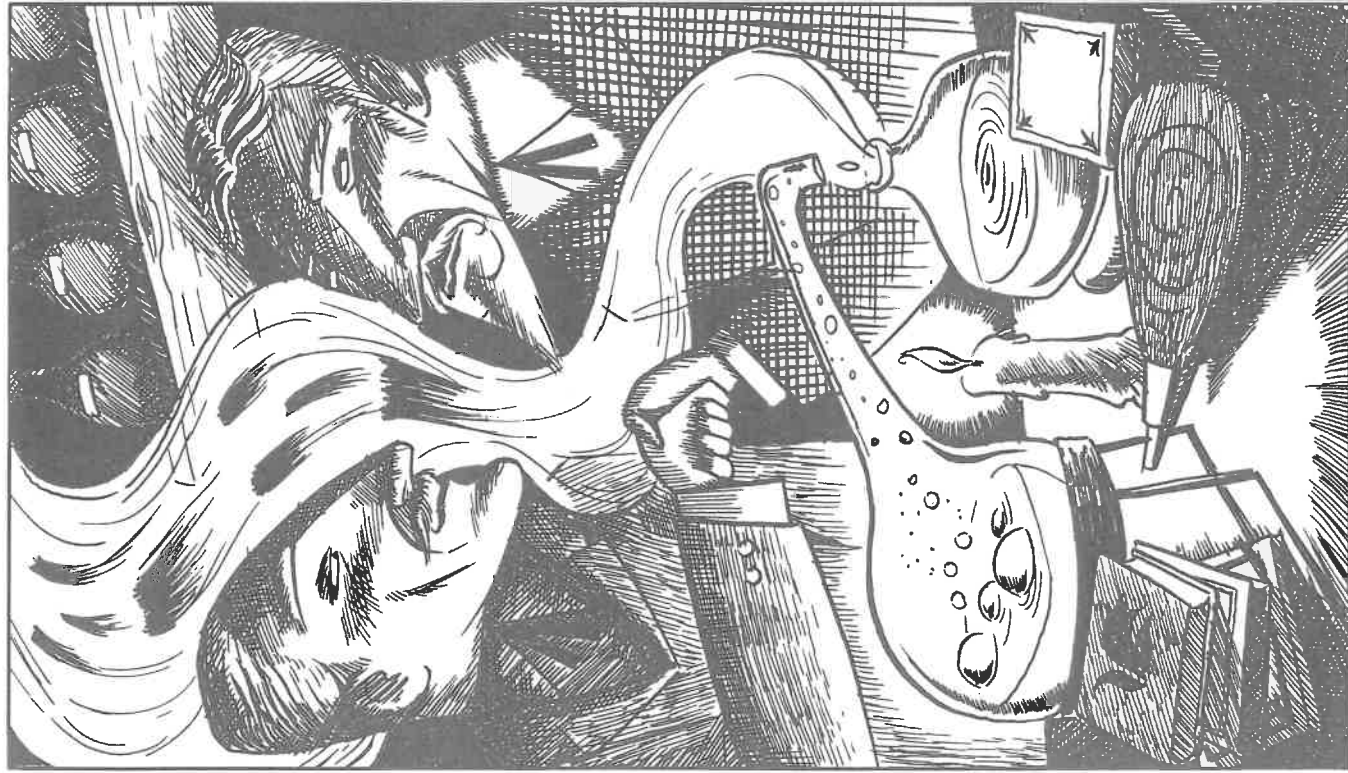




THE ECCENTRIC ALCHEMIST

Prague, 1894

COUNT MIROSLAV TYRS ADJUSTED THE clips on the voltaic cell and continued his demonstration. Lumps of iron ore and coke were spinning slowing in a revolving kiln. Through an isinglass window they could see the rocks absorb the electricity and begin to heat up.

"My passion has always been alchemy," the count admitted shyly.

Herbert Greenway laughed. "You mean like turning lead into gold?" the American millionaire said in passable German. "Is that what this is about? That's a fairy tale."

Karel, the count's nephew, bristled. "Isaac Newton did experiments in alchemy. It has an ancient tradition, especially here. Emperor Rudolf even set up a company of alchemists in the far corners of Prague Castle."

"This is not alchemy." The count stared daggers at his nephew. He needed the American's goodwill, needed his money, in order to finance his new iron-making scheme. "But it was while working with lead and gold that I happened upon this process. No more need for pig iron and a Bessemer furnace. Combine electricity with the right elements and voltage, and you get a harder, purer iron than previously possible."

Rolf Berger observed the three men and didn't know what to think. As the emperor's emissary, Rolf was wary of Count

Tyrs. The eccentric aristocrat was descended from one of the noblest of Czech families. But what riches hadn't been lost in the religious wars had been squandered by the count himself in his endless experiments. Just the year before, he had persuaded investors to back him in a search for a universal solvent, only to call off his quest when he couldn't find any container that could hold it without disintegrating.

Rolf, an old school chum of Karel's, had always liked Count Tyrs. But he could never decide if the alchemist was a swindler or a true believer. Today Rolf was here as a curious friend. Tomorrow might be different.

The four men retreated from the heat. The count checked his temperature gauge, then flipped an electrical switch at just the right moment, stopping the revolving kiln. Using a steel bar, Count Tyrs opened a latch and poured the molten iron into a mold.

The American inspected the cooling iron and was impressed. "Andrew Carnegie would give his eyeteeth to see this," he said in an awed whisper. "Count Tyrs, I think you and I can do business."

The count puffed out his chest with pleasure. "Wonderful."

