation had changed to a scholarly and thoughtful wonder. What he must do, he told himself, was to regard the whole situation impersonally and look on Madame Zilensky as a doctor looks on a sick patient. Her lies were of the guileless sort. She did not dissimulate with any intention to deceive, and the untruths she told were never used to any possible advantage. That was the maddening thing; there was simply no motive behind it all.

Mr Brook finished off the rest of the brandy. And slowly, when it was almost midnight, a further understanding came to him. The reason for the lies of Madame

Zilensky was painful and plain. All her life long Madame Zilensky had worked - at the piano, teaching, and writing those beautiful and immense twelve symphonies. Day and night she had drudged and struggled and thrown her soul into her work, and there was not much of her left over for anything else. Being human, she suffered from this lack and did what she could to make up for it. If she passed the evening bent over a table in the library and later declared that she had spent that time playing cards, it was as though she had managed to do both those things. Through the lies, she lived vicariously. The lies doubled the little of her existence that was left over from work and augmented the little rag-end of her personal life.

Mr Brook looked into the fire, and the face of Madame Zilensky was in his mind - a severe face, with dark, weary eyes and delicately disciplined mouth. He was conscious of a warmth in his chest, and a feeling of pity, protectiveness, and dreadful understanding. For a while he was in a state of lovely confusion.

Later on he brushed his teeth and got into his pyjamas.

Q He must be practical. What did this clear up? That French, the Pole with the piccolo, Baghdad? And the children, Sigmund, Boris, and Sammy - who were they? Were they really her children after all, or had she simply rounded them up from somewhere? Mr Brook polished his spectacles and put them on the table by his bed. He must come to an immediate understanding with her. Otherwise, there would exist in the department a situation which could become most problematical. It was two o'clock. He glanced out of his window and saw that the light in Madame Zilensky's workroom was still on. Mr Brook got into bed, made terrible faces in the dark, and tried to plan what he would say next day.

Mr Brook was in his office by eight o'clock. He sat hunched up behind his desk, ready to trap Madame Zilensky as she passed down the corridor. He did not have to wait long, and as soon as he heard her footsteps he called out her name.

Madame Zilensky stood in the doorway. She looked vague and jaded. 'How are you? I had such a fine night's rest,' she said.

'Pray be seated, if you please,' said Mr Brook. 'I would like a word with you.'

Madame Zilensky put aside her portfolio and leaned back wearily in the armchair across from him. 'Yes?' she asked.

'Yesterday you spoke to me as I was walking across the campus,' he said slowly. 'And if I am not mistaken, I believe you said something about a pastry shop and the King of Finland. Is that correct?'

Madame Zilensky turned her head to one side and stared retrospectively at a corner of the window-sill.

'Something about a pastry shop,' he repeated.

Her tired face brightened. 'But of course,' she said eagerly. 'I told you about the time I was standing in front of this shop and the King of Finland -'

'Madame Zilensky!' Mr Brook cried. 'There is no King of Finland.'

Madame Zilensky looked absolutely blank. Then, after an instant, she started off again. 'I was standing in front of Bjarne's *pâtisserie* when I turned away from the cakes and suddenly saw the King of Finland -'

'Madame Zilensky, I just told you that there is no King of Finland.'

'In Helsingfors,' she started off again desperately, and again he let her get as far as the King, and then no farther.

'Finland is a democracy,' he said. 'You could not possibly have seen the King of Finland. Therefore, what you have just said is an untruth. A pure untruth.'

Never afterwards could Mr Brook forget the face of Madame Zilensky at that moment. In her eyes there was astonishment, dismay, and a sort of cornered horror. She had the look of one who watches his whole interior world split open and disintegrate.

'It is a pity,' said Mr Brook with real sympathy.

But Madame Zilensky pulled herself together. She raised her chin and said coldly, 'I am a Finn.'

'That I do not question,' answered Mr Brook. On second thought, he did question it a little.

'I was born in Finland and I am a Finnish citizen.'

'That may very well be,' said Mr Brook in a rising voice.

'In the war,' she continued passionately, 'I rode a motor-cycle and was a messenger.'

'Your patriotism does not enter into it.'

'Just because I am getting out the first papers -'

'Madame Zilensky!' said Mr Brook. His hands grasped the edge of the desk. 'That is only an irrelevant issue. The point is that you maintained and testified that you saw - that you saw -' But he could not finish. Her face stopped him. She was deadly pale and there were shadows around her mouth. Her eyes were wide open, doomed, and proud. And Mr Brook felt suddenly like a murderer. A great commotion of feelings - understanding, remorse, and unreasonable love - made him cover his face with his hands. He could not speak until this agitation in his insides quietened down, and then he said very faintly, 'Yes. Of course. The King of Finland. And was he nice?'

An hour later, Mr Brook sat looking out of the window of his office. The trees along the quiet Westbridge street were almost bare, and the grey buildings of the college had a calm, sad look. As he idly took in the familiar scene, he noticed the Drakes' old Airedale waddling along down the street. It was a thing he had watched a hundred times before, so what was it that struck him as strange? Then he realized with a kind of cold surprise that the old dog was running along backwards. Mr Brook watched the Airedale until he was out of sight, then resumed his work on the canons which had been turned in by the class in counterpoint.

Q. Has Mr Brook (tolerant of PECULIARITIES, relished the ridiculous) succumbed to Madame's aura of fantasy or is reality stranger than fiction?

Q. Can you identify a 'King of FINLAND' in the society of today, or even in your own personal bubble?