



Good Luck

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(A translation by [Francis K Johnson](#) of the short story [Případy pana Janíka](#), which was published in [Povídky z jedné kapsy](#) in 1929.)

The Mr Janík I'm talking about isn't Dr Janík from the ministry, or the Janík who shot dead Jirsa the landowner, nor the Janík who's reputed to have performed 326 consecutive cannons at billiards, but rather the Janík who was the boss of Janík & Holeček's, paper and cellulose wholesalers – the polite little man who, after unsuccessfully wooing Miss Severa, resolved never to marry. So, to put it in a nutshell and for the avoidance of doubt, that Janík. The paper merchant.

Well, this particular Mr Janík became a paper merchant by sheer chance. It was when he was spending his summer holiday by the River Sázava, just at the time when they were searching for the body of Růžena Regnerová, who was murdered by her fiancé Jindřich Bašta, who poured petrol over her body, set it alight and buried it in the woods. Although Bašta was found guilty of her murder, they weren't able to find her body. The police combed the woods for nine days, with Bašta telling them it was here or it was there, but they never found anything. It was clear that, at his wits' end, he was either trying to confuse them or to gain time, or both.

Jindřich Bašta was a young man from a respectable and wealthy family but, when he was born, the doctor probably squeezed the forceps around

his head too much, because something about him wasn't quite right; that's to say, there was something perverse and strange about him. So, as white as a ghost, and with his nystagmic eyes flitting nervously here and there – a sorry sight –, he led the police hither and thither through the woods for nine days. The police trudged alongside him through bilberry undergrowth and through mud, becoming more and more furious and more and more determined to wear the beast out so much that sooner or later he'd lead them to the right place. Bašta became so exhausted that he could scarcely stand on his feet, and he kept sinking to the ground and croaking, "Here! I buried her here!"

At which point one of the policemen would bellow, "On your feet, Bašta! It's not here! Get going!" And Bašta would obediently haul himself up and stagger on for a bit, before collapsing once more with exhaustion. So it was quite a procession: four policemen, two detectives, a few gamekeepers, and some old men with hoes; not to mention that wreck of a man, Jindřich Bašta.

Mr Janík had got to know the policemen in the pub. As a result, he too was allowed to accompany that tragic procession, without anyone demanding to know what the hell he was doing there. And it should be noted that he carried with him some boxes containing sardines, salami, a bottle of cognac and similar things, which the other searchers had no objection to partaking of. But the ninth day was so dire that Mr Janík had decided he wouldn't return on the morrow. The policemen kept shouting in anger, the gamekeepers declared they'd had enough and had better things to do, the old men with the hoes grumbled that twenty crowns a day was a pittance for such drudgery, and Jindřich Bašta lay collapsed on the ground, trembling uncontrollably and no longer even attempting to respond to the yelling and abuse from the policemen.

But at that very moment – that desperate and desolate moment –, Mr Janík did something that wasn't exactly in the script: he knelt down beside the young man, shoved a cheese roll into his hand and said sympathetically, "Look, Mr Bašta... Come now, Mr Bašta... Can you hear me, Mr Bašta?"

Mr Bašta howled, before bursting into tears. "I'll find it...", he sobbed, "I'll find it, sir." He tried to stand up, and one of the detectives came and helped him, almost gently.

"Just lean on me, Mr Bašta. Mr Janík will help you on the other side. That's it! So, Mr Bašta, you'll show Mr Janík where she's buried now, won't you?"

An hour later, Jindřich Bašta was standing, smoking a cigarette, above a shallow grave, out of which a thigh bone was sticking.

“Is that the body of Růžena Regnerová?” asked PC Trnka between gritted teeth.

“It is,” replied Jindřich Bašta calmly, as he tapped the ash from his cigarette into the hole. “Do you need anything else?”

