

We Were a Handful

Karel Poláček

Cover illustration by Jiří Grus

Designed by Zdeněk Ziegler

Set by Karolinum Press

Translation © 2016 by Mark Corner

ISBN 978-80-246-3285-8

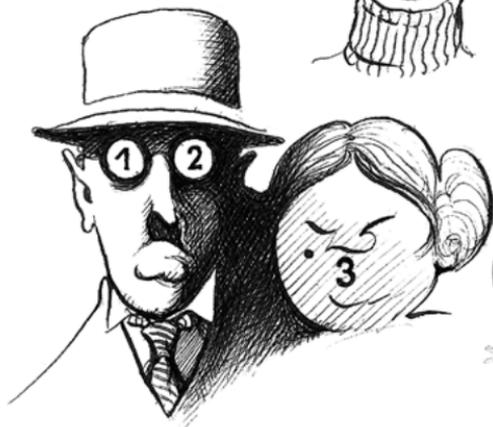
ISBN 978-80-246-3878-2 (online : pdf)



Charles University
Karolinum Press 2018

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz



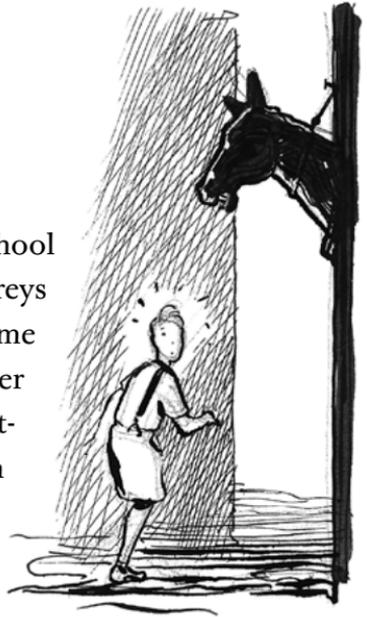


Kha



Every day I head for school past a house with two storeys and a shop sign with the name Martin Bejval on it. 'Haulier and Dealer in Coal' is written underneath the name in hand printed letters. The sign is painted blue and red with a pair of crossed hammers on either side,

which is something I really like. But what I like even more is the horse's head fixed between two windows on the first floor. When I was small I didn't like the head, not at all, because I was scared of it. Its mouth is always open and its teeth are bared. It grins at me as if it had something on me and was jeering: "Hold your horses, impish boy, I'm going to tell on you". I reported the fact that the head kept making faces at me and that I'd done nothing to deserve this. It started picking on me whenever I went by and it should have left me alone. Ma had to calm me down and explained that





the head couldn't do anything to me since it was made of wood.

But she could say that to me over and over again and I still didn't want to believe her, because my own head was terribly empty. And whenever I went past Bejval's place I just ran like the clappers. I got the idea that the horse's head was telling people all sorts of tittle-tattle about me in a whisper. Sometimes I heard it whispering: "Why didn't you have the soup today, it was such good soup?" "I know how you tormented Honza your ginger tomcat when you tied nutshells to his paws. What a clatter he made scurrying round the house. It greatly upset him. What made you do that? Don't you realise that he feels pain just as you do? Stop making his life a misery." "And who was it that scooped the raisins out of the maid Christina's Christmas cake, eh?"

I told the head that this wasn't true and to leave it out and that sneaks ended up in hell where devils would prod them with pitchforks to stop them telling tales. But the head went on pulling faces and whispering something in a low voice. So I decided to get hold of a long stick and sock it one in order to stop it grinning at me like that.

Now, on the other hand, I've grown up and therefore I've become clever and I know that the horse's head isn't jeering at me, it's just the way it is and I've made friends with it. When I go to school I say "Hello" to the head and it says "Hello" back. In the Spring it asks me whether I'll be playing marbles today or tipcat. Or perhaps I'll be running around playing football in the playground and so it reminds me not to forget that the ball needs more





air. I reply to this: “Ta for that, I shan’t forget!” In the summertime it will want to know what’s going to happen about swimming. Is it a day for swimming at the Trousers or a day for swimming at the Hat? In the autumn it will want to go kite flying with me or to make camp fires, and in winter to make a snowman or go tobogganing or visit the skating rink. I can see that it would like to join me, but what lad would want to go places with a wooden horse’s head? Let it stay put.

