

Stories from the Water Bailiff's Watch-Tower at Razice



by Jaroslav Hašek

Digitalized by

RevSocialist

for

SocialistStories

INTRODUCTION

A fascinating feature of Southern Bohemia is its chain of some 270 fish-ponds or lakes, in which the carp, so much prized in Catholic lands, are bred and fished. The system of interlocking lakes, held by dams and linked by narrow canals and conduits, is of great antiquity, dating back to the sixteenth century, when the Rosenbergs, the mighty "Lords of the Rose" who were the largest landlords in Bohemia, laid out this enormous complex of water. Every three years these lakes are still drained and the carp brought in by a wide sweep of drag-nets. The fisheries had to be protected from poachers, and the level of the waters and the state of the dams controlled. From the first this was done by water bailiffs or so-called "fishmasters", of whom Hašek's grandfather was one.

HAŠEK'S INTRODUCTION

Jareš, the water bailiff, was my grandfather. By now his bones and his wife's have long been mouldering in their graves. Once I went to see his former work-place, the water bailiff's watch-tower at Ražice. It lay in a picturesque valley, through which the river Blanice flows on its way from Vodňany and Protivín. All around in a semi-circle stretch the forests of Písek, and the old watch-tower is surrounded by the villages of Putům, Heřman, and Ražice which are about a half-hour away.

There are two lakes nearby — Ražice and Prkov. On the other side of the watch-tower are wide stretches of fertile land, and beyond that runs a white road which skirts the black woods of Háj. It is one of those many very picturesque corners of Southern Bohemia.

But today the former water bailiff's watch-tower, in which life was often so merry, houses one of the fishery keepers from the estate. The building is falling to pieces, and through a window, which is pasted over with grease paper, the old keeper watches the dam, which shows serious cracks. And beyond it he can see the lake, the upper part of which has now been changed into fields, where a ploughman, striding behind his plough, turns up here and there roots of water plants, which once rippled the surface of the water and gave cover to wild ducks. . . .

From the dam I gazed at the watch-tower and remembered how my late grandfather used to tell me of the many evenings when they sat in it and told stories of poachers, of Behalt, director of the estate, of the hollow oak on the dam, of Matěj, the stable boy, and of the final demise of the watch-tower itself.

The stories they told one evening

IN THE ROOM WERE SEATED ROUND THE TABLE THE WATER bailiff from Ražice, the fishery keepers from Řežabinec and Štětice, and a young assistant from Kestřany. They were waiting for it to get quite dark.

Outside, the autumn evening was gradually descending. Wisps of mist circled over the lakes and revolved between the tree-tops in the woods beyond the white road. Through the window one could see how in the mist above the meadows will-o'-the-wisps rose out of the pools, bobbed up and down a little while, and then vanished among the thickets.

"Those will-o'-the-wisps roam over the countryside like the late-lamented Hanžl," said the keeper from Řežabinec.

"Why the late-lamented Hanžl?" asked the young assistant from Kestřany, who was sitting at the table at the very window-ledge and peering into the autumn mists.

"Yes, the late-lamented Hanžl," the keeper repeated. "He was a farmer from these parts, from Ražice in fact. He had a fine farm, but he mortgaged all of it. He loved to drink and play cards. At that time, when he was still alive, there were three dangerous poachers in this region who did a hell of a lot of damage to our fisheries. Their names were Kalous, Špačík, and Šrámek. They knew every path there was and could find their way even at night and in the worst mist. No one ever managed to catch them.

“Well to go on — one day Hanžl went to Protivín to sell a cow at the fair.

“‘If you don’t bring back a hundred guilders,’ his wife said before Hanžl left, ‘don’t you dare show your face at home!’

“And so Hanžl went on his way and managed to sell the cow. He got a little more than a hundred guilders for it. It was then that same autumn weather, like today, and very cold.

“‘Why shouldn’t I go and have a glass of something to warm me up?’ Hanžl thought to himself. And so he went into an inn, and being the sort of chap he was, started drinking and playing cards. In the end he lost twenty guilders. ‘What am I to do now?’ he wondered. ‘I’ve got to bring home a hundred guilders or else my wife will throw me out.’ And you know, his wife was a masterful woman.

“And so Hanžl decided to stay the night at the inn, and spent the whole of the following day and evening playing cards until he had made up the hundred guilders again. But next evening he lost all his money once more, the whole hundred, and when he had none left to pay his bill with they threw him out.

“He was tipsy, and on his way home he fell into the lake somewhere. This sobered him up a bit and as soon as he got home he said to his wife, ‘Don’t stare at me like that! I fell into the lake. My goodness, in that mist it’s easy for a chap to lose his way. Now I must go and change, and then I’ll tell you everything. Old girl, it went absolutely splendidly.’

“Meanwhile Mrs. Hanžlová began to recover from her initial shock and said sternly, ‘Have you brought back all the money?’

“‘No, I haven’t brought any,’ Hanžl replied calmly. ‘But it’s all in good hands.’

“‘You dirty villain!’ said Mrs. Hanžlová. In short, she didn’t half swear at him and said she would throw him out, but God she would.

“‘Wife, don’t take the name of the Lord in vain,’ Hanžl said solemnly. ‘I’ve deposited the hundred guilders at the law courts at Písek as a security. It’s a long story. In Protivín I learned something very interesting. You know of course that Kalous, Špačík, and Šrámek poach fish hereabouts?’

