

Everyday Spooks

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STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

“Spare a cigarette,” said the man, and Mr Mikulášek, a wages clerk, took a step back, this being the all too familiar war-cry of ladies of the night and those enterprising spirits that bash people over the head with rocks wrapped in handkerchiefs and steal their watches.

His caution was a little overdone, since it was early afternoon and there was nothing to fear, but Mr Mikulášek was afraid in principle.

This particular scrounger was old, of slight build, with a huge beard and very dirty, as such little old men tend to be. A cross between a deserter and a leprechaun. I say ‘tend to be’, rather than



‘tended to be’, because there have always been such little old men and they still exist. Their shoes are worse than down-at-heel and they carry a sack of uncertain contents. What drives them remains to be fully researched.

Mr Mikulášek reached into his pocket and gave the old man a cigarette. Then he felt a twinge of embarrassment and gave him another. The little old man stuck the first cigarette through his whiskers and the second in his hat, said ‘Thank you, guv’ then asked for a light from Mr Mikulášek’s own cigarette.

“You’re a real gent,” was his expert appraisal. “I could put something in your way, young man.”

“I don’t need anything,” said the wages clerk. He didn’t take jobs on the side as a matter of principle. He was prison-averse and in any case felt that he lacked any business sense.

“It’ll be worth your while,” the little old man insisted. “It’ll only cost you twenty crowns.”

“Not interested,” Mr Mikulášek resisted. He wasn’t going to waste time with the old man. He was on his way to his favourite café, where he

habitually went after work for a plate of beans. Not that he was enamoured of beans, but they were cheap and filling. Both aspects were important. As a wages clerk Mr Mikulášek was not rolling in money.

He didn't keep a mistress from the corps de ballet, which is the traditional explanation for why people are penniless, nor did he squander his pay on drink. In spite of – or maybe because of – leading a blameless life, he had no possessions. Wages clerks don't earn much. That irked Mr Mikulášek, as did many other aspects of his job. When we are young, we want to be captains, engine-drivers or chimney-sweeps; if a boy wanted to become a wages clerk they'd have him looked at by a doctor. But with adolescence the embarrassing realisation dawns that not everybody can be a chimney-sweep or engine-driver, and there's no great call for captains either.

Accordingly, Mr Mikulášek had become a wages clerk. Unfortunate maybe, but not unheard-of. He was no good at anything but clerking wages, so his die was cast. He couldn't have earned his crust

by manual labour having been cack-handed from birth. In all other respects his prospects were also joyless. Once a wages clerk, always a wages clerk, except in the extreme event of becoming head of payroll if sufficiently decrepit and blameless. Mr Mikulášek hadn't reached that stage yet, and was afraid to show initiative. Any initiative in the field of payroll clerking is apt to attract the attention of the criminal law. Mr Mikulášek knew this and felt bad, because he was just an ordinary Mikulášek and in all respects undistinguished. But he was a kindly man. Which only made things worse, because everybody knew he was and so nobody was afraid of him.

Observing that even this little old man was trying to exploit him, he felt a surge of anger. He was annoyingly aware of being easy prey.

"Twenty," the old man pleaded. "You're doin' all right for yourself and you'll be helpin' a poor bloke."

"I'm not doing all right," Mr Mikulášek grew ferocious.

"And why aren't you doin' all right?"

“Because I’m no good at anything,” Mr Mikulášek said with all the distaste that beset him whenever his material conditions were up for discussion.

“Ho, ho,” the little old man guffawed. “No good? Look here, I’m good at things, but what use is it? None!”

“And what can you do?” Mr Mikulášek asked out of politeness.

“Well,” the little old man dropped into a whisper, “I can change into a bear. How about that!”

Mr Mikulášek took another step back and contemplated hitting the old man with his brief-case and handing him over to the man in a white coat



who must surely be somewhere nearby looking for his escaped charge.

But the little old man remained affable.

“Yeah, a bear. But it doesn’t do me any good. What a waste, eh?”

“Sorry... must be going,” Mr Mikulášek managed and crossed the road. The little old man toddled after him with a persistence worthy of better things.

“I say, young man, aren’t you interested?”

“Oh, very interested, very,” Mr Mikulášek sighed, silently praying that not all madmen were aggressive.

“You know,” the old man twittered on, holding the wages clerk by the sleeve, “it’s not at all difficult. In the Great War, when I was in the Bukovina...”

“Good-bye,” said Mr Mikulášek.

“...one chap was about to be hanged,” the bothersome ancient went on, quite unperturbed and apparently sure in the belief that Mr Mikulášek would not gnaw his sleeve off like a fox its trapped paw. “They were going to hang him. A real scruffy old bloke he was.”

Mr Mikulášek sullenly noted to himself that the old boy lacked a degree of self-criticism.

