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TALES FROM TWO POCKETS

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THE STOLEN PAPERS- 139/VII SECT. C.

AT THREE O'CLOCK in the morning the telephone at garrison headquarters gave a sudden whirr:

"This is Colonel Hampl of the General Staff. Send two military policemen to me at once. And tell Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal, he's in the Intelligence Department, yes, of course, oh, that's nothing to do with you, tell him to come here at once. Yes, now at this very moment. Yes, by car. But be quick about it, for Heaven's sake."

And the speaker rang off.

An hour later Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal was on the spot. It was a long way out, somewhere in the garden suburb. He was received by a middle-aged gentleman with a very worried look and in mufti, or rather, in shirt and trousers.

"I say, I'm in a devil of a mess. Just sit down, will you? It's a confounded, blasted, damned, rotten, sickening business. A hell of a fix to be in, I can tell you. It's like this: The day before yesterday the chief of the General Staff gave me some papers and said: *Hampl, you'd better work on this at home. The fewer people who know about it, the better. Mum's the word in the office. Now then, off you go, take a few days' leave and do the job at home. But keep your wits about you. All right.*"

"What papers were they?" inquired Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal.

Colonel Hampl hesitated.

"Well," he said, "as a matter of fact, they were from Section C."

"Aha!" observed Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal, and began to look exceedingly grave. "Go on."

"Well now, look here," said the crestfallen colonel. "Yesterday I was busy on the job all day. But then I wondered what in the name of goodness I was to do with the damned thing at night. No use putting it into a drawer. I haven't got a safe. And if anyone knew that it was in my hands, there'd be the devil to pay. Well, for the first night I shoved it in my bed under the mattress and by the morning it was crumpled all out of shape, as if an elephant had been trampling on it."

"I bet it was," said Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal.

"Well, it can't be helped," sighed the colonel. "My wife's even stouter than I am. Anyway, the next night my wife suggested we should put the papers into a macaroni-tin and keep it in the pantry during the night. *I'll lock the pantry for the night, and look after the key*, said my wife. You see we've got one of those shockingly fat servant-girls who're always asleep. *Nobody's going to look for it in the pantry, are they?* said my wife. Very well, then. I thought it was a good idea."

"Has your pantry got double or single windows?" Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal interrupted him.

"Confound it all," burst forth the colonel, "I never thought of that. Single windows! I completely forgot to look at the windows. Damn and blast the confounded thing!"

"Well, go on," the lieutenant-colonel urged him.

"That's about all there is to tell. At two in the morning my wife heard the servant-girl screaming down below. She went to ask what was the matter, and Mary yelled out *There's a burglar in the pantry*. My wife ran for the key and to fetch me, I rushed down into the pantry with a pistol, and damn and blast it all! the window in the pantry had been opened with a thingumabob, a crowbar, and the tin box with the papers was gone. And the burglar was gone, too. That's the lot," said the colonel with a sigh.

Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal drummed on the table with his fingers.

"And did anybody know you'd got these papers at home?"

The unhappy colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. My dear fellow, those spies manage to sniff out everything, the dirty crooks." But then he remembered what Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal's particular job was and was covered with confusion. "That is, what I mean to say is, they're jolly smart fellows," he corrected himself feebly. "But I never told a Soul, I give you my word I didn't. Why," he added triumphantly, "nobody could have known I put the papers into the macaroni-tin."

"And where were you when you put them in the tin?" asked the lieutenant-colonel casually.

"Here, at this table."

"Whereabouts was the tin then?"

"Let's see now," reflected the colonel. "I was sitting here and I had the tin right in front of me."

The lieutenant-colonel leaned against the table and gazed dreamily out of the window. In the dewy daybreak the outlines of a grey and red villa stood out opposite.

"Who lives there?" he asked wearily. The colonel banged his fist on the table.

"God damn it all, I never thought of that! Let's see now, there's a Jew living there, a bank manager or something. Confound the thing, now I see it all. Vrzal, it strikes me that we've got a clue."

"I'd like to have a look at that pantry," said the lieutenant-colonel evasively.

"Come along, then. This way, this way," said the colonel, leading him eagerly. "Here it is. The box was on that top shelf. Mary," bellowed the colonel, "what are you staring at? Go to the attic or else into the cellar."