We have a nice new school and a teacher called Mr. Veselík, who wears gold-rimmed specs and eats a bread roll during the break with his head in a book. When he sees a boy doing something wrong he dishes out punishment and doesn’t care a hoot. During the break we go into the courtyard and several boys make an awful racket and I’m one of them. Once Mr. Potůček took a photo of us in this courtyard and they made sure that the serious swats were the ones sitting in the front. Mr. Veselík sat in the middle and country bumpkins from over

the fields were standing there watching the whole scene. I have the photo in a frame, it's hanging above the settee, where no one is allowed to sit except for Aunt Angela. We will inherit from her and she's well aware of that so she's always in a terrible temper with us. That's why she always sits there and stares and looks ever so strict. Eddie Kemlink sits next to me, I'm a friend of his, and Charlie Páta sits on the left. I don't ever want to be friends with him. He's a sneak, he tells tales, but it never does him any good. He never shares anything with anyone either, he's so penny pinching, though he knows how to wheedle things out of others. But just let him try that with me!

How Ma laughed when she saw the picture! There was I with the top of my head looking like a parrot's crest. She said that it would be something



nice for me to look back on one day. Pa grumbled that I wasted money on trifles and he wasn't going to put up with it. "I slave away from dawn to dusk and you throw away money to have your picture taken," he said. The teachers, he explained, all took him for a millionaire, but they did all right, they were well looked after, whereas people never paid him what they owed. "Stop complaining," said Ma, "you old grouse. Stop spoiling the child's happiness." "We'll see how he will pay me back in due course," said Pa, and went to lie down. He always sleeps after lunch and covers his face with Affairs of the Nation in order to keep the flies off.

The teacher praises me for my good behaviour and for being clever, so I carry the exercise books for him after school. I have the best handwriting in the whole class, my written work always looks very neat. I write even more nicely than Francis Kolořenč, who is top of the class but often misses school because of scrofula and mumps and suchlike. I myself came home from school with lice, my head was full of them. No one had as many as I did, not even Zilvar, who lives in the poorhouse. Ma said

she despaired of me and went on combing my hair. My family say that I must go on with my studies in order to become a gentleman so that I won't end up packing boxes like Pa. Our Lawrence, he's the eldest, he was supposed to carry on with his studies too, but geometry never suited him and he smoked cigs. So they brought a student to the house to go over the subject with him, but Larry still couldn't make any sense of it. He stole sweets from our store and dished them out to girls so they'd go on dates with him. So the family hauled him out of school and put him in a grocer's in the town of Most, so that he could learn the German language. He took against that from the beginning and wrote asking them to take him home again, saying that he'd behave himself and asking them to send him his textbooks so that he



could prepare on his own for the senior class. Pa wrote back saying: “Dear Lawrence, A fine thing that would be, I know you well enough, I wasn’t born yesterday. We’ve had enough of your studying and if I hear any complaints about you I’ll fetch my cane. When you’ve served your apprenticeship, God willing, you’ll take over the business from me.” I took the letter to the post office where the clerk stamped it with a thumping sound that I liked. So our Larry settled down, he sent his washing home with a letter attached saying he was happy with his situation after all, likewise his boss was happy with him. “Please send me, my dear relatives,” he went on, “a little something to tide me over from time to time. I like you ever so much and little Mirabelle too. Talking of the tot, does she know how to walk yet?” I read this letter out to our tomcat. “What do you say to that, Honza? Are you happy with your situation too?” But the tom didn’t say a thing, he just made a face, licked his belly and then jumped out of the window and set out on one of his jaunts.

The family thinks that when I’m grown up I’ll sit in some warm office and people will come and doff



their caps to me while I go on licking government stamps. And come lunchtime I'll be sending someone to fetch me a hot dog. This is not really what I'd like at all. I'd rather be working at Bejval's place with the horses, because I'd wear a leather apron and I'd wear a brass earring to ward off the evil eye, which is what Jacob does, he's the groom there. Then I'd walk beside the furniture van, a handsome fellow with a swagger in his step, and I'd whistle to myself as I gave a wave with my whip. I've tried to walk like Jacob the groom a few times and now I know how to do it. I've taught myself to whistle too, horses like that, but you must always sound a sad note. Then they turn their heads towards the coachman and they look at him with their lovely dark eyes. Sometimes Jacob tucks the handle of his whip into his high boots and stops off at Friedmann's for a tipple. First he examines the glass against the light, then he drinks the contents, shakes his head and makes a "Brr" sound. The other day Ma was surprised at the way I drank the coffee she made me. I examined the mug against the light, then I drank and then I went "Brr" and made a gesture as if I had

a moustache to wipe. Ma asked: “What mischief is this, you rascally little rascal, how would you like me to tan your hide with the soup stirrer?” I assured her that I wouldn’t like it.