“I was a corporal at the time, and a corporal... a corporal counted for somethin’,” the old man went on disjointedly, “and I let him escape out the back. And he knew how to do it, I mean the bear thing. Turn into one, you know, and he taught me how to do it for lettin’ him escape, the old bloke I mean. He would’ve done it himself, but he didn’t have the right finger, he’d lost it somewhere. What you do is stick this ring on, he gave it to me,” he said, pointing to the wide brass ring on his unwashed finger. “It goes on the middle finger of your right hand, then you turn it three times to the left and twice to the right. But this groove,” Mr Mikulášek noted the transverse indentation cut deep into the brass, “this groove has to be turned towards your palm. It’s not hard, I managed to remember it straight off. Then two turns to the left and three to the right, and things are back where they were. And if you get it wrong, you just take it off, put it back on again and start from scratch, nothin’ can go wrong. But I can’t show you here,

there's too many people about. Try it out at home. Here you are."

The little old man grabbed Mr Mikulášek's hand, stuck the ring on his finger and scuttled off. Our payroll clerk looked, horrified, at the broad brass ring on his finger. Then he ran off after the little old man and grabbed him by his flimsy, patched overcoat. The old man turned his wrinkled face towards him and twitched his beard.

"What's up?" he muttered, "three times to the left, twice to the right, the groove towards your palm, then back again – twice left, three times right and the groove towards the back of your hand, that's all."

"Oh no," Mr Mikulášek resisted, "I can't take it from you. I don't want it. Take it back."

The little old man pushed his hand away.

"Just you keep it, sir, you 'ave it. Since you say you're not well off, you can 'ave it for nothin'. It's no use anyway, what can an old man like me do wi' it? You're young, it'll serve you well. – But give me the twenty, go on," he added quickly in case his victim had second thoughts.

He got the money. Of course he did. He secreted it in his hat. Mr Mikulášek concluded that, as madmen went, this little old man was pretty wily, and because he was no longer afraid of him he decided to make him expand on his story. With feigned trust he asked:

“What happens to clothes?”

“They become your fur, do stop worryin’.”

“And if I was wearing swimming trunks?”

“Well, you’d have your summer coat. But go on now, I don’t know any more than that. Try it and see. It’s no use anyway, believe me. Good day to you, sir, good day and thank you very much.”

That day Mr Mikulášek didn’t have his beans. He was cross and wanted to avoid any further expense. He went home to his lodgings, glanced into the kitchen to check whether his landlady was in and, back in his room, put his legs up on the table. He lit a cigarette, carefully replaced the dead match back in the box and began to examine his dubious acquisition.

The ring was worn, nearly half an inch wide, and with faint traces of an inscription running round

the inner rim. It wasn't in Roman lettering, and Mr Mikulášek couldn't recognise any other. His surprise at the little old man's imagination hadn't quite evaporated. He had read about werewolves, but he had no idea whether there were also were-bears. To the best of his knowledge, man's powers of reincarnation were limited to changing into a wolf. He concluded that the figments of the old man's imagination did not come from any recognised authorities.

A bear, eh, the idea vexed him. Suppose there was a were-beetle that could change into a beetle. Crazy.

He dropped the ring in a drawer, covered it with an old newspaper and began musing sorrowfully on the ease with which some people can earn twenty crowns. But after a while it got the better of him: he retrieved the ring from the drawer, looked at it with distaste, then stuck it on the middle finger of his right hand. With some uncertainty he got up and stood in front of his cracked mirror.

All of this he did with a sense of acting like an idiot, but because he was alone in the flat he didn't mind.

“Three times to the left, twice to the right,” he reminded himself and turned the ring accordingly.

Then he looked in the mirror.

Staring back at him he saw his own small, yellowy-brown, malevolent eyes. He half-opened his muzzle in surprise and a trickle of saliva dripped from one corner.

“Grrrrr,” he grunted in horror, took two steps back and sat down on a chair. The chair broke under his weight and he landed on the worn rug, leaving a number of deep claw-marks on the table edge.

Having survived the initial shock, he discovered that changing back into a man was a bit trickier, because the claws on his other paw kept slipping on the smooth metal of the ring. The solution was to stick his whole paw in his maw and twist the ring with his teeth.

Mr Mikulášek didn't sleep a wink that night. He rejoiced, as is only human, at having something that others didn't. However, he turned up for work at the proper time because duty was one thing, fun and games another.





Outside his office Mr Valenta was already waiting for him. The gaffer, sorry, foreman.

"This place is a shambles," he said noisily. "We work our hides off and you lot sit in your offices twiddling your thumbs."

"Do come in, Mr Valenta," the payroll clerk said politely, opening the office and letting the foreman go first. Valenta paused in the doorway. He preferred an audience when having a set-to.

