

An idyll from the almshouse in Žižkov

WHEN GRANNY PINTOVÁ, FROM THE ALMSHOUSE AT ŽIŽKOV, looks back on it all, what she regrets most is that she has no teeth to gnash. But she raises her eyes to heaven and spits, and after that her bent, wizened figure shambles over to a corner of the room where she pulls a rosary out of the pocket of her grey skirt. And slowly but surely she prays for Chaplain Toman, that God may forgive him the treason he was guilty of at the Žižkov almshouse. When the other old women talk of that same event, Granny Pintová's grey eyes take on a brighter gleam and she observes that even in those days, when Chaplain Toman was still coming to visit them, she did not like the way he behaved—he was rather loutish, more like an ordinary servant, she said, than a servant of God.

Of course they often quarrel among themselves, because they do not like Granny Pintová's sharp tongue. But these quarrels are very entertaining and at least kill the tedium of those long hours in the almshouse.

The other day Granny Skuhrovská said that in fact Granny Pintová herself was at the bottom of it all. But in my opinion things developed of their own accord and the circumstances alone caused the catastrophe. It was, however, undoubtedly a catastrophe of very considerable consequences, which even affected the small flat flask which Granny Pintová kept in her suitcase. That flask is now empty, but when the stopper is removed an experienced nose can

—merely by sniffing it— at once detect the smell of sweet kummel.

The flask will confirm that it used once to be full, and so, by a remarkable combination of circumstances, sweet kummel, Chaplain Toman, and the almshouse mutually complement each other.

Of course an important factor in all this was Granny Pintová's dying, but that happened a long time ago. Now she curses the chaplain and she certainly does not lie in bed. But the chaplain's tender heart must bear the blame for the whole episode. He was called to the almshouse some time ago because Granny Pintová was on her death bed and was asking for extreme unction.

It was the first time that the new young chaplain had had to administer, and he set about the task with enthusiasm. The surroundings and the situation had such an effect on him that after the whole religious ceremony was over he put his hand into his pocket and placed a gold piece in dying Granny Pintová's hand. That was something that had never yet happened to the old women in the almshouse.

After the chaplain's departure Granny Mlíčková announced that he was very clever indeed at administering. And indeed the effect of the gold piece on Granny Pintová was such that that very same evening she actually ordered for herself some ham and kummel.

When the doctor came next morning to give her an injection to relieve her death agony, he found her sitting at the table in a very cheerful mood and singing "I love my love dearest of all." A week later the kummel ran out, because the money ran out. Then one day the sacristan came and knocked at the chaplain's door to say that Granny Pintová was dying again and wished him to come to her with the grace of the Lord.

When she saw the chaplain, she whispered happily, "O, my dear sweet Reverend Father, I don't know, I really don't, whether I shall have the strength today to hold that gold piece in my hand." She managed all the same, and Chaplain Toman said to the sacristan, as they were leaving the almshouse. "She's a tough one. She certainly hangs on to life." She certainly did. The next

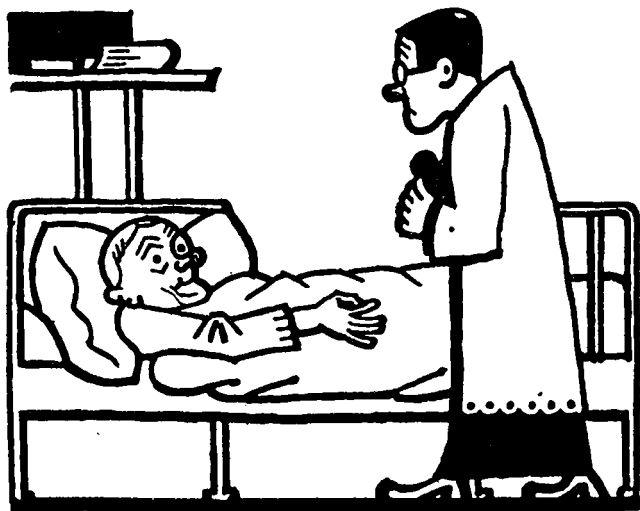
morning, when the doctor came, he heard her walking about the room and singing,

She's my darling dear.
I'm not the only one
After her to run.
There are thousands who
Do the same too.*

“My dear Mrs. Pintová! What *is* the matter with you?” “But that chaplain's so very clever at administering extreme unction, doctor, sir.”

That was on Wednesday. On Thursday the sacristan came running to Chaplain Toman, and while he was still in the doorway, called out, “Reverend Father, we must go to the almhouse again. This time we have to administer to that little old woman, Skuhrovská.” But before they got there the dying woman had got

* This ribald song, “I love my love dearest of all”, ends: “Do you know who she is? She's my Virgin Lady.” (Translator's note.)



into a quarrel with Mrs. Mlíčková, who all of a sudden had insisted on lying down too so that the chaplain could administer to her at the same time. Mrs. Pintová had made the suggestion. The others had however persuaded Mrs. Mlíčková that her turn would come on Monday. Mrs. Mlíčková of course cried out that she wanted to die immediately that very day and she would not wait until Monday. What if something were to happen to her in the meantime? In the end she calmed down, but when she later saw the chaplain giving Mrs. Skuhrovská a gold piece after the spiritual consolation, she could not contain herself and said in a tearful voice, "Reverend Father, I feel it in my bones that it's going to come to me too very soon." When he remembers that day the young chaplain shakes his head and a cold shiver runs down his spine.

In the almshouse they still remember what a row and uproar there was when on Saturday old Mrs. Vaňková began to complain that she was unwell and was feeling faint. Mrs. Mlíčková said that it was a dirty trick on Mrs. Vaňková's part and that it was *her* turn first, and if that was the way things were going she would rather get her dying over and done with now on Saturday, and on Monday Mrs. Vaňková could send for the chaplain.

A lot of argument followed until finally Mrs. Vaňková, being the younger woman, gave way; she was after all only eighty-nine and Mrs. Mlíčková was eighty-nine and three months.

But when they came to fetch Chaplain Toman to the almshouse, he turned pale and said that the Senior Chaplain Richter could go today. Accordingly Chaplain Richter came and prayed fervently at Mrs. Mlíčková's bedside, blessed them all, and was about to go away without giving her a gold piece. Granny Pintová, who like all the others was keeping a careful watch, caught Chaplain Richter by the edge of his cassock.

"Reverend Father, forgive me, but I must stand up for Mrs. Mlíčková. We've always got a gold piece, when we have been given extreme unction. It's true, Reverend Father, that you prayed longer, but you forgot all about the gold piece."

And Granny Vaňková hissed, "And Mrs. Mlíčková was

obstinate enough to insist on dying today, just so that that good chaplain should come to her, although her turn was not until Monday.”

Deeply crestfallen, Chaplain Richter gazed at the old women and then fumbled for his purse. . . .

The latest decision of the Žižkov town council is interesting. At the insistence of the chaplains it has decreed that the old women should be prohibited from dying on their own initiative. It has further laid down that extreme unction will in future always be administered in the almshouse once a month, and to all of them at one go. As a result the grandmothers' takings are now extremely meagre.

The flask smelling of sweet kümmel is empty and an air of great calamity hangs over the almshouse. Mrs. Vaňková hanged herself a fortnight ago, because the illustrious town council of Žižkov would not give her permission to die.