

## Šejba the Burglar Goes on a Job

Šejba the burglar had got himself shut in for the night at Number Fifteen. He was an attic-specialist and for tonight, he had decided to practise his art in this well-off part of town. Up to now, he had been working in a poor area and this had brought him in a grand total of two aprons, three petticoats and a moth-eaten headscarf. In court, this little lot would have got him about six months, whereas the Jew he had sold them to had given him just one crown for the whole bundle.

Šejba was standing in the cellar-area, leaning against the door and listening as the concierge turned down the light, locked the front door and went on her way. By all the signs, she was young, for she was singing softly to herself as she walked from the door to her lodging.

Šejba took this for a good omen. And then, he had met a hay-cart that afternoon. Another good omen. He had seen a chimney-sweep and blown him a kiss: that was good luck as well. He drew a bottle of cheap rum out of his pocket and took a pull at it. Cheap rum: that was what came of working in the poor part of town. Here, it would be a different story. He had had a look round his new patch in the morning and found that it was carpeted all the way up to the first floor. All the signs were that the people who lived here belonged to the well-to-do classes and would have something worth-while in the attic. Feather-beds, let's say, or clothes. He washed down this happy dream with a good swig of rum and sat down on the step by the cellar-door. He was tired, for he'd had the police after him today, down in the river district. It had all been over a handcart with no owner's nameplate on it. He'd hardly gone a few steps when he'd had to take to his heels, minus the cart. He'd got away, thanks be to God, but he felt as if every bone in his body was broken. There was no justice in this world. In the country, you got chivvied by the gendarmes and in town, by the police. Šejba had another swig and heaved a sigh.

There in the house, silence and darkness reigned. Down here by the cellar it was neither warm nor cold, but when Šejba heard his sigh echoing through the quiet of the night, right up to the third floor somewhere, a chill went through him and the thought of what would

happen if he got caught crossed his mind. If only they would at least wait till winter before they caught him. He'd spent a few winters in jail in his time. There were some houses of correction now where they'd installed central heating. You were nice and warm, you could eat your fill; the only thing you couldn't get was spirits. You could always rustle up a smoke from somewhere.

Inside the cellar, a cat miaowed. It was on the tip of Šejba's tongue to say 'Puss, puss!' but then he thought better of it. Why take needless risks? It was certain that not everyone in the house would be asleep yet; the concierge might hear him and then the game would be up. He might even get knocked about.

He could hear the cat walking about and miaowing behind the door. It seemed to have got onto the coal: pieces were rolling down from the pile with a noise like thunder. Blast that cat! It was kicking up a racket and what was more, the people on the street would think there was a thief in the cellar.

The idea that anyone might think he had tried to break into a cellar was repugnant to Šejba. Anyone could rob a cellar; an attic now, that was a different story!

He made an angry movement and the skeleton keys in his pocket rattled. This frightened the cat behind the door, which took flight and ran into some heavy object. The bang this made as it fell resounded through the house. He crouched down and listened. The noise rumbled round the house and gradually died away. Not a single voice was raised in response.

He steadied his nerves and took a drink from the bottle. If he had the bad luck to get caught, at least he could make sure the bottle was empty. They wouldn't let him finish it. Somewhere in the house, a bell rang.

'They're ringing for the concierge,' thought Šejba and crouched down again, as if wishing to avoid seeing anything of what was going on around him.

A light shone out of the concierge's lodging and the flip-flop of slippers and the rustle of skirts made themselves heard. The concierge was going to open the door. Šejba hardly dared breathe, in case he should chance to draw attention to himself.

The beam of light broke against the banisters and fell down to the floor opposite Šejba.

'I heard a rumpus in the cellar,' said somebody's voice in the passage, 'so I thought we might have burglars.'

'That's the cats, Mr Councillor Sir,' answered the concierge. 'Every day they make a racket in the cellar. And what they don't get up to in the attic! They trample about up there like devils dancing at a wedding.'

