

Synopsis of *The Last Castrato*

Full-length drama. 6M, 2F. Single setting.

The Vatican, Rome, 1903-4. An anteroom off the Sistine Chapel. Mustafa and Perosi, joint directors of the Sistine Chapel Choir, await the arrival of the celebrated young castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, who has been recruited to join their ranks. Pope Leo, the protector of the Choir's castrati, has fallen ill. Perosi and his friend Sarto, the Cardinal of Venice, reveal their intentions to weed the castrati from the Choir, and to restore the music of the Church to its ancient roots.

Mrs. Charles Astor Bristed, a wealthy expatriate American and recent convert to Catholicism, arrives, hoping to hire Moreschi for a musical soirée. She is accompanied by Lillie de Hegermann-Lindencrone, a young American widow and former singer. They meet Mustafa, who illicitly arranges an audition at which Moreschi is to sing. As they await the audition, Cesari, another castrato, daringly makes a pass at Moreschi. This event is witnessed by Perosi and Sarto, who put the offenders under house arrest. Later, Lillie comes to visit Moreschi and asks him to give her singing lessons, and a bond is formed between them. Perosi, empowered by the scandalous events and by the Pope's condition, forces Mustafa into retiring from his position. Then he frees Moreschi on the condition that he signs a condemnation of Cesari.

The Pope expires. Mustafa secretly watches the election of the new Pope, hoping that the victor will be another champion of the castrati. But when the new Pope is none other than Sarto, the fate of the castrati is sealed. Cesari departs in disgrace, leaving Moreschi in the hands of Perosi.

At the top of Act II, Sarto, now Pope Pius X, issues an edict banning the castrati from singing at all church functions. Mustafa falls into a deep depression from which he never recovers. Moreschi is told that he may no longer sing, and that boy sopranos will take the place of the castrati. Fred, a recording engineer, tries in vain to interest the new Pope in the talking machine. He introduces himself to Moreschi, but when Lillie fails to appear for her lesson, Moreschi rebuffs him. Cesari suddenly reappears, revealing that he has been blackmailing Perosi for seducing the choirboys. When it becomes clear that he is trapped, Cesari kills himself, but not before predicting Moreschi's return to prominence.

Fred succeeds in getting the Pope to allow him to record the Choir, although his ulterior motive is to persuade Moreschi to make records. Moreschi, reluctantly, makes a single recording, which he at first urges the engineer to destroy. When Lillie announces her intention to return to America in order to be married, Moreschi's fantasy of a romance with her is deflated. However, upon consenting to listen to his own voice, his pride is reawakened. Six months later, Moreschi's records have become best sellers. The Pope, delighted with the royalties that are pouring in, forgives Moreschi, and elevates him in stature to joint director of the Sistine Chapel Choir.