

# The Theft of Document 139/VII(C)

Karel Čapek's short story *Ukradený spis 139/VII, odd. C*,

which was published in *Povídky z jedné kapsy* in 1929.

Translated by Francis K. Johnson.

At 3 a.m. the telephone rang at garrison headquarters.  
“Col. Hampl here, from the general staff. Send me two military policemen immediately. And tell Lt. Col. Vrzal... Yes, yes, from Intelligence... to get over here right away. Yes, now, in the middle of the night! Yes, by car! Yes, now, damn it!”  
And that was that.



Lt. Col. Vrzal arrived an hour later at the house, which was out in one of the posher suburbs. He was greeted by an elderly and terribly anxious man in civies, i.e. in shirt and trousers.

“Lt. Col., the most god-awful thing has happened... Sit down, sit down... A bloody wretched stupid stupid thing! A right ruddy bastard of a thing! Can you imagine? The day before yesterday the chief of general staff gave me a document and said, ‘Work on this at home, Hampl. The fewer people who know about it, the better! Don’t say a word in the office. So, off you go! I’m giving you leave to work on it at home. But be bloody careful! Bloody careful.’”

“What sort of document was it?” asked Lt. Col. Vrzal.

Col. Hampl hesitated for a moment.

“Well, I suppose you better know. It was from Section C.”

“Ah!” Lt. Col. Vrzal began to look extremely concerned. “And...?”

“Well, it’s like this... I was working on it all day yesterday. But what the ruddy hell am I meant to do with it at night? Stick it in a drawer? That would never do... I don’t have a safe. And if someone knew I’d got the document, I dread to think what’d happen. So, for the first night, I hid it under the mattress. And it got pretty well scrunched up, believe me!”

“I expect so,” said Lt. Col. Vrzal.

“No surprise there,” sighed the colonel. “My wife’s even heavier than me... So the next night she suggested putting it in an empty macaroni tin and keeping it in the pantry. Because she locks the pantry at night and keeps the key with her. You see, we have a terribly overweight maid, who’ll eat anything she can lay her hands on. My wife said nobody would ever think of looking for it there. Well, I thought that was a good idea...”

Lt. Col. Vrzal interrupted: “Has your pantry got a secondary window on the inside?”

“Blast it!” groaned the colonel. “That never occurred to me! No, just the outside. I was so busy thinking about the Sázava case and other stupid things like that, that I completely forgot about the window! Damn the bloody thing!”

“And so...?” asked the lieutenant colonel.

“Well, what do you expect? At two in the morning, my wife hears the maid shouting her head off downstairs. So she goes down, and there’s Mára bawling, ‘There’s a thief in the pantry!’ So my wife runs for the key and wakes me up. I grab my handgun, run

downstairs and unlock the pantry and... Bloody hell! The window's been prised open and the macaroni tin's gone. And so has the thief." The colonel heaved a sigh. "End of story."

Lieutenant Colonel Vrzal drummed his fingers on the table. "Did anyone know you had that document at home, Colonel?"

A picture of woe, the colonel shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, my friend. The ruddy spies aren't so thick as you might think."

But then he remembered he wasn't speaking to a mere private. "I mean to say, Lieutenant Colonel, they're very clever people. But I didn't tell anyone, without a word of a lie. And in any case, how could they know it was in the macaroni tin?"

"Where were you when you put the document into it?" asked the lieutenant colonel.

"Here, at this table."

"And where was the tin?"

"Hold on a minute... I was sitting here and I had the tin in front of me."

The lieutenant colonel leant against the table and stared at the window opposite. In the dewy dawn he could make out a red-roofed and grey-walled house. Deep in thought, he asked, "Who lives there?"

The colonel thumped the table. "Ruddy hell! That never occurred to me! I think he's a Jew, the man who lives there. He's a bank manager or something. God damn it! I can see it now! Vrzal, I think we're on to something!"

"May I take a look at the pantry?" the lieutenant asked warily.

"Certainly. Come with me. This way." And the colonel eagerly led the way.

"Here it is. The tin was on the top shelf over there... Mára, this is none of your business! Be off with you to the attic or the cellar!"

The lieutenant colonel put on a pair of gloves, clambered up to the window and had a good look at it. "Prised open with a chisel. The frame is soft wood, Colonel. A boy could have done it easily."

"Damn it!" hissed the colonel. "Can't we even make a half-decent window in this country?"

There were two figures on the other side of the grill.

"Are they the military police?" asked Lt. Col. Vrzal. "Good. I'll take a look from outside. But I must request that you don't leave the house without permission, Colonel."

"OK," said the colonel. "But why?"

"So that you're here in case... The two soldiers will remain where they are, of course."

The colonel took a deep breath and swallowed with difficulty. "I understand... Would you like some coffee? I could get my wife to make some."