“‘Lord love us,’ wailed Mrs. Hanžlová, ‘you haven’t surely been making friends with them?’

“‘Oh, it’s difficult to make you understand,’ said Hanžl seriously, ‘but, to cut a long story short, the noble Prince Schwarzenberg’s estate has offered a reward of three hundred guilders to anyone who catches those three. Well, I thought to myself, ‘Good heavens! I’ve got plenty of courage, so why shouldn’t I try?’ But the snag is that anyone who applied had got to deposit a hundred guilders at the Písek law courts as a security, to ensure that no one makes a fool of the estate. All right, then, I deposited the money and went home. And as I was coming from Písek, it was so dark that I couldn’t see a single step in front of me. Then suddenly I heard a voice. And, can you imagine it? It was Šrámek, Kalous, and Špačík. I recognized them by their voices and followed them as far as Sukov lake. There in the mist I fell into the water and, before I could manage to climb out, the rascals were gone.’

“‘Dear heaven,’ sobbed Mrs. Hanžlová, ‘think that there were three of them and you only one! If they do anything to you, what’ll become of me?’

“‘Yes,’ said Hanžl, ‘it’s true that I’m only one, but I’m pretty tough you know. Or do you want me to give the whole thing up? Then I’ll lose the deposit and we shan’t get anything.’

“‘No, for heaven’s sake, don’t do that!’ said Mrs. Hanžlová in a frightened voice. ‘I’m only saying that one day that boldness of yours will be the death of you.’

“‘You can easily imagine that he probably hardly slept a wink the whole night, being so afraid that his wife might jump to the truth. She didn’t, however, because she said to him next morning, ‘I dreamed that Šrámek threw you into the lake.’

“‘I’ll get the better of them,’ said Hanžl. ‘This evening I’ll be on the watch, to see whether they go after the fish again.’

“And that evening he went out. You can understand how he felt. He couldn’t come home until night, in case the truth became obvious to his wife. In the autumn it’s not pleasant to wander about the countryside at night in the mist. We all know that very well.

“Well, it went on like that for three days. Hanžl wandered

about the countryside at night, caught a cold, and his wife began to grumble that he had still not caught anyone and that in the end he would lose the deposit. And so he went out into the mist for a fourth day, swearing and telling himself that he had been an awful ass to tell lies like that to his wife, all because he had been afraid of confessing the truth.

“But one day it all came out at last. Hanžl went out once more in the evening into the mist and during that time his wife went to see some neighbours. They happened to have their son Vincek with them and, as luck would have it, he kept the inn at Protivín, where old Hanžl had lost that wretched hundred guilders. One thing led to another and they started talking, just as we’re talking now, until the conversation turned on the fair. And Mrs. Hanžlová pumped Vincek so long until she wormed out of him that Hanžl had lost that hundred guilders playing cards.

“That night all hell broke loose at the Hanžls. When Hanžl returned home numb with cold from his wanderings, he knocked on the window and waited.



“Not a sound. Silence over the whole building. He knocked again. Once more no sound, silence. And when he knocked a third time, he heard the voice of his wife from the room, ‘You low-down scoundrel, they ought to offer those three hundred guilders for catching *you*, throwing away those hundred guilders playing cards. Go and sleep at those law courts in Písek or in the lake, but I’m not going to have you here, you dirty crook!’

“There was nothing for Hanžl to do but go away and continue his wanderings in the countryside in the cold and misty night. In the end he came to see us at the water bailiff’s watch-tower at Kestřany, where I was then apprenticed. He told us about his sufferings and slept the night with us. From that time on, we called him Hanžl, the will-o’-the-wisp, because he roamed about at night like the will-o’-the-wisps from the marshes.”

“Yes, I remember that too,” said the fisheries keeper from Štětice. “At that time there was only a water bailiff at Kestřany and not a head fisheries overseer as there is now.”

“Alas, those times are gone,” said the water bailiff. “It was quite different then.”

But that’s exactly what they used to say in those days,” said the keeper from Řežabinec. “When they remembered the old times, they always said, ‘And think of what it’s like today!’

“Yes, certainly, it was jolly in the watch-tower at Kestřany,” he went on, “especially when they drained the lakes of the fish. Then all the gentry came. All the free beer was drunk up at once; there was a lot of baking, cooking, and singing. The servants had a good time too. When I was an apprentice there—I remember I was about seventeen—I hadn’t been there longer than a few months, when I took part for the first time in the catch and had the job of counting the fish they caught.

“I counted up to twenty. Then I suddenly realized that when you count fish, instead of ‘twenty’ the fisherman say ‘*mecítma*’. But I counted ‘one and *twenty*’. Suddenly I got a terrific clout on the ear from the water bailiff, who shouted in my ear, ‘*Mecítma, mecítma, one and mecítma!*’”

“‘Why do you hit me, master?’, I asked. And he replied, ‘You

must say "one *mecítma*" and then go on counting "two *mecítma*, three *mecítma*" and so on.'

"But I went on counting, 'One and twenty, two and twenty.' And once more I got a great clout on the ear. The water bailiff shouted, 'One and *mecítma*, two *mecítma*.' But this was too much for me and I said, 'But, master, I can't speak that language.' And after that they laughed at me for a whole week. Fortunately the water bailiffs came up and took over the counting and I helped them draw in the net."

