

The Baron's Bloodhound

Pinned to a yellowing door opposite the attic, up on the fourth floor in a god-forsaken back-street, there was a visiting-card which read:

BARON DEKKER OF PŘEHOŘOV

Serving-girls going up to the attic to hang up the washing would often stop outside that door and eavesdrop on the conversation issuing from that superior residence:

'You were saying, Count?'

'Thank you, Baron,' the selfsame voice would reply and then go on: 'I observe that His Excellency is in good spirits. Without doubt, by dear Prince, you were lucky at cards yesterday. What do you say to that, Count?'

'Unless the luck has something to do with that pretty Countess, dear Baron,' said the same voice, 'I'd put my shirt on it. What do you say to a ride today?'

'The horses are ready, gentlemen. *Allons*, then! Where have the hounds got to? *Auf*, Zebor!'

Then the servants would make haste to open the attic door, for a key would rattle in the lock and out of the door would emerge Baron Dekker and behind him, his bloodhound Zebor, he of the sorrowful countenance. The Baron wore a shabby, carefully preserved coat; the bloodhound, it seemed, had on a second-hand skin.

If he had been a horse, he would have looked like Don Quixote's Rocinante.

As it was, there was nothing for it but to trail along after the Baron through this Vale of Tears, one side of him drooping with despondency, the other flaunting the airs and graces of a dog raised in high society.

He had learned this trick from his master.

Outside the house, the Baron was a totally different person. He let everyone feel the full weight of his baronhood. But at home in the evening, back in his lodgings, the old man gave a terrible groan, sat down at his desk and began to write begging-letters to noblemen of all kinds of title and description.

The Baron's bloodhound sat beside him meanwhile, lifting an ear now and again and then turning, with an aristocratic gesture, to look for fleas.

Those confounded fleas! In one of those confidential moments when professional men air their differences, Zebor had said to a dachshund belonging to a huckster down on the street: 'pon my word, those fleas have cost me a good ten years of my life.'

Hearing the scratching of the pen, Zebor stopped rootling about with his nose in the fur on his thigh, twitched one ear and gazed at the Baron with the rheumy eyes of a man who has a cold.

In the begging-letter he was writing to a Count he knew, who was a Captain in the army, the old man was in the process of constructing an enormous fib. He had worked his way so thoroughly into the fiction that he had lost 80,000 crowns and had given his word of honour that he would pay his debt within the week, that he laid down his pen and walked rapidly up and down, declaiming in a loud voice: 'Yes, my dear Count, I must redeem my word of honour; that's the sort of thing, I trust, that doesn't need even to be discussed among gentlemen.'

His bloodhound walked snorting behind him like a shadow and when the Baron sat down once more to continue his begging-letter, he sat down beside him once again and fished a mean and modest titbit out of his fur. When they had finally sent the letter off, the two of them went to bed. Zebor climbed up to his master's feet and through the cold, dingily furnished chamber, the quavering voice of the Baron resounded: 'Zebor, Zebor, where have we got to?'

This was one of those times of deep intimacy, when everything comes to the surface. The hound had his say too: don't imagine that he was a silent partner. When he had had a good grunt, he gave his opinion on the whole matter: 'Well, My Lord, we shouldn't have thrown our money about so wildly.'

'You know, Zebor, just between you and me, we were a pair of numbskulls. What on earth made us take it into our heads to keep so many dancers all at once?'

'Pardon me, My Lord,' growled the bloodhound in reply, 'I didn't keep any dancers, not a single one. And you, My Lord, you were a bit of a card-fiend as well. Was it me, My Lord, that played *trente-quarante*? All I did was chase the hares. Do you remember, My Lord, the time I bit the gamekeeper?'

'Zebor, Zebor,' sighed the Baron in his skimpy feather-bed, 'can you remember the way I used to put down the oysters? Just a nice

sprinkling of lemon . . . It makes me cry to think about it . . . and th-then, th-th-then some nice wine on top . . . dammit, Zebor, I'm going to blub!

'You and me both, My Lord,' growled Zebor and they both had a whine into the feather-bed.

The last thing the old Baron said before he went to sleep was: 'Suppose we won the lottery, Zebor?'

Zebor, who was just nodding off, stirred himself and thought: 'At your service, My Lord.' Then he lay down again and slept on.

They lay like that for two days without eating, until the postman came - with twenty crowns from the Captain.

Then they both got dressed. That is, Zebor licked himself into shape as far as he could reach and the Baron climbed into those faded garments of his, and they stepped ceremoniously out onto the street.

The twenty crowns had warmed the blood in their veins. Zebor knew they were going round the corner and then down the passageway and on to the other end of town, to a certain shop which had a sign outside bearing a horse's head and the inscription: 'Horsemeat Butcher'.

They marched grandly along, each preoccupied with a vision of smoked horsemeat. And plenty of it.

There was no question, for Zebor, of dallying with other dogs today. One simply didn't have any time to spare for riff-raff of that sort. Today, one was a gentleman. One was going to the shop with the sign of the horse's head.

In the shop, the Baron always manifested certain scruples and would say that he would like three kilograms for a poor widow of his acquaintance who had a large number of children. He would have bought them beef, but would rather spend what he saved on meat to buy stockings for the widow and her children.

And while the Baron was entangling himself in one lie after another, his bloodhound was saying to the butcher's dog: 'We had young sucking-pig yesterday. I ate half a goose, myself.'

And he walked airily away with his master, who was carrying three kilograms of horse-meat. And that night, on a full stomach, they both dreamed they were at the races.