"There's no time for that now," said the lieutenant colonel rather sharply. "Of course, don't say a word about the stolen document to anyone. Unless... unless you get a phone call. And something else: tell the maid the thief only stole some tins."

"But listen," begged the colonel. "You *will* find that document, won't you?"

"I shall certainly look for it," replied the lieutenant colonel, clicking his heels.



The colonel spent the rest of that morning slumped in an armchair like a broken man. When he wasn't expecting the two military policemen to come and arrest him at any moment, he was trying to think what Lt. Col. Vrzal was doing in order to bring the huge, clandestine machinery of the secret service to bear on the problem. But then, imagining the hoo-ha that must have broken out at headquarters, he groaned.

“Karel,” said his wife for about the twentieth time – she’d made sure to hide his gun in the maid’s wardrobe – “wouldn’t you like something to eat?”

“Leave me in peace, for Christ’s sake!” he growled. “I think the Jew next door must have seen it.”

Sighing, his wife returned to the kitchen in tears.

The doorbell rang. The colonel stood up and straightened himself, so as to submit to his imminent arrest with appropriate military dignity. And he wondered which officers they’d sent.

But instead of officers, it was a little red-haired fellow who entered the room, with a bowler hat in his hands. He had squirrel-like teeth.

“How do you do, sir? My name is Pištora. I’m from police headquarters.”

“What do you want?” the colonel blurted out, trying to shift his stance, at the same time, from Attention to At ease.

Detective Constable Pištora grinned, in rather too familiar a way for the colonel’s liking. “I believe your pantry’s been burgled. And here I am!”

“And what’s it got to do with you?” snapped the colonel.

“Well,” replied Detective Constable Pištora, still grinning, “this is our patch. Your maid, she mentioned to the baker this morning that your pantry had been burgled, and so I says to the superintendent, ‘How about if I hop over there and take a look?’”

The colonel was already shaking his head. “It’s not worth it. They only took... they only took a tin of macaroni. You can forget about it.”

“That’s strange,” said Detective Constable Pištora, “that they didn’t snaffle anything else.”

“It is strange, Detective Constable Pištora, but it’s none of your business.”

But the detective constable merely smiled beatifically as a thought occurred to him. “I bet someone disturbed them!”

“Yes, no doubt. And now I bid you good day, Detective Constable.”

“Ah! But!” said the detective constable, smiling and frowning at the same time. “I think I need to take a look at your pantry before I take my leave, don’t you?”

The colonel was about to explode, but instead he just sighed. “Come on then.” And he led the little man to the pantry.



The detective constable’s eyes darted about the narrow room. “Well, well, well! Window prised open with a chisel. Must’ve been Pepek or Andrlík.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” asked the colonel.

“It was either Pepek or Andrlík who done it. But I think Pepek’s in the clink at the moment. If it had been just the glass that was taken out, that would’ve been Dundr, Lojza, Novák, Hosička or Kliment. But this job’s down to Andrlík.”

“I sincerely hope you’re right, Detective Constable.”

But the detective constable was frowning again. “Or... or perhaps there’s another pantry specialist in the district. But surely not? That’s to say, Mertl also does windows with a chisel, but he never goes for pantries, sir, never.” Detective Constable Pištora grinned. “I think I’ll go and have a feel of Andrlík’s collar.”

“And give him my regards while you’re at it,” growled the colonel.



*It's unbelievable*, he thought when he was left once more to his own gloomy ruminations, *it's unbelievable how incompetent our police are! If only they'd look for finger prints or footprints! A specialist approach. But to go about it in such an airy-fairy way! ... They'd be no match for one of those foreign spies! ... I wish I knew what Vrzal's up to.*

Unable to resist, he reached for the phone. After half an hour of huffing and puffing, he finally got through. "Hello, Lieutenant Colonel," he said in a mellifluous voice. "Hampl here. I was wondering... how far... I know you can't say anything, but I only... I know, but if you'd just kindly tell me if it's already... Ruddy hell, still nothing? ... Yes, yes, I know it's a difficult case, but... Just a moment, please, Vrzal. A thought just occurred to me. What about if I offer ten thousand to whoever catches the thief. I don't have more, but you know, for a job like that... Yes I know that wouldn't be possible, it would be a private matter. I couldn't do it in my official capacity... Or what about making the offer to the police detectives, eh? ... No, of course you wouldn't know about that. But if you somehow hinted to them that Colonel Hampl has promised ten thousand... OK, so leave it with your station manager. Yes, please, my friend! ... Forgive me for interrupting you... Thank you."