The lieutenant-colonel took off his gloves and swung himself up to the window, which was rather high.

"Prised open with a chisel," he said, inspecting the window. "The window-frame's made of soft wood, though. Any schoolboy could split it apart."

"Confound the thing!" The colonel was taken aback. "Confound the people, what

do they mean by making such rotten windows.”

Outside, in front of the grating, two soldiers were in attendance.

“Is that the military police?” inquired Lieutenant Colonel Vrzal. “That’s right. I’ll just have a look outside. By the way, if I were you I’d stay’ at home until further orders.”

“Oh, of course,” agreed the colonel. “But what for?” “So as to be at hand, in case those two soldiers will stay here, of course.”

The colonel snorted and then gulped something down.

“I see. Won’t you have some coffee? My wife will make you some.”

“There’s no time for that now” said the lieutenant-colonel curtly. “Of course, you won’t breathe a word to anyone about these stolen papers, except when . . . when you’re sent for. And there’s one more thing: tell the servant-girl that the burglar only stole some jam.”

“But I say,” exclaimed the colonel in despair, “you’re going to find those papers, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to look for them,” said the lieutenant-colonel, and clicked his heels together in the prescribed manner.

All that morning Colonel Hampl moved about like a bundle of misery. There were moments when in his mind’s eye he saw two officers coming to arrest him; there were other moments when he tried to imagine what Lieutenant Colonel Vrzal was up to and how he would set in motion the vast and hidden mechanism of the military intelligence service. He pictured to himself how scared the general staff would be, and he groaned.

“Karlous,” said his wife to him for the twentieth time (to be on the safe side she had hidden his revolver in the servant girl’s trunk at an early stage in the proceedings), “wouldn’t you like something to eat?”

“For God’s sake leave me alone!” snarled the colonel. “I expect it was that Jew opposite who spotted me.”

His wife sighed and went off into the kitchen to have a good cry.

At this moment the bell rang. The colonel stood up and pulled himself together. He would be strictly soldier-like in his reception of the officers who were coming to arrest him. (He wondered distractedly who they were likely to be.) But instead of the officers a sandy little man entered with a billycock hat in his hand and showed the colonel a set of teeth like a squirrel’s.

“Beg your pardon, sir, but my name’s Pistora and I’m from the police-station here.”

“What do you want?” demanded the colonel explosively, as with a casual movement he changed over from attention to at ease.

“I hear as how your pantry’s been burgled,” said Mr. Pistora, with a toothy grin and a slightly confidential air. “So I just came along.”

“And what’s it got to do with you?” barked the colonel.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” beamed Mr. Pistora, “but this here’s my beat, see? Your

servant-girl, she was telling them this morning at the baker’s that your pantry’s been burgled, so I says to the inspector, I says, I’ll just run along there, see?”

“It’s not worth troubling about,” objected the colonel testily. “They only took – er – a tin of macaroni. You may as well let the matter slide.”

“It’s funny,” observed Mr. Pistora, “that they didn’t collar more than that.”

“Yes, it’s very funny,” said the colonel sourly. “But there’s no need for you to bother about it.”

“I expect someone disturbed ‘em,” said Mr. Pistora in a sudden burst of brightness.

“Well, good day,” snapped the colonel.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” said Mr. Pistora with a mistrustful smile, “but I’ve got to have a look at that there pantry first, sir.”

The colonel was about to let himself go, but then he submitted to his plight.

“Come along then,” he said with distaste, and led the little man to the pantry.

Mr. Pistora gazed delightedly round the poky little room. “Oh, yes,” he said in a satisfied tone, “the window’s been forced open with a chisel. That must have been Pepek or Andrlík.”

“What do you mean?” asked the colonel sharply.

“Why, it was Pepek or Andrlík who done that. But I reckon that Pepek’s doing time. If the glass had only been pushed out, it might have been Dundr, Lojza, Novak, Hosicka, or Kliment. But this here was one of Andrlík’s jobs.”

“You seem very cocksure about it,” growled the colonel. “You don’t think there’s anybody new round here after pantries?” said Mr. Pistora with sudden gravity. “I don’t reckon it’s likely. There’s Mertl who opens windows with chisels too, but then he never goes after pantries, sir, he don’t. What he does is to get through the closet into the house, and all he takes is linen.” Mr. Pistora showed his squirrely teeth. “Well, I reckon I’ll have a squint at Andrlík.”

