

The Battle for Souls

I

Father Michalejc was a saint on a stipend of three thousand crowns a year, to which was added a whole string of other emoluments from the eight communities attached to his parish of Svobodné Dvory. These communities were dispersed among the ancient forests in the mountains round about and the people who lived there were for the most part lumbermen who would come down to the church in Svobodné Dvory once every three months. And then they would say a great many prayers, enough to last them for the next three months, make confession, receive the Body of the Lord with an ecstasy and awe that were beyond description and perform their penances with the utmost seriousness. Then they would go over to the Mid-Day, the inn behind the presbytery, and bit by bit, the inhibitions that held their tongues in check would fall away. Delivered from their sins and exalted by the mystery of that sacramental transubstantiation, they would become more boisterous than the inhabitants of Svobodné Dvory could bear.

And the tensions in the Mid-Day would develop into brawls between the men of the valley and those of the eight mountain villages, who had just had three months' worth of sins taken away. Having occasioned damage both to the Mid-Day Inn and to the heads of the men of Svobodné Dvory, the loggers from the mountains would retire, their shoulders laden with new sins and their backs with bruises, to their mountain forests and peace would descend for another three months.

And then, three months later, those tall, angular figures would come striding down the mountainside into the valley, their faces full of contrition, and the church would be filled with the booming voices of these quarterly sinners, which could be heard over on the village green. And when they said the Lord's Prayer, it sounded from a distance like two people shouting across from one mountain-slope to another: 'Václav, what are you up to?' And the cries of the penitents sounded with a mighty roar when Father Michalejc in his wooden pulpit

thundered out one of the eight sermons with which he would chastise the inhabitants of all nine villages.

But he was wasting his breath. It is true that tears of emotion would trickle down many a weatherbeaten cheek but once they had done their penance, the burly men of the mountains would just go off to the pub for a punch-up.

During these bouts of violence, Father Michalejc would shut himself in his room, from which he had a good view of the Mid-Day Inn, and from behind the curtain observe his faithful flock, and as and when he saw one of the lumbermen fighting outside the inn, would jot down the details in his notebook in an entirely businesslike spirit: 'Bočan, forty Our Fathers, Kryšpin, twenty Our Fathers and look at Antonín Dlouhý there, jumping on the Mayor! That's fifty Our Fathers for you, my lad, and you don't get off a single Amen! Černouch: well, if you don't want a beating, don't get into a fight. I'll give you just fifteen Hail Marys.'

So it went on and Father Michalejc would conscientiously enter the names of the loggers in his book and when penance-time came round again, each of the men from the mountains would receive a slip of paper on which his appointed quota and type of prayer had been copied from the notebook.

And it would all go like clockwork and in proper order as one after another they knelt on the stool in the old, worm-eaten confessional and let rip in emotional tones: 'I confess to Almighty God and to You, Venerable Father, that after Holy Communion, I got into a fight at the Mid-Day Inn.' That was the principal sin. It would be followed by another series, consisting always of the identical transgressions: taking the name of the Lord in vain, cursing and swearing with the first words that came into their heads, 'pinching a log or two from the boss' and 'setting a snare when I shouldn've.'

For fifteen years, four times a year, it was always the same and only once in all that time did it occur that Bočan omitted the 'snare when I shouldn've' from his confession. With a delicate reproach in his voice, Father Michalejc turned to the penitent: 'And what about the odd snare, eh, Bočan?'

'You're bark'n' up the wrong tree there, Your Reverence,' said Bočan. 'Could'n' do no snarin' this time: some bugger run off with me wires and I could'n' get down to town for a new lot. Bunch of thieves they are up our way, Your Reverence.'

That, though, was the one and only time when one of them at least

had a sin missing from the usual list but in his next confession, Bočan no longer deviated from his normal declaration and Father Michalejc derived a sort of comfort from hearing once more the sorrowful pronouncement: 'An' I set a snare when I shouldn've.'

I say that Father Michalejc was comforted by this, for he was fond of those burly mountain-folk and he knew from experience that if the snare did not make its scheduled appearance, there was something bodily and spiritually amiss with the man in question and he hadn't got long to go. Fifteen years of experience as a spiritual shepherd teaches you things like that. First the snares stopped coming, then there would be no mention of logs and the sinner would not drop in at the Mid-Day after completing his devotions, but climb laboriously back up to his home in the wooded mountains. And when his wife came running down to the priest's house to complain that her husband hadn't let out a 'Goddam' or 'Bloody Hell' for a whole day, then priest and sexton set out for the mountains straight away, hoping to be able to administer extreme unction while the poor devil was still alive.

His fifteen years' experience had taught Father Michalejc that he was not going to make his mountain-dwelling parishioners from the eight attached communities any better, not by the finest preaching, nor by the most passionate exhortation, bitterly as they might weep; they themselves acknowledged that the endeavour was pointless.