Jacob is not a talker, he’s a man of few words with people, the words being “Hm”, “Yeah”, “So”, “No”, “OK” and things like that. On the other hand he understands what horses say, and horses have to watch out that they don’t let slip any secrets in front of him. I’ve seen how they whisper to each other when they’re standing in front of Friedmann’s and I can guess what they’re saying. That Jacob is giving himself up to the bottle, which harms your health and leads to trouble. I’d also like to understand horse talk and I asked Jacob to teach me it, saying that I’d give him my collection of minerals in return. Jacob laughed and said “Some chance!” Then I said to him: “I don’t care if you don’t. It’s all the same to me, because I already know horsetalk anyway. A moment ago I heard White Spot say to Dappled Dawn, ‘Look who’s coming! It’s Sir Plastered.’” Jacob laughed some more and said “Sure thing!”



The name of my best friend is Anthony Bejval. Tony and I are thick as thieves. We lend each other books. He's got a suitcase full to bursting with westerns such as 'Morning Brings Plague to Prague', 'The Mercenaries from Passau Hit Town' and 'The White Lady of Rosenberg'. There's a picture on one with a caption saying: "The Prince faces a twenty-pointer'. A huge stag has its antlers at the ready to run the prince through. At that moment his trusty huntsman shoots it dead, and



because of this he gains the undying gratitude of the prince. Tony's got penny dreadfuls and thrillers galore. He's got the lot, because Mr. Bejval says that he cares about learning and doesn't count the coppers.

Tony will have to take over from his father as a carter, and has promised me that he'll then take me on in the removal business. That would be great. The only problem is that Tony himself doesn't want to stay at home but plans to set off for greener pastures, because he's an inventor. He's invented glass that burns. When the sun's out he says: "Give me your hand, I'm going to show you something but you're not allowed to watch,

because you'd give away the secret of my invention." So you hold out your hand and for a while nothing happens, but after another while you give a yelp from the pain and there's a red mark on your hand. Tony says that when he's grown up he'll get oodles of cash for this invention and buy himself a motorbike.

His father, Mr. Martin Bejval, is the strongest of them all. He's not afraid to stand up to anyone, he'll take on all comers. To me he's like Samson, Bone-crusher and Battering Ram all in one. It's just like I read in one of the books which our teacher lent us from the school library. The books have to be returned in good condition, otherwise the families or those who stand in for them have to pay up. Once Mr. Bejval started wrestling with Mr. Plachetka for fun. Mr. Plachetka is a brewer and also incredibly strong. He fought in the war and got the better of all his enemies. The two of them fought till they were red in the face and breathing heavily. Then Mr. Bejval hurled Mr. Plachetka to the ground. He fell with a thud. Mr. Bejval knows all the right holds. Everyone laughed and Mr. Plachetka said:

“Phew! You’re a crafty devil,” and he had to buy everybody a beer. In the Physical Education Association Mr. Plachetka lifts hundred-kilo weights, no one but him can manage it. So I’d like to be a delivery man in order to build up my muscles. All my worst enemies will then run for their lives from me. I’ll be scared of no one, even someone armed to the teeth like Horia, the Highwayman who used to go around with Gloska.

So I’m glad to be a boy, because only a man knows how to bring his enemies down so that they’re begging for mercy and promising that they’ll never do anything wrong again. Girls fight too, but it doesn’t mean anything, all they do is giggle and cry. They don’t know how to play, their games are so stupid and they want to get married. But no one will have them because it’s no fun with them. When they play at weddings, a girl has to be the bridegroom because no boy will do it, so she does a wiggle and twists her mouth and that’s how we’re supposed to tell she’s the groom.

You ought to know that I was once in great danger of staying a girl, because every boy when





he's born starts off as a lassie and only later becomes a lad. I wore girls' dresses until I was four because our family wanted them used up. It made me feel really ashamed. Boys wanted nothing to do with me and my brother Lawrence, who's now an assistant shopkeeper, felt shown up by me. I can remember how some gentlemen were once passing our house and I was standing on the doorstep sucking a sweet. Lawrence was standing next to me and he was sucking a sweet too. And one of these gentlemen pointed at me and said: "What a lovely little girl."

"'snot true," Larry said back to them sulkily. "Cos he's a boy."

“But he’s wearing a dress, how can he be a boy?”

“See for yourself,” said Larry, and lifted up my dress.

