

Mr Čaboun: the Making of a Hooligan

You will, I am sure, have had the experience of being called rude names. You leave home bright and early one day, firmly convinced you're as decent a person as ever walked the earth, and there lying in wait for you is a beggar, a grizzled old codger, and when you give him a heller, he flings it down at your feet and starts to shout: 'You no-good bloody layabout!' So very early on, you know you're a layabout and as the morning progresses, you find out you're a sodding great brute. Of this you are informed by the old lady in the tram whose foot you have stood on. Then nothing gives you pleasure any more; you go back home and in the entrance, you collide with a man who's carrying something extremely hard wrapped up in a parcel. He crashes into you with it, so hard it takes your breath away and then he says: 'Can't you look where you're going, you stupid dozy bugger?' You think of making some remark, the man deposits his parcel on the ground and you feel it might be better to melt quietly away into the house and back into your flat. You got up in the morning thinking you were quite someone and you come home at midday a no-good bloody layabout, a sodding great brute and a stupid dozy bugger.

Nothing of this sort had ever happened to Mr František Čaboun. Never had this gentleman had a cross word addressed to him. And a very worthy gentleman he was; a retired librarian, formerly in the employ of a prince. This nice old buffer was scented through and through, as if with musk, with humanistic culture, in which he had become steeped as he arranged the prince's medieval manuscripts in the library and the sonorous Latin verses had permeated his mentality. His manner was courtesy itself: 'You were kind enough to enquire?' and 'Please allow me, I beg.' He was also very fond of flowers and the fuchsias outside his window enjoyed his comprehensive and tender care.

One fine day, he was watering his blooms and as ill-luck would have it, a sunbeam tickled his nose as he was gazing up into the blue sky. He sneezed, and the watering-can in his hand began to jump about as if there had been an earthquake, shedding some of its contents down

onto the pavement. He looked out in alarm from behind the curtains at a gentleman with a big black moustache, who was standing there on the pavement wiping drops of water off his coat and shouting: 'Hooliganism, that's what it is, pure hooliganism!' To which another voice replied: 'That's it exactly, hooliganism.'

Mr František Čaboun stood there trembling behind the curtains and then tiptoed off to his bedroom, got undressed, put the watering-can away in a cupboard and got into bed, even though it was a lovely day.

Once in bed, he burst out in lamentation: 'So I'm a hooligan then! A hooligan in my declining years! I who have always lived by the book!' When he closed his eyes, he heard that sharp voice saying: 'Hooliganism, that's what it is!'

For the first time in his life, someone had called him names. His head swam with the shock and when evening came, he sat down at his desk and covered sheet after sheet of paper. Next afternoon, this letter arrived in the office of every daily paper in Prague, containing the declaration of Mr František Čaboun:

To the Editor,

Dear Sir,

I would most respectfully request, in the interest of removing a stain on my honour, the courtesy of your most esteemed columns so that I might give my account of an occurrence shortly before four o'clock yesterday afternoon, in Carmelite Street. I am a passionate lover of fuchsias and as I was watering them, I sneezed, thereby inadvertently sprinkling a little water on a certain gentleman with a black moustache who happened to be passing at just that moment. This unfortunate incident was erroneously interpreted as 'Hooliganism'. I am a man of advanced years, a retired librarian formerly in the employ of a Prince, and I am sure the public will realise that I am not the kind of person who would deliberately pour water on anyone from my window. Never in my life have I performed a mischievous action and I am certainly very far from feeling the inclination to sprinkle anyone. I trust that you, Sir, will see fit to accommodate this explanation of mine in your journal and would like to offer you my thanks in advance.

Yours Faithfully,
František Čaboun,
(Princely Librarian; retd.)

In their various offices, the editors looked at each other with a meaning expression, touched their foreheads and said: 'Persecution mania'.

When they duly omitted to publish his letter, he was devastated and pondered as to how he could yet clear his name before the public.

Then he took out an advertisement in all the papers: 'I would be most grateful if the gentleman who was sprinkled in error on Thursday 15 September would come to 27 Carmelite Street, so that we might become more closely acquainted. František Čaboun, Princely Librarian (retd.).'

Nobody came. All he got was an anonymous letter which ran: 'Now I can see what a hooligan you are, since you want to make fun of me as well!'

'If only I could meet the gentleman I sprinkled,' sighed Mr Čaboun despondently, 'everything would be all right. I'd be able to give him a satisfactory explanation and my name would be cleared. What sort of hooligan could I possibly be?'

He couldn't get it off his mind. At last he could contain himself no longer and confronted the concierge direct: 'What do you think? Am I a hooligan?'

'Good Heavens, Sir,' cried that worthy lady. 'Your Honour is such a nice gentleman!'

His mind at rest, he returned to his dwelling full of a sense of well-being. Those words had comforted him and he took his watering-can and went to water his fuchsias.

As he was on the point of sprinkling them, he saw walking along the pavement below that gentleman with the black moustache, that very same sprinkled citizen who had so insidiously haunted his dreams.

'Please allow me, I beg,' he called down, in the joyous hope that all would now be cleared up.

But the man with the black moustache walked on as if he had heard nothing.

Just as he was, Mr František Čaboun rushed through the door and down the stairs to the street.

In his shirt and underpants and grasping a watering-can.

He flew out through the main gate and ran up to the man with the black moustache, calling: 'Mr Sprinkled Gentleman, Sir, please allow me, I beg!'

The man thus addressed twisted round, saw the panting countenance of Mr Čaboun and the watering-can in his hand and thought: 'My

God, he wants to throw water over me again!' And took to his heels. After him ran Mr Čaboun, calling out: 'Please allow me . . .'

There was a policeman standing at the corner and the man with the black moustache fled to his protective wing like a chick to a mother-hen. And so Mr Čaboun, in full flight, ran into the policeman and on impact, the watering-can shed its contents over the tunic of this grave personage. Next day, all the newspapers carried the following report:

The Hooliganism of Mr Čaboun

At No. 27 Carmelite Street there lives a former Princely Librarian by the name of František Čaboun, whose favourite pastime is sprinkling passing citizens from his window. Yesterday, he went so far as to come out into the street and attempt to pour water over Councillor Dr Wollner of the Vice-Regent's Office, whom he had already sprinkled once before, and when a policeman appeared on the scene, he sprinkled him and was therefore taken to the police-station, where he was interviewed and then allowed to go.

From that day forth Mr Čaboun became a complete recluse, and one fine day he began to throw fuchsias down onto the street.

In the Institution, he works in the garden. Watering the flowerbeds.