“You know,” said PC Trnka to Mr Janík in the pub that evening, “you’re quite a psychologist, I’ve got to give you that. Your good health! The fellow softened up as soon as you said, “Mr Bašta.” All he wanted was a bit of respect, the miserable so-and-so! And to think of the trouble we’d gone to with him... How did you know politeness would do the trick?”

The hero of the hour blushed slightly. “Well, it’s like this, you know. I... that’s how I speak to everyone, you know. The thing is, I felt sorry for him, for Mr Bašta, so I wanted to give him that cheese roll...”

“Instinct!” declared PC Trnka. “That’s what I call sixth sense and psychology. Your very good health, Mr Janík! You’re wasted! You should have been a detective...”

Some time later, Mr Janík was travelling in the night train to Bratislava, where the annual general meeting of shareholders in a Slovak papermill was going to take place, and because he had some shares in it himself, he was anxious to be there.

“Please wake me before we get to Bratislava,” he asked the conductor. “I don’t want to miss my stop.” Whereupon he headed for his compartment in the sleeping car and crawled into the bottom bunk. As he was alone, he made himself as comfortable as he could, thought for a while about various business matters, and fell asleep.

He had no idea what the time was when the conductor opened the door for another man, who immediately got undressed and climbed up to the top bunk. As he did so, Mr Janík caught a glimpse of a pair of trousers and a pair of unusually hairy legs. Then he heard grunting as the man snuggled beneath the blanket, and then the man turned the light off, leaving darkness again and the rattling and clanking of the train.

Mr Janík dreamt about this and that, but mainly that he was being pursued by a pair of hairy legs. Then he woke up because it was unusually quiet all of a sudden and someone was shouting, “See you in Žilina!” Mr Janík scrambled hurriedly out from his bunk, looked out of the window, and saw that the train was already standing at Bratislava

station. The conductor had forgotten to wake him up! He didn't even have time to swear; instead he got dressed, feverishly, over his pyjamas, stuffed his belongings into his pockets and managed to jump down on to the platform just as the station master was raising his hand for the train to leave.

"Damn you!" he shouted, shaking his fist at the departing train.

Then he went to the gents' toilets to get dressed properly. And it was when he'd just started to sort out the items in his pockets that he froze: instead of one wallet in his breast pocket, there were two; in the bulkier one, which wasn't his, there were sixty new Czechoslovak 500-crown banknotes. The wallet clearly belonged to his nocturnal fellow-traveller; but the still sleepy Mr Janík couldn't begin to think how it had got into his pocket.

It goes without saying that the first thing he did was to find a policeman so that he could give him the stranger's wallet. And the policeman left Mr Janík dying with hunger while he telephoned Galanta for them to inform the passenger in Couch 14 that his wallet with his money in it was at the police station in Bratislava. Whereupon, after providing his personal details, Mr Janík went to have breakfast. But then someone from the police station came looking for him and asked whether it wasn't some sort of mistake: the man in Couch 14 said he hadn't lost his wallet. So Mr Janík had to go to the police station again and explain once more how he came by it. Meanwhile two men in civies took the sixty banknotes somewhere, leaving him to wait for half an hour. When they came back, they took him to some higher-up policeman.

"Sir," said the higher-up policeman, "we're just sending a telegraph to Parkány-Nána to ask them to arrest the passenger in Couch 14. Can you give me a precise description of him?" But Mr Janík could only say that the passenger in question had remarkably hairy legs. Which wasn't a satisfactory answer as far as the higher-up policeman was concerned. "The thing is," he said all of a sudden, "those banknotes are counterfeit. You'll have to wait here until we can bring you face to face with your fellow-passenger."

In his head, Mr Janík cursed the conductor who hadn't woken him up on time and hence has caused him, in his haste, to put that wretched wallet into his pocket. It wasn't until about an hour later that a message came back from Parkány-Nána that the passenger in Couch 14 had got out at Nové Zámky and, at the moment, no one knew where he'd gone from there.