“emember me to him,” fumed the colonel. It’s incredible, he brooded, when he was again left to his dismal reflections, what utter duffers the police are. If they’d only look for some finger-prints or foot-marks-that’d be all right, that’s something like a method. But the idiotic way they go about it, -how on earth can they be expected to ‘tackle international espionage? I only wish I knew what Vrzal is up to.

The colonel could not resist the temptation to ring up Lieutenant-Colonel Vrzal. After half an hour’s raging he managed to get through to him. “Hallo!” he exclaimed in honeyed tones. “This is Hampl speaking. I say, how much have you – I know you mustn’t talk about it, but I only – I know, but if you could just tell me whether there’s any – Good heavens, nothing yet? – I know it’s a difficult case, but I say, Vrzal, just a moment. It struck me I might offer a reward of ten thousand crowns out of my own pocket, of course, to anyone who nabs the thief. That’s all I’ve got, but you know what it’d mean to me, if Yes, I know, but quite privately Why, yes, just my private affair, it couldn’t be done officially. Or it could be divided among the detectives, eh? Oh, of course, you’re not supposed to know about it, but if you just sort of dropped

a pint to those chaps that Colonel Hampl has promised ten thousand. Right you are, then, your sergeant can mention it. You might see to it, old fellow. Excuse me for troubling you. Thanks very much”

This bountiful resolution brought Colonel Hampl a slight relief. It made him feel that now he himself had at least some share in tracking down the confounded, rascally spy. He lay down on the sofa, because he was tired after all the excitement and pictured to himself how a hundred, two hundred, three hundred men (they were all sandy and showed their squirrely teeth like Mr. Pistora) were searching trains, stopping motor-cars which raced towards the frontier, lying in wait for their prey at street-corners, and suddenly appearing on the scene with the words: *In the name of the law, come with me and hold your tongue.* Then he dreamt that he was sitting for an examination in ballistics at the military academy, moaned loudly and woke up in a sweat. There was a ring at the bell.

Colonel Hampl jumped up and tried to straighten out his thoughts. In the doorway appeared Mr. Pistora’s squirrely teeth.

“Well, here I am again,” remarked the squirrely teeth. “It was him all right, sir.”

“Who?” inquired the colonel, attempting to comprehend. “Why, Andrlík, of course,” said Mr. Pistora in such surprise that he stopped showing his teeth. “Who else could it have been? Pepek’s doing time, see?”

“But what do you keep trotting out this chap Andrlík for?” growled the colonel testily.

Mr. Pistora’s small bright eyes goggled.

“Why, it was him who stole the macaroni from your pantry,” he said with mild emphasis. “They’ve got him in custody at the police-station. Beg your pardon, sir, but I just come to ask – you see, this here Andrlík says there wasn’t any macaroni in that box, but only some pieces of paper. I was just wondering, like, whether it was true or not.”

“Look here,” exclaimed the colonel breathlessly, “where are those pieces of paper?”

“In my pocket.” Mr. Pistora showed his teeth. “Where the – ?” He fumbled in his alpaca jacket. “-Ah. Is this yours?”

The colonel dragged from his band the precious, crumpled papers No. 139/vii, Sect. C. Tears of relief welled up in his eyes. “You’re a brick and no mistake,” he murmured.

“I’m more obliged to you than I can say. My dear,” he gave a sudden yell, “just step this way, will you. Here’s superintendent, er, inspector, er”

“Police Constable Pistora,” said the little man, showing his dentures with the utmost satisfaction.

“Well, he’s found those stolen papers already,” exulted the colonel. “Come along, my dear, bring glasses and some brandy. Mr. Pistora, I’d like to . . . but I don’t quite know how . . . what I mean is . . . Have a drink, Mr. Pistora.”

“Why, that was nothing at all,” said Mr. Pistora with a toothy smile. “This liquor’s

got some bite in it, sir. Oh, and that there box, ma’am, is at the police-station.”

“Box be damned!” thundered the colonel blissfully. “My dear Mr. Pistora, it was wonderful how quickly you found those papers. Here’s my respects, Mr. Pistora.”

