

## Mr Florentin vs. Chocholka

Mr Florentin was a class-teacher and Chocholka was a first-former. Mr Florentin was Chocholka's class-teacher and he was also the Latin master, while Latin, for Chocholka, was a struggle of naked brutality. Latin made him think of Spain and it was not a castle of which he thought, but a boot: the Spanish Boot which was put to such good use, in the days of the Inquisition, to the greater glory of God. Mr Florentin would look down with a disdain to equal that of the Inquisition at the face of first-former Chocholka as he sat there aghast, shaking his way through the whole of the Latin lesson and literally shaking out the first and second declensions. And when the hour of the third declension had come, Chocholka's shaking transformed itself into a veritable fever. And then, whenever Mr Florentin glanced at him, Chocholka would lift his stupefied eyes to the ceiling and ask permission to leave the room. He would go out in the same way when his turn to answer a question was coming round. And when the time arrived for the written examinations, Chocholka trembled in abject fear, wondering how he could possibly survive the Latin.

It was the day of the first Latin test and there sat Chocholka - prayers having been said and exercise-books given out with the warning that there was to be no copying and that any pupils found to have made identical mistakes would be failed outright - there was Chocholka, taking his pen in his quivering fingers and copying down from the blackboard the sentences which he was to translate into Latin. He had one thought in mind: he had to make different mistakes from those of his neighbour or he'd be failed outright and that would be the end of him. He wrote down the first word of his rough version and stole a sly glance sideways at his neighbour Batěk, who also had the reputation of being anything but a star performer. That glance at his neighbour's work was enough to convince him finally that he and Batěk were both doomed. For Batěk had begun his version in exactly the same way that he had. Chocholka took fright and his tearful gaze slid from the depressing picture of the ruins of Troy on the wall down to the instrument of salvation, the key to the latrines. And just as in

Hellenic times a criminal on the run would seek refuge in some place of sanctuary, so Chocholka grabbed the key and legged it for the latrines, turning his back on Classical civilisation, which shone forth on the blackboard in sentences like: 'The table is neither high nor wide; The heel is a part of the body; A foot-soldier is a warrior; A mother is not a sister; In Rome there were many houses; In the garden there are trees' . . . and other such profound truths.

All this he left behind him. His only thought was to hold out in the toilet, the hiding-place, the refuge for all first-formers who were heated in the chase, until the end of the lesson, so that his written exercise should be a shining example of linguistic chastity, a void in which not a single offence against either the grammar or the spirit of the Latin language could be found. And when the absent-minded teacher questioned him as to why he had not done his translation, he would reply without turning a hair: 'Please, Sir, I was on the toilet for the whole lesson.' And if they didn't believe him, he would take them to the place and then they would see written on a panel the words: 'Václav Chocholka, IA, 16.xi.' And he wrote this inscription on the wall in bold characters and sat locked inside that tiny enclosure, not exactly in a calm state of mind, but certainly more or less resigned to whatever fate might befall him.

Someone came running down the corridor, banged on the door and called out: 'Chocholka, you've got to get a move on!' 'I can't,' came Chocholka's reply to Mr Florentin's message. While Messenger Fourteen dashed back so as not to miss too much of his examination, Chocholka sat on in the full and solemn realisation that with those two words: 'I can't', he had defied the authority of his class-teacher. War had been declared. Five minutes later, Messenger Fourteen was back again, knocking on the door of Chocholka's last resort. 'You really have got to get on with it!' 'I can't,' answered Chocholka once more, but this time in a tone as proud as that with which Leonidas had answered the Persian envoys at Thermopylae. Peace descended once again on the gloomy school corridor where every footstep resounded with a loud echo. Chocholka was counting the seconds and minutes and he had got almost up to six hundred, which meant that it was about ten minutes since the last communication from Mr Florentin.

Then came the ring of determined footsteps and Chocholka was startled by a heavy pounding on the door. 'Chocholka, come out now, or you'll never get your composition finished.'

'I can't, Sir!' came the quivering, timid voice of Chocholka.

'I order you to come out!' A fierce struggle arose in Chocholka's soul in which the spirit of mutiny was victorious.

'I'm sorry, Sir,' he said, this time in a firm tone, 'I can't.'

'You won't come out, then?'

'I'm sorry, I can't.'

Mr Florentin ran off to the Headmaster's study. 'Headmaster, one of my pupils, a boy called Chocholka, is spending the time allotted for his first written test on the toilet and he won't vacate it.'

The Headmaster rose, his eyes blazing with anger at such depravity, and the two of them advanced with determined tread on Chocholka's retreat.

Mr Florentin knocked first. 'Chocholka, pull yourself together! The Headmaster is here. Come out of the toilet.'

'Look here, Chocholka, you come on out!' said the Headmaster, making his presence felt. 'Don't be disobedient, or you'll regret it. Where do you live?'

'Number Five, Army Street, Headmaster,' the class-teacher informed him. 'His mother is a charwoman.'

'Now come on, Chocholka,' said the Headmaster reproachfully. 'Your mother goes out to work and instead of bringing joy to the poor woman's heart by getting yourself a good mark in your Latin composition, you just sit there on the toilet and you won't budge. Don't you feel at all sorry for your mother? But what's the point of all this talking? I order you to come out and return to your duties!'

'I can't, not yet.'

'Don't try to make fools of us! You'll have your name put in the punishment book!'

'I can't!'

'You'll lose marks for conduct!'

'Can't!'

'You'll be expelled from school!'

'Can't!!'

Mass psychology works in a mysterious way. The class-teacher's eyes flashed. The Headmaster gave a roar like a rutting stag and the two worthy gentlemen hurled their combined weight against the door of the toilet. It was a fearsome onslaught and Chocholka, hearing their efforts to force their way in, braced himself against the door with all his strength, in an attempt to hold the pass. But his efforts were in vain. From outside, Mr Florentin and the Headmaster rammed the full force of their bodies against the gates of the fortress, the gates gave way, and

they burst into the interior.

But the fortress was empty. Hearing the rending of the door and resolved not to be taken alive and forced to do his composition, Chocholka had plunged head first into the toilet.

'It's better for him this way,' said Mr Florentin. 'He'd have made a terrible hash of the composition.'

But the Headmaster called down into the last ditch which had swallowed up its doughty defender: 'Chocholka, you're to stay in after school for six hours!'