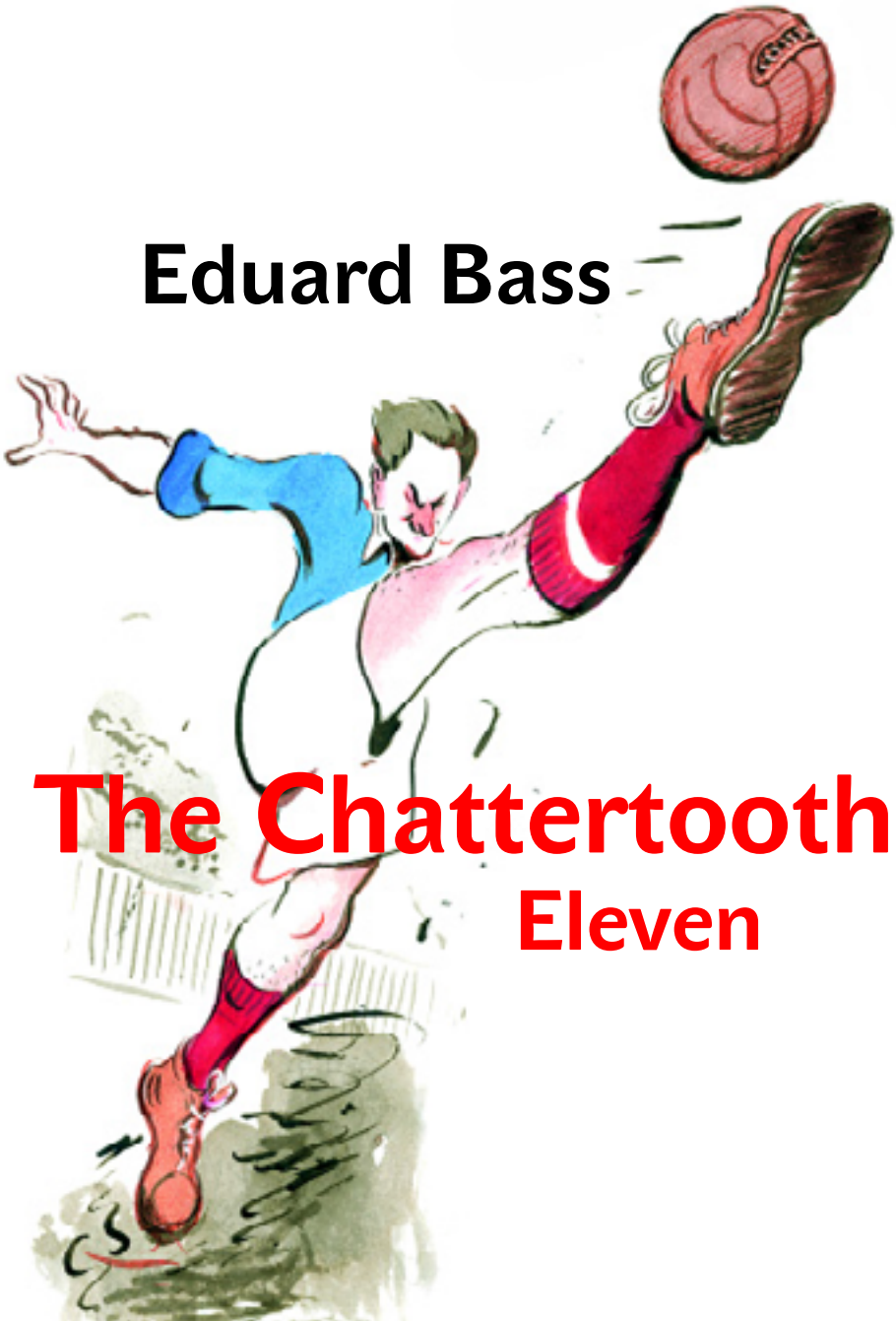
Eduard Bass



The Chattertooth Eleven

THE CHATTERTOOTH ELEVEN
A TALE OF A CZECH FOOTBALL TEAM
FOR BOYS OLD AND YOUNG

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Edited by Martin Janeček
Typeset by MU studio
The 30th edition, second in English
and first English by Karolinum Press
This English edition first published by
"The Czechoslovak" and Unwin brothers
Ltd., London and Woking, 1943