"It was not only in the water bailiffs' watch-towers that we had fun," said the keeper from Štětice, "but we had it in the keepers' lodges too. Like, for example, once in the lodge at Telín, when they were fishing out Telín lake. The water bailiffs came there from all over the region. They ordered food at the village inn but it's a long way from Telín to the lake's edge. So they went to the keeper's wife. 'Missis, here's a nice carp. Cook it for us *au bleu* — blue.' 'Of course I will, however you like,' she replied. That was in the morning.

"When you're fishing you get pretty hungry, and the water bailiffs were longing for the moment when they could sit down to their meal that evening.

"'I think we ought to have one more carp cooked *au bleu*,' said one of the water bailiffs. And so they had another one cooked, and talked about how they would enjoy it. Their mouths watered at the thought of that carp *au bleu*.

"Whenever the keeper's wife appeared, they asked her how the carp was getting on.

"'You're going to enjoy it,' she replied.

"'It had better be good,' the water bailiffs said. 'You'll be well paid for your trouble.'

"At last came the evening after the catch. The water bailiffs came into the room starving and sent for some beer.

"'Now, Missis, let's have that "blue" carp.'

"'Missis, you're taking a long time over that carp.'

"Finally she came in carrying a huge steaming dish and with it a small paper bag.

“Here you are, gentlemen, here’s that carp, and if some of you, gentlemen, think it’s not “blue” enough, please add a little “blue” yourselves. I’m a simple woman and I don’t know how exactly you gentlemen like it,’ the keeper’s wife said.

“Oh, you Godforsaken woman, you, you’ve put washing blue in it,’ the water bailiffs groaned and went off hungrily to the village to get some food there.

“The keeper’s wife said afterwards, ‘Well, well, it’s not easy to please important gentlemen.’”

“It was marvellous fun, and it still is to be there when the fish are being counted,” said the water bailiff Jareš. “But once that fun cost me dear. When we had finished counting — it was at Kestřany before Christmas — we had a drink or two, as was our custom. I drank too and when we left I was not perhaps drunk but a little ‘squiffy’, as they say.

“And so I walked home to the Ražice water-tower at midnight. It was snowing and the wind blew in my face. My waders sank deep into the snow. The wind made snow drifts and you couldn’t tell the road from the ditch. It was blowing everywhere and snowing all the time.

“I might have frozen. I wanted to have a rest. I was hot because I had a heavy fur coat on, and so I sat down on a small slope. At home they organized a search party for me and in the meantime I fell asleep in the frost and blizzard. I don’t know how it happened, but all at once it was as if something fell on me.

“Suddenly I woke up and found myself in bed at home. I should certainly have frozen outside, if it had not been for the dog Pinčl.

“He scented me just outside Ražice. Then he barked, and ran out onto the dam. Then he rushed back again and went on barking and running until people came out, went to look for me and brought me home.

“Pinčl was the first to find me and he saved my life. Alas, the poor creature had a sad end. He was an excellent dog, but unfortunately he caught rabies. One day he ran after us the whole morning, licked the hands of every one of us, rubbed up against us, licked our hands and whined. We looked for him in the afternoon,

but he was nowhere to be found. We called him, but he didn't come. Only in the evening one of the servants found him hidden in a corner. He was motionless and quite cold.

"We thought it was all over with him, and the servant carried him out into the yard to bury him the next morning. We were very cut up about that dog. Next morning we went out into the yard to look at him — and he was gone! He'd recovered outside and run away. But after he'd bitten three dogs, the hunters from Písek shot him. It was confirmed that he had got rabies.

"Then Tonda Košťel, from the hospital at Skočice, treated us all to a crust of bread basted with something like ink. We had to cook it in unsalted water and drink the brew for nine days. Just think of it, we weren't allowed to eat anything salt for nine days. Nothing but unsalted food!"

"Tonda was a good medical assistant," said the keeper from Štětice. "In the late Princess Eleonore Schwarzenberg's time a mad dog bit the prince's hunting dogs. They called in Tonda and he cured them all.

"The doctors took him to court in Písek and tried to get out of him how he did it, but he wouldn't tell."

"He ought to have told them," said the gamekeeper from Řežabinec. "As it was, no one had any benefit from it."

"They say his father made him promise not to tell it, when he confided the secret to him," said the keeper from Štětice. "His father learned it somewhere in France where he was fighting during the Napoleonic wars there."

"Well, it's time for us to go and wait for the poachers in the lake at Řežabinec," the gamekeeper said, interrupting Jareš's story. "It's nearly ten o'clock."

All of them rose from the table and went out into the foggy autumn night, the water bailiff, the two fishery keepers, and young Hynek from Kestrány.

While Jareš was water bailiff at Ražice, most of the poachers were in Putím and poached fish, sometimes in one lake and sometimes in another.

And of all these Putím poachers the most famous were the Vejr family, which consisted of father, son, and daughter. As for the daughter, Anna, she only sold fish which had been poached by her brother or father.

At the age of twenty, Josef Vejr went one better than his father, when he once actually tried to drain Prkov lake.

He pulled out the plugs which keep the water from running out of the lake into the conduits, and then in the shallow water he caught a huge creelful of carp.

That was young Vejr's method. Old Vejr usually stuck to the traditional methods, catching fish in a net with a long handle. "It makes less noise," he said, justifying his traditional technique, but the young man, imbued with new and advanced ideas, objected. "It doesn't yield half as much as when you drain the lakes."

