

## The Fat Magician

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Dear Frank,

I have quite a tale to tell. It is not exactly folklore. Not yet, but it is fast becoming folklore. It is a mystery story if you will, and centers about a man in league with the Devil, who was on the side of the angels. It is also a story of murder, though there is no mystery about the murder. Most signally, it is a horror story, by far the most horrible I have ever been made aware of.

And it is a ghost story, on top of everything else. You will have to accept my own testimony as regards the ghost; so let me say here that everything I am about to tell you is true to the best of my knowledge. I am going to stretch nothing, because there is nothing that requires stretching. I am not, however, going to tell you the *whole* truth. I cannot do that without betraying the pledge I gave this morning to a most attractive woman who has been exceedingly kind to me. I know, Frank, that is not a thing you would wish me to do.

As you will probably be able to tell from the postmark, I am not yet in Vienna. Trains do not break down—or so I have always thought. It turns out I was wrong. I am not sorry, but I am very glad that I allowed myself a few days in Vienna before the opening of the WFC.

In brief, I woke up this morning and found my train at a dead stop between two flower-spangled mountain meadows when it ought to have been in the Vienna station. I have my demotic, as you know, and fair command of Spanish. My German, I fear, is merely amusing. Amusing

to me, I mean. Actual Germans and Austrians are inclined to burst into tears.

By jumping up and down and shouting, I was able to make the conductor (“Herr Schaffner”) understand that I wished to know why we were not in Vienna. Herr Schaffner, by shouting back, stamping, spitting in my face, and wiping his own with his handkerchief, was able to convey to me that ein gross Herr Shaft (I suppose the crankshaft) of our engine had broken. In all fairness, I must admit Herr Schaffner’s English is better than my German. Say, about ten percent better.

Soon we were joined by a handsome young guy called Heinz, a grad student who speaks English a good deal better than I shall ever speak German. Heinz conferred with Herr Schaffner, and explained to me that the Austrian State Railway would not be able to spare us a new engine for a day or so. We were welcome to stay on the train until the new engine arrived, eating such food as there was in the dining car. Or we could walk three kilometers down the tracks to R——, where there would be restaurants and so forth. When the new engine arrived, the train would pull into the station at R——and stay there for an hour or more collecting its passengers.

Heinz and I conferred and decided to walk to the village and perhaps take rooms there, I promising to buy his breakfast if he would interpret for me. We fetched the overnight bags that were all we were permitted to have in our compartments and off we went, hurrying along before the rest of passengers (they were still yawning and dressing for the most part) came along to overwhelm the village facilities.

“I myself am living not so far from this place when I was a child in Freistadt,” Heinz informed me. “This R——, it is where the famous and terrible Ernst S——lived.”

Naturally I wanted to know what made Herr S——famous and terrible.

“He is a Hexenmeister.” Heinz grinned and made magical gestures.

“A master of bad luck?”

Heinz laughed. “He will make you a dog or a toad, Herr Cooper. This is bad luck enough, ja? Only we do not worry now. He is dead. When I am little, the older kinder scare us with him, the big children.”

After that I wanted to know a great deal more, as you can imagine; but Heinz could only tell me that “Fat Ernst” (this was the name used to frighten children, apparently) had been a giant, that he had

disappointingly boasted but a single head, and most surprisingly that he had been a living, breathing man in Heinz's grandparents' time. Heinz's great uncle, a traveling salesman, had met him more than once; Heinz thought that he had died during World War II, and that he had probably been killed by a bomb.

We got to the village and soon found a snug *das Café*, where Heinz quizzed our waitress on my behalf. She called "Fat Ernst," Ernst the Great (which interested me), agreed that he had been a bad man, but seemed to feel a secret sympathy for him. An older man with a bristling mustache stopped at our table on his way out and snapped something in German that I could not understand, at which our waitress colored. When she had gone, Heinz explained in a whisper that the other patron had called Fat Ernst a liar and a thief.

Our *Frühstücks* came (bread, butter, pastries, cold cuts, three kinds of cheese, and the wonderful Austrian coffee), and with all the other things an old man who had been drinking his coffee at a table in the back, speaking a German so slow and simple that even I could understand most of what he said: Fat Ernst had been a friend of the Devil's. It was better not to talk, or even think, about such people.

Properly chastened, Heinz and I confined our conversation to the excellence of the food and the length of our delay for the remainder of the meal.