“Same to you, sir,” said Mr. Pistora respectfully. “Good Lord, that’s nothing at all. When a pantry’s been broke open, we goes after Andrlík or Pepek, but Pepek’s doing two months at present. If it’s a top floor, it lays between Pisecky, Tondera with the lame leg, Kaner, Zima, and Houska.”

“Well, I never!” said the colonel in astonishment. “And look here, suppose it was a case of spying, what about that? Your health, Mr. Pistora.”

“Same to you, sir. Spying, sir, oh, that ain’t in our line. But brass hooks, that’s Cenek or Pinkus, copper-wire, there’s only one bloke goes in for that and his name’s Tousek, and if it’s lead piping, it’s bound to be Hanousek, Buchta, or Slesinger. Yes, sir, all that’s a dead cert for us. And safe-breakers, we got them taped from all over the country. There’s – hic – there’s twenty-seven of ‘em, but six are in quod.”

“Serve ‘em right,” declared the colonel blond-thirstily. “Mr. Pistora, drink up.”

“Thanks very much, sir,” said Mr. Pistora, “but I ain’t much of a drinker. Well, here’s my best respects, sir. Them there – hic – them there crooks, they ain’t what you’d call intelligent, sir. Each of ‘em’s just got one little stunt, like, and he keeps to it till we collars him again. Like that chap Andrlík: *Aha*, he says, as soon as ever he’d clapped eyes on me, *that’s Mr. Pistora about that there pantry. Mr. Pistora, it ain’t worth while, all I found in that box was some pieces of paper. I had to hop it before I could collar anything. You come along with me*, I says to him, *You’ll get at least a year for this, you damn fool.*”

“A year’s imprisonment,” remarked Colonel Hampl compassionately. “Isn’t that rather a lot?”

“Why, that’s burglarious entry, sir,” and Mr. Pistora showed his teeth. “Well, much obliged to you, sir. I’ve got to see about a shop-front, now. It’s either Klecka or Rudl. And if you should want anything, just you ask at the police-station. All you got to do is to mention me – Pistora’s the name, sir.”

“By the way,” said the colonel, “if you – hm – for this little job-what I mean to say, those pieces of paper weren’t anything special, but – I’d be sorry to lose them, do you see? Well, supposing you just took this for the job,” he said hastily, and thrust a fifty-crown note into Mr. Pistora’s hand.

Mr. Pistora became quite solemn with surprise and emotion. “There wasn’t any need for that,” he said, rapidly slipping his hand with the bank-note into his pocket. “That wasn’t anything. Well, much obliged to you, sir. And if you should want anything – ”

“So I gave him fifty crowns,” said Colonel Hampl to his wife. “Twenty would have been quite enough for a booby of that sort, but – ” The colonel waved his hand magnanimously “-after all, he did find those confounded papers.”

THE TROUBLES OF A CARPET FANCIER

"Hm," said Dr. Vitásek, "you know, I'm a bit of a connoisseur of Persian carpets; but I don't mind telling you, Mr. Taussig, that nowadays things aren't what they used to be. Nowadays those swindlers in the Orient won't take the trouble to dye the wool with cochineal, indigo, saffron, camel's wine, gall-nuts and all the rest of the high-class organic dyestuffs; oh, it's a crying shame. I suppose these Persian carpets are what you might call a lost art now. That's why only the old specimens that were made before 1870 have got any value; but that's the sort of thing you can only buy when some old family sells their heirlooms 'for family reasons', as the best people say when they mean 'debts.' Why, I once came across a real Transylvanian carpet in the castle at Rozemberk – one of those tiny praying-carpets that the Turks made in the seventeenth century when they were living in Transylvania: there in this castle the tourists tramp over it in their hobnailed boots and nobody knows how much it's worth – I tell you, it's downright heartbreaking, that it is. And we've got one of the rarest carpets in the world here in Prague, and nobody knows about it.