This often disturbed the family harmony, because both of them, the younger and the elder, obstinately defended their own ideas, and once it even happened that young Vejr went off to live with his uncle Holoubek, who was a poacher too.

But he did not stay with him for long. You see, he didn't get on with his uncle either, because of his technique of "draining the lake". Uncle Holoubek said to him one day, "If you have to poach, then do it decently. New tricks like that are neither decent nor honest. Look, yesterday, with the net, my godfather and I caught four fully grown carp in the Ražice lake."

And so young Vejr moved back to his father again. That was the time when the following song was going the rounds of Putím:

Young Vejr from Prkov,
Drained the lake at night. . . .

It ended:

And so that young devil
Flooded all the meadows
Until Ražice's water bailiff
Drove the plugs in again.

Young Josef was mortally offended by this song and swore that he would take vengeance on its author.

From the earliest times the history of the human race offers us abundant examples of how in various peoples and communities traitors can be found, who, driven partly by a lust for revenge and partly by a desire for fame, have basely betrayed the plans of their fellow-citizens to the enemy. Just such a traitor was young Josef Vejr in Putím. When he learned that his uncle Holoubek had composed the above-mentioned insulting song, he came one day to Kestřany and told the fisheries overseer that Holoubek planned to poach fish in the Řežabinec lake the following Saturday.

The fisheries overseer at Kestřany was an old man, but it was well known all over the district that he was very fond of girls, if they were the least bit pretty.

His old wife was consequently very careful when it came to choosing maids for the household. She refused to accept any that were even a tiny bit pretty, and so all those who worked in the old overseer's house were notorious for their ugliness. Consequently he sought compensation among the girls of the nearby villages, to the considerable fury of his wife, who was madly jealous of her husband and just as ugly as all the maids who worked for her.

"You're young Vejr, aren't you?" the overseer said, when Josef confided to him that his uncle was going to poach fish in Režabinec lake, "and you have a sister called Anna?"

"Yes," Josef replied.

"She has dark hair," the old overseer, who knew all the girls in the neighbourhood, went on, "and it was you who drained the lake at Prkov?"

This came as a thunder-clap to young Vejr.

"Confess it now!" said the overseer in a severe voice. "You'll go to gaol for that."

Then he altered his tone and said familiarly:

"Well, tell the truth to me now. Who else is going poaching with your uncle?"

"Papa," Josef blurted out. A vision of gendarmes and the gaol rose up before his eyes and in his ears rang out the refrain of the song:

And so that young devil
Flooded all the meadows,
Until Ražice's water bailiff
Drove the plugs in again.

"And old Vejr too?" the overseer replied. "Then you must send your sister Anna here, so that I can investigate the matter properly."

Young Vejr pulled himself together and said, "Yes, but please don't tell that I've been to see you."

"In that case I'll send a boy to fetch Anna," said the overseer in an affable tone, because he already saw Anna in front of him and visualized how he would clasp her round the waist and pinch her cheek.

And so he sent Hynek to fetch Anna. The young assistant had danced three times with her not so long ago at the country fairs at Putím, Štětice, and Ražice.

"My young lass," the overseer said to Anna, when Hynek brought her to him, "this is an official matter, so sit here close by me! I've just heard that your father poaches fish. Now, come on, sit closer to me — much closer! This is what I've heard and I think that it's sometimes better to settle things in an amicable fashion. Come on, do sit closer to me! You know, my lass, that I'm a good man, but duty is duty. There's the gendarme, prison, and so forth, but all sorts of things can be arranged."

And as he spoke these words he seized Anna round the waist with one hand and pinched her cheek with the other, smiling very amiably as he did so. "Give me a kiss," he whispered.

Anna was furious and jumped away. "Kiss your old missis, grandpa!" she said. "If you dare to try that again, I'll tell your wife straight away. Goodbye."

She rushed out of the room, flushed with anger.

"Dear little Anna," Hynek called after her, as he stood on the dam, "don't run so fast! I'll see you home. What's happened to you?"

And he went with Anna as far as Putím and, when they parted, he said, "Don't be afraid. I know our old man's going to take his revenge, but I'll put it right somehow."

The old overseer did indeed take his revenge. He informed the water bailiff Jareš that on Saturday the poachers were going to take fish from the Řežabinec lake and that he should take strict counter-measures. He sent young Hynek off to help him.

As they all went out into the dark autumn night the water bailiff, Jareš, the fishery keepers from Řežabinec and Štětice, and young Hynek from Kestrány. The water bailiff warned, "Quiet! None of you are to utter a word!"

The expedition walked over the meadows, jumped over the ditches, and strode along the narrow track between the fields.

They strode confidently, although they could not see a step in front of them, confidently and silently, so that they could hear how the water gurgled in the canals and somewhere in the distance the carrier's cart rattled along the road.

It was so dark that, although they walked in single file, they could not see each other.

In this way three-quarters of an hour passed until they came near the dam of the Řežabinec lake. But before they actually reached it, they heard a suspicious splashing of water, a continuous splashing, quite unlike the single ripple made when a carp jumps.

The suspicious splashing and murmurs went on and now it sounded more definitely as though they came from the other side of the lake.

"And so the overseer was right," they all thought to themselves. "We've got them," said Hynek, remembering Anna.

They separated on the dam. They wanted to encircle the poachers.