When I paid our bill, the owner of the cafe said in halting English. "Quick you will want *das Mittgassen*, ja? In R——we have ein fine Gasthaus." He pointed. "Der Romantik Hotel S——. Sehr alt. Sehr inter-es-ting. Gutes Speise."

Well, Frank, I have never claimed to be the sharpest knife in the drawer; but even I could not help noticing that he was—yes, earnestly—recommending a place other than his own, and that the name of the "Romantic Hotel" he recommended was also that of Fat Ernst.

In retrospect, we should have found a cab. As it was we assumed that der Romantik Hotel S——was in the village; and when we found out (by asking directions on a street in which all the houses seemed to be modeled on cuckoo clocks) that it was not, that it was nearby. As, alas, it was not. Frank, the Chinese are right. Uphill miles are longer. So are uphill kilometers. By the time we had gone wrong, and found the right road again, and stopped a couple of times to rest and hold lengthy conversations concerning job opportunities in American universities, and

Austrian folklore, and American folklore (poor Heinz thought that Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan were legitimate, but had never heard of the Boss in the Wall), and German and Russian and Polish folklore, to say nothing of the opportunities awaiting an unmarried man in Vienna ... Well, it was nearly lunchtime when got there; and I honestly think I could have sat down, taken off my shoes, and eaten Heinz's lunch as well as my own.

Now I'm going to describe Gertrun's hotel. Pay attention, Frank. This stuff is important.

Although the setting is lovely, the building itself is not. What it is, is old. It was built (Gertrun says) in 1757 as a hunting lodge. Her family, the S——s, took it over in 1860 and have operated it as a hotel ever since. It is of weathered gray stone, is as square as a bouillon cube, and has three stories, with one of those high, pointed roofs you see everywhere here and (I suppose) a good-sized attic underneath it. Parlor, dining room, kitchen, hotel office, et cetera on the ground floor, with a wine cellar and other cellars underground. High ceilings in all the rooms. Go up the stairs and you find a square landing on which you might drill troops, with a massive carved railing. This landing gives access to the twelve rather old-fashioned bedrooms on the floor. The stair continues to the floor above where there are more rooms; I did not bother to count those, but Gertrun says those are smaller, so sixteen up there, possibly.

Gertrun owns and runs the place. Picture a substantial woman between thirty-five and forty, very blond, with a round, smiling face, a toddler's complexion, and truly beautiful clear blue eyes. She showed us into a dark-paneled dining room ornamented with the antlers of deer that had died before any of us were born, assured us that lunch would be ready in a minute or two, and stayed to chat with us. At first I supposed, as I think anybody would, that she was an employee; I asked if there were any members of the owner's family about.

"I am here, Mein Herr. I am Gertrun S——."

I apologized, and we introduced ourselves and explained about the train.

When I mentioned Ernst S——, I unleashed a flood of information. He had been Gertrun's grandfather. A giant? Oh, ja! She rose on tiptoe and stretched a hand as high as she could reach to indicate his height, and embraced an imaginary barrel show his girth. Three hundred kilos—four hundred. She did not know, but he had been sehr gross, huge.

Heinz asked several questions I was too dense to understand; Gertrun replied in German, but I caught the word *Jude*.

Heinz turned to me, smiling. "He hid people from the Nazis when they took power in our country, Herr Doktor. Jews—"

Gertrun interrupted in German.

"She says he had a Jew, a priest, and a man that wore dresses in his secret room at the same time once." Heinz roared with unfeigned delight. "What a rumpus that must have been!"

"They wished to send them to the camps," Gertrun explained. "Mein Grossvater did not like." She shook her head violently. "He was before on die stage, ein performer."

I said that I had thought the Nazis sent only Jews to their concentration camps, at which Gertrun became very somber. "It does not matter what they say, Herr Doktor Cooper. When such mans have authority, they send to their camps what they do not like. They send Jews und the priest does not like that, und so they send the priest. A man which does Lippenstift." Her finger signaled lipstick. "He ..." (She groped for a word, one hand on her own soft stomach.) "They grow sick from seeing it. So him auch. Him also. Mein Grossvater hides him like those other mans."

I asked whether the Nazis had found them.

"Nein! To Schweiz they go." Gertrun's eyes, which were very round already, became rounder still. "Again und again der Nazis come! All night almost for many, many ... Mein vater ist a little boy, Herr Doktor. He hears them up und down die steps, in den cellars, everywhere. Into his room they come, und under his bed look. If him they frighten, mein Grossvater will show wo ist das Geheimzimmer. This they think, but they make der mistake."