Well, it's like this: I know all the carpet-dealers in town and sometimes I have a look around to see what they've got in stock. You see, sometimes the agents in Anatolia and Persia still come across an old specimen which has been stolen from a mosque or somewhere like that, and they wrap it up together with a common-or-garden carpet; then afterwards the whole bundle is sold by weight, just as it stands. So I think to myself, supposing they were to wrap up a Ladik or a Bergamo that way; and I sometimes look in at one of the carpet-dealers, sit down on a pile of carpets, have a smoke and watch them selling Buchará, Saruka and Tabriz carpets to mugs; and now and then I say, 'What's that you've got underneath, that yellow one?' And, by Jove, if it isn't a Hamadan. Well, among my favourite dealers is a certain Mrs. Severyn – she keeps a little shop in a back alley in the Old Town, and sometimes there are some fine Kararams and Kelims to be picked up there. She's a plump, jolly person, who talks nineteen to the dozen and she owns a poodle-bitch so fat that the very sight of it makes you feel sick. It's one of those fat, surly dogs with an asthmatic and cantankerous bark; I don't like them. Look here, have any of you ever seen a young poodle? I never have; if you ask me, all poodles are old, just like all inspectors, auditors and surveyors of taxes are old; I suppose it's a mark of the breed. But being anxious to keep on good terms with Mrs. Severyn, I always sat in the corner where the bitch Amina was grunting and wheezing on a large carpet folded square-shape and scratched her back; Amina liked that no end."

"Mrs. Severyn," I said to her one day, "business must be bad; why, the carpet I'm sitting on has been here for the last three years."

"It's been here longer than that," said Mrs. Severyn; "it's been folded up in that corner for a good ten years; but it isn't my carpet."

"Aha," I said, "it belongs to Amina."

"The idea," said Mrs. Severyn with a chuckle; "it belongs to a lady; she says she hasn't got enough room for it at home and so she's left it here. It's rather in my way,

but anyhow Amina can sleep on it, can't you, Amira?"

"I just pulled aside the tip of the carpet, although Amina began to growl ferociously. 'Why, this is quite an old carpet,' I said; 'may I have a look at it?'"

"Of course," said Mrs. Severyn and she took Amina on to her lap. "Come now, Amina, this gentleman is only going to have a look, and then he'll spread it out again for Amina. Hush, Amina, you mustn't growl. Now then, you silly thing, you."

"Meanwhile I unrolled the carpet and, I tell you, my heart gave a terrific thump. It was an Anatolian of the seventeenth century, here and there worn threadbare, but, if you know what I mean, it was what they call a 'birdcarpet,' with a pattern of Chintamans and birds; that, let me tell you, is a sacred and forbidden pattern. You can take my word for it, that it's a great rarity; and this particular specimen was at least thirty yards square, of a beautiful white colour, interwoven with turquoise blue and cherry pink ... I went over to the window, so that Mrs. Severyn couldn't see my face and said: "That's quite an old bit of stuff, Mrs. Severyn, and here it is lying on your hands and getting absolutely worn out. Look here, you tell that lady that I'll buy it, if she hasn't any room for it."

"That's a bit of a job," said Mrs. Severyn. "This carpet isn't for sale, and the lady, she's all the time in places like Merano and Nice. I don't even know when she's home. But I'll try and ask her."

"Yes, please do," I said with as much indifference as I could, and then went about my business. You know, a collector looks upon it as an affair of honour to pick up a rarity for a song. I know a very rich and important man who collects books; he doesn't mind giving a few hundreds for some old second-hand book, but he fairly jumps for joy when he picks up the first edition of the poems of Jan Krasoslav Chmelenský for a few pence at a rag-and-bone dealer's. It's just a sport, like stag-hunting. So I had made up my mind that I must get this carpet on the cheap and that then I'd present it to the museum, because that's the only place for a thing of that sort. Only there'd have to be a label on it with an inscription: *Presented by Dr. Vitásek*. After all, everyone's got his private fancies, hasn't he? But I don't mind admitting that I'd got this one fairly on the brain.

"It was all I could do not to start off on the very next day for this specimen with the Chintamans and the birds; I could think of nothing else. I must stick it a day longer, I said to myself every day. There are times when we enjoy tormenting ourselves. But after about a fortnight it struck me that somebody else might find that bird-carpet there, and I rushed round to Mrs. Severyn's. 'Well what about it?' I gasped from the doorway.

"What about what?" asked Mrs. Severyn in astonishment, and I collected my thoughts. 'Why,' I said, 'I was just going along the street here and I happened to remember that white carpet. Will the lady sell it?' "Mrs. Severyn shook her head. 'It can't be done,' she said, 'she's at Biarritz now and nobody knows when she's coming back.' So I had a look to see whether the carpet was there; of course, Amina was lying on it, fatter and mangier than ever, and was waiting for me to scratch her on the back.

