

Vladislav Vančura Summer of Caprice

Translated by Mark Corner



Summer of Caprice

Vladislav Vančura

Cover illustration by Jiří Grus

Designed by Zdeněk Ziegler

Set by Karolinum Press

Translation © 2016 by Mark Corner

Epilogue © 2016 by Jan Rubeš

ISBN 978-80-246-3289-6

ISBN 978-80-246-3876-8 (online : pdf)



Charles University
Karolinum Press 2018

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vladislav Vančura (1891–1942) was an author, playwright, and pioneer of the Czech avant-garde, along with being a member of the resistance during the Second World War.

He was a founder and leader of the influential artistic collective Devětsil. A Communist from 1921 until 1929 (when he was expelled from the party), he remained a leftist for the rest of his life. As a member of the Czech resistance under the Nazi occupation, Vančura headed the writers' section of the National Revolutionary Intelligence Committee. In 1942 he was executed by the SS in the reprisals for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich.

A highly influential author in his homeland, Vančura's creative work is influenced as much by Expressionism and his experiences in the First World War as by cinematography and the concept of Poetism, a movement he helped formulate with Devětsil; his writing spans the spectrum from social protest, such as *Baker Jan Marhoul* and *Fields of Plough, Fields of War*, to poetic and humorous works like *Summer of Caprice* and the Czech children's classic *Kubula and Kuba Kubikula*.

Humor is fundamental to Vančura's style, yet in each of his works it manifests itself differently, as subtle irony, parody, linguistic experimentation, and even "new methods of expression."

Because of his extensive work in theater and film, Vančura's literary works incorporate a number of dramatic and cinematic elements. This is perhaps one reason why his novels have been adapted so successfully for the screen. 1967 saw the release of two classic films based on Vančura's work: *Capricious Summer*, directed by Jiří Menzel, is perhaps the most charming movie to come out of the Czechoslovak New Wave, while František Vlácil's version of *Marketa Lazarová*, Vančura's experimental and brutal historical novel, is the most critically acclaimed film in Czech cinema.

DAYS OF YORE

Many daredevil characters, fetched up at the start of the magnificent month of June, find their hardened features smoothed over as they sit in the shade of the plane trees. See how the branches and the high column of mercury rise and fall like the diaphragm of a sleeper. See the swaying of the sunshade and set your eyes upon that face, once so repugnant. Let them rest in peace, that nose and swollen lip which have erupted so violently from the face, let them grow calm because, for goodness' sake, this is a time of quiet for the town.

In the midst of fertile fields there are plenty of white farmsteads as imagined by our national poetry. The young bulls have become oxen, the heifers are with calf and May has passed on.

Should you be able to do so, dress in white and venture hesitantly into a seat in front of your hotel. Great Scott! Is the example of our forefathers not good enough? On went their belts, over their arms went their coats and one step at a time they edged their way towards the orchards below, where a stool was already prepared for them to sit on.

In those days the camp followers, decked in bonnets and sporting flat and well-ventilated shoes, the sort that didn't dig up the ground, used to move from man to man, from stool to stool, extracting invoice pads from deep and bulging pockets, tearing off one slip after another. A pink flush spread to the tufts of their noses whenever they spoke to a guest saying:

"Good day, sir. Isn't it a beautiful morning? Don't you enjoy a moment like this, as the chime of ten comes flying down from the time-honoured tower of St. Lawrence's Basilica? We believe that there's nothing more rewarding than time and in any case ten is larger than nine. There was some very bitter feuding over this church, because it was built by a fop who had the gall to change the ground plan against all the

regulations. We knew this builder and we can tell you that we liked him, however much he may have been something of a libertine."

"What's that you say?" interposed the elderly man, "This church is out of order and contravenes the rules of good architecture? And to think that it took me till today to recognise it!"

"You are quite correct in your observations," remarked the lady, "however, would you guess that this hat of mine has seen nine seasons of service as a hothead of idiosyncrasy? Yes, my dear, both the basilica and my hat are part of the furniture here and their transgressions have become part of the world order. Because, let me say it again, time lends dignity even to monstrosities."