"Mr Janík," the higher-up policeman announced eventually, "we won't detain you any longer for the time being. We'll refer the matter to

Inspector Hruška in Prague – he deals with counterfeiting. But I can tell you this is serious. Return to Prague as soon as possible and they'll give you a call. In the meantime, please accept my thanks for so successfully getting hold of these fakes. It won't be a coincidence, believe you me."

Mr Janík had hardly got back to Prague before they called him to the police headquarters. There he was greeted by an extraordinarily large man – who everyone called Mr President – and a sinewy, yellowish fellow, who turned out to be the aforementioned Inspector Hruška.

"Have a seat, Mr Janík," said the large man, as he opened the seal on a small packet. "Is this the wallet that you... erm, that you found in your pocket at Bratislava station?"

"It is," answered Mr Janík, wearily.

The large man took the banknotes out of the wallet and counted them. "Sixty," he said. "They all have the serial number 27451. The office in Cheb asked us to look out for that number."

The sinewy man took hold of one of the notes, closed his eyes and rubbed it between his fingers. Then he sniffed it.

"These are from Štýrský Hradec. The ones from Geneva aren't so sticky."

"Štýrský Hradec," mused the large man. "That's where they make these things for Pešť, isn't it?"

The sinewy man only blinked. "I'd need to go to Vienna," he said. "But the police there won't hand him over."

"Hm," said the large man. "So try to get him here somehow. If that's not possible, tell them we'll give them Leberhardt in exchange. Good day, Hruška. And you, sir" – turning to Mr Janík – "I can't thank you enough. You're the one who found Jindřich Bašta's fiancée, aren't you?"

"It was purely a coincidence," said Mr Janík emphatically. "I really... I didn't have any intention..."

"You have the gift of luck," said the large man, nodding his head. "It's a gift from God, Mr Janík. One person doesn't come across anything during his whole life; another stumbles upon the best cases as if by chance. You should join us, Mr Janík."

"That's not possible," said Mr Janík. "I... that's to say, I have my own business... a successful business that I inherited from my grandfather..."

The large man sighed. “As you wish, but you’d be sorely missed. It’s not everyday you come across someone as damned lucky as you. We’ll meet again, Mr Janík.”

About a month later, Mr Janík was dining with a business friend from Leipzig. Of course, these business lunches are quite something. The cognac, in particular, was of the best. In short, Mr Janík definitely did not wish to go home on foot, so he signalled to the wine waiter: “A taxi, please!”

When he left the hotel, he saw the taxi already waiting at the entrance. He climbed in, shut the door and – rather the worse for wear – forgot to tell the driver his address. Nevertheless, the taxi set off and, comfortably ensconced in the corner, Mr Janík fell asleep.

He had no idea how long they’d been driving, but he woke up when the car stopped and the driver opened the door for him.

“We’re here, sir. You need to go upstairs, sir.”

Mr Janík had no idea where he was, but because the cognac had dulled any concern he might otherwise have had, he went up the stairs and opened a door behind which loud conversation could be heard. There were about twenty people there, who all turned impatiently towards the door. Suddenly there was a strange silence. One of the men stood up and approached Mr Janík.

“What do you want here, sir? Who are you?”

“Mr Janík looked around in amazement. He recognised five or six of the men – rich people who were said to have some sort of special interest in politics. But Mr Janík kept out of politics.

“Goodness gracious!” he said in a friendly tone. “There’s Mr Koubek, and there’s Mr Heller. Hello, chaps! I wouldn’t say No to a drink, lads.”

“Where’s this fellow come from?” one of the men shouted angrily. “He’s not one of us, is he?”

Two of them pushed Mr Janík back out to the landing.

“How did you get here?” asked one of them. “Who invited you?”

All this rough treatment brought Mr Janík to his senses.

“Where am I?” he demanded. “Where the devil have I been taken?”

One of the men ran down the stairs and button-holed the driver.

“Where did you pick up this man, you idiot?”

“In front of the hotel, of course,” said the driver. “They told me in the evening to wait for a gentleman in front of the hotel at ten o’clock and bring him here. That gentleman got into the taxi at ten o’clock without saying anything. So I brought him here...”

