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978-0-521-13677-8 - Jaroslav Hasek: A Study of Svejek and the Short Stories

Cecil Parrott

Excerpt

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## I

THE INDIVIDUAL AND  
THE GIANT POWER

‘Human existence, humbly report, sir, is so complicated that the life of a single individual is nothing more than a bit of rubbish in comparison.’ (Švejk)

The distinguished Czech critic František Šalda found *The Good Soldier Švejk* for all its comedy ‘a desperately sad book’. If he was right, then its tragedy lies as much in the personal disappointments of the author as in the frustrated hopes of the Czechs. Šalda went on to say that in the book ‘the individual fights against... a giant power’. This could be applied not only to Švejk, but to his creator, Jaroslav Hašek himself. He was always trying to come to terms with life and no doubt in his imagination saw himself ‘fighting against a giant power’. He certainly portrayed Švejk in this rôle and there is much of Hašek in Švejk – but not all of him, because he deliberately avoided creating Švejk in his own image.<sup>1</sup>

Hašek’s life was in many respects a picaresque novel itself.<sup>2</sup> Born in Prague in 1883, there was nothing in his ancestry to suggest inherited literary talent. The Hašeks had been fairly prosperous farmers in Southern Bohemia for many generations and one of them, it is claimed, had been a parliamentary deputy. Hašek’s father was an impoverished schoolmaster and alcoholic who died when the writer was only thirteen. His maternal grandfather had been a water bailiff on one of the famous Bohemian fishponds on the Schwarzenberg estate. He himself was brought up by his mother, who seems to have had no outstanding characteristics except her inability to control her wayward son.

Although the family were poor, they had well-placed relations and patrons. Hašek’s paternal uncle was a master-printer on the largest Czech daily *National Policy* and later helped him to become a contributor to it. After his father’s death Hašek was

*Jaroslav Hašek*

fortunate enough to have as his guardian Jakub Škarda, an alderman of the City of Prague and founder of the then influential Young Czech Party.

Even though the Hašeks lived in straitened circumstances and changed their address many times, they always managed to find accommodation in one of the best quarters of Prague among the academic institutions in the New Town, even if the accommodation itself was not of the best. It was this quarter of Prague which Hašek knew best and which is most often mentioned in *The Good Soldier Švejk* and his stories. In some of the churches in the neighbourhood he earned a little pocket money by acting as a server, which taught him a good deal about the Catholic liturgy. He made good use of this knowledge in *The Good Soldier Švejk* and his anti-clerical stories.

At school he was intelligent, but headstrong and rebellious. According to his brother Bohuslav, complaint followed complaint, and he was often made to stand in the corner or sent to the bottom of the class. He had little respect for authority, whether in the shape of his schoolmasters or the police, and took a leading part in fights with rival bands of youths, especially Germans. When posters were put up proclaiming a state of emergency, he and others of his gang went around pulling down all they could find and setting fire to them. When armed dragoons with drawn swords chased the adult demonstrators, he succeeded in escaping by climbing over walls and hiding away in the gardens of some of the academic institutions, but not before he had thrown a large paving stone through the window of the German Institute on the other side of the road. Official complaints arising out of these escapades and excesses were too much for the school and Hašek was finally expelled. However, thanks to the help of his guardian, he managed to obtain a job at a chemist's store, from which he was soon sacked for playing a joke on his stupid and fussy employer. He was then taken on by another more discerning chemist who came to recognise his talents and recommend that he should complete his education at the Czechoslavonic Commercial Academy. This institution, contrary to what its name implies, was in fact a general secondary school of high repute, and had on its staff some very distinguished literary men of the time, including V. A. Jung, one of the editors of the standard large

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[More information](#)*The individual and the giant power*

Anglo-Czech dictionary, who was far-seeing enough to prophesy that Hašek would eventually become a second Mark Twain.

Hašek spent three years at the Commercial Academy and passed his final examinations with distinction. He showed from an early age that he had many qualities which could be assets to him as a writer. He was not only observant and imaginative, but full of mischief too, and soon revealed an unusual capacity for creating absurd situations, which lent themselves readily to literary exploitation. At the age of fourteen, while still employed at the chemist's, he had already started writing – an occupation which he continued after finally leaving school. But it was the walking tours which he undertook in Moravia, Slovakia and Hungary during his vacation which kindled in him a literary flame that was never quenched. They also provided him with the material for many of his early stories.

His first trip, undertaken in the summer of 1900, when he was seventeen, led to the publication of his first newspaper story, 'Gypsies at Their Feast', which was accepted by the largest Prague daily, *The National Paper*. By the time he left the Commercial Academy at the age of nineteen, he had succeeded in placing eleven stories in various leading newspapers. Meanwhile he was developing a taste for a vagabond life and spending more and more time exploring the Czechoslovak and other Austrian lands.

