

# Human Vanity

My experience as a local reporter has given me occasion to marvel at the vanity of which human beings are capable . . .

It chanced one day I wrote that a certain gentleman from Smíchov by the name of Václav Stránský had got himself so pickled in a bar on Kinský Avenue that he had been thrown out of the establishment in front of a large crowd of onlookers and that his hat had been crushed in the process. Next day, Mr Václav Stránský appeared in the office in a state of high excitement and asked me to correct the story to the effect that it had been a *top*-hat of his, not just any old tuppenny-ha'penny hat, that had been damaged.

A few days later, another case occurred, and the cause this time was a story in which I described how a fire had been put out in the pork-butcher's shop of a Mr Slabý.

It had, I wrote, been a truly dangerous fire, for the flour in the sausages had gone up with elemental force. I wrote this with the best of intentions, namely to entertain the reader, for I regarded it as the sacred duty of a local reporter never to be dull.

Next day, three people came to the office, Mr Slabý the pork-butcher, his father and his grandfather.

The most belligerent of the three was the old gentleman who kept egging his son and grandson on to give me a going-over, while the grandson said in a voice pregnant with emotion: 'If only you were to taste our bangers' and the son kept bawling that I had ruined his trade.

Just as things were reaching a critical stage, in came the Editor-in-Chief and I judged it to be the most tactically sound policy that I should now disappear, after stammering that they should take it up with the responsible editor.

The word 'responsible' had no sooner fallen from my lips than it exercised such a charm on our visitors that they started to pull my chief about like children playing with a puppy and when he eventually got away from them, they ran after him into the printing-room and when he finally barricaded himself into the smallest room of all, they hammered on the door and tried to batter it in, like a mob in a

cholera-epidemic. It was the grandfather, again, whose behaviour was the most uncivilised. He banged on the door and roared: 'We'll give you a bellyful of those floury bangers!'

'Gentlemen,' piped the Editor in his reedy voice, 'It's not my fault. We got the story from the police and it went into the paper without my knowledge.'

All of my readers, I am sure, know how often an Editor gets blamed by those stern judges among the public for something arising out of a lack of due care and attention in the office . . . and these three men were behaving worse than a Mexican jury.

It was only when the workmen on the staff came running up that the clan of butchers could be removed from the building by force, whereupon they went off to sort it out with the police.

And so later on, when I went to the police-station to check on some stories relating to broken legs, suicides and vicious cats, a collision somewhere involving an electric tram and some theft or other, the Chief Commissar met me with the request that I refrain henceforth from landing him with any more pork-butchers whose floury sausages had gone up in flames.

The epilogue of this affair was played out in the daily paper published by our political opponents, to which the butcher-family had turned for help. They came out against us with a piece of purple prose on the bankruptcy of our party's trade-policy. The whole article rested on the high moral argument that we were the paid lackeys of big business, intent on grinding the small trader into the dust. The day would come, it concluded, when our party would be swept from the face of the earth, lock, stock and barrel.

So I resolved that I would no longer report the local news in such a spectacular manner, but with dry, precise objectivity.

And so I wrote: 'At five o'clock yesterday afternoon, Jan Kysela, a cabinet-maker, quarrelled with his wife Maria, *née* Fochtová, in his workshop at 612 Žižkov, and hit her on the head with an iron bar, so that she had to be taken to hospital by a vehicle from the emergency service. The occurrence caused a large crowd to collect.'

When I arrived at the office next day, the attendant met me on the stairs with a worried expression on his face and told me that there were two men waiting for me in the office. They had already sat down and one of them had a big thick stick in his hand.

Without any preliminaries, he addressed me in an angry voice: 'Mr Editor, is this an iron bar?'

I had to concede him this point. No, I declared, he was not mistaken; this was indeed not an iron bar.

'So you see,' he went on in a calmer tone, 'I only hit her on the head with this bit of wood here' and he went on to speak with feeling of the fact that he would certainly never have been capable of such brutality as to hit his wife with an iron bar.

And then, how could he, as a cabinet-maker, have had an iron bar handy? By the time he had found one, the anger would have passed.

So it was no more than the performance of a pleasant duty when, in the interests of justice, I corrected that report.

'It is not true,' I wrote, 'that cabinet-maker Jan Kysela from Žižkov struck his wife with an iron bar. Mr Kysela came into our office yesterday with a large stick two metres and forty centimetres in length and informed us that it was with this stick alone and in no way with an iron bar that he had beaten his wife over the head.'

I did not expect that this man, whom I had so handsomely vindicated in the eyes of the public, would come back to the office with that same stick and beat me over the head as well, explaining as he did so that he was acting in this way solely because I had given the affair undue extra publicity. Yes indeed, such is the vanity of the human race!

Once, we got a visit from Alfonso the Dwarf, who came in the company of his impresario Massarini, because he was currently on show in Prague for an entrance-fee of forty hellers a time.

I wrote a gripping article about him, portraying him as the most hideous monster on earth, one that the paying customers would find a delight to behold. His impresario had this translated and somehow, a misunderstanding crept in. He got the impression that he was the hideous creature that I had been describing.

And he shot me three times with his revolver, rejoicing in this opportunity to defend his reputation for manly beauty with so much *éclat*.

From that day forth, since one of his bullets wounded me in the shoulder, I have been unable to write any more articles, to the great delight, no doubt, of all our readers.