



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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“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.

with light, so that they appear misted with silver dew. It lays itself down on the white bed and makes it appear even whiter. It sits in a comfortable chair and shines on the various paraphernalia of the writing desk, and even stretches itself along the entire length of the carpet. This lasts long into the night, but finally the door latch clicks, the weary hinges sigh, and the owner of the flat steps in.

The Doctor places his walking-stick in the stand by the door, hangs his straw hat on a hook, then rubs his hands together. "I see we have a visitor," he whispers. "Welcome, Brother Moon, didn't we meet on Whitsunday? I hope everyone's well at home. Oh, this cursed knee of mine!" he grumbles somewhat more loudly, bends down and massages his knee. The Doctor's face illumined by the moon betrays both annoyance and amusement.

He stands up and removes his coat. As he opens the wardrobe to hang it up, he once again mutters to himself, but this time softly intoning a tune, "Doctor Bartolo ... Doctor Bartolo ... lolo ... lo ... lo ... Was that an E or an F? It must be an F. Bartololo ... lolo ... lolo ..." He puts on his gray dressing gown in mid-song, ties it with a red silk cord, and slowly lolos his way to the open window.

"My little kitten Josefinka is probably asleep by now, may her dreams be pleasant. What a charming girl she is – and so kind-hearted." He bends down again to rub his knee, but this time without cursing. He stands by the window. "They've got quite a large flat there, larger than they need. We'll stay with them, and just add a bit of new furniture. We'll be glad to have her mother and the ailing Katuška stay on there, too; they're nice. And they have no one else. That Bavarian cousin will be the best man; of course Josefinka must have a best man at the wedding, that goes without saying, isn't that right, kitten! It will all be done quietly. Why can't I get that doctor from Seville out of my mind! Bartolo ... Bartolo ... I'm not that old and am quite well preserved. In fine shape, I must say! I'm no *periculum in Morea*. I needn't fear, 'I'll never be more handsome than I am right now.' A new life awaits me; I'll be happy, and happiness brings youth." He glances up at the disk of the moon. "I wonder what my little kitten



of any important person so that no one would say Mr. Velš was being hurried on his way. The room was close: the afternoon sun surging in and reflecting off the large mirrors, large wax candles around the catafalque burning and smoking, saturating the warm air with soot, the smell of the freshly varnished black coffin, the sawdust beneath the corpse, and perhaps also the smell of the corpse itself. Silence reigned, broken only by the soft whisper of several of the guests. Since Mr. Velš had left behind no close relatives, no tears were shed. The more distant ones would say, "If only I could cry, but even though my heart is breaking, the tears simply won't come." "Yes, that always makes it worse."

Then Mrs. Ruska entered the room, the widow of the late Mr. Rus who worked as landlord at the Gráfovské Gardens where the most wonderful artillery balls were held. Since it's of no matter to anyone, I'll mention only in passing what was said about Mrs. Ruska's widowhood. At the time, every artillery regiment had its own company of bombardiers, all of them fresh, red-blooded young men. Apparently Mr. Rus simply hated this company because of something to do with his wife. For this reason, they gave him a good sound beating one day, which did him in. But as I've said, it's of no matter to anyone. Mrs. Ruska had been eating her widow's bread now for twenty-five years, childless and living in a house at the Peasant Market, and if anyone ever asked what she did with her time, the answer would be that she went to funerals.

Mrs. Ruska elbowed her way up to the catafalque. Although she was in her fifties, she was still a robust woman of above-average height. A black, silk mantilla flowed down from her shoulders, a black cap with light green ribbons framed her round and earnest face. As her hazel eyes gazed into the face of the deceased, her face twitched, her lips began to tremble, and copious tears welled up in her eyes. She burst into sobs.

Deftly wiping her eyes and mouth with a white handkerchief, she glanced at the other guests to the right and left. To her left stood Mrs. Hirt the candle maker's wife reading from a prayer book. To her right stood a nicely dressed young woman with whom she was not acquainted; if she was from Prague, as she appeared to be, she must have been from somewhere across