The men laughed and said: “He’s still a girl,” and Larry stuck his tongue out at them, grabbed my hand and said: “Get inside, you.” But that was a long time ago now, back when I was still small. I’ve grown since then.

It was great luck for me that Mirabelle was born at our place, but a shame that I wasn’t there at the time, because Pa had sent me to fetch a cube of yeast for baking. He said that afterwards I should go to Uncle Emil’s for lunch and shouldn’t be back before evening. When I got back Mrs. Štichauerová was there looking after little Mirabelle who was all wrapped up in her swaddling-clothes. Mirabelle’s face wasn’t very big, it was red as a tomato and inside all the baby towels she looked like a Christmas cake. Mrs. Štichauerova said: “This is your baby sister,” and she told me to say “Blessed be the Lord God”. I didn’t want to say it. Ma was lying in bed and was ill.

From the moment Mirabelle was born I got to wear trousers and so I became a real boy. So things turned out well for me. When our Mirabelle was still quite a tiny tot, she had a button instead of a nose and believe it or not she was able to suck her big toe. I've tried to do it like her time and time again, but I always miss. All the same I must teach myself and when I've learnt how to do it I'll be famous. Then I'll get my own back on Christopher Jirsák, he's a schoolmate and his family make caps and slippers. Christopher Jirsák knows how to turn his eyelids inside out so that he looks horrible with eyes as





red as a devil's. Once the bleating greengrocer saw him do this, the one who sells fruit, sweets, coconut biscuits and even oranges in the square. She spat on the ground and said: "Baah! You little brat, you gave me a fright. Someone should tan your hide, you little imp."

"And the same to you with knobs on," Christopher Jirsák answered her back as he leaped around bleating "Baah! Baah! Bleating Goat!"

"Now look here, young man," the greengrocer wagged a finger at him. "You've gone overboard, you've no fear of the Lord," and she threatened:

“Just wait, you nasty urchin, I’ll get the police onto you.”

That made us laugh. And straight away Christopher Jirsák wrote in his notebook “I made fun of an old person”, because he makes a list of all the errors of his ways so that of all the boys he can have the best sins when he goes to confession. Christopher Jirsák made a bet that if he wanted to he could break all of the commandments. In order to sin against the commandment which says: “Thou Shalt not Commit Adultery,” he wrote something very rude on the wall of Herman’s factory.

I don’t have far to go to school. After about a quarter of an hour it’s just a stone’s throw away. In the morning they can’t get me out of bed. Especially in winter, when snowflakes are sticking to the window and a driving wind is moaning ‘Woooooh! Woooooh!’ The mornings are dark and the place is lit by a paraffin lamp. I’m dozing and listening to Christina shuffling around in the kitchen. I can hear her yawning and muttering “Oh God, oh God” and grinding coffee and there’s something bubbling. Water’s popping in a pot on the stove

and it seems to me as if Christina's in that pot under the lid and boiling away in a rage herself. Beneath the covers it's warm and I imagine I'm an animal inside its burrow, a mole or a badger or something like that, and I've got lots of curvy corridors and when the hunter comes I'll find another exit to make my escape. We learnt all about this in our zoology lesson. The hunter, that's to say Christina, yanks me out of bed saying: "Get up, lazybones, it's time you were off to school." I tussle with her and shout out: "Leave me be, you Rampusite," because she comes from the village of Rampus which is high



up in the mountains. She can speak Czech as well as German, but with her family she speaks Double Dutch, like those men who bring tree trunks down from the mountains. Cherries grow on the sides of mountains, all tiny, red and terribly sweet. When Christina comes back from the mountains, where she's been visiting her family, she always brings a bag of these dried cherries, which I like more than anything.

What I don't like is washing in winter time, when the water is cold and stings my face. I drink down my coffee in a hurry without so much as sitting down. It's a good thing that I always pack my books away in my satchel the night before, so I can be outside in a jiffy. Christina always runs out after me shouting: "Just you wait, you loutish little imp, you haven't even said goodbye to your mother and father!" She's right about that, so I poke my tongue out at the Rampussykins. She shakes her fist at me, but I'm not scared. I say to her: "Just to make it clear, from now onwards I'm calling you a Rumpusite." She laughs like a mad thing, she's got a boyfriend and she's going to marry him.

On the way I stop to pick up Anthony Bejval and I make clear to him at once that Christina is really a Rumpusite. He likes this idea and we have a laugh together about it.