“Some days later I had to go to London; and once I was there I took the opportunity of calling on Sir Douglas Keith – you know, he’s the greatest living authority on Oriental carpets. ‘Would you mind telling me,’ I said to him, ‘the value of a white Anatolian carpet with Chintamans and birds, more than thirty square yards in area?’

“Sir Douglas looked at me over his spectacles and rapped out almost ferociously : ‘None at all.’

“‘How do you mean, none at all,’ I said, taken aback. ‘Why shouldn’t it have any value?’

“‘Because there’s no such carpet that size,’ Sir Douglas yelled at me. ‘You ought to know perfectly well that the largest carpet with Chintamans and birds that’s known is scarcely fifteen square yards.’

“My face went red with joy. ‘But supposing,’ I said to him, ‘that there was a specimen as big as that. What value would it have?’

“‘None, I tell you,’ yelled Sir Douglas. ‘A specimen like that would be unique, and how on earth are you going to decide the value of a unique specimen? If a specimen’s unique, it may as easily be worth a thousand pounds as ten thousand pounds. How the dickens do I know? Anyway, there’s no such carpet in existence. Good day, sir.’

“Well, you can jest about imagine in what frame of mind I came back. Ye gods, I must get hold of that specimen with Chintamans and birds. That’d be a windfall for the museum. But you must bear in mind that I couldn’t very well show that I was so keen on it, because that’s not a collector’s way. And don’t forget that Mrs. Severyn had no particular reason for wanting to sell the tattered old rug that her Amina rolled about on, while the confounded woman who owned the carpet was gadding about from Merano to Ostend and from Baden to Vichy – she must have had a medical dictionary at home with lots of diseases in it. At all events, she was everlastingly in some spa or other. So about every fortnight I used to look in at Mrs. Severyn’s to see whether the carpet was still there in the corner with all its birds, I scratched the loathsome Amina till she squealed with delight, and so as not to make it too obvious I bought some sort of carpet each time. I tell you, at home I’ve got piles and piles of Shiraz, Shirvan, Mossul, Kabristan and other common-or-garden carpets-but among them was a classical Derbent, yes, sir, that you don’t see every day, and an old blue Khorasan. But only a collector can understand what I went through for two years. Talk about pangs of love, why, that’s nothing to the pangs of a collector; but the funny thing about it is that no collector has ever been known to commit suicide, though on the contrary, they generally live to a ripe old age; I suppose it’s a healthy sort of passion.

“One day Mrs. Severyn said to me suddenly: ‘Well, Mrs. Zanelli that this carpet belongs to was here; I told her I could find her a customer for that white rug and that anyway it was getting worn out lying here; but she said it was an heirloom and she didn’t want to sell it and I was to leave it where it was.’

“So as you can imagine I went off on my own to find this Mrs. Zanelli. I thought

she’d be no end of a society dame, but, as it turned out, she was an ugly old frump with a purple nose and a wig, and her mouth kept giving a queer twitch as far as her left ear.

“‘Madame,’ I said, and I couldn’t help watching her mouth jerking across her face, ‘I’d very much like to buy that white carpet of yours; of course, it’s a bit threadbare, but it’d just be about suitable for – er – my entrance hall.’ And as I waited for her to answer, I felt as if my own mouth was beginning to jerk and twitch to the left; I don’t know whether it was catching, or if it was just nervous excitement, but I tell you, I couldn’t keep it under.

“‘How dare you?’ the dreadful woman screeched at me ‘Get out of here this very instant, this very instant,’ she yelled. ‘That’s the heirloom my grandfather left. If you won’t get out, I’ll send for the police. I won’t sell any carpets, I’m a von Zanelli, let me tell you. Mary, see this man out of the house.’