In October 1902 he obtained a post in a Prague bank but soon put his career in jeopardy by his unruly conduct. Bohuslav described how his brother came to part company with the bank in the spring of 1903: 'One day Jaroslav had a special errand to perform at Vyšehrad. On the way he stopped at a pub and took a decision. He packed up his ledger, put his visiting card inside it and sent it by messenger to the bank. The message on the card was short and sweet:

'I'm not baking today!'  
Jaroslav Hašek.'

His employers at first treated his truancy with indulgence for the sake of his widowed mother, but, when he repeated the offence, they could tolerate it no longer and he was finally dismissed in the spring of 1903.

\* 'I'm downing tools!'

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[More information](#)*Jaroslav Hašek*

A few months earlier he had published a volume of poems called *Cries of May* in collaboration with his best friend at the Academy, another budding writer, Ladislav Hájek. By 1904 he had contributed fifty articles to the press, a respectable quantity for a beginner of twenty-one, but not nearly enough to pay for his keep or contribute to the family funds.

An important development in Hašek's career at this time was his recruitment by the Anarchist movement. It is not quite certain how this came about, but it is known that in Prague in 1904 the Anarchist and Social Democrat youth tried to break up a service of prayers for Russia's victory in her war with Japan which had just broken out. Hašek was among the young and noisy demonstrators who were arrested and held for questioning. In the process he made friends with one of the group, who persuaded him to help compose a radical pamphlet attacking the 'reformist policy' of the Social Democrat Party, which placed its hopes on universal suffrage rather than revolution. Later he got to know Bedřich Kalina, editor of the Anarchist paper *Progressive Youth*.

It should be remembered that at this time there was no Communist Party in Bohemia, and the only Left parties were the Social Democrats and the National Socials. Neither of these were radical enough for some of the Czech youth, but the National Socials, who were Socialists of nationalist persuasion as against the traditionally international Social Democrat Party, had links with the Anarchists, and Hašek had some friends among them.

Partly to escape trouble with the police, in which his drunken escapades were increasingly involving him, and partly out of genuine enthusiasm for the Anarchist cause, Hašek left Prague shortly afterwards in Kalina's company to work in the editorial offices of *Progressive Youth* in Lom (Bruch) in Northern Bohemia, where the Anarchists had strong support among the miners. After contributing a number of articles to the paper and taking part in the distribution of propaganda, he had a disagreement with the editor and threw up his job. Feeling that it might be risky for him to reappear in Prague, he went on a tramp round Bavaria and Switzerland, in the course of which he found plenty of material for many new stories. But when funds ran out, he returned to his mother's home in Prague, where during 1905 he got into further minor scrapes with the police. Having quarrelled with

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[More information](#)*The individual and the giant power*

the Anarchists, he published no more articles in their press for the time being, but concentrated on the more remunerative and more respectable conventional newspapers and reviews, where he had considerable success.

Probably at the end of 1905 he made the acquaintance of Jarmila Mayerová, a student of the Women's Manufacturing Association, a girls' commercial school, and the daughter of a well-to-do partner in a firm of plasterers and sculptors. She was not pretty; freckled, snub-nosed and pince-nezed, she had all the appearance of a bluestocking, except that she was elegantly and fashionably dressed. But there was something appealing and tantalising in her sensitive and piquant little face, and her timid look seemed to call for his protection. As an 'emancipated woman' she admired him for his bold views, even if she did not always approve his unconventional behaviour. At this time one of Jarmila's friends described Hašek as 'not at all romantic looking, but very handsome. His eyes were grey and his hair wavy and chestnut colour. His face was like a girl's, with a silky, pink complexion. He looked healthy, well-nourished and level-headed.' (He had obviously not suffered physically from the straitened circumstances in which he was brought up, or from the effect of his exhausting and penniless hiking trips all over Austria-Hungary.)

But Jarmila's father not unexpectedly looked with disfavour on his daughter's friendship with the impecunious young Anarchist. He had been born the son of a mill-hand, who had worked up to a position of respectability and means. After a family quarrel in the autumn of 1906, Jarmila was forbidden to see Hašek for half a year. The frustrations of a winter of separation, broken only occasionally by clandestine meetings, drove Hašek back to the Anarchist fold. He started to contribute to their Prague publication, *Commune*, which he later edited, and to its supplement *Pauper*. On 13 April 1907 he spoke at one of their rallies in Northern Bohemia and on the following day led a demonstration to break up a Catholic Party meeting. Three days later the police ordered him to be placed under regular surveillance.