"Absolute quiet!" the water bailiff whispered into their ears, "and you, Hynek, go round the dam on the other side."

But just as they were encircling the unsuspecting poachers, a shout suddenly rang out through the quiet misty night: "Help! Help! I'm in the water."

It was Hynek's voice and the result was that from the other side of the dam the irate voice of the gamekeeper from Štětice rang out: "You ass, can't you at least keep your mouth shut?"

Another result was that the suspicious splashing stopped and that when old Vejr and Holoubek trudged their roundabout way

across the meadows to Putím with empty nets they congratulated themselves, "It was a good thing that that ass fell into the water."

Hynek, assistant at the water bailiff's watch-tower at Kestřany, remember that a prophet is never honoured among his own people — especially if the people don't know about him. . . .

I am afraid that in the eyes of both parties you made a perfect ass of yourself.

Director Behalt

AFTER THE RETIREMENT OF THE GOOD DIRECTOR OF THE PRINCE'S estate at Protivín, a new one came, by the name of Behalt. He was a German. It was true that he had already learned Czech, but he never missed an opportunity to introduce into his Czech conversation the German expletive "Himmel, Herrgott!"

What was remarkable about his person was that wherever he went there appeared in the doorway first his waistcoat and only afterwards his face, because he had a belly of enormous proportions which might have resembled many other round objects but least of all a human belly, if the saying is true that the most perfect creature on earth is man.

It is rather sad that when describing Mr. Behalt's person one has to start with this part of his anatomy. But it is very necessary to describe it because throughout his life, and during his time as director at Protivín, it played the most important role.

His digestive organs were in good shape, as was self-evident, and they too played an important part in his life.

One can safely say that Mr. Behalt gorged his way through life and I am sure that when he was sleeping he dreamed he was sitting at a table groaning with food, and if he had nightmares they would certainly have been that a famine had descended upon Bohemia.

Some directors have a habit of making a small fortune for themselves during their term of office, neglecting other vital

questions, and Mr. Behalt certainly not only tried to amass a fortune, but wanted to enlarge the circumference of his belly as well.

Different people have different foibles, like the former director, for instance, who was fond of remembering the years he spent in the army and used to talk about them wherever he went: "Ah, yes, yes. . . . At that time. . . . Our captain. . . . And there were many like him. . . . The whole company stood as though they were on guard. . . . He winked his eye. . . . But the army now. . . ."

But in whatever company Mr. Behalt found himself he would say, "And you say that piquant sauce with goose. . . . What? Crisply roast goose. . . . Yes! That's the best. . . . What about sirloin of beef with dumpling? Roast mutton, sir, that's something, only it must be swimming in sauce."

I can picture him quite clearly from my late grandfather's account of him. I can see him going home after a visit somewhere, pleased that they had helped him into the carriage, which had been specially built for him, delighted with his good lunch, stroking his waistcoat, patting his belly, and saying, "Now, all praise to the Lord, and render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."



I can imagine how he contentedly panted and puffed, until the coachman, who did not yet know him very well, looked round on his driver's seat thinking that the director was trying to give him a sign to turn to the left or the right.

I can also see how after an hour's driving he would start to stir uneasily, because he was beginning to feel hungry again, and how he would stroke his waistcoat once more and speak to himself in a fatherly tone, "Just keep calm. We'll be home in a minute."

The journey continued to the accompaniment of his sighs: "Oh, it's a nightmare, when a chap is always hungry."

Yes, it was true. He suffered from everlasting hunger: it woke him up even at night; he felt it ten minutes after he had had his breakfast, soon after he had had lunch, and after dinner too. In short, there had never been in Protivín a director like that, so fat and so everlastingly hungry. When after taking up his post he gave a lunch to the staff of the Protivín estate, he ate a whole goose and two hens, and after the guests had gone he said to his wife, "For the first time I could not eat very much. Everyone of those people kept staring at me. A chap feels he has to restrain himself. But I'll make up for it in some other way."

And make up for it he did, by driving round the various water bailiffs' watch-towers.

The wives of the water bailiffs on the Protivín estate kept up the custom of bringing to the director's kitchen geese, chickens, ducks, eggs, butter, and various other requisites.

It was a custom of unknown provenance, observed by all the wives except the wife of Jareš of Ražice.

It was a form of bribery which could have had its origin in the bad conscience of some of the water bailiffs, because Jareš used to say, "Anyone who does his job honestly doesn't need to deliver anything. A director like that, who has six times my salary, is an employee of the Prince, just like me. Why should I have to give him anything, when I earn six times less than he does and do my job honestly and well?"

And so his wife never brought anything to the kitchen of any of the directors.

But now the new director, Behalt, to appease his everlasting hunger, drove round the water bailiffs' watch-towers under the pretext of getting to know the people personally. He made them arrange lavish feasts for himself and later, on the excuse that he had to keep an eye on how they were carrying out their duties, he drove round again and sampled their tables.

The wives of the water bailiffs entertained him royally. After he had eaten his fill and cleverly hinted during the meal that it would do no harm if he could take home with him some of their poultry, he drove a little further to another water bailiff's watch-tower, where he had another meal and where the wife not only set food on the table but before he departed put some poultry into his carriage as well.

Mr. Behalt looked forward most of all to visiting the watch-tower at Ražice, because he had heard it said in all the watch-towers what an excellent cook Jareš's wife was.

