

A very involved story

THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT VARIOUS HORRIFYING STORIES AND it was the tale told by the innkeeper, Vidnava, which made the deepest impression on the company.

“It was early in the morning, on the day when I opened a new inn for the first time in one of the larger district towns. You can imagine how a chap looks forward to his first customer. At about seven a.m. he arrived—a respectably dressed young man, who ordered a glass of wine and a cigar. He seemed rather tired after his journey and mentioned that he was taking some money to the savings bank.

“I was in the midst of conversation with him when he suddenly fixed his eyes on a distant point, closed them, continued sitting for a while, and then all at once fell off his chair. I’ve never had such a shock in my life. I tried to revive him, but he’d ceased to breathe and his hands were as cold as ice.

“‘My God, he’s dead! That’s a fine beginning! As soon as it gets about that the first customer in my new inn has died, not a living soul will dream of coming here!’ But my wife was more energetic than I was and had more business sense. ‘Let’s carry him down to the cellar for the time being,’ she said calmly, ‘and in the evening we’ll shove him into our neighbour’s garden.’ (You see, the restaurant of my main competitor was next door.) And so we put him in the cellar.

"It was not long before another customer appeared in the doorway. He was an elderly gentleman, of pleasant countenance, who ordered tripe soup and a glass of beer. Warming up, he told me that he had an appointment to meet his son here, who was taking some money to the savings bank. He described him in such detail that I soon realized that that son was that same unfortunate first customer who was at that very moment a stone-cold corpse lying in the cellar.

"The elderly gentleman began to show signs of nervousness. "I'm afraid something may have happened to him," he said. "He may have been attacked and robbed. You can't trust a soul today. He had his money sewn into his overcoat." You can imagine that I turned deadly pale.

"But my wife kept her presence of mind and went off somewhere. She came back looking even paler, and whispered to me that the lining in the dead man's overcoat which I had hidden in the parlour was ripped open and the money gone.

"The elderly gentleman grew more and more nervous and ordered a glass of wine after he had drunk up his beer. When he had finished his wine he suddenly announced that he was not feeling well. He stared at the corner of the room, lowered his eyes, and dropped his head on the table.

"Full of dire foreboding I pulled him by the coat, and the poor old man fell to the floor like a lump of lead. When we found we couldn't revive him, we carried him off to the cellar too.

"And so now we had both father and son down there. We locked the cellar and reflected on the awful calamity which had befallen us. Destiny certainly seemed to have played a terrible trick on us. It was a ghastly advertisement for the opening of our inn.

"Shortly after eight o'clock an elderly lady arrived and asked for her husband and son. She said a policeman had told her that they had come in here. She had been waiting for them in the market for half an hour already and was afraid that something might have happened to them, because both were taking money to the savings bank.

“With a trembling voice I told her that no gentlemen like that had come in yet. She said she would wait for them. . . .”

The innkeeper took a sip of wine, wiped his brow with his hand and slumped to the ground. . . .

He passed away in my arms without finishing his very involved story and telling us how it ended. Instinctively we were going to carry him down to the cellar like the others.