VOJTA AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH

OF all the things that people in this country are now sending to their friends and relatives in Europe, none are more appreciated than American cigarettes, coffee, and nylons, which have become accepted media of exchange everywhere in Europe's new barter system. Next on the list are American books, magazines, and newspapers, for which there is an enormous demand. Unlike cigarettes, which are warmly appreciated regardless of brand, American reading matter should not be sent overseas indiscriminately. Some time ago, an old friend of mine, whom I'll call Vojta, wrote from Prague asking me to send him "anything printed in America." I sent him a lot of stuff and gave his address to some friends in California and New York and asked them to do likewise. One of them, a painstaking fellow who has an office on Broad Street and an apartment on Park Avenue, in due time notified me that he had sent Vojta some back numbers of *Fortune*, *Barron's*, *Banking*, the *Bond Buyer*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

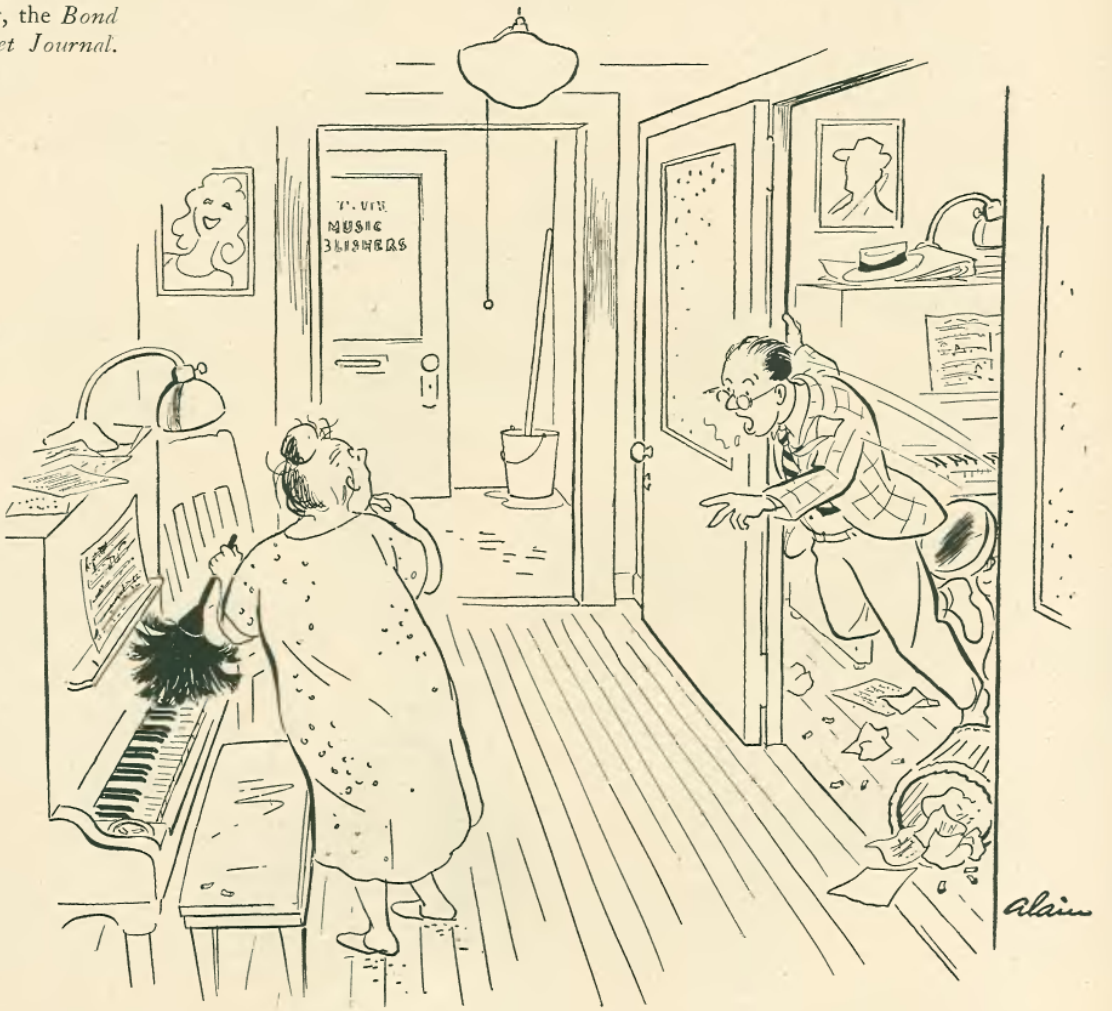
This assortment did not cause unmitigated joy in Prague. A few days ago I received another letter from Vojta. He asked me to thank my friends for the magazines but suggested that they stop sending such "untimely" publications as the *Wall Street Journal*. "You see," he wrote, "my friends and neighbors wouldn't always understand. We are back in Klobouk's waiting room."