Rolf stayed for supper and afterwards wandered into the display hall. Through the centuries, the Tyrs family had amassed an unparalleled collection of gold figurines, some dating back to the earliest days of the Holy Roman Empire. The small, jewel-decorated statuettes represented a high point of Czech workmanship—treasures, but ones that the Tyrses couldn't easily profit from. Emperor Franz Joseph himself had forbidden them from splitting up the collection or allowing it to be sold outside the Hapsburg domain.

Rolf circled the room, admiring the artifacts in their simple, glass-fronted cupboards. "Are you ready to head back to the Stare Mesto?"

Rolf looked up to see Karel Tyrs standing in the doorway already dressed in his riding cloak. "Yes, of course."

The two friends bade farewell to Count Tyrs and the

American, then mounted Karel's open carriage and began the brisk ride from the estate back to the old section of Prague.

"Is Herr Greenway staying with your uncle?" Rolf asked.

"Yes," answered Karel. The young man seemed in a foul mood. "They met yesterday in Vienna. He was coming to Prague and offered Uncle a seat in his private railway car. You know Uncle Miroslav. He becomes fast friends with anyone who has money."

"You disapprove?"

Karel shrugged. "So many of Uncle's projects fail, or they cost more to operate than they bring in. Every investor in the Austro-Hungarian Empire has lost money. But what if this iron-making process actually works? It would leave Bohemia and make more millions for America, millions that belong here. It's not right."

Rolf understood. Karel was one of the new breed of nationalists, young men determined to preserve the Czech ways, working behind the scenes, never quite breaking the law, hoping for independence from the Hapsburg throne.

"Don't forget who I am," Rolf warned his friend. "You must be careful."

Two days later, Rolf received an urgent message and rode out to the Tyrs estate. The count was waiting for him, looking frantic. "Herr Greenway has vanished," he whispered. "Yesterday, my man Vaclav drove him into Prague to tour the city. The American wanted to walk across Charles Bridge to view the statues and the scenery. Vaclav drove the carriage across and waited on the other side. But he never came. The man disappeared."

"What do you think happened?"

"A rich American in a city full of cutthroat gypsies?" Count Tyrs shuddered at the thought. "I'd inform the police, but they won't do anything. What scandal! He was my guest."

"And a potential investor," Rolf observed.

Rolf agreed to conduct an unofficial search. Greenway, he

discovered, had not registered with the American consul, nor was he known by any of the foreign contingent at the Grand Hotel. Hospitals and morgues had no body matching the description. It was as if the foreigner had fallen off the face of the earth—or been pushed.

After a day and a half of fruitless searching, Rolf returned to his lodgings. His doorman raced up with a telegram. Count Tyrus, it seemed, had found something. An hour later, Rolf Berger was in a guest bedroom of the manor house inspecting a man's scarf and a shabby box of matches. "Hotel Club," he read from the box top. "Prague."

"Herr Greenway never stayed at a hotel," the count explained. "He was my guest from his arrival, or so I believed. Today we found these in his room, fallen behind a dresser. I wired you right away. What could it mean?"

Rolf pocketed the matchbox. "I don't know."

Before leaving, the imperial emissary interviewed the coachman. Vaclav was a swarthy, angry-looking man who might have possessed a little gypsy blood. "It was as the count told you," he assured Rolf. "The American wanted to see the sights. I drove him straight to Charles Bridge, where he got out of the carriage. He was carrying a business valise; nothing else."

Before heading back to Prague, Rolf stopped at the local village. An old peasant friend still owned a pair of bloodhounds. Rolf gave the peasant the scarf and instructions. "Have them smell out this scent around the Tyrus estate. And don't let Vaclav or anyone else know what you're up to."

It was late that night when Rolf arrived in the dark crooked alleys of Prague's lesser town. The Hotel Club was an old stagecoach inn that had deteriorated into a maze of cheap rented rooms. It was hardly the place one would expect to house an American millionaire. With some difficulty, Rolf tracked down the porter and described his quarry.

"A tall man who speaks bad German?" the man said eagerly as he eyed Rolf's uniform. Everyone connected with the court of Vienna had some sort of uniform and often they

came in handy. "Yes. Room 305. Let me present you, dear sir." The porter grabbed a set of keys from a letter box and led the way. When no one responded to his knocks and repeated entreaties, he used a key.

The door to 305 swung open to reveal a room just as shabby as the hallway; shabbier, if you counted the body sprawled out on the floor. Rolf recognized the man—Herbert Greenway, surrounded by a pool of blood, a dagger handle ornamenting his chest. The body was already cold and beginning to smell.

(1) Who killed Herbert Greenway? (2) What was the motive? (3) What evidence led Rolf to the right suspect?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 137.

To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 114.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON ALCHEMY

AS PEOPLE STRUGGLED between the worlds of superstition and science, alchemy often took hold of the popular imagination. One legendary ingredient was the philosophers' stone, an elusive powder that, combined with a magical incantation, was supposed to turn lead into gold. The roots of alchemy can be traced from ancient Egypt through Greece to the Arab world. It emerged again in Medieval Europe. In the 16th century, Emperor Rudolf made a concerted effort, setting up alchemy labs in his castle and convincing much of the Prague nobility to experiment on their own.

To the medieval mind, the concept was logical. After all, iron could be transformed into steel, sand could become glass, and with a recipe stolen from the Far East, clay could be made into fine porcelain. But alchemy could also be a dangerous pursuit. In times of religious fervor, alchemists were executed for witchcraft, hanged from gilded gallows.