

# The Stamp Collection

Karel Čapek

Translated by Paul Selver

## FOCUS: IRONY; CHARACTERIZATION

What does the narrator mean by the statement, "If a man were to rummage in his past...set of lives"?

Why does Mr. Karas state that the "other lives" are not "entirely dead"?

What do we learn about Mr. Karas from his comment on friendship?

"There's no getting away from it," said old Mr. Karas, "If a man were to rummage in his past, he'd find material in it for a whole different set of lives. One day, either by mistake, or because he felt inclined to, he chose just one of them and went on with it to the end; but the worst of it is, that those other lives, the ones he might have lived, are not entirely dead. And sometimes it happens that you feel a pain in them, like a leg that has been cut off.

"When I was a boy of about ten, I began to collect stamps; my father didn't altogether approve of it; he thought it'd make me neglect my lessons, but I had a chum,\* Lojzik Cepelka, and we used to share our passion for foreign stamps. Lojzik's father used to play a barrel-organ,\* and he was an untidy lad with freckles, a regular ragamuffin,\* but I was fond of him, in the way that schoolboys are fond of their chum. You know, I'm an old man; I've had a wife and children, but I must say that none of our feelings are finer than friendship. But you're only capable of it when you're young, later on, you get sort of crusty and selfish. A friendship of that sort I mean springs simply and solely from enthusiasm and admiration, from excess of vitality, from abundance and overflow of emo-

### HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**chum** — a friend.

**barrel-organ** — a hand organ; a musical instrument played by turning a crank.

**ragamuffin** — a child wearing tattered, dirty clothing.

tion; you've got so much of it, that you simply have to give it away to somebody. My father was a lawyer, the chief man among the local bigwigs, a most dignified and severe person, and I had chummed up with Lojzik, whose father was a drunken organ-grinder and his mother a downtrodden laundress, and yet I *venerated* and idolized Lojzik, because he was smarter than myself, because he could shift for himself\* and was as plucky\* as they make them, because he had freckles on his nose and could throw stones left-handed — in fact, I can't remember all the things that made me so attached to him; but it was certainly the closest attachment I have ever had.

*What is implied about Mr. Karas' boyhood from his reasons for admiring Lojzik?*

"And so Lojzik was my trusty comrade when I began to collect stamps. I suppose that the craze for collecting things must be a survival of an instinct dating back to the times when every warrior collected the heads of enemies, the spoils of war, bearskins, stags' antlers, and, in fact, anything that could be captured as *booty*. But a stamp collection possesses one quality which makes it a perpetual adventure; it somehow excites you to touch a bit of some distant country, such a Bhutan, Bolivia or the Cape of Good Hope; it brings you into a sort of personal and intimate touch with these foreign countries. So there is something about stamp-collecting which suggests travel by land and sea, and deeds of derring-do,\* in general.

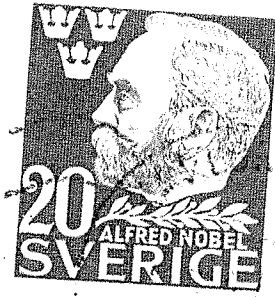
*Why is stamp-collecting a "perpetual adventure"?*

"As I was saying, my father didn't exactly approve of it .... Anyway, I had to hide my stamp collection in the attic, so that my father couldn't catch me with it; in the attic there was an old chest, a sort of flour-bin, and we used to crawl into it, like a couple of mice to have a look at each other's stamps. Look here, this is a Netherlands, this is an Egyptian, this is Sverige or Sweden. .... The way I got hold of those stamps was also an adventurous business: I used to go round to families I knew and those I didn't, and beg and pray of them to let me soak the stamps off their old letters. Now and then I came across people who'd got drawers crammed full of old papers stored away, in an attic or a writing-table; those were my most delightful hours when, sitting on the floor, I sorted out those dusty piles of litter to try and find stamps I hadn't already got — you see, I was silly enough not to col-

*Why is it "silly" not to collect duplicates?*

**shift for himself** — (idiom) take care of himself.  
**plucky** — courageous.  
**derring-do** — heroic actions.

*H*ELPFUL  
DEFINITIONS



lect duplicates, and when I happened to come across an old Lombardy or one of those tiny German states or free cities, why, the thrill I had was perfectly agonizing — every vast happiness has a sweet pang about it. And in the meantime Lojzik was waiting for me outside, and when at last I crept out, I whispered right in the doorway, 'Lojzik, Lojzik, I found a Hanover there!' — 'Have you got it?' — 'Yes.' And away we ran with our booty, home to our treasure chest.