It was a coded message, and it took me right back to the late twenties, when Vojta and I were studying law at Prague University. We and a few of our friends were deeply interested in the far-away, fantastic land of America and wanted to know all about it, but there were few American publications to be found in Prague in those days. The City Library had the New York *Times*, one big textile firm, to whose offices we had access, subscribed to the *Corset & Underwear Review*, and a few doctors had back numbers of the *National Geographic* in their waiting rooms. But these publications didn't quite satisfy our curiosity about the currents and undercurrents of American thinking. So we were greatly excited when Vojta, who then was a wild-haired, chess-playing, radical thinker of twenty-two, and violently ashamed of his wealthy family, told us that he had discovered, in the proletarian suburb of Žižkov, a dentist by the name of Klobouk, in whose waiting room there were such unheard-of treasures of American radical thought as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, *Justice*, and the *New Masses*.

"Klobouk, I've been told, has a brother-in-law in America," Vojta reported. "This man is a dentist in Cleveland and sends Klobouk all his magazines. From what I've seen in the *New Republic* and *New Masses*, I feel sympathetic toward the brother-in-law in Cleveland."

The next morning, Vojta, three other fellows, and I went to Klobouk's waiting room in Žižkov, found it to be all that Vojta represented it, and thereafter a number of us became habitués of the place, losing ourselves among Klobouk's clientele, which was vast, and readily being accepted as patients waiting for dental ministration. Klobouk was not a doctor but merely a *zubni technik* (tooth technician). In Czechoslovakia then, a man with three years' practice as a dental-laboratory worker was permitted to practice dentistry as a *technik*. People who couldn't afford expensive crowns and bridgework at a real doctor's had their fillings made and teeth extracted by a *technik*, at considerably less cost.

Klobouk was a very thin, sinister man, consisting mainly of bones and a little skin. He had hollow cheeks, deeply sunken eyes, a hypnotic stare, and a high-pitched, barking voice. One of his patients told us that he was popular in the district as an amateur actor, and that at an annual banquet of the Žižkov



"Do that again! With the duster!"

trolley-car motormen he had played the part of the Angel of Death in an allegorical play called "Death and the Poor Rich Man, or Money Isn't Everything," without using any makeup at all. We judged, from the shrill cries of his victims, that Klobouk was a follower of the old European dentistry school that shunned the use of anaesthetics.

DURING the following weeks, Vojta and the rest of us spent many mornings in Klobouk's waiting room. It was full of the smell of chemicals and rotten wood. On one wall was a photograph showing the members of the Žižkov *Sokol*, the local branch of Czechoslovakia's nationwide physical-culture organization, at a canoe outing. Presumably, Klobouk was one of the people in the picture holding a paddle. Tacked up on another wall was a program of the first performance of Karel Čapek's "R.U.R.," at the National Theatre, and a framed painting of two birds of paradise, with real feathers glued to the picture, which was considered by Klobouk's clientele a major objet d'art. The only other decorative effect in the room was a drawing of the inside of a man's head, which hung near the door.

Every once in a while, the door to Klobouk's operating room would open and the technician would stand just inside the waiting room, wearing a long, grayish coat that had perhaps never been white. He would give the frightened crowd in the waiting room a sweeping, terrifying stare, while his latest victim staggered out behind him in a daze. There would be a moment of hushed horror, then Klobouk would bellow "*Příští!*"—"Next!"—and some wretch would get up, white-faced and trembling. The only unconcerned people in the room would be myself and Vojta and the rest of my friends. We wouldn't even bother to look up from the American magazines.

"You be sure to leave before noon," Vojta told us several times. "After eleven-thirty, no more patients come in, and if you don't get out soon after that, Klobouk may catch you."

A couple of our group decided to back out after two or three visits to Klobouk's waiting room. They said that the feathered painting and the cries of the agonized patients were more than they could stand. Vojta shrugged disgustedly when he heard about these defections. "That proves again how decadent our youth has become," he said. "As far as I am concerned, Klobouk's waiting room is more cheerful than my home. At least it's got *reality*." Vojta's home had reality too, though of a different kind. It was an elegant, modern villa with a big garden. His father was an executive of the Škoda munitions works, much to Vojta's embarrassment —"Imagine, my own father a Profiteer in Death"—and the villa was in the swank suburb of Bubeneč, a long way from Klobouk's waiting room in Žižkov, both geographically and ideologically.