I always try to steer clear of the house where Mr. Fajst lives. He's a clerk and he's retired with nothing to do, which means that he pokes his nose into everything. Most of all he keeps an eye on all the schoolkids, whom he blames for being up to





no good. He has it in for me in particular and I've never done anything to him. He suddenly comes storming out from I don't know where, grabs me by the collar and shines a torch into my ears to see whether they're clean. If the ears aren't properly scrubbed he shouts out "Ha!" and drags me back to our shop. He doesn't give a fig whether there are people in the shop or not, he just yells out: "See that, Mr. Wholesaler, see the dirt in the young master's ears, shame on him, shame." Pa quotes back to him: "You know what they say, Mr. Fajst, you can't keep children on a leash." Then he ticks me off and thanks Mr. Fajst, but I know he doesn't like doing it. It's just that we are shopkeepers which means we have to fire politeness in all directions. If he insulted Mr. Fajst then he wouldn't put any business our way. However, I don't have to be so full of respect because I'm still little and I'm not meant to understand this sort of thing. Maybe I'll spit on Mr. Fajst's window. Or

I'll slip something unmentionable into his pocket, like a dead mouse. I'll go over the options very carefully with Bejval.

We go hopping on one leg down Palacký Street, seeing who can last longest, or else we run backwards, which not everybody can do, and then we come to a halt in front of Mr. Svoboda's sweetshop. There are cakes and cream horns, croissants and cookies, all pink and brown and green in the window. There are chocolate biscuits too, sprinkled with something like red and white seeds. So I'm standing in front of the shop window with Tony Bejval, where we point our fingers at the cakes and say to each other over and over again at lightning speed: "That one's mine, that's yours." It's as if we were dishing out the whole shop to each other.

I even asked Bejval whether he'd be scared to be shut inside the sweetshop overnight. Anthony Bejval came back at me saying that he wouldn't be a bit afraid, he'd just polish off everything there.

I wouldn't be scared either and I'd scoff the lot too. But I'd be scared in the cemetery. There's a part of it that's haunted. The latest person to die and go

there gets no respect from the other corpses, it's like a new boy arriving at school. So a new member of the dead must sit down by the fresh grave, wrapped in a sheet, and keep guard. What a bore that must be! I wouldn't want to be on duty in a graveyard, even if someone gave me a whole sackful of peanuts, not to mention a stamp album full of foreign stamps, a blue jersey and one of those glasses that burn things.

Those of us living in Palacký Street are friends, but everywhere else we have enemies. We're the most intrepid of all, so we terrify everyone who's against us.

Who are these enemies of ours? Worst of all are the Ješínák gang. They live in a neighbourhood called Chaloupky, they've got red hair and freckles on their faces. In fact they're so spotty that they look like those speckled beans. Their hideout is the area round a pub called Na Purku. It starts from the station and runs past the brick factory to some small labourers' cottages called Na Zavadilce. The adjacent territory belongs to the Dražák gang, a

two-faced lot. They like to be in both camps at once. One time they're with us, another time they're with the Ješíňák gang. But most of all they're with themselves and jeering at everyone else. Mr. Letovský, the policeman, frogmarched one of these Dražáks before the town council because he'd hit Duchaba's head with a stone. He was blubbing and his dad, who's a barber, said that he'd take the matter to court. The culprit, being one of these two-faced Dražáks, lied in front of the town council that no, he'd never had any stone in his hand, but I know very well that this Bednařík, who's the worst of the lot, is always causing trouble for people. The Bednařík family eats cats and dogs, and the junior version gets a double fail in practical ethics.

But our worst enemies of all are the Habrovák mob. These are the beastliest of the lot. The Habrovák mobsters even go to school with their pockets full of stones. They outnumber us, their morals are bad and their habits are mean. By nature they like to pick fights. They are often kept in detention after class as a punishment and they sit at the desks at the back which are reserved for the worst pupils,

because they can never pass any of the tests. They cause trouble there too and tempt others to do the same thing. They don't wash their hands and even their necks are dirty, so the teacher sends them to the washroom. The other day he said that the Habrováks could plant potatoes behind their ears and that made us laugh so they became furious. And the religion teacher said: "You Habrováks are of the race of the Amelekites, who were abhorred by other peoples and hated by God."

The Habrovák mob rules the area on both banks of the brook which runs through a maple wood. The local population lives from raising geese and making cloth. A few of them are into smuggling, and when that happens the gendarme has them up before the district council. Many of them suffer in prison for their bad deeds. The Habrováks swear all the time. God help any strangers who dare go onto their land without being accompanied by their parents or other guardians!