“I tell you, I raced down those stairs like a schoolboy. I could have wept with rage and vexation, but what was I to do? For a whole year after that I kept on looking in at Mrs. Severyn’s; Amina by now had become so fat and bald that she had learnt to grunt. A year later Mrs. Zanelli came back again. It was then that I gave in and did something which as a collector I ought to be ashamed of to my dying day; I sent a friend of mine to her – Bimbal the solicitor, a smooth-spoken fellow with a beard which always makes women trust him unreservedly – and told him to offer the worthy lady a reasonable sum for that bird carpet. Meanwhile I waited below, as agitated as a suitor who is about to receive his answer. Three hours later Bimbal staggered out of the house, wiping the sweat from his face. ‘You blackguard,’ he gasped at me, ‘I’ll wring your neck. I’m damned if I didn’t have to listen to the history of the Zanelli family for three whole hours just to oblige you. And let me tell you,’ he bawled vindictively, ‘you’re not going to get that carpet; seventeen Zanellis would turn in their graves if that heirloom was to get into the museum. My God, what a trick you played me!’ And with that he took himself off.

“Now you know that when a man gets an idea into his head, he won’t let go of it in a hurry; and if he’s a collector, why, he won’t stick at murder to get what he wants; collecting is quite a job for heroes. So I made up my mind that I’d simply steal that carpet with the Chintamans and birds. First of all, I spied out the lay of the land; Mrs. Severyn’s shop is in a courtyard, and at nine o’clock in the evening the passage-way is locked. I didn’t want to do any unlocking with a skeleton-key, because that’s a job I know nothing about. The passage-way leads to a cellar where anybody could hide before the place is locked. There’s also a small shed in the yard, and by getting on to the roof of the shed, you could climb over into the next yard which belongs to a public-house, and you can always get away from a public house. So it was quite simple; the only thing was to find a way of opening the shop-window. I bought a glazier’s diamond for that job and practised on my own windows, till I knew how to remove a pane of glass.

“Now don’t imagine that burglary’s a simple matter; it’s harder than performing an

operation on the prostate or slicing chunks out of a man's kidneys. In the first place, it's a bard job to avoid being seen. In the second place, it involves lots of waiting and other inconveniences. And in the third place, there's a good deal of uncertainty about it; you never know what you're likely to run into. Believe me, it's a hard job and a badly paid job. If I found a burglar in my home, I'd take him by the hand and say to him gently: 'Look here, couldn't you manage to rob people in some other way, more convenient to yourself?'

"I must admit, I don't know how others set about a burgling job, but my own experiences are not exactly encouraging. On the critical evening, as they say, I sneaked into the building and hid on the stairs leading to the cellar. That's how a police report would put it; what really happened was that for half an hour I loitered about in the rain in front of the doorway, thus becoming conspicuous to all and sundry. At last I made a desperate resolve, just as a man makes a desperate resolve to have a tooth drawn, and went into the passage-way. As a matter of course, I knocked against a servant-girl who had gone to fetch beer in the public-house next door. To soothe her ruffled feelings, I muttered something to the effect that she was a ducky or a darling; which so scared her that she made her escape. In the meantime I took shelter on the stairs leading to the cellar; the dirty brutes had got a dustbin standing there with sweepings and other garbage, most of which, while I was engaged upon what I have described as sneaking in, got spilt with a tremendous clatter. Then the servant-girl came back with the beer, and told the house-porter with much fluster that a suspicious character had got into the house. But the excellent fellow kept cool and remarked that it was probably someone who was boozed and who had missed his way into the public-house next door. A quarter of an hour later, yawning and clearing his throat, he locked the door and things quietened down. All I could hear was a servant-girl sobbing loudly somewhere upstairs—it's funny how noisily servant-girls sob, most likely they fret about something. I began to feel cold, and besides that, the place smelt sour and musty; I groped about, but everything I touched felt somehow slimy. My goodness, what a lot of finger-prints must have been left there of Dr. Vitásek, our distinguished specialist for diseases of the urinary organs! When I thought it must be midnight, it was only ten o'clock. I wanted to start my burgling at midnight, but at eleven o'clock I couldn't stand it any longer and off I went to steal that carpet. You wouldn't believe what a row you make when you want to creep along in the dark; but the people in that house were sound sleepers. At last I got to the window and with a fearful scraping began to cut the glass. Inside there was a muffled bark; heavens alive, it was Amina.

