

# The Coffin-Dealer

Mr Lindiger was one of those people on whom Fortune never smiles. Even when he was on his way to be christened, the woman who was carrying him to church, all neatly wrapped, was within an ace of getting herself picked up, for no reason at all, on the horns of a runaway bullock. On the very day that he got his first pair of trousers, so that even from a distance, his masculinity was plain for all to see, he somehow found himself hanging, by those same trousers, from a nail in the wooden bridge over the stream. And another misfortune followed relatively quickly after that, and then a whole string of accidents.

As for example when he fell from the attic onto his mother's prize gander and killed it.

He himself, it must be said, suffered no injury and he even described with relish how enjoyable it was falling on top of a goose: just like falling on a feather-bed. But his mother took a different view and this was the first occasion on which young Frantik came into contact with the switch which continued from then on to play an active part in his family life.

At the same time, no-one should assume that the young Lindiger brought these disasters on his head out of wilfulness. The catastrophes came upon him of their own accord . . . one misfortune departed, to make way for another. At school one day, he was lying in wait behind the door with a ruler for one of his friends and it was simply a matter of course that it was the Headmaster, who had unexpectedly opened the door at just that moment, whom he whacked on the nose with it.

And later, when he had reached the age when any man worth his salt ought to fall in love, the delicate maidenly blossoms to whom he chose to give his heart were usually of the type that leads a man up the garden path.

He fell in love with twelve women in all. Of these, nine, who had vowed never to take anyone but him, went off and married other men. That left three and of these, one ran off with someone else, another, in playful mood, poured vitriol over him by mistake and one - who unbeknown to him was a divorcee - went back to her husband.

Whatever he turned his hand to came out badly for him. He embarked on a career in the Civil Service, for example, and one day he left the office, got into some sort of crowd and before he knew what was happening, he had been arrested. At the police station, they found some stones in his pocket and he learned, to his amazement, that he had apparently been throwing stones at the dragoons. He got two months, lost his job in the Government Office, appealed against conviction and sentence and had the sentence raised to five months by the appeal court.

Then he set himself up as a dealer in cosmetics. He settled in a small town which counted among its nine hundred inhabitants eight hundred and twenty workers in a glass factory. Naturally enough, none of these good people bought his powders, his lotions for the complexion and delicate toilet-soaps, his perfumes and toothpastes and sweet-smelling ointments which made the breasts grow firmer and the hair thicker. So he sold it all for a song to a chemist in the main town of the district, where there was a military garrison, and before he could send the goods off, a fire broke out in his shop and the whole lot went up in a blazing inferno.

So off he went to the town to shoot himself. He went to a hotel, lay down on the bed, cocked the gun, pressed the trigger . . . and the bullet missed his head and went through the thin wooden partition into the adjoining room where it knocked a cup of tea out of the hand of a commercial traveller and smashed the sample bottles of liqueur in his suitcase. This gave rise to protracted and unpleasant complications, fines and claims for compensation. The hotel-owner behaved as if the unfortunate Mr Lindiger had shot the whole hotel to pieces and the commercial traveller blew his sample-bottles up into hectolitre vats of liqueur.

Small wonder then that, after all these afflictions and misfortunes, Mr Lindiger's face assumed an expression of infinite sadness.

One day, he read that as a result of the death of the owner, a large coffin-business was selling off its stock at a low price. It did not take Mr Lindiger long to make up his mind. He saw that dogged as he was at every step by ill-luck and misfortune, he was fated to become a trader in some thoroughly melancholy commodity.

And he quickly came to see the great advantages of the coffin-trade for here, after all, is a product for which there will always be customers.

'Well now,' he said to himself, 'I've already stood on the brink of death; why not take the plunge into coffins?' So he bought a stock of

coffins of all shapes and sizes and looked round for a place where he could set up shop. An acquaintance of his told him that Dolní Opatrovice didn't yet have a wholesale and retail business of that kind and that furthermore, it was situated in an area with a harsh climate.

So he applied for the concession, and three weeks later they were hanging up this sign outside a certain house in Dolní Opatrovice:

*FRANTIŠEK LINDIGER*

ACCREDITED DEALER  
IN COFFINS OF ALL KINDS  
FOR GENTLEMEN, LADIES  
AND CHILDREN

Mr Lindiger had more than three hundred coffins in stock. He smiled as he walked up and down among them in his store-room. His heart was filled with gladness. Now at last he had a product that no-one could do without.