ISBN 978-80-246-1573-8
ISBN 978-80-246-2579-9 (online : pdf)

Charles University in Prague
Karolinum Press 2014

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FOREWORD

From the moment it was published, in 1922, Klapzubova jedenáctka (The Chattertooth Eleven) was a huge success, running through over thirty editions. It was made into a film directed by Ladislav Brom as early as 1938. Seventy years on it continues to be very popular. It is no surprise that Divadlo Minor, a famous theatre in Prague, as recently as 2005 decided to bring the book to the stage in a production directed by Petr Forman, son of the famous film director Miloš Forman. Divadlo Minor traditionally focused on children, but in the last few years it has sought to draw in adults as well and produce plays for the whole family. What could be more appropriate than the story of Klapzuba (Chattertooth) and his eleven sons, sub-titled 'a tale of a Czech football team for boys young and old'? Indeed the book has always been a great favourite among young and older readers alike – which in modern parlance would mean it has that crossover potential, something publishers are always looking for.

The Chattertooth Eleven take on all comers and defeat them, first at home and then abroad. In order to do so they have to do much more than show footballing talent. With one side they have to come out onto the pitch looking like Michelin Men with huge leg-pads, because the strategy of their opponents (Barcelona,

as it happens) is to commit enough fouls to disable them. In fact the Chattertooth Eleven scrupulously maintain fair play during their time at the top, breaking with tradition only when faced with cannibals as opposition ('Cheating is cheating and the world's a dirty place. But with God's help we shall escape the frying-pan'). Bar the need to escape the bubbling pot, the Chattertooth team believes in working hard, fair play, mucking in and being true to one another. If the Crown Prince of Brazil (the King of England becomes the Emperor of Brazil in the translation, perhaps for reasons of wartime delicacy) wants to play with them, then he has to sweat for it like anyone else (besides, 'the best King is the one who has the fewest servants'). The team must never become too mechanical, losing their flair. They should never forget that football is a game, not a life (a boy from a village team who refuses to play against them declares 'we play for honour. You play for money'). They are warned of the dangers of complacency. And as for girls, in the face of whose charms 'some kind of peculiar magic seemed to have enveloped the young people,' they should be careful not to fall for the ones who are only out to enjoy a vicarious fame.

The author, Eduard Bass, was born in Prague in 1888 and died in 1946, living through Nazi occupation and surviving it by just nine months. His versatile career included working as a

journalist, editor and cabaret director as well as a writer. It is no surprise that his most famous work, apart from Klapzubova jedenátcka, was Cirkus Humberto (1941), about the life of a circus troupe. Bass was well-known for being good company, but humour travels through languages with more difficulty than anything else. Only if you know that in Czech restaurants people order not a 'small' or 'large' wine but 'one tenth' or 'two tenths' (jedno deci/dvě deci) of a litre, does it make sense that Bass asked for a large wine (two tenths) because 'one might feel lonely and abandoned'.

This translation by Ruby Hobling is very much a product of its period (it was published in 1943, with drawings by Joseph Čapek), but that is one of its delights. It is perfectly readable – indeed like all the best translations it doesn't read like one. Its vocabulary might be uncommon (boys do not now fall out 'on account of a petticoat') but it is certainly not unrecognisable. In the first few pages we read that when the boys have to think brains are racked rather than loaves used, while they 'raise Cain' when they complain. The lankiest is a 'maypole of a lad', their trainer looks 'as if he didn't know how many beans make two' and their first opponents have 'a high-falutin name'. When they get over-excited there is a 'general scrimmage' (very St. Trinian's). All these expressions are used in contemporary English,