Šejba felt a weight fall from his shoulders. He heard the concierge go back to her lodging and a key rattling in a door up on the second floor. He took advantage of the bustle created by the resident who had got up to have a stretch and a drink of rum.

The light went out and total darkness reigned. Šejba worked out how he would do the job. When it was late he'd sneak up to the attic, open it up, collect anything that was worth having, wait there and early in the morning, immediately the house door was opened, he'd dash out. There weren't many police patrols on the streets at that time of day. And then nature would take its course. With the money he got for the loot, he'd pay his board and lodging, which was already a month overdue. They were poor people and they knew a thing or two about him that could get him into trouble. If it were winter, he wouldn't mind if they turned him in but just now, he wanted to stay outside. It's a peculiar trait of human nature that a man doesn't like to be locked up when the world around him is fresh and green.

Šejba had fallen into what you might say was a mellow mood and when he heard the cat miaowing again in the cellar, he couldn't resist the temptation to give a gentle call of 'Puss, puss!' through the keyhole. The cat ran over to the door and miaowed once more.

Šejba heard it scratching and then it seemed to sit down by the door and purred. Clearly, it was bored, all on its own in the cellar, and was glad that now it had some company, even if they were separated by an impenetrable barrier.

'Why don't I drink her health?' thought Šejba and put this agreeable idea into practice.

Suddenly, he felt safer and stretched his legs, which caused a slight noise. To be on the safe side, he took off his boots.

He managed this without any commotion. Inspired by this success, he swigged some more rum. He stroked the bottle lovingly. It had been his companion on so many jobs. And when he had it filled with rum out of the proceeds, he felt he was giving it its share in his success.

It was his sole companion, the only one he had to talk to during those endlessly tedious hours of waiting in other people's houses, when a man never knows what the next moment may bring.

He held the bottle to his lips and noticed by the gurgling sound that

it was now down to only a quarter full. When he couldn't squeeze out a single drop more, he'd go upstairs, and tomorrow he'd fill it up again and say: 'Good girl! You did a great job!'

The rum filled Šejba with a pleasant warmth and carried him up in thought to the attic. It was a well-to-do house; it'd be a well-to-do attic. He recalled the attics in the poor part of town and spat against the door. Two aprons, three petticoats and a moth-eaten headscarf! God, what a drag! Things were going from bad to worse. If they put the price of brandy up again, a bloke might just as well go and hang himself.

He took another swig and his good mood returned. There might be feather-beds up there. You could still get a good price for feathers today. There were just two things it wasn't a total waste of a craftsman's skill to pinch: telegraph wire and feather-beds. You didn't have to half-inch an enormous amount: a little would still get you a jury-trial. How many aprons, petticoats and moth-eaten scarves would it take to do that? A jury was better than a judge sitting alone. He'd been up before a judge any number of times. You always got more prestige out of going before a jury. 'There's a lad,' his colleagues would say, 'he's up for jury-trial!'

'I'll drink the jury's health,' thought Šejba and finished off the contents of the bottle. He'd rest a little longer and then go up the stairs. Nice and slowly, nice and quietly; he dared not make a noise. Holding his boots safely in his hand and barefoot. Why was he feeling angry with himself? Quietly does it. Just hang on a little bit longer and give it a bit more thought. Why not say the Lord's Prayer? That was it: he'd pray first, and then he'd go.

Šejba crept up to the first floor. He held his boots in his hand and paused on every step. You can't be too careful. There he was on the first floor. He groped for the banisters and his hand touched a door. Ah yes, the banisters were on the left. He felt for them and his groping hand again found a door. A bell rang. No doubt about it, he'd pressed the button. His feet turned to lead and he couldn't move a step. And then the door opened and a hand grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the flat. Into a darkness full of terrors.

Šejba heard a fearsome female voice: 'Breathe on me!'

Šejba breathed, while the terrible hand continued to hold him by the collar.

'So you've descended to drinking rum?' he heard the frightening voice say, in a cutting tone.

'Yes,' answered Šejba, 'I couldn't afford anything else.'