In the meantime Jarmila had become quite ill from the effects of their separation and the Mayers had to relent and agree that the lovers should go on meeting, provided Hašek promised to quit

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[More information](#)*Jaroslav Hašek*

the Anarchist movement for good. He glibly gave this undertaking, and they were allowed to go about together. This permission was given on May Day 1907 – an unfortunate date, because on that very day the Anarchists had arranged a mass meeting in Prague. Hašek attended it only as a reporter (or so he claimed) and was arrested by the police for ‘inflicting serious bodily injury on a policeman and inciting the public to similar assaults’. He was remanded until 14 May, and Jarmila tried her best to keep from her parents the news of his detention and the ensuing trial. He was finally sentenced to a month’s imprisonment which he served in the gaol of the New Town Hall in Prague.

When Mr Mayer finally got to know what had happened, he refused to allow them to meet any more and warned Hašek that his only hope of marrying Jarmila lay in his solemnly promising to reform. He must really stick to his promise and never again have anything to do with the Anarchist movement, and he must go about respectably dressed and try to find a steady job. In a serious endeavour to make good, Hašek renewed his efforts to achieve literary success and secure permanent employment on one of the papers he contributed to.

Meanwhile, until Hašek could satisfy Mr Mayer, the lovers had once more to go on meeting in secret and communicating through friends. Worried by the effect this was having on Jarmila’s nerves, Hašek determined to take the bull by the horns and go and see Mr Mayer. So one day he went to his front door and calmly knocked at it. But his characteristically jocular and jaunty approach did not pay off. Menger, one of Hašek’s biographers, tells us: ‘When Jarmila’s father opened the door and asked him what he wanted, Hašek replied: “I’m coming to ask you for Jarmila’s hand, my dear respected father-in-law. I thought for a long time beforehand whether I should clean my shoes or put on a clean collar, and finally I plumped for a clean collar. It means less work.” But he had no time to finish. Mr Mayer froze him with a withering look and slammed the door in his face.’

Hašek’s efforts to find a job were unsuccessful, because they were not seriously meant, as a letter which he addressed to the Director of the Library of the National Museum shows very well:

Gentlemen,  
I offer you my services.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The individual and the giant power*

I have practical experience behind me.

I have edited the journals *Commune* and *Pauper* and although I am not an outright Anarchist I edited them in an anarchist way.

Would someone of the age of twenty-five suit you?

One day Hašek waylaid his would-be-father-in-law in the street and tried to appeal to his better nature. Mr Mayer, who was a tender-hearted man, was moved by his pleading. Finally he gave way and said, 'Come for her, when you've got a job. I'll gladly give her to you.' But Hašek's chances of getting a job were not at all promising. He had alienated editors and Party leaders not only by his Anarchist activities but by his erratic conduct. A friendly Prague Police Commissioner allegedly advised him as follows: 'If you want to join a party where they shout a lot, join the National Socials. If you've still got revolutionary ideas, join the Social Democrats.'

Hašek tried to do both. With his usual optimism he wrote to Jarmila on 10 January that he had been in touch with Social Democrat leaders and they had allegedly promised him a job on their main daily *The People's Right*. Discouraged by what he believed to be their failure to keep their promise, he stupidly resorted to blackmail. One day he brought them an article guying the National Social leaders. When they hesitated to accept it, he sat down, crossed out the original names and substituted those of the Social Democrat leaders instead. After making a few further alterations, he sent it to the National Social press, who published it. He then started to make fun of both parties, offering articles to *People's Right* (Social Democrat) and *Czech Word* (National Social) and even carrying on polemics between the two papers by writing anonymously both sets of articles himself.

Hašek had been too strongly associated with the Anarchists' campaign against the Social Democrats to be wholly trusted by their leaders. His relations with the National Socials were rather better. At the by-elections in the Vinohrady district of Prague in 1908 he was given charge of their offices in their campaign against the Young Czechs. But he turned the whole proceedings into a farce and alienated not only the Young Czechs, the party of his former guardian, but also the National Socials who employed him.

After his electioneering escapade Hašek found himself on the

*Jaroslav Hašek*

rocks once more. Fortunately his friend Hájek took pity on him and found him a job on the magazine, *Animal World*, of which he was editor. By a coincidence it happened that shortly afterwards Hájek quarrelled with the owner and resigned, which enabled Hašek to take over his post. It was the first offer of a salaried job he had received since he left the bank. He immediately wrote enthusiastically to Jarmila's mother that he had a job at last and that the proprietor had promised to increase his pay as soon as he was married. The Mayers now felt that they could no longer oppose the marriage and gave permission for the wedding on condition that it was in church. It took place on 23 May 1910 in the huge pseudo-Gothic brick basilica of St Ludmila, which stood opposite a leading Prague theatre – not inappropriately perhaps, because the ceremony had an air of comedy about it. Hašek had typically tried to 'fix' his return to the Catholic fold by attempting to bribe the sexton to give him a false certificate of attendance at confession.

After a brief honeymoon in the environs of Prague and not far from the editorial offices of *Animal World*, the young couple installed themselves in a flat in a new building in the neighbourhood, which Mr Mayer had provided for them. Hašek not only ran *Animal World*, but looked after the proprietor's kennels and his pet monkey as well. He was genuinely fond of animals, and his experiences provided him with the material for many of his stories about pets.

