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The Little Quarter (also known as the Lesser Town) is a historic part of Prague, situated on the left bank of the Vltava river. In Czech the area is called *Malá Strana*, hence the original Czech name is also used in this English edition.

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grumbles. Another scrape, and a little flame finally bursts into existence, casting a glow across a figure in a nightgown. The flame flickers feebly once again, but the bony old hand has already placed it against a glass filled with water and oil with a black wick floating on the surface in a cork. The wick begins to glow like a little star. The match drops to the ground, and the little star grows in size, gradually illuminating a figure in a nightgown, an old woman, yawning and rubbing her sleep-filled eyes.

The figure stands by a little table next to some sort of dark varnished partition dividing the entire room in half. The light from the lamp doesn't reach behind the partition, so we see only one half of the room. But our sense of smell has not deceived us – we're in a grocery store. And it's apparent that this single room is used as both a flat and a store. The store is rather well stocked, with several sacks of basic goods placed about the room. Full baskets and bags are stacked against the walls, and bundles and braids hang from the ceiling. The woman shivers from the night cold, takes the lamp from the table, and places it on a counter next to several milk pots filled with fresh and clarified butter, and above which hang the scales along with braids of garlic and onion. She takes a seat behind the counter, raises her knees up to her chin, and from a drawer removes a box filled with thread, scissors, and other odds and ends. She takes everything out of the box and rummages around the bottom of it until she finally brings up some books and paper. She ignores the paper covered with figures, chooses one of the books, and opens it up. It's a dream book, the so-called "great" dream book. She becomes absorbed in turning the pages, reads, lets out a yawn, and continues reading.

The measured breathing of one of the sleepers can be heard behind the partition. The second sleeper, awakened by the noise or the glimmer of light, stirs in his bed.

"What's going on?" an old, wheezing male voice suddenly grumbles.

The woman makes no reply.

"Is something wrong, woman?"

"Just go back to sleep," replies the woman, "there's nothing wrong, I'm just cold!" and she lets out a yawn.

"What are you up to over there?"





“Oh how nice!” Matylda rejoices like a good girl and claps her hands in joy. “Marie, you’re a fine one. You haven’t been to see us in ages!” and she warmly embraces the younger of the two new arrivals.

“Just thought we’d stop in, Frau von Eber,” explains the older woman. “We’re on our way up to see our uncle the canon, and Marie just wouldn’t give me any peace. She just had to see Matylda. You haven’t been to see us in ages. It’s clear who values whose friendship. We come visit you much more often, but we really can’t stay but a moment. I was just telling Marie that maybe we’re coming at a bad time; it’s Monday after all, wash day.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” objects Mrs. Eber. “How is a little washing in the kitchen going to bother us? Do sit down. Would you look at that, those girls like each other so much they can’t let go of each other! Don’t smother her to death, Matylda!”

Mrs. Eber seats the women by the window. The older of the two is very elegantly dressed and around fifty years old, the younger perhaps thirty, but despite a polite smile her features bear a distinct lassitude. The eyes of the younger woman betray a certain vivaciousness as they wander from object to object around the room.

The women immediately strike up a conversation, sometimes in Czech, sometimes in German, according to the whim of the speaker.

“I hope there isn’t a draft in here,” says the old woman as she settles in her seat. “My teeth bother me terribly if it’s cold. It was the wonderful weather that tempted us outside. Isn’t it just beautiful outside, Matylda?”

“Indeed it is – quite beautiful.”

“Quite so,” assents Marie.

“I see you’ve been busy sewing, Mrs. Eber,” says Mrs. Bauer, picking up a piece of cloth from the floor. “Isn’t this material used for making military uniforms?”

“Yes ... cloth for uniforms,” Mrs. Eber finally stammers in some embarrassment.

“Our servant, a poor old woman, sews for the military, and when she cleans for me I help her out a bit with the sewing.

“No!”

“Then I’ll be going, Doctor.”

“My regards, Madame.”

The Doctor stood frozen in the center of the room.

Finally, heaving a sigh, he raised his head. “Well, this is a fine little mess,” he muttered. “Yes, I’ll see to my papers, my unexpected mother-in-law, but not for your daughter’s sake. Your short-lived career as my mother-in-law is at an end! Now I really must speed things up. Tomorrow letter number two, the day after number three, and the day after that ... no, that’s Friday, who knows what would happen. First thing the day after tomorrow I’ll propose! Then I’ll have to get another flat or, my goodness, imagine coming and going here after that!”