## A CLOSER LOOK

Stamps had to be **soaked off** the envelope to protect the perforations from becoming damaged. If a stamp is removed from the envelope without prior soaking, the perforations can become torn, or the integrity of the stamp itself can possibly be affected. A stamp loses much or all of its collectible value if its perforations are damaged or if any part of its image has been destroyed or spoiled. Today many stamps no longer feature perforations. In the past, however, they were an integral part of many stamps and of the stamp-collecting process.

The stamps from **Lombardy** and "**those tiny German states**" are truly special because these states disappeared soon after they issued postage stamps. Lombardy was absorbed into Italy in 1859, and the tiny German states were merged into various unions of German states, such as the inclusion of Hanover in the German Customs Union (1851).

"In our town there were factories which turned out\* all sorts of trash, jute,\* calico, cotton, and *shoddy* wool. ... They used to let me *ransack* their waste-paper baskets, and that was my happiest hunting-ground; there I came across stamps from Siam and South Africa, China, Liberia, Afghanistan, Borneo, Brazil, New Zealand, India, the Congo — I wonder whether the mere sound of the names gives you the same sense of mystery and glamour as it does me. Good heavens, what joy, what frantic joy I felt when I found a stamp from, say, the Straits Settlements,\* or Korea

### HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**turned out** — here, produced.

**jute** — a coarse fiber used to make burlap, rope, etc.

**the Straits Settlements** — four trade centers (Singapore, Penang, Malacca, and Labuan) that in 1826 were incorporated as a British Crown colony; the colony was dissolved in 1946.

or Nepal or New Guinea or Sierra Leone or Madagascar! I tell you, that particular *rapture* can be realized only by a hunter or a treasure-seeker or an *archeologist* who's doing excavations. To seek and to find — that's the greatest thrill and satisfaction which a man can get out of life. Everybody ought to seek something, if not stamps, then truth or golden ferns or at least stone arrowheads and ash-trays.

"Well, those were the happiest years of my life, my friendship with Lojzik and stamp-collecting. Then I had scarlet fever\* and they wouldn't let Lojzik come to see me, but he used to stand in the passage and whistle so that I could hear him. One day they must have taken their eyes off me or something; at all events, I got out of bed, and slipped upstairs to the attic to have a look at my stamps. I was so *feeble* that I could hardly lift the lid of the trunk. But the trunk was empty; the box containing the stamps was gone.

"I can't describe to you how distressed and horror-stricken I was. I think I must have stood there as if I'd been turned to stone, and I couldn't even cry, there was such a lump in my throat. First of all, it was *appalling* to me that my stamps, my greatest joy, were gone — but what was more appalling was that Lojzik, the only friend I had, must have stolen them while I was ill. I felt overwhelmed, dismayed, *dumbfounded*, *woebegone* — you know, it's amazing how much a child can suffer. How I got out of that attic, I don't know; but after that I had high fever again and during my clearer moments I *pondered* in despair. I never said a word about this to my father or my aunt — I had no mother. I knew that they simply wouldn't understand me and through that I became rather *estranged* from them; from that time onwards my feelings for them ceased to be close and childlike. Lojzik's treachery affected me terribly, it was the first time anyone had played me false.\* 'A beggar,' I said to myself, 'Lojzik's a beggar and that's why he steals; it serves me right for chumming up with a beggar.' And this hardened my heart; it was then I began to draw a distinction between one person and another — I *forfeited* my state of social innocence; but at the time I didn't realize what a shock it had been to me and how much damage it had caused.

**scarlet fever** — a contagious disease marked by a red rash.

**played me false** — (idiom) cheated me; tricked me.

What important point does the narrator make?

Why doesn't the narrator tell his father and aunt about the loss of the album?