'I see; the great Mr Dorn, Presiding Judge of Court Number One, has to drink his way through all he's got and come down to rum in the end!'

The hand of this terrible woman stroked his face.

'Ah,' thought Šejba, 'she's taken me for Judge Dorn. He tried me not so long ago.'

'Please be so kind as to turn on the light,' Šejba begged.

'So I've got to turn the light on so that the maid can see the state of the Presiding Judge when he comes home!' the woman shouted. 'A fine thing! And you talk to me, your own wife, who couldn't sleep and has been waiting up for you since twelve o'clock, as if I were a stranger! What's that you've got in your hand?'

'My boots, Madam,' Šejba blurted out. The terrible hand ran across his face again.

'He calls me "Madam"; he thinks I'm crazy and he's had his long whiskers shaved off, the miserable wastrel!'

Šejba felt the hand under his nose.

'Ugh! He's clean-shaven, like a common criminal. I swear to God, I'll beat him to a pulp! So that was why he wanted me to turn the light on. The wastrel, he thought I'd be frightened and fall down in a faint and he could go to his room and lock the door.

'Look at him, a Presiding Judge and he looks like a convicted criminal. What's that you've got on your head?'

'A cap.'

'Great God almighty, he gets himself so thoroughly plastered that he leaves his top hat lying about somewhere and buys himself a cap. Or maybe you stole it from someone?'

'Yes, I did steal it,' said Šejba in a penitent tone.

He got another box on the ear and the woman shouted, as she pushed Šejba out through the door: 'You can stay out in the corridor till morning. Let the whole world see what a good-for-nothing layabout Mr Presiding Judge Dorn is!'

She shoved him so hard that he fell over and banged his nose, and locked the door behind him.

'Thank God for that,' thought Šejba as he climbed the stairs. 'It turned out all right in the end.' The only thing was, she'd held onto his boots. His bare feet seemed to him to be shedding a little light on his path, somehow.

He crept up to the second floor. God be praised, he was already passing the door of the first flat without any noise . . . and then all of a

sudden, a hand grabbed his collar and dragged him inside.

Šejba found himself surrounded by a darkness even more terrifying than that on the first floor and then, for no reason, he got a slap on the head and a female voice rang out in his ears: 'Kiss my hand!'

He kissed the hand and the voice asked: 'Where are your shoes?'

Šejba said nothing. He felt the warm hand that he had just kissed running across his bare feet.

He felt himself struck in the back, so hard that he saw stars and heard the words: 'I see, Doctor Peláš, the Examining Magistrate, is not ashamed to come home to his wife drunk and barefoot. What have you done with your stockings, you jailbird?'

Šejba was silent. He was thinking: Examining Magistrate Dr Peláš had been in charge of his last interrogation.

'What have you done with your socks, you jailbird?' the question rang out again.

'I never had any on,' he replied.

'Aha, you're disguising your voice, you villain and you don't know what you're saying.' Šejba felt himself being shaken and his skeleton-keys fell out of his pocket.

'What's that?'

'The keys to the attic,' Šejba replied despondently.

Hardly had he uttered these words than he was thrown out into the corridor. The skeleton-keys came flying out after him followed by the words: 'You're blind drunk, you filthy pig!'

He was about to pick up his keys when someone gripped his arm, gave him a shove and cried: 'No, that really is too much! He gets the whole house up, drinks himself silly and tries to get in through the first door he comes to. What would Mrs Peláš think of that?' And a woman's hand dragged him across to the door opposite, through the hall and into an inside room, where he was dumped onto the sofa. He heard the key turn in the door of an adjoining room and a voice called out: 'It's a good job the Manager can't see you now. A fine cashier he'd think he's got! You can sleep on the divan tonight.'

A quarter of an hour later, Šejba the burglar opened the door and fled from that ill-starred building as if the Devil was after him. And to this day, he doesn't know whether he just imagined it all, or whether it really happened.

He doesn't read the newspapers either, so he hasn't found out in which house it was that his boots, his skeleton-keys and his empty rum-bottle were found.