Hear! Hear! Aren't these conversations worth coming back to? Are they a disturbance to those who trudge towards labour? Do they want for honesty? Do they not reek of what is nearly the ultimate mediocrity?

THE SPA TOWN OF LITTLE KARLSBAD

On the remarkable River Orsh there lies a town of good reputation and good water. The water bubbles up in shady places and the nine most powerful springs, secured in nine wells, have been designated with the names of the nine Muses. This is the spa town of Little Karlsbad. It is a town open to view, built half in brick and half in mud and stone, a town of doubtful construction and enduring health.

"There are no loafers here, mind you," the mayor of the spa is used to saying as he cuts a deck of cards. "Tally ho! Ours is a community forever on the go, running the race and arriving at the sixth month of June without delay and duly awaiting the regular deadline."

Well then, in this distant realm of purposeful activity, where there is no time to lose (alas, see how age bears

down upon its citizens while it gives an air of legality to their assets), there were several smallholdings and some fairly ancient properties. They were acquired for the most part thanks to a card game variously known as Little and Large and Tiny Takes All. These assets were blessed and well administered, because, as God is my witness, the local burghers are thoroughly versed in their trades and are not deterred by the fact that, as spas go, Little Karlsbad is in the ninth band where size is concerned. Nor are they deterred by the unseasonable cloud cover and the feeble efforts of the sun to break through it, by the impermeability of the soil or by the thermal inadequacies of its hot springs. Let it be so! They may lack a public sewage system here, but this is a good-natured and respectable town.

TIME

The Gregorian calendar turned red for the first Sunday of June and the great bells pealed. Time moved forward at a rapid pace, as it always did at times of leisure or on great feast-days. Eight o'clock was approaching, the time whose snout, where the hours are concerned, is always said to be at the head of the pack, the time which will always track you down, whatever the cost.

THE AGE AND LOCATION

OF ANTONY HUSSEY'S ESTABLISHMENT

This is the moment when, with a song and a game of whimsy, the curtain opens on a tale set in the floating domicile of the Hussey family. Various light structures serving the swimming trade have been built onto Antony's raft-like erection, which has been tied at a point where the poppling Orsh has ripples along its back, sniffing at a sandbank that runs for as much as a hundred yards. In this area the

bank on the town side of the river is covered in willows, which reach as far as the gardens of the leather dressers and wafer producers. Each year the willows get out of hand, preserving an unmanicured appearance that almost exceeds the bounds of decency. No one trims them and for those who make their way to the river there is nothing but a smattering of footpaths which are, alas, narrow. At the beginning of each pathway an inscription has been fixed to an indifferently painted pole, which carries its message rather as a female donkey carries her saddle. The announcement reads: River Resort.

"Why yes," said the burgrave, when sometime back in the fourteenth century he determined for once to speak in a straightforward manner, "Why yes, let us take the waters!" With these words he set off through the undergrowth to the sandbank, where his words became deeds. Since those times, for as long as anyone can remember, the area has been consecrated to the same purpose.

ANTONY HUSSEY

Having finished his song, Antony the Great clasped his hands behind his back and started breathing stealthily onto the ball of the thermometer. The column was virtually implacable in the face of such bribery and barely moved. Making a mental note of its probity, Mr Hussey found several thoughts taking turns to run through his head, like a sequence of shuffled cards.

Words finally broke his silence as he turned his back on the apparatus of Anders Celsius. "Such a summer, seems to me, spells misfortune. It is cold and I have ice on my breath, no matter that I haven't been taking draughts of water. What month is left to us, in which we might take care of our health and purify our bodies, when even June proves unpropitious for this purpose?

Very well, then. Be the climate propitious or not, such things brook no delay."

With these words the master lifeguard proceeded to undo his belt, remove his clothes and look down at the water in which his long hairy legs, the edge of the pool and the heavenly firmament were mirrored. He noticed the reflection of an upturned glass, which someone or other had placed crudely right on the edge, and added:

"Ah well. A swimming-pool empty of people and a cup empty of drink."