“Christ Almighty!” shouted the other. “It’s somebody else! You’ve dropped us right in it!”

Mr Janík sat down resignedly on the top step.

“Ah,” he said, sounding rather amused. “It’s some sort of secret meeting, isn’t it? Now you’ll have to strangle me and bury my body somewhere. A glass of water, please!”

“No,” said the one who’d stayed with him at the top of the stairs. “You’re wrong. Neither Mr Koubek nor Mr Heller are inside there, do you understand? It’s a mistake. We’ll get you taken back to Prague. You’ll have to forgive us. It was a misunderstanding.”

“It’s no problem,” said Mr Janík graciously. “I know that, on the way, the driver will shoot me and bury my body in a wood somewhere. It doesn’t matter. My fault for forgetting to give him my address. What a fool I am!”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you?” said the man, sounding rather relieved.

“Slightly,” agreed Mr Janík, remaining seated on the top step. “The thing is, I was at dinner with Meyer, from Dresden. My name’s Janík, by the way – wholesale paper and cellulose. A well-established company. Founded by my grandfather. Pleased to meet you.”

“Go and sleep it off,” said the other. “Once you’ve had a good sleep, you won’t even remember that... hm, that we treated you so badly.”

“Quite right,” said Mr Janík in a dignified manner. “Go to bed, sir. Where is my bed?”

“At home,” said the other. “The driver will take you home. Allow me to help you to your feet.”

“No need,” said Mr Janík. “I’m not as drunk as you. Go to bed. Driver!”

The car set off back, and Mr Janík made a point of observing where they were going.

The next morning he telephoned the police headquarters to inform them of his night-time adventure. The voice from the other end came after a few moments of silence.

“That’s remarkably interesting, Mr Janík. We’d be most grateful if you’d come over immediately.”

When Mr Janík arrived, four men, including the large, corpulent fellow, were waiting for him. Mr Janík had to repeat what had happened and who he'd seen.

"The car had registration number N XX 705," said the large man when Mr Janík had finished speaking. "A private car. I don't know three of the six men Mr Janík recognised. Gentlemen, I'll leave you now. Mr Janík, come with me, please."

Mr Janík soon found himself sitting in complete silence in the office of the large man, who was walking up and down, deep in thought.

"Mr Janík," he said eventually. "I really need to ask you not to say a word about this to anyone. Reasons of state – you understand?"

Mr Janík nodded silently. *Jesus Christ!* he thought. *What have I got myself into now?*

But the large man was speaking again.

"Mr Janík. I'm not exaggerating when I say we need you. You're incredibly lucky. They can talk all they like about methodology, but a detective who doesn't have plain, down-to-earth luck is of no use. We need people who are lucky. It's not that we're not intelligent, but you can't buy good luck. Join us!"

"But what about my business?" whispered Mr Janík, not looking at all happy.

"Your partner will look after it. You and your extraordinary gift are wasted on it. What do you say?"

"I... I'll need to think about it," stuttered Mr Janík. "I'll come back in a week, but if there's no avoiding it... and if I've got the capability... I don't know. I'll come back and tell you."

"Good," said the large man, offering his large hand. "You needn't have any doubts about yourself. I'll see you next week."

A whole week had not gone by before Mr Janík returned, looking decidedly happier.

"I'm back," he announced breezily.

"And you've made up your mind?" asked the large man.

"Yes, thank goodness! I've come to tell you I'm not the person you're looking for."

"Really? Why not?"

"Just imagine!" said Mr Janík. "My chief clerk's been embezzling from my business for five years, and I've only just found out. What an idiot I am! So, you tell me, sir, what good I'd be as a detective. God in heaven! I've been working with that joker for five years, and I didn't

know anything! So you can see how useless I am! And it was making me sick with worry! Mary, Mother of God! I'm so glad nothing will come of it. I'm off the hook now, aren't I? Thanks anyway!"