One would have thought that this kind of life would have suited him down to the ground. He was at last united with Jarmila and had a job which was to his taste. Indeed at first he seemed to have become a reformed character, staying at home with Jarmila in the evenings and sending to the local inn for beer instead of going out to drink with his cynical and pleasure-loving bohemian companions.

Unfortunately this hallowed period did not last long. He soon became bored with the editorial routine and made as much of a farce of editing the paper as he had of running the electioneering offices for the National Social Party. He had an irresistible penchant for hoaxing, and nothing lent itself better to it than *Animal World*. Perhaps his best piece of spoof was to advertise a couple of 'thoroughbred werewolves' for sale, and, when the



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[More information](#)*The individual and the giant power*

proprietor was flooded with applications and nearly went off his head, Hašek consoled him by saying, 'It's quite simple, Mr Fuchs, I'll send them the following circular: "We are unfortunately out of stock of thoroughbred werewolves. Be assured that as soon as a new consignment arrives we shall pick out a nice pair for you!"'

But soon some incredible articles which he wrote about animals which never existed began to arouse the suspicions of the readers. Mr Fuchs became alarmed and secretly persuaded Hájek to return and take over the editorship from him. The story is told by Marek in *The Good Soldier Švejk* (pp. 323–8).

And so the 'ideal' job was lost to Hašek, and after two months he had left the offices of *Animal World* for good. Hájek, pitying his condition, tried to get him a job as editor of a paper at the provincial town of Poděbrady, but Hašek drank too much before the interview and offended the selection board. As a last resort he and Jarmila set up a dog business on their own at the end of 1910, which Hašek pretentiously called their 'Cynological Institute'. He secured the services of a certain Čížek, who, like Švejk, dyed and trimmed the dogs and made forged pedigrees for them. But as a result of Hašek's questionable business methods they soon found themselves in court. However, the adventure ended happily, because, thanks to a lawyer friend, they were finally acquitted on appeal.

Hašek's dismissal from *Animal World* greatly distressed the Mayers. He was now without a job again and the young couple had no money. Family relations were strained and for the time being the parents took Jarmila home to live with them. They wanted to persuade her to make a final break with her husband, and for a time she gave in. Later she rebelled and went to live with Hašek once more.

At the beginning of December 1911 Hašek succeeded at last in obtaining a staff appointment as a local reporter on *Czech Word* (National Social). He did not hold the job long but just before he was sacked there occurred a mysterious episode in his life which has never been satisfactorily explained. On 9 February 1911 at 1.45 a.m., according to a newspaper report, he was seen climbing over the parapet of the Charles Bridge with the apparent intention of throwing himself into the river. He was allegedly only prevented from doing so by a theatrical hairdresser who happened to be

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Jaroslav Hašek*

passing that way. The hairdresser handed him over to the police, who took him off to the lunatic asylum.

He remained there eighteen days, and in the meantime Jarmila and her father came to visit him. Afterwards Hašek wrote a comic story called 'A Psychiatric Enigma', which described the episode as having occurred to an elderly man who was on his way back from a meeting of total abstainers. He had bent over the parapet, because he thought he heard a cry for help from the river, and was furious when his rescuer (also a hairdresser) insisted to the police that he had been trying to throw himself in the river. In the end, like Hašek, the total abstainer was taken off to the lunatic asylum 'where he has already been kept for one and a half years because the doctors have not yet been able to detect in him an awareness of his mental illness, which, according to the rules of psychiatry, is a sign of an improvement in mental condition'.

One can only suppose that Hašek had had some scene with Jarmila and threatened to leave her or do himself harm, because he left the flat at 5 p.m. and the very same evening she was enquiring about him at the police station. And in his first statement to the police he said he hated the world and wanted to drown himself. Later he withdrew this, but it is unlikely that Jarmila and her father would have allowed him to stay in the asylum for so long unless they had reason to believe that he was suffering from a temporary mental disturbance.

On leaving the asylum Hašek went to stay for a time with his mother, but when Jarmila's parents learned that she was expecting a baby they agreed that she and Hašek should move into a flat which the father had taken for them and be reunited. It was probably here that Hašek first conceived the idea of writing about the Good Soldier Švejk (as will be told in Chapter 4). In 1911 he published for the first time five stories about the Good Soldier in *Caricatures*, a fortnightly published by Lada, the future illustrator of the final book. At the end of the same year the stories were republished in book form.

Hašek now planned his biggest hoax yet. He and his friends had founded a mock political 'party' called 'The Party of Moderate Progress within the Bounds of the Law', and he thought it would be a great joke to stand as its candidate at the parliamentary elections of 1911. The name of the 'party' and its