OF MATTERS CONTEMPORARY AND A PRIEST

At this moment Canon Gruntley, who held the moral life in higher esteem than any other man, appeared on the embankment bordering the other side of the river. While he was reciting some poem or prayer appropriate to the hour of day, time granted him the opportunity to peek in all directions. In this particular location it was not difficult to set eyes upon the master of bathing ceremonies, Antony Hussey, his tongue protruding from his lips and his moist eyes fastened upon a small glass.

"I say," exclaimed the canon, "I do declare, my dear sir, you're making a late start to the sabbath! Did the bells ring too softly for your ears? Detach yourself from that broomstick between your thighs which is plain for all to see. Part company with all that is abominable before it proves to be your ruin. Procure some coat or cloth from the rail beside this vile sewer. Otherwise, by George, I shall move to the other side and empty your bottle into the Orsh."

"So be it," responded Antony, shifting position, "Do as you wish and come across. Hurry over and see for yourself the particulars of your error. Search high and low in every corner for a broom, and if your skills extend so far as to find my bottle anything but empty, I will not hold it against you.

Get going, strike out across the stream in your sandals. I would like to acquaint you with some home truths which must be heard before it's too late."

The priest closed his book, keeping a forefinger clamped between the pages, took a pew on the stone edge of the stream and began a reply at once scolding and susceptible to the constraints of a civil conversation.

"What sort of vermin," he began, "discards its trousers as easily as an honourable man removes his hat? Who mentored such manners? Who inculcated such a code of behaviour in your head?"

"Very well," came the reply from Antony, lighting a cigar he'd unexpectedly come upon in the pocket of a coat which some customer had forgotten the previous day, "All right, I can tell you something about my teachers, who were without exception good souls and erudite scholars. However, do not mistake me for a man given to indecency. I removed my underclothes for a good reason. You must understand that the human skin, as has been made clear to this day in the schools I attended for my early education, is adapted to breathing and demands satisfaction in this respect. These principles were instilled into me, while I in turn accepted them and have always observed them to the great benefit of my body. I have had enough of your book of odes, enough of seeing that finger of yours chewing over one and the same worn-out line of which it fails to make anything like sense. Be off with you, expositor of unwholesomeness, bound by gibbering letters and panting lines which wend their whimsied way in accordance with rules."

Having delivered himself of these words, the manager of the lido began a slow descent of the steps before collapsing into the pool.

"You see me here," he continued, bearing up manfully in the cold water, "as one prepared to make riposte to all those calumnies which you have heaped upon me since I

was five. However, my hands are wet. It is too late to remove the cigar from my mouth and yet too soon to throw it away."

"Heavens above," exclaimed the holy man, "do you wish to re-enact the fable of the crow who lost the cheese! For the love of God hold your cigar and your tongue too."

PRIVATE HUGO

During such exchanges, fine-tuned in their fierceness, a man of about fifty appeared at Hussey's lido. He had the calves of a fencer 'en garde' and hands firmly planted inside gloves. He was accoutred like an English master of the hunt and his unscarred royalist face bore a fatty cyst the size of a nut above the line of his left jaw.

"Good day to you," he began from behind a cloud of choice fragrances known to any stable.

"Good day to you too," came the rejoinder from Master Hussey, "I'm doing my swimming exercise. You will be at home with this drill, while to the canon it is sufficient grounds for a fit of apoplexy. Pray indulge me in a final circuit of my little reservoir."

"No question about it. Provided the padre does not take offence, I'd prefer not to stand in your way," were the words which proceeded from the new arrival as he billeted himself on a stool, while Master Hussey, cigar in mouth, ruffled the surface of the pool.

The man of God on the far bank laid down his book, marking the page, and reciprocated the greeting.

"Good morning, Major. Do you think that you have been making the right choice in showing indulgence towards a foolish man whose mind lacks a single mark of distinction?"

"Certainly," came the hunter's reply, "The master's physical training has put him in good shape and his mind, even though he's no more than a lifeguard, is nimble enough to run rings around you with its replies. I could have stopped