"The secret room," Heinz translated.

"Never! Never his secret room he shows! Kommen mit, I show you his chair."

She led us back into the parlor. It was an enormous chair, like a throne. The seat was as high as a table and four feet across, and the legs looked sturdy enough to support a small house. "'Search!' he tells them. 'I sit till you are done. You leave, you close mein door.' So they think the secret room it is he sits on. They make him get up. They move his chair." She showed us a nick in the sturdy oak back that the Nazis had supposedly made. "They take up der carpet. They drill through our floor,

but ist der Weinkellar they searched every night. There they find ein klein Judsch Mutze,” she touched the back of her head, “und mein Grossvater laughs.”

Naturally Heinz and I wanted to know where the secret room was.

Gertrun’s face went blank. “I do not know, Herr Doktor. Nobody knows but mein Grossvater. I see in die Kuche. You will be hungry, ja?” She hurried away.

“She knows,” Heinz told me.

“Of course she does,” I said. “What I’d like to know is why she doesn’t want us to.”

From that time until our lunches arrived, Heinz tapped panels and moved pictures, and ran up the stairs to the floors on which the guest rooms were located, without finding anything. He went back to the train after lunch, but I decided to rent a room at the Romantik Hotel S——, enjoy a good dinner (there is excellent food all over Austria, but our lunches had been superb) and a good breakfast today before Ire-boarded.

“In Juni will be full,” Gertrun told me. “Ist when young people ist married. They come then to hike und climb. Now you have mein best.”

It was indeed a large room, and beautifully furnished with antiques. I have seen more dramatic views than the one afforded by its four wide lacecurtained windows, but few if any that were lovelier.

“There und there ist dem doors for des rooms next door.” Gertrun pointed them out to me. “Sometimes two ist rented together. For this die Hotelrechnung for number two ist half. But you have die Bolzen. Chains mit locks die handles of them both holds, you see?” She demonstrated, shaking the handle of one of the bolts. “Here ist keys to der locks for dem chains. So you know nobody comes und bother you. You must give back to me mit der key of das room when away you go. If you not, I must telfonieren der Schlosser from R——.” She pantomimed cutting the shackle.

I promised that I would certainly return all her keys, and asked whether she had been in show business like her grandfather, praising her appearance and melodious voice.

She laughed. “Nein! Nein! But I have picture. You would like to see?”

I thought she meant a picture of herself, but she led me to her office, a small room off the parlor, and showed me a framed theatrical poster on which rabbits bounded, rings flew, and maidens floated about an imposing man in evening dress—a man already portly, although from

what Gertrun told me he must have been quite a bit younger in those days than his waxed mustache and full beard made him appear. Behind him a shadowy, Mephistophelian figure taller even than he stooped as though to whisper some dreadful confidence. Fat Ernst had been a conjurer!

“Till his vater ist no more,” Gertrun explained. “Then he comes home to take care of mein hotel.”

“With the secret room in which he hid the Jew and those others.”

“Ja, ja.” Gertrun looked a trifle flustered. “Many more also, Herr Doktor.”

“No doubt. The room that the Nazis were never able to find, even though they searched this building repeatedly and no doubt systematically, since Austrians are every bit as systematic as Germans.”

“Ja. Never.” She was at ease now, and smiling. She has good teeth and is very attractive when she smiles.

“You said that they found a yarmulke in the wine cellar?”

Gertrun nodded. “In die attic, too, they find something once. I do not remember.”

“A rosary or a crucifix, I’m sure. A breviary, perhaps. Something of that kind.” I took her hand, “Frau S——, I don’t know why you’re so anxious to keep the location of your grandfather’s secret room a secret, but I want you to know that whatever harm others may intend to you or your family, I intend none. I like you—more than I should, perhaps. And yet I can’t help being curious. Would it trouble you if I had a look at your wine cellar? And the attic?”

“Nein!” She shook her head violently. “I take you myself, Herr Doktor.”

I told her she need not bother and went up to my room, where I immersed myself in thought as well as hot water.

Fat Ernst’s having been a conjurer had given me the clue. When I had dried myself and changed my underwear, shirt, and socks, I unlocked the heavy wrought-iron bolt on one of the connecting doors and tried to move it. It traveled a sixteenth of an inch, perhaps, but no farther.