Before he had finished speaking, his door opened and Mrs. Lakmus entered with the maid bearing a plate and silverware.

“I’ve taken out the silver service for you, Doctor,” she said as she placed it on the table. “Why should we keep it hidden away!” She stepped up to the Doctor, placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered, “I’ve already told Klára.”

A MANUSCRIPT AND A STORM CLOUD

The present chapter begins just as the previous one is ending, with the return of Mr. Eber, the landlord, home from work. His wife was in the kitchen stoking the stove, and her husband’s premature entrance startled her. He usually came home around three, but today it was just after twelve. Furthermore, he looked positively odd.

Everything about him was different than when he’d left that morning. His shabby top hat was thrust on his head all the way down to his thick and prickly eyebrows, casting the folds of his once plump cheeks in shadows; his hair, normally neatly combed, stuck out wildly from beneath his hat; and his eyes seemed as if





*"His Most Esteemed Magistrate of the Royal City of Prague!
The undersigned hereby announces his intention of entering into
matrimony with Miss ..."*

He looked over what he'd written and shook his head. "These glasses are useless. It's getting dark – time to cover the windows and light the lamp." Then he heard a soft knock at the door, at which sound the Doctor swiftly grabbed a sheet of black paper and placed it on the letter. He then muttered a feeble, "Come in!"

It was Václav.

"Am I interrupting, Doctor?" Václav closed the door behind him.

"Not at all, come in," murmured the doctor, suddenly hoarse. "I was just starting something, but, please, have a seat! What have you brought me?" He asked more out of habit than due to the scroll of paper in Václav's hand. Due to a fog of embarrassment, he was not able to perceive Václav clearly.

Václav took a seat. "I've brought you something for those moments of agitation, when you'd like to calm your nerves. It's a novelistic trifle, that is, perhaps it won't move your soul, but it may soothe your nerves. The idea is simple, perhaps even poor, but the execution is original. The contemporary novelistic form and novelistic subjects bore me. I'd very much like to hear what you have to say about my first attempt at fiction." He placed the scroll on the Doctor's desk. Each of Václav's movements was imbued with the freshness of youth.

"I see you're still fooling around. Well, that's okay; you're still young," the Doctor smiled. "And how are you doing, Mr. Václav?"

"Not so well right now, and it's only going to get worse. They're probably going to kick me out of the office. They found some of the notes I was making, satirizing the Director. The landlord is reviewing my case."

"You poor, reckless young man!" The Doctor clasped his hands. "What are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? Nothing! ... I'll become a writer!"

"I see!"

"It would come to that sooner or later, and I think I'm ready for it. Or do you think I don't have enough talent, Doctor?"

THE WEEK COMES TO AN END

Although Josefínka's wedding took place early on a Sunday morning, the courtyard and passageway were crammed with curious neighbors. In front of the house, another considerable crowd had gathered, the members of which had taken in the situation at once and declared the affair a "pale wedding."

The term did not imply plainness, for Josefínka's bridegroom had spared no expense – the bride was arrayed in beautiful silk, and there were plenty of carriages, yet the neighbors were certainly correct. The faces of the wedding party were particularly pale today, as if before their departure goodness knows what had happened. Of course the bride's pallor was understandable, for, as the saying goes, "pale bride – happy wife," but following her was the groom, pale with emotion, the eternally colorless Miss Klára, and the pale bridesmaid. As luck would have it the faces of the others were likewise distinguished by a lack of color. Even the face of the Doctor, the witness, which at other times sparkled with health, was today quite sullen. Only the best man, Václav, laughed and bantered as usual. Everyone knew that to him nothing was sacred.

Later that afternoon the Doctor was pulling on his gloves in front of the house and glancing occasionally at the passageway as if in expectation. Suddenly Václav came out of the shop fully dressed and walked up to him.

"Out for a stroll, Doctor?"

"Yes, to Stromovka."

"By yourself?"

"Yes. I mean, Mrs. Lakmus is going too."

"I see. With Miss Klárka! She certainly looked nice today."

The Doctor cast a quick glance down the street. "And where are you off to, Václav?"

"To Šárka."

"I assume you're not going alone. Perhaps with Mária?"

"Actually, no," smiled Václav. "With the Ebers."

From the passageway female voices resounded, and the Lakmuses and the Ebers entered the courtyard.