The war with the Habrováks usually gets going in the autumn while the farmers are getting in the harvest, pleased with their bumper crop. From the

barns comes the ratatat of flails threshing. This is the time when we climb the hillside to where we can spy on the whole Habrovák domain which stretches right up to the sky-line where it borders another territory called Lukavice. Such a stunning sight is the eye's delight, and while we delight in it we strike up a song at the top of our voices to humiliate the Habrováks. This is how the song goes:

In a stable one fair day
An old mare passed away
The Habrováks were pleased
They were going to have a feast!
Habrováks - hop! hop!
They scoffed the barley crop
They drank up all the whey
Till stomachs went astray,
hey hey!

As soon as they hear our war cry, they come dashing out of all their shacks and hovels and even normal houses, shaking sticks in the air and shouting wildly.



However, there are manoeuvres before any war so that our army can get used to being in the field and to the tough life of a warrior. This year we've made a ruling that we'll carry out manoeuvres on Budín Hill, which overlooks our town and where there's a marvellous view that even strangers are amazed at. Budín has a wood but no strawberries or blueberries grow there. In fact nothing grows there.

And so one morning the army formed at our house. Pa knew nothing of what was going on,



because he'd actually gone to the store for paraffin. If he'd known what was happening he'd have bel-lowed in a terrible voice "Manoeuvres? I'll give you manoeuvres! Just get hold of a schoolbook and get down to your homework!"

The commander-in-chief of all our forces was Anthony Bejval, because he's the strongest and knows the ropes. Edward Kemlink would have wanted to be our commander, since his pa works for the Inland Revenue which means everyone has to salute him. Our dad has to salute him too,

and takes his pipe out of his mouth every time he does so. Eddie Kemlink prides himself on knowing how to draw up a reconnaissance map, so he made a map of Budín and the area around it. He said that every army has to have such a map, or else it'll be crushed and will have to beat a quick retreat. He knows all about it and when he grows up he's going to join the military academy and learn to be an officer. Then he'll have a sabre with a sword knot. Bejval said that this was all right, let him draw up his maps. He himself was going to invent a weapon that would wipe out all our enemies anyway.

Zilvar, the boy from the poorhouse, came to join us because he saw that we had buns with us. He had stones in his pocket and a catapult. He said that he was bringing more boys, but Bejval told him that we'd got enough already. Eddie had a rifle, a revolver and some firecrackers. He had a wild look about him and spoke in a deep voice. I was carrying a mace, just as the Hussites used to when they set up camp in the town of Naumburk and the people



sent out their maids of honour to tell the Hussites to leave them alone and not to go near them. Then the Hussites left, singing ‘We are warriors of the Lord’ as they went and striking fear into everyone who heard them. I read about this in a book and I’m going to whack every one of my enemies with my mace, and I don’t care if they go and sneak on me afterwards.

We also had a handcart with us to put the buns on, and make sure that we didn’t suffer from starvation while on the march. We were just ready to sally forth when Eve turned up, the daughter of Svoboda the Sweetmaker, to say she wanted to join us on manoeuvres. Our commander, Anthony Bejval, told her that this was a stupid idea because you couldn’t have girls in an army. Eve got upset and was ready to turn on the waterworks. So I butted in and asked why she couldn’t go along with us. I like Eve, because there’s a fabulous smell of vanilla sugar about her.

Just when I’d spoken up on her behalf Christopher Jirsák looked at me and grinned horribly, just to spite me. While he was looking at me I start-

ed looking at him too. Then I went up to him and he went up to me as well. I made a fist, he made a fist. I said “Just try it!” and he replied “Just you try it!” The commander said that this wasn’t the time to fight, there was no point in it, there’d be time enough for all that later, now was the time to be marching to war. So we left it at that for the time being, but I’ll get my own back on that Christopher Jirsák. I know why he was grinning horribly. He thinks that Eve is my wife-to-be, which is a rotten fib, and he says that I’m going to be her husband, which is the biggest lie of all and anyway it’s a case of pots calling kettles black. I’m not the marrying kind, and if Christopher gives me one more of those horrible grins of his I’m going to find the biggest stone ever in order to give him a hiding.

The commander decided that Eve could come with us and haul the cart stocked with buns, so she had something useful to do. Eve jumped for joy and said she’d be there at once, only could she take Josephine along with her, her best and most faithful friend, from whom she had no secrets. Bejval said: “Why not? Just make sure you’re here right away.”