What has happened to estrange the narrator from his father and his aunt? After all, he does not suspect them of taking his stamp collection!

How has the narrator absorbed his father's social prejudices?

What does the narrator mean by the statement, "I forfeited my state of social innocence"?

**HELPFUL DEFINITIONS**



Why does Lojzik come to hate Karas?

Why does "nobody" like Karas?

What does the narrator mean when he says, "When my time comes..."?

How have "solitude, mistrust, and self-will" affected the "valuable work" done by Karas?

"When I had got over my fever, I also got over my distress at the loss of my stamp collection, though my heart still ached when I saw that Lojzik had now found new friends; but when he came running up to me, rather *sheepishly* because it was so long since we'd seen each other, I said to him in a *curt*, grown-up tone: 'You sling your hook,\* I've finished with you.' Lojzik turned red and presently replied: 'All right, then.' And from that time onward he hated me as thoroughly as the underdog can hate.

"Well, that was the incident which affected my whole life. The world I lived in was, so to speak, *desecrated*; I lost my faith in people; I learned how to hate and despise. After that I never had a friend; and when I grew up, I began to assume that because I was by myself, I needed nobody and would show favour to nobody. Then I discovered that nobody liked me; I used to put this down to the fact that I despised affection and was proof against all sentimentality. And so I became an *aloof* and purposeful man, very fussy about myself, very *punctilious*, and the kind of person who always wants to do the right thing. I was *cantankerous* and harsh towards my subordinates\*; I brought up my children to obey and fear me, and by my industry and sense of duty I gained quite a reputation. Such was my life, my whole life; I attended nothing except my duty. When my time comes, the newspapers will say what a valuable work I did and what an *exemplary* character I had. But if people only knew how much *solitude*, mistrust, and self-will there is about it all.

"Three years ago my wife died. I never admitted to myself or to anybody else, but I was terribly upset; and in

## HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**sling your hook** — (slang) get away from here.

**subordinates** — here, persons of lower rank; employees.

my distress I rummaged about among all sorts of family keepsakes which had been left by my father and mother; photographs, letters, my old school exercise-books — I felt like choking when I saw how carefully my stern father had arranged and kept them; I think that, after all, he must have been fond of me. The cupboard in the attic was filled with these things, and at the bottom of a drawer was a box sealed with my father's seals; when I opened it, I discovered the stamp collection I had made fifty years earlier.

"I'm not going to keep anything back from you: I burst into tears and I took the box into my room like a man who has found a treasure. So *that's* what happened, suddenly flashed across my mind; while I was ill, somebody must have found my stamp collection and my father *confiscated* it, so that I should not neglect my lessons. He oughtn't to have done it, but it was all because of his concern and affection for me; I don't know how it was, but I began to feel sorry for him and for myself.

"And then I remembered: so Lojzik never stole my stamps. Good heavens, how I had wronged him! Again I saw the freckled and untidy urchin before me, and I wondered what had become of him and whether he was still alive. I tell you, I felt so wretched and ashamed when I looked back on it all. Because of a single false suspicion I had lost my only friend; because of that I had wasted my childhood. Because of that I had begun to despise the lower orders\*; because of that I had been so self-opinionated; because of that I never became attached to anyone. Because of that the very sight of a postage-stamp always made me feel annoyed and disgusted. Because of this I never wrote to my wife, either before or after our marriage, and I explained this away by pretending to be above what I chose to call gush\*; and my wife felt this keenly. Because of that I was harsh and aloof. Because of that, only because of that, I had so fine a career and performed my duties in such an exemplary manner.

"I saw my whole life afresh; suddenly it seemed a different life, was the thought which struck me. If that hadn't happened, I should have been so full of enthusiasm and dash,\* affection,

**lower orders** — here, lower (economic) classes.

**gush** — here, excessive display of sentiment.

**dash** — here, vitality.

*Why might Karas begin looking through family keepsakes after the death of his wife?*

*How do we know that Karas has reached a healing stage in his emotional development?*

*Why does he feel sorry for his father and for himself?*

*Why didn't Karas write to his wife?*

**H**ELPFUL  
**D**EFINITIONS