Above all, it was common talk how exquisitely she could cook game, and this filled him with enthusiasm. People also talked of her roast mutton, which sounded to the director like the loveliest poetry, assuming of course that he ever read any.

And so he was not slow to visit the watch-tower at Ražice. He had the carriage prepared — to the back of which he had fitted, after he had taken up his post, a sort of trunk, into which the coachman stored away the eatables — and then he drove off, looking forward very much to the meal which the wife of Jareš would have prepared to welcome him.

His reception by Jareš was quite formal. Neither the water bailiff nor his wife bowed very deeply.

"I've come," said the director, when he had sat down on a chair (after having first carefully examined it to see whether it would bear the weight of his body), "to meet you and get to know you personally."

"Would you like something to eat first, sir?" the wife asked.

"Well, hm, something to eat, well, to tell the truth, I certainly wouldn't reject it," he answered hungrily, looking with peculiar pleasure through the window, where geese and ducks could be

seen wandering about, as well as various poultry—from crested Houdan to guinea fowl—which he also very much enjoyed eating.

“You’ve got a lot of poultry, geese, and ducks here,” he said to the water bailiff, as though in a reverie. “I love a good roast goose. I’ve heard that you’re marvellous at cooking game. Ah, there I see guinea fowl. I adore them with noodles. Also hens with noodles. . . .”

“Take it easy, now,” the water bailiff thought to himself and went on listening to what the fat director had to say. “On the estate where I was director before,” he said, “the bailiffs also kept guinea fowl, geese, ducks, and poultry of all kinds. Wherever I went they entertained me and, when I went home, the coachman said, ‘Your Honour, I can’t sit properly on the driving seat, I am so cluttered up with geese and ducks. I believe they’re for Madam’s kitchen, for your good lady.’ And the bailiffs’ wives came themselves and brought all sorts of things. Of course I said to myself, ‘I’ll show myself considerate in return.’ And so I never harried anyone unnecessarily. And you should have seen how popular I was.”

“I see,” thought the water bailiff to himself, “but you’re not going to catch me quite so easily,” and he went on listening to what the director was saying; he was speaking in dulcet tones, like someone recalling lovely moments. “And wherever I went they at once asked me, ‘What do you like to eat best, sir?’ ‘I like this and that,’ I replied, and after a time they set before me on the table just what I had said.”

The director patted his belly and sighed. “They forced me to help myself to more and more. ‘I’ve had too much to eat,’ I told them. And believe me, I had to loosen my waistcoat very often, and, when I left they again gave the coachman things for my kitchen.

“In Kestrány,” he continued after a pause, “I heard that your wife knows how to roast a joint of mutton like venison, and that few people can do it so well.”

Again he was silent and then, stroking his waistcoat, he went on, “Mutton prepared like venison is my weakness, but of course a chap has to give prior warning. At home I say, for example, ‘I’d like

mutton done in venison style.' And in a week's time I have a delicious leg of mutton.

"You don't hapen to have any sucking pigs?" he asked suddenly. "If you do, you could perhaps sell me some for my kitchen. I love sucking-pig. When a chap sees a finely roasted sucking-pig, then — if I may put it like that — everything inside a chap sings with joy. I'll tell you something. On the estate which I ran before, I once said to a bailiff, as I said to you just now, 'Could you sell me a sucking-pig?' 'I can't, Your Honour,' he replied and made some excuse or another. But after a few days he came to my kitchen in person and brought two sucking-pigs. 'You sly rogue,' I said laughingly, 'why, you said you couldn't sell them. How much do they cost?' And, do you know what he said? 'For Your Honour nothing at all.'"

The director expected that the water bailiff would laugh, but it produced no such reaction.

Jareš said, "Will you allow me, sir, to show you over the watch-tower and the dam? Some repairs are needed."

"Oh, some other time," the director replied, and went on in dulcet tones. "But here too on the estate it's not so bad either. The water bailiffs are appreciative people, I think."

"They do their job," said Jareš.

At that moment his wife came in and set in front of the director a dish of fried chicken and a bottle of beer.

"This is a good beginning," he thought to himself, as he ate the chicken. "Fried chicken always provokes the appetite. It's strange that they serve chicken before the other courses, but perhaps that's the custom hereabouts."

When he had eaten the chicken and drunk up the bottle of beer, they took away the empty plate and bottle, and cleared the table.

"They're perhaps going to change the table-cloth," the director thought to himself, as he stroked his waistcoat. "Judging by that chicken the wife is really an excellent cook. I've got something to look forward to when the other courses follow."

If he had gone on looking forward until evening, he would

still have been waiting in vain, for he sat at the empty table for another half hour and the table had still not been laid again. "They haven't got it ready," he decided and interrupted the half-hour's silence with the words, "The chicken was really delicious."

"We've given you what we have," answered the water bailiff, "but we gave it with all our hearts. I, for example, don't really care about a chicken like that. I prefer a good piece of smoked pork with peas and cabbages, which we're going to have for lunch. If you'd like to wait and share our simple lunch with us, please do so. Now I must go and see if the reapers are doing their job properly. If you would care to come with me. . . ."

"Smoked pork with peas," the horrified director burst out. "I thought—very well then, if you have work to do—now I think about it, I too have got some other visit to make."