At first, he had tried to explain to them the need for a resolution to live in holiness and righteousness for the rest of their days, but at the end of his careful exposition of the doctrine, Valoušek from Černkov had said to him: 'Your Reverence, we'll leave all this holiness and righteousness stuff to the young folk. Anyway, if things go on the way they have been, the game will've died off and a man won't be able to trap anything in a month of Sundays.'

And ten years ago, Chudomel had taken him by the hand and said, frank as could be: 'Your Reverence, we just aren't goin' to get any better. Whatever you do, them devils is going to be turning us round over the fire on their pitchforks. 'twill be as God wills.' And so Father Michalejc became accustomed to the way things were. He had a piece of woodland up there in the mountains beyond Černkov in Wolf Valley and one day Pavlíček said to him in the quarterly confessional: 'There was a log or two belonging to the boss, Your Reverence and then I went into that wood, you know, Your Reverence, the one that sort of belongs to you, and I kind of took a log . . . 'twas a very hard winter this year. So I cut down four spruces from Your Reverence's

wood and with every one that I cut down, I said an Our Father for you. And all of a sudden I felt as if a weight had fallen off me and there was such a lightness in my heart that I cut down another three.' Chudomel got ten Our Fathers for the landlord's wood and thirty for the priest's, both as a penance and as a warning that a priest was God's representative on earth and if you rob your priest, it's the same as if you were to cut down the trees of the Lord God Himself.

After these experiences, Father Michalejc tried to persuade his patron to be so kind as to exchange his woodland in the mountains for something in the vicinity of Svobodné Dvory but when these attempts failed, got used to the fact that they were stealing from him in the full knowledge that it was the same as cutting down the trees of the Lord God Himself.

Surrounded by sinners like these, Father Michalejc's resolve to strive for the moral betterment of such people ebbed with the passage of the years, for whenever he met one of them his exhortations were received with a sigh of hopelessness: 'Well now, Father, 'tes a waste of your time talkin' t' us, I b'lieve. We ain't no good, none of us.'

And this was said with such heartfelt sincerity that after fifteen years of battling against this 'moral insanity' (in the English jargon) on the part of his mountain-dwelling parishioners, Father Michalejc laid aside his notebook and stopped registering the quotas of penitential Our Fathers for each individual. At the quarterly sessions, he would reel off his stereotyped sermons on sin and the consequences of sin completely mechanically. His style lost the colour of younger days and he was only stirred to passion when Povondra, for example, started to haggle over his Our Fathers. That Povondra was as hard a bargainer as any Jewish trader and would make Father Michalejc an offer of half the required amount: 'No more than fifteen Our Fathers, Your Reverence. I'd be hard put to it to get any real warmth into the sixteenth and by the time it came to number thirty, I'd be loading another mortal sin onto my soul. I've tried, Reverence, really I have, but from fifteen to thirty, I was just swallowing them down and I was through them in two shakes of a duck's tail.'

Even to this Father Michalejc became inured, and he even gave up arguing against Bočan's theory that by the time you'd done three Our Fathers, God had already forgiven you because all good things came in threes, and so the others were just so much wasted effort.

Wearied by this battle for the welfare of the souls of his mountain flock, Father Michalejc omitted, one day, to ask for details when

Mareš from Kořenkov sorrowfully replied, when asked what he had to confess: 'Same as last time, Your Reverence.' Stoically, he gave absolution without adding any admonitions and would even have forgotten to impose a penance if Mareš himself hadn't reminded him: 'Same Our Fathers as usual, Your Reverence?'

Sometimes he felt a renewal of the energy he had once had, when he arrived in Svobodné Dvory years before and when, a quarterly influx of penitents due, he would open one of the volumes of his *Preachers' Yearbook* to dig out some material for a sermon capable of transforming the soul of a sinner, but then he would look at the hard outlines of the mountains, as solid as the principles of his mountain-dwelling parishioners, shut the book and go off to the Mid-Day Inn for a game of tarock.

And finally, he found himself in retreat across the whole front. And as they noticed how resigned he had become, they gradually began to leave sins out. Gradually, the logs disappeared, then the 'snare when I shouldn've', the cursing and swearing and the fighting at the Mid-Day Inn, and one fine day it came to pass that Zamečnick from Horní Bourov, after reeling off the formula: 'I confess to Almighty God and to you, worthy Father,' added in a tone of exaltation: 'that I am as pure as a lily, Your Reverence!'

On that very same day, the disconsolate Father Michalejc sent a request in to the Consistory for a chaplain with real drive.

