

Man and woman in marriage

MR. HENDRYCH, THE GEOMETRY TEACHER IN THE GRAMMAR school, stood behind his desk like Caesar, like God, like the Supreme Being. Looking down at the class with an expression of sublime perfection, he announced the following to the gathering of boys on the school benches beneath him:

“A straight line can intersect a curve, in which case it is called a secant. Or it can touch a curve, and then it is called a tangent. A straight line which joins two points of a curve is called a chord.” And with a vigorous gesture he pointed to the diagram he had drawn with a large pair of compasses on the smudgy school blackboard, exclaiming triumphantly, “These straight lines s , s_1 are, as you can see, secants. Straight lines t and t_1 are tangents, and straight lines AB and CD are chords.”

He was beautiful in his grandeur, fearful and noble in his majesty, as, slowly lowering his hand from the blackboard to his pocket, he stared down the row of school benches.

Taking two quick steps back towards the blackboard, he was like a Bengal tiger about to spring at an unhappy Indian on a pilgrimage to the sources of the Ganges.

And then he said quietly, “Chaloupecký, can a tangent of a circle also intersect this curve?”

There was no reply. The teacher's voice took on a note of

urgency and he repeated the question more loudly, "Chaloupecký, can the tangent of a spiral do the same?"

There was a silence like the grave. The teacher sprang up. He made a wonderful leap from the blackboard to the first row of benches and shouted at the class, "Chaloupecký, what do you call a chord which goes through the centre of a circle?"

Again there was a deathly silence. All the boys in the front benches turned round and looked back at where Chaloupecký was sitting on the last bench but one. He was not actually sitting, because only his arched posterior could be seen, jutting out between the desk and the back of his seat like Mount Říp rising out from the plains or the rump of an ostrich which, stupid thing, had stuck his head into the sand so as not to be seen.

With a majestic sweep of his hands, the teacher called out, "Pull him up!" When Chaloupecký's neighbours had done so, the schoolboy's face was revealed. He stood now face to face with his teacher, whose ears had caught the sound of a falling object, obviously a book, as they raised Chaloupecký up. Only a book can make that sound, the impact of a flat object on a flat surface.

Chaloupecký looked quite calm and resolute.

"What have you been doing under the bench, Chaloupecký?"

"I've been reading."

"What have you been reading?"

Chaloupecký looked round the class and announced with pride, "*Man and Woman in Marriage* by Debay."

"And what kind of book is that, Chaloupecký? A novel or something of that kind?"

And again Chaloupecký replied proudly, as he looked triumphantly over the whole class. "It's the biology and medical history of man and woman in the most specific details. It advances a new theory, sir, on the determination of sex during procreation, on impotency, and sterility. There's an annex too called 'Special Hygiene for Pregnant Women and New-Born Infants'. I've just finished the last page."

He stooped under the bench for the book, came out of the

row and, followed by the envious looks of the whole class, carried it to the teacher. After handing it to him he stepped up to the blackboard like an invincible hero on the steps of the gallows or the guillotine.

Calm was mirrored in his face. He knew that the teacher would now sit down at his desk, turn over the pages of the book, and rebuke him. Then he would enter it all into the class book like an examining magistrate and announce that he would hand him over to higher justice, to the extraordinary summary criminal court, the frightful inquisitorial tribunal, the Headmaster's Committee, which would be presided over by that old dotard, the headmaster himself.

He knew that he was lost and that the chaplain would declare him a reprobate and an outcast. But he had not had time to read the book anywhere in the park by himself. He had been lent it by a friend in the fourth class of the Second Grammar School for this morning only, and he had honestly tried to read it during the lessons of Czech, physics, and geometry. And he had managed it. Now the whole pattern of sexual life was clear as day to him, and that was worth much more to him than a straight line and a curve. *Après nous le déluge*. This evening he would explain everything to Máňa from the Girls' Commercial School. Anyhow, she had once given him fifteen crowns to buy *Sexual Hygiene* for her and he had lost the whole amount at billiards.

It turned out just as he had thought it would. The teacher sat down at his desk, opened the class book and Debay's *Man and Woman in Marriage* and, turning over the pages, started off, "Chaloupecký, you have always been an exceptionally immoral student. You smoked in the lavatory, and the year before last you rammed my boat with your canoe, yes, mine, your class master's. It's a miracle that you didn't capsize it. To this very day I am still convinced that you wanted to drown me. . . ."

"Like a puppy," a mysterious muffled voice could be heard calling out from somewhere in the class.

"Give me the pen," the professor ordered and solemnly announced, "It's a matter of indifference to me who it was who

said that. I am not going to hold an investigation, but I shall enter the whole class in the class book. One for all and all for one."