And he went on without even saying goodbye. When he climbed into the carriage and was a little way away from the cabin, he said to the coachman, "Volešník, didn't the wife of the water bailiff give you anything for the kitchen?" "No, she didn't," answered Volešník. "Where do you wish me to go now, sir?"

"To the water bailiff's watch-tower at Sudoměř," the director ordered, looking at the notes he had made the day before. "Sudoměř, three ducks for the kitchen."

And now he wrote: "The cabin at Ražice. Water bailiff a rebel." This brief note meant, "Wait, I'll teach you to do what your betters require of you!"

He was beside himself with rage, because nothing like that had ever happened to him before.

"I'll teach you to talk to me about repairs," he thought to himself, remembering the water bailiff's words— "Will you allow me, sir, to show you over the watch-tower and the dam? Some repairs are needed."

"One fried chicken and a bottle of beer, and they didn't even say 'Your Honour!' Repairs needed, indeed! I'll teach you who I am. Why, to me you're just a nobody! Never mind, we'll see each other again soon."

And the director came again a week later and from that time

on he drove to the Ražice watch-tower at any hour, surprised the water bailiff with his visits in the morning or afternoon, and always found something which did not please him.

"I definitely forbid you to keep geese and poultry here," he said one day during his visit. "They do a lot of damage."

"Excuse me, sir," the water bailiff answered, "His Highness gave me permission to keep them, and as far as the damage is concerned, if they do any, it's only on my meadow, which I receive in kind in lieu of part of my wages, and I have a herdsman to keep an eye on them."

"They do a lot of harm to the fields," said the fat director. "The fields belong to the farmers," replied the water bailiff, "and if they did any damage, I'd settle it with them."

"They eat the fish and small fry," said the director, falling back on his last objection, which was in his opinion unassailable.

"Excuse me, sir, geese don't eat fish or small fry. I've certainly never taught them that," replied the water bailiff.

On another visit of inspection the director looked at the ricks near the cabin. "You're a real landowner," he said, with a malicious smile.

He tried to find any way possible of getting his revenge. He forbade now this, now that, waiting for the water bailiff to send something to his kitchen at last. But nothing of the kind happened. The director's wife said, "It's a funny thing, but I know all the water bailiffs' wives except that one at Ražice."

And the director drove again and again and again to the watch-tower at Ražice, always on the look-out for some opportunity of revenging himself.

And one day the news spread over all the watch-towers on Protivín estate that the director had died and that the water bailiffs must go to his funeral.

When the Božov water bailiff returned home, he gave an account of it:

"There hasn't been such a funeral for a very long time. All the officials, the director, the water bailiffs, the fishery keepers—in short, masses and masses of people. And lots of ordinary folk. You

know, he hasn't been director for as much as half a year and then he dies. According to custom we water bailiffs ought to have carried the coffin. But something happened which won't happen again soon. The late director, as you know, was a fat man, and because of that fatness, he burst while in his coffin. And the coffin got soaked, and the stench was appalling. No one wanted to take it on his shoulder, until Jareš said to me, 'Josef, we'll take him on our shoulders.' And we did and carried him off. The others found this extraordinary and said, 'Hallo, look at Jareš! Behalt couldn't see any good in him and they were always at daggers drawn. Now, see how splendidly he has behaved.'"

People all over the region went on talking for a long time about that strange funeral, until another event completely brushed aside the story of Director Behalt.

Another event

THIS IS HOW THEY GOT TO KNOW ABOUT IT ON THE ESTATE AT Protivín. The director mentioned it to the officials, the officials to their wives, the wives to their married lady friends in Protivín, and they in their turn told other people, until it spread to the village and the water bailiffs' watch-towers. Something quite unheard of and unprecedented had happened to the director, who was the main person on the estate after the Prince himself, and this was what it was.

The director had set out on a tour of inspection and a survey of the water bailiffs' watch-towers and the dams only a few days after the great autumn rains.

In the part of the country where the lakes are situated the rainy season keeps the water bailiffs busy. They have continually to walk on the dams in the rain, see how far the water is rising and whether the plugs controlling the outflow are properly released, so that the superfluous water can escape through the conduits onto the meadows. They must see whether the water has not seeped out through the dam somewhere and that the dam is not leaking.

God forbid that it should! If it does, a great quantity of water begins to undermine a stone and seeps out through a small opening, which grows gradually wider. The enormous pressure of water

forces itself through the opening, undermines another stone, and begins to erode the masonry of the dam. And all this happens so quietly, without any noise, perhaps without even any pounding of waves or the surface of the lake being rippled.

Watch the lake. The rain makes infinitesimal rings on the surface, which begins to seethe slightly and all at once a torrent of water spurts out of the dam, a small torrent which becomes larger and larger, and after that the harm is done.

If this torrent is not noticed, the dam soon begins to break. As though at a given sign, huge boulders overgrown with grass begin to break out of the dam. It starts to rock and torrents of water begin tumbling out, foaming, and carrying with them stones, grass, and clay from the dam. The force of the whole lake seems to be concentrated here on this opening, which goes on and on widening with terrifying speed to the accompaniment of the terrible thunder of the waters, that hideous force, which only a short time before was lying so still and whose roaring muddy torrents are now bursting out on to the meadows below and destroying everything in their path.