II

The dynamic chaplain was a man by the name of Müller. He was as thin as one of those ascetics who could hold out to the glory of God, standing on a pillar, for a whole week without eating. It was impossible to guess from his pale face how old he was, but this much was clear: in amongst those severe, dessicated features, the manly joys of youth had vanished without trace. Not that his eyes were animated by any spark of heavenly inspiration. Even in his moments of greatest excitement, those eyes resembled the grey, watery soup they serve up in a seminary on fast-days. As for his speech, he enunciated each individual syllable as precisely as if he were speaking the Aramaic of Biblical times.

The dynamic chaplain had a stammer. The Consistory's gift to Svobodné Dvory was a severe shock to Father Michalejc and the latter's sister, who acted as housekeeper for him, walked about the

house like a ghost for the whole of the first day. After the formalities of arrival, the dynamic chaplain expounded to them in a speech which, as a result of his habit of giving Aramaic impressions, took more than two hours to deliver, how he had been a missionary in Port Said for two years and had 'c-c-converted a m-m-m-mullah.' Then he had returned to Moravia, where he had been a chaplain in Tišnov, 'g-got to g-g-grips with g-g-g-gambling' and 't-t-totally eradicated it.' Now, he was here.

Over supper Father Michalejc gave him an account, punctuated with copious sighs, of his fifteen-year experience of the area and the dynamic chaplain, nibbling at a piece of bread, pushed away the plate full of smoked meat and said: 'I don't approve of m-m-meat-eating and I intend to r-root it out. I shall give them a g-g-good t-t-talking-to. I-I-I shall enlighten them with the H-H-H-Holy S-Spirit!' Then, turning his eyes up to the ceiling and fixing them on the hook from which the lamp hung, he cried out prophetically: 'I shall c-c-convert them!'

Father Michalejc set out for a game of tarock and the dynamic chaplain went off to his chapel to pray from his breviary.

God knows how it came about, but the very next day, when the dynamic chaplain was on his way to the woods carrying some theological tome or other, he heard a child's voice behind a bush say: 'C-Convertamullah!' Then a shadowy childish figure flitted through the trees and vanished with a cry of 'Hoo!' into the graveyard.

'Sh-shocking m-m-manners!' said the dynamic chaplain to himself and sitting down at the edge of the forest, began to make a few notes: 'When I last made confession, was I properly prepared and in the right frame of mind? Am I certain that I did not omit any sins? Have I completed my penance? Can I remember the admonitions and warnings I received? Have I not sinned since then?'

The dynamic chaplain gazed at the mountains and shook his fist in that direction with a cry of: 'I'll sh-sh-show them!'

Within a week, it was known through the mountains that the 'fine young gen'lman' had 'c'nverted a mullah'. Bočan, who was working on a fir-tree with Fanfulík the other side of Baba, said to his mate: 'e's got the gift of the gab all right! Last Christmas, when he was still in Moravia, he struck up: "Jesus Christ is born", but 'e won' get round to the "Rejoice" bit till our service 'ere, this Christmas coming.'

'They say 'e wants t' lead us back to the path of righteousness', said Fanfulík, and spat in contempt.

'e can try till 'e's blue in the face,' said Bočan calmly. 'tes all

wasted on us.'

And then Chudomel, chatting with Valoušek from Černkov, remarked: 'Well, if our old gent couldn't take away our sins, old "Convertamullah" certainly won't.'

And through the mountains, the unshakeable conviction established itself that the sudden appearance of the chaplain in Svobodné Dvory was an infringement of their rights. This brought about an increase in the sylvan crime-rate.

When news of this reached the ears of the dynamic chaplain, he cried out in a voice fired with conviction: 'I'll c-c-convert them!' and burrowed deeper into his theological books.

But the penitents from the mountains did not give in so easily. Before confession, they listened to his ardent, persuasive, hour-long general exhortation to the effect that 'Th-thousands of p-p-people had already been l-lost' and that 'the same f-f-fate' awaited them, and were deeply moved. Yes, they said, with a sad shake of the head, it was all true and then in they came to confession with innocent looks on their faces and just like Zamečník from Horní Bourov, declared themselves free from sin.

With many a stutter, the chaplain refused to give them absolution and threatened them with eternal punishment. The words rang out from the confessional: 'What about those l-logs then? the s-snares? Th-think of Eternity', followed immediately by the innocent, emphatic reply: 'Dedn' set no snares, Young Reverence, dedn' take no logs!'

There were those among them who were carrying in their pockets a summons to appear before their secular judge in the District Court a few days after this appearance before their spiritual one, but these too denied the snares and logs with the serenity of martyrs, being firmly convinced that in the matter of eternal damnation, there was nothing that anyone could do.

'tes no use,' said the penitents from the mountains, 'even if the Archbishop himself were to come, let alone old "Convertamullah" here.'