"Hear, hear!" the muffled voice in the class repeated, followed by a burst of laughter from all the boys. When the laughter died down, the teacher went on, "You have behaved very badly, and today is no exception. Perhaps, indeed, it is the final *coup de grâce* for your immoral conduct. You were once the most capable student in the class. You did not know that the paths of diverging straight lines do not meet, but with the greatest relish you have been reading in this book ideas about marriage. In addition you have underlined the sentence, 'The existence and survival of living creatures is based on the reproductive instinct revealed in sexual intercourse.' Well, the Headmaster's Committee will certainly drive the reproductive instinct out of your head, and their decision to ask you to go elsewhere will be much too good for you. While I am explaining what are tangents and secants, you are reading under your bench that, from a physiological point of view, marriage is nothing more than the intercourse of both sexes for the achievement of the same aim, that is to say the lasting preservation of the species."

"Hear, hear!" the unknown voice repeated once more, but immediately afterwards some twenty voices shouted, "Shut your mug or you'll get beaten up." There was a death-like silence. If at that moment the strictest of all inspectors had come in, he would have had to say to the teacher, "I congratulate you. You have the most model class. Never have pupils shown such an interest."

"Chaloupecký," the teacher continued, "in the sixth school exercise you only know the right angle and the straight line, and you left out the acute, obtuse, and convex angles. That does not seem to worry you provided you can read that virginal chastity and abstinence are impossible, and passionate desires, if suppressed without hope of satisfaction, make a man and woman pensive and taciturn. Now, with the aid of a protractor, please draw for me an angle of 75° . There you are, you see, Chaloupecký, you can't even do that, but reading in a geometry lesson all about erogenous zones, you consider that more important than knowing what a radius is,

and immersing yourself in the description of the human body has far more point for you than trying to understand that an oval is a closed curve like an ellipse, made up of arcs of circles. Tell me, what is an ellipse? Can't you answer?"

The teacher paused, eagerly turned over the pages of the book, and exclaimed, "But if anyone were to ask you about an erotic malady I am sure, and I don't doubt it for a moment, that you would be able to explain it to him in great detail."

Looking at the book, he asked Chaloupecký, "Now tell me, for example, what is erotomania?"

One could hear the tick of Matoušek's pocket watch, who was sitting on the front bench.

And Chaloupecký answered promptly at the top of his voice, "Erotomania is erotic madness, which both sexes succumb to without distinction."

"Quite wrong, Chaloupecký," the teacher corrected him, looking at the text of the chapter, "not which both sexes succumb to, but which *attacks* both sexes."

"There's a great difference, boys," he observed to the class. "Erotomania attacks both sexes without distinction, but you cannot succumb to it. Go on, Chaloupecký, or don't you know any more?"

Chaloupecký continued with the same confidence of knowing his facts, "An erotomaniac is carried away by his passion for an object, whether it is real or ideal; he dreams only of love, happiness, sweet pleasures, and, being full of a fire which rages inside him, he constantly gives way to the object of his ardent desires. For all his passion the erotomaniac is chaste, as is explained by the following example."

"That's enough, Chaloupecký."

The teacher absorbed himself in the book, and after a long time turned to Chaloupecký in the tense deadly silence:

"Tell us, Chaloupecký, what are aphrodisiacs?"

"Under the term aphrodisiac," Chaloupecký answered without hesitation, "we understand various nutritive and healing substances, which we use to awaken in ourselves the dying fires of

physical love and fan them into flame again, if they have completely gone out. In most cases the recipes for these products are made up from materials which are more or less unpalatable and unsavoury. Numerous facts recorded in ancient and modern history leave us in no doubt about that."

"Not altogether, Chaloupecký," the teacher said excitedly. "For instance, what is it that drove the Roman emperor Caligula mad? What were the ingredients of the love philtre which Kesonía gave him to drink?"

Chaloupecký, who had kept his nerve up to now, began to waver. Throughout his studies he had had a distaste for historical facts and so he had skipped those historical examples.

He gasped and looked appealingly at the front benches in the hope of getting some prompting from them, but none was forthcoming. Thirsting for knowledge, they were all of them waiting for the explanation too, as though it were the grace of God.

"Very well, then, I'll tell you, Chaloupecký. She made him drink a concoction of savory, peppermint, and garden nasturtiums. Note that down, boys. That is what made the emperor Caligula mad. It's quite clear, Chaloupecký, that you have not done your preparation."

The teacher turned over a few more pages, approached Chaloupecký with a notebook, and floored him with the following question:

"What is the average length in centimetres of a new-born baby? Quiet there!"

There was noise again.

Chaloupecký was lost. He had just the same aversion to figures as he had to historical facts. And he had only read quite cursorily about the hygiene of new-born babies.

"So, you don't know," the teacher roared, "and obviously you don't know either what their average weight is?"

The noise in the class grew louder. It was as though everything had livened up again.

Chaloupecký was silent.

"No marks, Chaloupecký. Go and sit down."

Before he had got to his bench, the usher rang the school bell, which brought the lesson to an end and helped to conclude this interesting case.

I am exceptionally obliged to that school usher.