That evening, in the restaurant, he made the acquaintance of the leading figures of local society and his good humour became somewhat dented. For the conversation got round to the 'flu which was about that year and he complained of a certain tightness in the chest. 'You'll get better here,' said the Tax-Inspector, 'It's a very healthy area.'

'That's a blow, dammit!' sighed Mr Lindiger and his face clouded over.

A fortnight later, he was hanging his head. Not a single customer as yet. 'I have faith,' he said to himself; 'surely God will send me a death from somewhere!' After four weeks, he was looking like a ghost and vainly attempting to drum up some custom by means of a sign he had fixed to his door: 'ALSO AVAILABLE ON THE INSTALMENT PLAN'.

The people who walked by seemed to him to be bulging with muscle and bursting with health. He spent hours on end sitting in his shop and sighing: 'Great God Almighty, what a healthy area this is!'

At night, he dreamed of nothing but epidemics: of cholera, of spotted typhus and a doorway jammed with weeping widows and relatives. Forty coffins a day - fifty - whole families were dying off. He was about to send a telegram to a certain firm: 'Please send by return, high-speed freight, 1,200 coffins. Damaged goods accepted if necessary.' And then Mr Lindiger would awake from his beautiful dream, alone among his coffins, and no-one would come, no-one would open the

door and ask him, in a voice choked with tears, to come and take the measurements.

He tried another tack. In the Club that night, when the beer was flowing, he started a conversation about the Chinese. The Chinese, he said, had a very keen awareness of the Last Things. Over there, the idea was to get yourself a handsome coffin while you were still alive. Husbands would buy their wives a coffin as a present; children would buy coffins for their parents.

He spoke with the tongue of an angel. He was warm in his praise of this custom and ended by saying that something of the kind ought to be brought in over here. He, for example, would start the ball rolling and would be glad to donate a fine oak coffin as a prize in the Charity Tombola which was to be held in a week's time. If this proved a success, he was willing to give away a small child's coffin free with every third coffin sold . . . The people looked uneasily at one another and then down at his beer-mat and finally, the organiser of this entertainment told him that the maximum weight of gift they were accepting for the tombola was one kilogram.

He went home in a state of dejection and overnight got together this poster, which he displayed in his window.

### ABSOLUTELY FREE

*To anyone buying a coffin from this shop*

A

### SPLENDID SHROUD IN PURE LINEN

Order a child's coffin, and get a free set of  
Tasteful Decorative Pictures

Every tenth coffin free with bulk-orders.  
Replacement of unsuitable coffins guaranteed.

'If that doesn't do the trick,' he said to himself, 'nothing will.' It didn't. He began to have hallucinations in which the funeral-bell was tolling. Every time, he would rush out and ask who had died, and every time he came home again disappointed.

Then it came to the point where he started speaking openly and in public about a brother of his who was a ship's doctor at present working in India where the plague was raging at the moment and

saying that he had written to ask him to hurry up and pay him a visit.

In the pub, he took to saying that since it was winter now, it would do the children no end of good if their parents were to send them out into the snow barefoot, to toughen them up.

And then one day, his face lit up. A certain local inhabitant had been unfortunate enough to shoot himself in the stomach in a hunting-accident and it was said that he was not going to recover. He rubbed his hands and said that he would give the man a coffin the like of which Dolní Opatrovice had never seen.

That hope, too, was dashed. They took their fellow-townsmen off to hospital in Prague, with Mr Lindiger running along behind the waggon for part of the way and shouting in desperation: 'Don't take him to Prague! I'll give you a fifty per cent discount!' His fears were realised: his hopes were laid to rest in Prague.

Then one night, there was an attack on the District Medical Officer, who had come to inoculate the children of school age. Someone knocked his top hat in. The general opinion was that it was Mr Lindiger who had done it. At the same time, an unsigned petition was received at the Sheriff's Office requesting that the Imperial and Royal Sheriff's Office should ban doctors from treating the sick.

This was on a Tuesday. On the Wednesday, the gendarme who had come to investigate the assault on the Medical Officer found Mr Lindiger hanging from a nail behind his door. Remarkably, his face wore a light-hearted expression, which was explained by the inscription written underneath the body: 'At least, that's one coffin off my hands!'

It was learned in addition that there was an unfinished letter on his desk in which he was planning to order twenty flasks of spotted typhus bacilli from the Bacteriological Institute in Vienna. Truly, this was a man with the real entrepreneurial spirit!