but taken together they convey an atmosphere and reveal a style of mid-twentieth century comic writing. One can imagine P. G. Wodehouse's Gussy Finknottle having problems knowing how many beans make two, while Bertie would be highly wary of anyone with a high-falutin name in the Drones club. On the other hand he would love a spot of fresh country air around Nether Buckwheat, the beautifully chosen name of the village from which the Chattertooth Eleven come ('Lower' Buckwheat would have been quite wrong as a translation of 'Dolni': think Nether as in 'Netherlands'). Readers will enjoy the wonderful line when the boys are hauled before the inhabitants of Cannibal Island and find themselves facing 'a circle of pedestalled gods with mouths agape,' not to mention the monosyllabic conversation on board ship that cements a lifelong friendship between Old Chattertooth and an Anglo-Indian colonel.

It is difficult to discover very much about the life of Ruby Hobling, but we know that she graduated from Somerville College, Oxford and then went on to teach English at a school in London. She turns up again teaching in Poland and she may well have spoken Polish, Czech and German, moving between the various parts of Central Europe in a way that was possible in the 1920s and early 1930s and only again in the 1990s after both fascism and communism had finally been cleared away.

We also know that she translated at least one other book, whose authors were also part of a complicated Central European mix. In 1947 Nicholson and Watson published a book called Warrior of God on the great mediaeval Czech reformer Jan (John) Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415. In the authors' note Paul Roubiczek (who later went on to be a very well-known philosopher of existentialism) and Joseph Kalmer explain that they left Czechoslovakia just before the outbreak of war and that all their notes were lost in transit. Kalmer had left Austria for Czechoslovakia in 1938 after the 'Anschluss' with Austria. Now the occupation of Bohemia was forcing him to leave again. The two of them went to London, but all they could take with them was the manuscript. They therefore apologise for the absence of a bibliography while they thank Ruby Hobling 'for her invaluable help and inexhaustible patience in the translation of this book'. It is history written with fervour – 'Hus had looked death in the face; the flames could not frighten him even though they were already consuming his books.' Doubtless there was something in the story of the martyr that could have strengthened the resolve of a Chattertooth, and that in turn may be part of the reason why this book was chosen to be published in wartime London by 'The Czechoslovak', based in Fursecroft in London's George Street. The name still remains but as a block of flats; during the war

it was used for several ministries including the Czechoslovak Research Institute and was one of the places used by the Czech government-in-exile.

Old Chattertooth laments the fact that nations don't produce football teams instead of armies, 'I wish to God as it were so, and then Bohemia would be a great power'. When this book was translated into English Bohemia was busy simply surviving, but the rules of life (and, if you ignore the offside rule, the rules of football) have remained much the same in the sixty-five years since. No one will find it hard to enjoy this in the twenty-first century as a tale for all time, even though Planička of Slavia has now become Čech of Chelsea.

Brussels, May 2008 Mark Corner

I. In Nether Buckwheat, in the province of Bohemia in Czechoslovakia, there once lived a poor cottager named Chattertooth. He had eleven sons and not a penny in his pocket. He used to rack his brains as to what to put his sons to. At last he decided to make a football team of them.

Behind the cottage was a level piece of meadow; this he called the Playing Field. Then he sold the

goat, bought two balls with the money, and set about training the boys. Honza, the eldest, was a maypole of a lad, so he was put in goal: and as the two youngest, Frantik and Jura, were small and wiry, old Chatter-tooth put them at outside right and left.

He would wake the boys at five in the morning and walk them briskly through the woods for an hour. As soon as they had covered four miles the order would be given, "About turn and back at the double." Only after that did the boys get their breakfast, and then work began in real earnest. And old Chattertooth saw to it that everyone of them knew his job inside out. He taught them how to take a ball in mid-air, stop it and pass, to feint, to centre, to kick from a stationary position or on the run, to throw the ball in, and indeed everything that a footballer should know.