"Well, are we going to get paid for the overtime or not?"

Mr Mikulášek squeezed by under his shoulder and glanced into his paperwork.

"I'm afraid not," he apologised, "no overtime was approved."

"How come?" Mr Valenta asked, hunching his neck menacingly down into his shoulders.

"That's the way things are. It wasn't approved, so it can't be paid."

"Why not?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know."

"So who the hell does?" Valenta's voice had risen

as he mellowed at the prospect of a noisy public dingdong.

“The site manager. I just do the accounts.”

Such frivolous buck-passing made Valenta righteously indignant. Shouting at payroll clerks was his favourite pastime and he didn't take kindly to having it spoilt. Basically, he meant no ill, but shouting had become as vitally necessary to him as, say, daphne to goldfish. Because Mr Mikulášek was the last and only wages clerk at his mercy, he found it terribly hard to take any unsportsmanlike manoeuvre.

“So, do we get it or not?”

“Sorry,” Mr Mikulášek shrugged. This meant that the interview was over and the time for work had come.

The foreman lumbered over to his desk.

“Look here, I don't give a shit for your excuses! Pay up now! All you do is try to put it on someone else, and ...”

The wages clerk took refuge behind his desk. He was used to being shouted at, but his sleepless night

had left him very edgy. He was afraid he might burst into tears at any moment.

“Don’t you shout at me,” he said, his voice faltering.

Valenta was secretly jubilant. As we all know, the bleating of a baby goat excites a lion.

“And you don’t tell me what to do! You! Pay me what I’m owed or I’ll make matchwood out of this dump!”

Mr Mikulášek cowered behind his desk. He was determined that this threat should not be carried out.

“You be careful,” he warned, “or...”

“Or what?” roared the foreman, thumping the table with his fist.

Mr Mikulášek felt that the foreman might devour him at any moment. Three times to the left, twice to the right, he repeated to himself mentally. “Ooaahaaaavrr,” he then said out loud, pulled himself up to his full height and bared his yellowed fangs.

The foreman thrust out his arms with the gesture of a churchwarden who has suddenly espied the

devil incarnate. He let out a few squawks like a terror-stricken chicken and, waving his arms in front of him, staggered back out into the corridor. Then he slammed the office door and took to his lumbering heels, screaming like a strangled hare.

Once his shrieks had died away in the distance, the wages clerk's hasty efforts to change back left his entire paw covered in saliva. He had noticed before that any excitement caused his ursine organism to over-produce the stuff, which made the job harder. He had barely sat back down, his face slightly pale, and opened up his files, when the site manager burst in.

"Good morning," Mr Mikulášek greeted him politely. The latter ignored the greeting.

"What on earth did you do to Valenta?" he asked.

"Me? To Valenta?"

"Of course you; it wasn't me. Valenta came flying into my office complaining that you'd roared at him like a bear. Then he collapsed. They've sent for an ambulance."

"I..."

“I don’t want to know! I won’t have it! I’ve got a deadline to meet and you go and bawl out one of the men fit to make him collapse. Where am I going to find another foreman, eh? Are you going to stand in for him? We’ll see what management has to say about this!”

Bang, crash, wallop.

The bang and crash came as he thumped the table. The wallop was the door.

The following day, Mr Mikulášek was summoned to the management offices, where he was hauled over the coals for bullying.

“How d’you do it?” the old head of payroll asked him on the side. “Did you haul him over the coals? What did you say to him?”

“He was drunk,” the clerk lied shamelessly, but he felt an unaccustomed sense of pride.

By evening, however, his pride gave way to serious reflection. He was a practical man. Turning into a bear was undoubtedly a fantastic aptitude. But facing up to being a bear was painful. Any aptitude must be fully appreciated, otherwise it affords no warmth, and Mr Mikulášek was a firm

believer in appreciation on earth. Wages clerks inclined to reckon with the possibility of their temporal deeds being appreciated only in heaven usually die young. Of one thing Mr Mikulášek was certain: his ability to metamorphose into a bear could not be properly appreciated in his present profession. It was a trick, a skill, a stunt, and that could be exploited for profit.

He believed he was on the right track. He took a day off and went first thing in the morning to the Music and Arts Agency.

MAA, he pondered, that could be like a lion roaring; I bet they're all circus folk.

Human resources was housed on the ground floor of a tenement block, a fact that already struck Mr Mikulášek as inappropriate and sordid. Nowhere could he see any merry-go-round horses, or even a mermaid, and the man at the desk was another letdown: unconsciously he had been expecting a ringmaster with a brightly coloured sash round his belly. The man at the desk had no coloured sash. He didn't even have a belly. He was a doctor of laws.