Colonel Hampl felt much relieved after this generous decision on his part. He felt that at least now he was himself involved in some way in the hunt for that damned, thieving spy. He lay down on the sofa, because all the alarums and excursions had tired him out, and he was soon dreaming of a hundred, nay! two hundred, nay! three hundred men – all of them red-haired and squirrel-toothed like Detective Constable Pištora – searching trains, stopping cars speeding to the borders, waiting for their prey behind street corners and suddenly stepping out with the words, "I arrest you in the name of the law. Come with me and keep your mouth shut." And then he dreamt that he was doing a ballistics exam at the military academy.

Groaning, he awoke and found himself bathed in sweat.

Somebody rang the doorbell. The colonel jumped to his feet and tried to arrange his thoughts. But the squirrel-toothed detective constable was already entering the room.

"It's me again!" he said. "It was him, sir, just as I said."

"Who?" asked the colonel, still struggling to reorganise his thoughts.

"Who?" Detective Constable Pištora was so taken aback by the question that he even stopped grinning. "Who else? I told you Pepek's in Pankrác jail."

"Why on earth do you keep going on about that Andrlík fellow, Detective Constable?"

The detective constable's eyes were almost popping out of their sockets in disbelief. "Because it was him who stole the macaroni from the pantry of course! We've got him down the police station already. So that's that, but I just wanted to ask... He – Andrlík – says there wasn't any macaroni in the tin, it was just some bumf. So, is that right?"

"My good man," exclaimed the colonel hurriedly, "where is that... erm... bumf?"

Detective Constable Pištora grinned. "In my pocket... Now where have I...?" He started searching his pockets. "Aha! Is this it?"

With tears of relief in his eyes, the colonel snatched the precious, crumpled Document 139/VII(C) from the constable's hand. "My dear man," he sighed, "I can't thank you enough..." He turned and called his wife. "Come here, my dear. It's Sergeant... Inspector... erm..."

"Constable Pištora," said the little fellow, giving a full-on squirrel smile.

"He's found the stolen document," the colonel continued shouting to his wife. "Do come here, and bring the cognac and some glasses... Constable Pištora, I'd... you've no idea... that's to say, so that you know... Have a drink, Constable Pištora."

The constable grinned. “But it was nothing! ... Just some bumf, sir! And I almost forgot: the tin’s at the police station, Madam.”

“Blow the tin!” said the colonel, now with a big smile on his face himself. “But my dear Constable Pištora, how did you manage to find the document so quickly? Your good health!”

“Cheers!” said the constable. “But, heaven help us! It was really nothing. When it’s theft from a pantry, we go after Andrlík or Pepek. But Pepek’s doing two months at Pankrác. If it’s an attic, we go for Písecký, Tondera the Cripple, Kaner, Zima or Houska...”

“But... but... but... Constable. Listen, what about if it’s a case of espionage? *Prosit*, Constable!”

“Thank you kindly... Well, espionage, we don’t cover that. But brass keys, that would be Čeněk or Pinkus, copper wire we’ve only got one, Toušek, at the moment, and if it’s beer pipes, that would have to be Hanousek, Buchta or Šlesinger. We’re on to it straight away, sir. And safe-breakers... we get them from all over the republic. So many of them! Twenty-seven at the last count, but six of them are in the slammer.”

“Serves them right,” said the colonel bloodthirstily. “Drink up, Constable!”

“Thank you very much,” said Constable Pištora, “but I don’t drink a lot, me. Thank you, cheers! ... All these... these crooks and criminals, they’re not too bright, sir. Each of them’s only got his only little trade, and he plies it until we catch him. Like this Andrlík. *Ah!* he thinks, as soon as he clocks me approaching. *That’ll be Constable Pištora about that pantry.* ‘Constable, it weren’t nothing, all I got was some bumf in a tin. And I had to scarper before I could do anything else.’ ‘Doesn’t matter,’ I say to him, ‘you’ll get a year at least all the same, you twit.’”

“A year’s prison?” asked Colonel Hampl, sympathetically. “Isn’t that a bit much?”

“But it’s burglary,” said the constable, displaying his teeth once more. “So, my regards, sir. I’ve still got a shop-window to do. That’ll be Kleček or Rudl... If you should need anything else, just ask at the station. All you have to do is say Constable Pištora.”

“Please, Constable Pištora. I wonder if you would... erm... for your help... That’s to say, those papers are... nothing special certainly, but all the same... I wouldn’t want to lose them, you know. So, perhaps you’d accept this for your help,” and he pressed a fifty-crown note into the constable’s hand.

Surprise and gratitude caused Constable Pištora to put on a serious face. “But there’s really no need,” he said, as he hurriedly pocketed the banknote. “It wasn’t anything... Thank you very much, sir. And if you ever need anything else...”



“I gave him fifty crowns,” the Colonel told his wife in the warm after-glow of his benevolence. “Twenty would have been enough for a PC Plod like him, but...” – waving his hand magnanimously – “the main thing is, the ruddy document’s been found.”



[TRANSLATIONS FROM CZECH](#)