That in itself was a good deal, but it was not by a long chalk all that the Chattertooth boys had to learn. There was running and jumping as well; they had to cover anything from a hundred yards to five miles, and they soon became as good at pole-jump-

ing and at the hop, step and jump as at high and long jumping: and of course they had to know all about hurdle racing as well, and how to set off to a good start.

But even all this did not satisfy old Chattertooth. When the boys had learnt to put the weight and throw the javelin and discus to develop their arm muscles, they had to learn classical wrestling to keep their whole bodies in trim.

Before all else, however, they did breathing exercises with light dumb-bells, for old Chattertooth always said that without good lungs and a good heart training of any kind was nothing but murder and sudden death. In a word, they were kept so busy that they stormed the kitchen like hungry wolves at midday, gobbled up their food, and left their plates looking as if a cat had licked them. Then for an hour they lay down in a row, either on the floor of the cottage or on the bare earth of the yard outside, and rested. Hardly a word was exchanged, for each was glad to be able to stretch his bones and do nothing for a while. As soon as the hour was up old Chattertooth put

aside his pipe, drew out his whistle and blew it to assemble the lads, and then the fun started again. Towards evening the old man put on his football boots and joined the boys in a six-a-side game. At the end of the day they streamed back into the house, and old Chattertooth massaged them in turn and threw three pails of cold water over each, as there was no shower-bath in the cottage. This was followed by a light evening meal. For a while they talked to each other, but soon they were sent to bed. Next morning the same old round started anew.

Day in, day out, this went on for three years. At the end of the third year Father Chattertooth popped along to Prague and came back with a sign-board which he nailed on to the gate of the field. It had a blue border, and on a white background was painted in red letters:

THE CHATTERTOOTH ELEVEN

In his pocket he had a paper stating that the Chattertooth Eleven had been enrolled in the third division of the Central Bohemian Football League.

The boys all raised Cain because they were only in the third division, but old Chattertooth said tranquilly: "Everything in its turn. With God's help you will one day beat the Slavia Club and be top of the League, but you must work your way up to that. I have taught you all you need, but getting to the top depends on you yourselves. That is the way of the world."

For a while the boys went on grumbling, but bedtime came and they all fell asleep except Frantik and Jura, who kept on whispering to each other for a long time before they could agree just how they would get one goal after another against Planička of the Slavia Club of Prague, a remarkably fine goalkeeper.

In the spring the League matches started. The Chattertooths went to Prague. They were to make their first appearance against the Hlubočepy Football and Athletic Club. Nobody had ever heard of the Chattertooth Eleven, and the crowd made jokes about the name and grinned from ear to ear at the appearance of the eleven shy village lads who had never seen a town before. They had lambskin caps

on their heads, and as for their trainer, well, this old country fellow with his pipe in the corner of his mouth looked as if he didn't know how many beans made two.

From the moment the whistle blew, however, the Chatter-tooths piled on the goals, and at half-time led 39–0. That proved too much for the team with the high-falutin name, and they did not appear after the interval. They explained that the League Committee had made a mistake, and that the opposing team certainly did not belong to the third division. Old Chattertooth sat there, with an ear cocked first in this direction and then in that, so that not a word escaped him of what the people around him were saying. He smiled to himself in silent amusement, chuckled and shifted his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, and his eyes shone like a tomcat's. Finally, when he heard the referee say that there had been some mistake which he would report to the provincial committee, he fetched the boys from the pavilion, patted them approvingly on the back, one by one, and led them off home.

On Wednesday the postman turned up with a fat letter. The letter said that by a decision of the provincial committee the Chattertooth Eleven had been promoted to the second division and was to play the Vršovice Sports Club on the following Sunday. Old Chattertooth chuckled quietly, and the boys gurgled with laughter.

Sunday found them in Vršovice. Thousands of people had collected there, for the news had spread from Prague of what a remarkable team these Chat-


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