ONE morning, I arrived early at Klobouk's waiting room with two classmates. A new shipment of Radical Thought had arrived from the United States, and soon we were deeply engrossed in the case of former Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, who had been found guilty of accepting a bribe of a hundred thousand dollars from Edward L. Doheny in the leasing of the Elks Hill naval oil reserve. I was trying to figure out, somewhat wistfully, how much a hundred thousand dollars—three million crowns—would buy in Prague, when Vojta arrived. He looked angry. He had had another argument with his father, the Profiteer in Death, at the breakfast table.

"My father now even objects to my reading the *Rudé Právo* while I sit in his Praga limousine waiting for him every afternoon in front of the Škoda offices," Vojta said bitterly. The *Rudé Právo* was the official newspaper of the Czechoslovak Communist Party; the Praga limousine was black, long, shiny, and very capitalistic. "He pretends I'm making him the laughingstock of the office. I find it more and more difficult to stay at home."

I showed Vojta the articles on the bribery case and he was fascinated. He was still reading at eleven o'clock, when the rest of us left to attend a class.

My two schoolmates and I saw nothing of Vojta for two days afterward;

then he turned up for an important lecture at the University, and when it was over, he told us his story.

It seems that he had been in the middle of the bribery case when he was suddenly aware of Klobouk's voice barking "*Příští!*" And then, louder, "Come on, I haven't got all day for you!" Vojta glanced up from his magazine and found himself staring into Klobouk's hypnotic eyes. He looked around the waiting room and saw that there was nobody there but himself.

Klobouk shrugged impatiently. "Another of those cowards who come here day after day and always sneak away before their turn comes, ha?" he shouted. "I been watching you, *hochu*. You've been here for weeks. You are the kind that just can't face it. You must be *made* to face it."

Vojta, still preoccupied with the fascinating bribery situation around Washington, D.C., didn't quite get the meaning of Klobouk's words at first. By the time he sensed their awful significance, he found himself pulled up by the *technik's* strong, sinewy fingers, shoved into the operating room, and slammed down into the dentist's chair.

"I tried to protest, to fight him off," Vojta said. "But he kept shouting at me, and the first thing I knew, I had a gag in my mouth, and one of those devilish contraptions around my jaw which they show you in the torture chamber in the old Town Hall dungeon. Klobouk's head was eerily silhouetted against a shaft of light that slanted from the window, and I swear that he looked like the Angel of Death. I was done for."

The Angel of Death pushed most of the fingers of both hands into Vojta's mouth, centered his attention on a molar, and attacked it with a weapon that, according to Vojta, looked like a combination of a harpoon and a battle-axe, and all the time he kept talking.

"We'll have that son of a bitch right away," Klobouk was saying. "Open up! Wider! Much wider! A little suffering will do you a lot of good. You guys always amaze me. Sitting around out there for *weeks!* Always leaving in panic before your turn comes. The things you people will do to get away from your fears! Even pretending to read those American magazines, which no one can understand. Open up! There! Like a girl who goes to her date and can't quite make up her mind. *Voilà*—that molar! It's bad. It's full of poison. It must come out. *Bože*, people beat up their wives, go into bank-

ruptcy, and put *slivovice* into their beer, and they don't know that it's all in their teeth. Don't bite me, silly. We'll have it out in a minute!"

At this point, Vojta's narrative became confused. It seems that Klobouk started to pull, at the same time delivering his great monologue from "Death and the Poor Rich Man." Vojta vaguely remembered that at one point he gave a long, unearthly cry of terror, and that some time later he staggered out into the street and made his way home.

He never went back to Klobouk's waiting room, and neither did any of the rest of us.

VOJTA graduated from the University a few months later. His father got him a job with an old, conservative law firm handling the business of the Škoda works and affiliated Profiteers in Death. Vojta kept up his interest in American Thought. Once, a year or so after we had graduated, I went home with him, and he showed me a copy of *Harper's*, to which he had just subscribed. Some time later, I passed the head office of the Škoda works and saw the black, long, shiny Praga limousine parked in front of the house, waiting for Vojta's father. Vojta was sitting inside, reading *Lidové Noviny*, Prague's most distinguished newspaper, which its admirers, in their tender moments, compared to the London or the New York *Times*. —JOSEPH WECHSBERG

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The story about Emil Morris getting a marriage license from the county clerk last week is an error. It was a license to hunt rabbits.—*Toluca (Ill.) Star-Herald.*

Well, that's more like!