

A Sporting Sketch

Oh, what gladness fills your pounding heart as you read the words: 'Our small nation has lived, in the three days just past, through moments of joyful anticipation, high excitement and very special pride.'

And your excitement mounts as you go on to read in the following lines that the Genius of Slavdom has put an end to the suffering of the people and you read of the days of Hus and of Comenius and of the spreading of the nation's cultural wings.

And what it's all about is the glorious appearance among us of a troupe of Scottish entertainers.

'It was from history that we drew the support, the strength of will and the pride that after two centuries awakened our good people to a new and beautiful life.'

And it is for this very reason that a handful of itinerant professionals are being fêted in the City Hall.

'The truth, for which the best of our sons sacrificed their blood and their possessions, has brought forth the most exquisite of blossoms.' After Dobrovský, Šafařík, Jungmann* and a whole string of names from the National Revival, along come Slavie and put three goals past the paid artists of Aberdeen who, against the descendants of the people which groaned for centuries under the iron heel of the usurper, could manage no more than two.

The trail of Germanisation stretches across the purely Czech regions and if you find yourself on the other side of Turnov, the man in the ticket-office won't give you a ticket for love or money if you ask for it in Czech. In the Czech enclaves, outrageous things are being done to the Czech school system . . . but then, along come Aberdeen and Slavie beat them 3-2.

What balm for our cultural wounds! The Town Council wheels out its conveyances for these paid gladiators, ferries them around in carriages and entertains them; a banquet is arranged and Anglo-Czech relations are firmly cemented.

* See Introduction, note 2 on these figures and, later in the story, Havlíček.

If a sword-swallower from the island of Cuba comes here, all the talk will be of Czech-Cuban relations. Once again, they'll take the sword-swallower to the City Hall, and there he'll be given an album of views of Prague, a banquet will be arranged in his honour, he'll ride up to Hradčany in a carriage with the Deputy Mayor and be made to feel at home everywhere. No-one will ask him who he is exactly; it'll be enough for us that he's from Cuba and good at swallowing swords.

And this will assuredly be the occasion for our papers to write about the Cubans' struggle for independence and to say that there are few fields in which we too could not excel. So now we are showing the Aberdonian entertainers the monuments in the City Hall.

And the next day, our papers will report the dubious intelligence that there are some good minds among the Aberdonians as well, for there are three former university students among their number.

We have given an official reception at the City Hall for eleven mercenaries from Aberdeen who don't give a damn whether they're dribbling a ball in Prague or Budapest, or in Vienna or Brussels maybe and who, just like all the other employees, take their wages, their pay from the management of Aberdeen Ltd (Directors, William Jaffrey, James Philip and the dentist Joseph Ellis Milne). These gentlemen draw a hundred thousand crowns a year in salary and pay their employees good wages. Just like any Count who keeps a staff of jockeys to win prizes for him. And so here we are in the City Hall in our best black coats, holding an official reception for the paid employees of Aberdeen Ltd.

And we lavish flattering phrases on them. The Deputy Mayor speaks of the proud sons of the Scottish mountains, who haven't a clue what he's on about: how could they, when all they know how to do is head a ball, kick the cover off it, pass the bouncing ball from one to the other and hurl themselves at the opposition? Why, when that is all they know, do they show them pictures in the City Hall, talk about the Council of Constance, the execution of the Czech gentry or the awakening of the Czech people?

Then they hear the name 'Havlíček', and since Havlíček is constantly being mentioned they have to ask: How many did he get?

And the questions come in a rush: When did Havlíček last play for Slavie? Did he have a good shot?

And then they hear someone going on about Hus, upon whom the mantle of their own Wyclif has fallen, after which those selfsame people who talk so enthusiastically about Hus take them out in boats to see the

Saint John Fireworks.

'This is in memory of Saint John Nepomucene.'

'How many did he get?'

And then they take them out to a party and sing them 'The Maidens of the Castle', the Czech anthem.

To which they reply with a Scots song about a pretty sutler-lass, the contents of which are no whit less salty than our soldiers' song *When we went to Jaroměř*. Nobody understands what it's about and there is great enthusiasm all round.

The eleven professional entertainers from Aberdeen leave for home.

They've won some and lost some. They've headed, they've dribbled, they've scored and they've passed. Besides their pay, they're carrying with them in their cases some medals which they had presented to them in the City Hall.

Their heads are in a whirl from all the things they've seen and what bothers them most is that they never found out how many that Charlie Havlíček scored and what team he played for.

While we, in our papers, give those eleven professional entertainers the following rousing send-off: 'Gone are the days of meek submission; we long to stand strong beside the strong and to make it impossible that we should ever again suffer the terrible shame of bondage. Let us take an example from these proud sons of the Scottish mountains who dedicate all their strength to the service of the homeland they love so dearly.'

Oh yes, for a wage of two pounds sterling a day, which is the equivalent of forty-eight crowns . . .

Mary Queen of Scots, now: how many did she get?