Let me interrupt myself here, Frank. On the first page of this letter, I promised you a mystery. It is the location of Fat Ernst’s secret room. You have all the facts that I had now. Where was it?

Gertrun and I breakfasted together the next morning in her private apartment—a meal large enough to last me all day. Over coffee, I asked her whether her grandfather himself had ever spoken of a secret room. Had he said, for example, that there was one?

She shrugged. “Gone he was before I am here to hear him, Liebling.”

“I doubt that he did, although he may well have said that no one would ever find it. In that he was quite correct. No one ever will, because it does not exist.”

She stared without speaking.

“Allow me to tell you, so you’ll know I’m not bluffing. Then I will give you my word that I will never reveal the name or location of this hotel, or the name of your family. Never. Not to anyone.”

“Danke.” I had taken her hand as I spoke, and she managed to smile. “Danke schön.”

“There’s only one kind of secret room that can’t be found no matter how thorough the search, Gertrun. It’s a secret room that does not exist. Your grandfather put the people he was hiding into the ordinary rooms of his hotel. Many hotels have connecting doors between rooms, as yours does. And all of those I have ever seen have sliding bolts on both sides of the doors; I cannot enter my neighbor’s room unless his bolt is drawn back as well as my own, and he cannot enter mine. In this hotel, however, those bolts are connected by a slot through the door. I don’t know the word in German, but an American conjurer would say they were gimmicked. Or gaffed. That’s why you think it necessary to chain and padlock them.”

I waited for her to speak, but she just stared; I saw her lower lip tremble.

“When the Nazis put their room key into the lock, the person hiding in that room had only to slip into the next and hold the bolt of the connecting door closed until he heard the searchers leave and he could return. When the Jew’s room was being searched, he could slip into the priest’s, and when the priest’s was searched he could slip into the Jew’s. Or both could slip into the room occupied by the transvestite. I would imagine that they were careful to sleep on the floor, and so on—not to leave any indication that the room had been occupied that could not be



snatched up and carried away. As for the yarmulke in the wine cellar, and whatever may have been found in the attic, they were false clues planted by your very clever and very brave grandfather to throw the searchers off the track.”

She nodded and gave me a shaky smile.

“How did he die? Was it an Allied bomb? That’s what Heinz thought.”

“Nein. These Nazis here take him.”

That puzzled me. I said, “But they can have had no evidence if they never found—”

“For ein trial, Herr Doktor?” Gertrun’s smile was bitter then. “Evidence they do not need. They take him, und he ist dead.”

It required some time to digest. That immense body sprawled in a gas chamber. Half a dozen Storm Troopers to drag it out and get it on the truck. Then I said, “You keep his secret—”

“For nachst, Herr Doktor. For next time.”

There you have it, Frank. But my train has not come yet, so let me tie up a few details. I promised you a mystery, and I think you will agree that I gave you one.

A murder, as well. Was not Fat Ernst murdered by his government? If not, how did he die?

That seems to me the greatest of all horror stories. When the millennium now ending began, government meant a king; and that king, whatever else he might be, was his nation’s leader. He might wage war upon his neighbors, but he would have been thought mad if he had waged war upon his followers. Bandits and cutpurses abounded, and they constituted a very real and present danger to everyone except the strongest; but the king was the sworn foe of all such criminals. In the century we are just now closing out, we ordinary men and woman have been in much greater danger from our own governments than from all the criminals in the world.

In Nazi Germany, and not long afterward here in beautiful, smiling Austria, the government declared that Jews must die. The priest objected, so the priest had to die too. The man who cross-dressed disgusted the government’s functionaries, and he was added to the list.

Which is more disgusting, a man in a dress or a government that murders the people who created it to protect them? Which is more

horrible, Frank? Is it the werewolf of our folklore, or this soulless monster squatting over the corpse of its nation, its hands running with innocent blood?

Sincerely,  
Sam Cooper

PS. Still no train, although I spent nearly an hour sipping coffee in das snug Café. Thus I have time to tell you that last night about one thirty I woke to the sound of footsteps, footsteps slow and so heavy that the timbers of the landing creaked and groaned. Very distinctly, I heard the door open and saw a vertical bar of very bright-seeming light from stairwell. Somebody standing not more than a step from the bed in which I lay said softly but unmistakably, “1st gut,” and the door closed again. I got out of bed and turned on a light, but the only other person in the room was sleeping soundly. All three doors were securely fastened, as we had left them.

I intend to return here to R—for a week or so after the conference to investigate this and other matters.