A water bailiff's life seems to be nice and peaceful, but in reality it is nothing but a series of anxieties. He must continually watch the dam and see that the stones are firmly seated and the dam nowhere undermined. And if there are rains and the water in the lake rises, he has to pay careful attention and see that no tiny spring is trickling out of the dam. If it is, then the most important thing for him is not to lose his head. Clay must be thrown on both sides of the opening so that it is stopped up. All this has to be done very quickly, because if the opening is a large one no one will be able to stop the torrent of water, however many cartfuls of clay are thrown into the lake in front of the opening.

And now, when the rainy season had come and the surface of the lake had risen, the water bailiff Jareš watched the dam vigilantly throughout the night, testing the level of the water and seeing that the overflow plugs were removed so that the water could safely flow out.

The state of the dam of Ražice lake was good, but it was always necessary to keep a sharp look out none the less.

The water was now higher, but it was flowing out through the conduit, and when it rose still higher, the water bailiff had the sliding beams raised so that it flowed out along the conduit onto the meadows below the dam, where it flooded the grass.

Then the rains ceased. The surface of the lake returned again to its normal level, the plugs were firmly fastened, the dam had dried out, and only the grass below the dam, which had been under water during the rains, was beaten down — a sign that there had been a flood.

And it was just then that the director elected to come on a visit to the water bailiff's watch-tower at Ražice. He examined the entries in the book and went to inspect the dam, accompanied by the water bailiff.

The director noticed that the grass below the dam was beaten down and covered with mud.

"The dam must have leaked," he declared. "This is a very strange state of affairs."

"Excuse my saying so, sir," Jareš answered, "but there has not been any leak. Please come and look here."

"There's no doubt about it at all," the director said. "Do you think I'm blind? Do you really imagine I can't see that the grass is beaten down?"

"But please believe me, sir, that the dam has never leaked while I've been employed here."

"Of course it has," said the director. "Look, the grass is covered with mud."

Jareš began to get angry. "Please, I would have you understand, sir, that I know very well whether a dam has leaked or not. The grass is flat because there has been a flood and the water from the conduit has flowed out onto the meadow."

"The dam *must* have leaked," the director declared decidedly, although he understood very little about it.

Then Jareš became angry in earnest. "And I tell you, sir, that it has *not*. Look at it! You would know by the stones, if it had. It's

the dam, not the grass, which shows whether there has been a leak.”

As he said this, they were both standing on the dam above the sluice-gates, and the director, looking back into the black pools of water, repeated, “I tell you that it has leaked.”

His obstinacy maddened the water bailiff to such an extent that he shouted out in fury, “If you say that once again, I’ll throw you into the water!”

The director turned deadly pale, jumped away from the dam and stammered out, “Well, it’s not quite as bad as all that. I’m only asking. I like things to be in order, you know.” And he added as an afterthought, “How many days did it rain for?”

“Three days in succession,” replied the water bailiff.

“Three days! Hm, that’s quite a while,” he said, jumping off the dam. “Well, I think I’ve seen everything now.”

Jareš’ wife, who was in the courtyard and had listened in horrified astonishment to their dispute, watched them coming to the cabin in perfect calm, as though nothing had happened.



From that time on, whenever the director paid a visit to the Ražice watch-tower, he made himself as amiable as possible, never giving any sign that he was angry with the water bailiff, because he was so afraid of him.

However he did not fail to mention the incident to his staff; the staff then told their wives; the wives told their married lady friends etc., etc., until it got around the whole estate that the Ražice water bailiff had threatened to throw the director into the water.

But everyone said, "Don't tell anyone, whatever you do."

The end of the water bailiff's watch-tower

IT HAPPENED VERY SUDDENLY. IT WAS NOT PERHAPS A NATURAL calamity, but the will of the all-powerful director of the estate, to whom the water bailiff at Ražice appeared to be a rebel, all because he would not humble himself as he would have liked him to do.

Not far away at Talín they were once fishing out a lake and Jareš was there.

The lake had been drained in the evening, until water was left only in the middle, and in the falling waters heaps of fish had collected, which must be caught next morning by drawing in a net over what remained of the surface of the lake. Then an unknown miscreant opened the flood gates, and the remaining water escaped out on to the meadows so that the fish remained high and dry.

In this critical moment, Jareš appeared, roused up the other men and then, but only with tremendous exertion, brought water from a neighbouring lake in barrels on carts and poured it into the empty lake, where the fish were lashing about in the mud.

If that had not been done, all the fish would have perished but although Jareš, by his vigilance when all the others were asleep, saved the whole shoal of fish, the director, when he heard of it next morning, rebuked him for his carelessness.

And when Jareš, conscious of the correct way he had discharged his duties, tried to defend himself, the director shouted at him, "Get away from the tub and clear off!"

Then Jareš pulled off his waders, threw them at the director's feet and said, "All right, then, you can damn well get the fish yourself!"

And he went home to his watch-tower at Ražice.

The director left word that Jareš must come and apologize.

He left word once, twice, three times, but the water bailiff said each time, "Because he drove me away from the tub, am I to beg his pardon and perhaps kiss his hand?"

Then the director finally summoned Jareš to his office. When the water bailiff came home afterwards, he said quite simply to his wife, "Well, from this autumn we're retired."

"I'll get two hundred guilders a year," he went on. "We're going to abolish the water bailiff's post at Ražice," the director told me. "We've been thinking of doing so for a long time. We shall just have a fishery keeper there and the watch-tower will become a keeper's cabin."

And that was the end of the water bailiff's watch-tower. . . .