III

The dynamic chaplain fought the good fight for the souls of the parishioners from the mountains for a full two years and gave Father Michalejc a great deal of satisfaction in the process. In vain did the

chaplain strive to instil some kind of moral responsibility into them. The attitude of the men from the mountains was conveyed to Father Michalejc by Bočan when they met one day up in the hills: 'Y'know, Your Reverence, 'tes hard. We aren' goin' let'n steal our sins away from us. Honesty, that's for the rich folks; ain't no respectable people been born among us up to now.'

'But why won't you repent of your sins, Bočan?'

'We do repent, we do; but 'e's trying to convert us and as Your Reverence d' know, we're a hopeless lot. Now if only he, that's the young gen'lman, would stop going on all the time 'bout damnation. You, Your Reverence, you used't tell us some 'andsome tale 'bout 'ow they devils would melt us down for candle-grease, but you never said nothin' 'bout damnation. Damnation's for rich folks; cauldrons and brimstone's good enough for us poor people. And if only the Young Reverence would at least stop telling us we can't fight no more an' that we've got to stop stealing an' swearing. Believe it or not, 'e wuddn' 'ere five minutes 'fore 'e started telling us not to do things.'

Bočan paused for breath and then went on, speaking with a delicate warmth in his voice and an affectionate glance at Father Michalejc: 'You wuddn' like that, Your Reverence, you was kind to us an' in all them fifteen years, you never once said to us: "Don't do that no more." You just used to talk 'bout the old sins but when it came to those we might do 'tween one confession and another, you never warned us off them, Your Reverence.'

This outpouring had such an effect on Father Michalejc that he had to sit down on an overturned tree-trunk. It had hit him like a bolt from the blue and what was more, it was the melancholy truth. He remembered that in actual fact he had never warned them against future sins in all those fifteen years. He turned his remorseful eyes up to heaven as Bočan went on in an intimate tone: 'tes just the way we're born, you see. 'twas like when you d' do a job of work. We came feeling sorry and said we'd stolen this an' that from the boss, we'd been fightin', we'd damned and blasted and then you, Your Reverence, would say we 'ad to make a sincere resolve to repent and we'd repent and scrape about on our knees and say: "Lord God, forgive us miserable sinners." But you didn' say nothin' 'bout what we was going to do and we recited all them Our Fathers gladly, 'cos they was for the old sins, not the new ones, or the old ones *and* the new ones, like the Young Reverence wants us t'do; because 'e d' say twenty for the old ones and another twenty for the new ones that's still to come. That

eddn' fair, Your Reverence. Our boss only pays us for the trees we've cut down, not for those we're going to cut down tomorrow. The Young Reverence now, when 'e goes on like that, 'e d' take our sins away from us in advance and that eddn' proper repentance. And if we've worked them off in advance, then we're bound to be pure when we d' come to confession, but he won't believe us, even though he went an' let us off them beforehand. And so we *has* to say we 'avn' set no snares nor pinched no logs, 'cos we've already done the penance for them in advance.'

And saluting the Father like a good Christian, Bočan took his axe and strode off up the slope and Father Michalejc continued to gaze remorsefully heavenwards and then went sadly off to report Bočan's views to Chaplain Müller. The dynamic chaplain heard him out, nodding his head sadly, and said: 'I too can s-see that they're a b-b-bunch of riff-raff!' And that evening, he wrote and respectfully requested the Consistory to allow him to give up this post and take the missionary trail once more to Asia Minor. 'For the purpose of c-converting m-m-mullahs!'

IV

Two months later, a new chaplain appeared at the presbytery in Svobodné Dvory. A jolly young man and a real treasure as far as Father Michalejc was concerned, for he could play tarock.

After three months, the word had spread across the mountains that here was an angel and one day, Zamečnik from Horní Bourov came into the presbytery and kissing the Father's hand respectfully, said in a grateful voice: 'Praised by Christ Jesus, Your Reverence, the new young gen'l'man we've got as chaplain is right up our street. He don't ask us 'bout the old stuff, nor the new stuff; he d' know it's all a waste of time, you see. A angel he is an' 'e d' call us such lovely names at confession that we breaks down and cries like old women.'

With these words, he dragged into the room a sack that he had left outside the door and said to Father Michalejc in a friendly tone: 'I'd be much obliged to you, Your Reverence, if you would give this doe to the new young gen'l'man. Caught 'er in me snare last night, I did; she's a real beauty. An' if you would please tell him that 'tes out of gratitude because he d' do it so lovely when he calls us bloody thieves.'

Before Father Michalejc could recover himself, Zamečnik shook the

doe out of the sack and vanished like an apparition.

And so there on the carpet, in front of the parish priest, there lay a doe: the final summation of a seventeen-year battle for the souls of the penitents from the mountains.

V

And when, before midday three days later, the Mayor was passing the open windows of the presbytery kitchen, he stopped, sniffed the vapours drifting through the window and cried: 'Well, I'll be damned if that isn't venison I can smell!' And with his head full of agreeable thoughts, he went on past the presbytery, where they were just laying the table for dinner.