"Amina,' I whispered, 'you ugly brute, keep quiet; I've come to scratch your back.' But you know, in the dark, it's appallingly difficult to coax the diamond into the same slit as you made at first; so I fumbled about with the diamond on the pane till at last I pressed a little harder and the blessed pane snapped right across with a bang. That's the way, I said to myself, now the whole neighbourhood'll come dashing up. I'd better see where I can hide; but nothing happened. Then with a coolness which was

nothing short of diabolical I got rid of some more panes of glass and opened the window; inside, Amina yelped every now and then, but only in a half-hearted sort of way and just as a matter of form, to show that she was doing her duty. So I crawled through the window and made a bee-line for that wretched tyke. 'Amina,' I whispered fervidly, 'where's your back? Come along now, I'm a friend of yours—you like that, you brute, don't you?' Amina writhed with bliss, if a sack can be said to writhe; and so I said very affably: 'That's right, and now let go, you tyke,' and tried to drag the precious bird carpet away from underneath her. At this point I suppose Amina decided that her property was at stake and began to howl; she didn't just bark, she fairly set up a howl. 'Come, come Amina,' I hastily remonstrated with her, 'be quiet, you brute! Wait a moment and I'll spread something better out for you to lie on.' And wallop, I dragged from the wall an ugly, shiny Kirman that Mrs. Severyn thought was the best thing in her shop. 'Amina,' I whispered, 'that's where you're going to bye-bye.' Amina gazed at me with interest; but scarcely had I stretched out my hand for her carpet, than she again set up a howl. I thought they'd hear it miles and miles away. So I again worked the repulsive brute up into a state of ecstasy by a particularly voluptuous process of back-scratching, and took her into my arms; but the instant I put my hand out to catch hold of that unique white specimen with the Chintamans and birds she snorted asthmatically and began to swear. As true as I'm standing here. 'You brute,' I said at my wits' end, 'I shall have to kill you.'

"Well, you know, this is a thing I can't make out: I looked at that fat, repulsive, vile tyke with the most savage hatred which I have ever felt, but I couldn't kill the brute. I had a good knife, I had a leather belt: I might have cut the animal's throat, or strangled her, but I hadn't the heart. I sat down beside her on that divine carpet and tickled her behind the ears. 'You coward,' I whispered to myself, 'just one movement or two would be enough, and the thing would be done; you've operated on plenty of people in your time, and you've seen them dying in terror and pain; why can't you kill a dog?' I tell you I gritted my teeth to try to pluck up courage, but I couldn't manage it; and at that point I broke down and cried—I suppose it must have been because I felt so ashamed of myself. And then Amina began to whine and licked my face.

"You wretched, beastly, good-for-nothing freak, you,' I snarled at her, patted her mangy back and climbed through the window into the yard; I had now reached the stage of defeat and retreat. What I wanted to do next was to jump on to the shed and from there get along the roof to the other yard and out through the pub, but I hadn't an ounce of strength left, or else the roof was higher than I had supposed; at all events I couldn't get on to it. So I climbed back on to the stairs by the cellar and stayed there till morning, absolutely fagged out. Idiot that I was, I might have slept on those carpets, but I never thought of that. In the morning I heard the house-porter opening the door. I waited a moment, and then made straight for the exit. The house-porter was standing in the doorway and when he saw a stranger walking out of the passage he was so flabber-gasted that he forgot to raise an alarm.

"A few days later I called on Mrs. Severyn. A grating had been put in front of the

windows, and on the sacred Chintamans design, of course, that disgusting reptile of a dog was coiled up; when she saw me, she joyously wagged the stumpy sausage which in other dogs would be called a tail. Mrs. Severyn beamed at me. ‘That’s our darling Amina, our pet, our dear little doggie; just fancy, the other day a burglar got in here through the window and our Amina chased him away. Why, I wouldn’t let her go for all the money in the world,’ she declared with pride. ‘But she’s fond of you; she can tell an honest person when she sees one, can’t you, Amina?’

“Well, that’s the whole stony. That unique white carpet is still lying there – I believe it’s one of the rarest specimens of textile-ware in the world; and still that loathsome, scabby stinking Amina grunts with delight on it. I wouldn’t be surprised if one day she’s choked by her own fat, and then perhaps I’ll have another try: but first of all I’ll have to learn how to file through a grating.”

In: Čapek, Karel. *Tales from Two Pockets*. Translated by Paul Selver. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932. 5-14, 135-145.