

Tuesday, May 8, 1945

The next morning I'd just left the house and started walking down the street when I saw them – a bunch of men in green khaki uniforms and dusty shoes with knapsacks on their backs. The sun was shining and the men looked exhausted and they trudged on in silence. The minute I saw them I knew they were English. A tall, lean man with a gaunt face was in the lead and next to him an older, short, bowlegged guy who had sergeant's stripes on his sleeve. I caught up with the older one and asked, 'Are you English?'

He stopped, looked at me in surprise and then said, 'Yes.'

'Welcome,' I said. They gathered around me and the older guy said, 'You speak English?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Well,' the sergeant said, 'we are trying to get to the Americans. Think we might find a car around here anywhere?'

I understood him. 'A car would be hard,' I told him, 'but you can wait here until the Russians come.'

'We would rather reach the Americans,' he said hesitantly. A buzz of agreement ran through the bunch of men.

'I know,' I said. 'But it's impossible. The trains aren't running now.'

'A shame,' said the sergeant.

'How far is it from here to Prague?' asked a guy with a red moustache and wearing a bright Scottish cap. I noticed they were all cleanshaven.

'One hundred and forty-three kilometres,' I said.

'Which is...?'

'About a hundred miles,' said the tall man with the gaunt face.

'We'll never make it,' said the bowlegged sergeant.

'No. The Russians'll catch up with us,' said the Scotsman.

'But you can stay here,' I said. 'We'll put you up and feed

you.' I said it without even thinking but I knew people'd be interested in Englishmen.

'Do you know where the Russians are now?' the sergeant said.

'No. But they ought to be here any day.'

I was feeling pretty proud of my English. The Tommies started talking about what they should do. They stood around the sergeant, talking in low, calm voices. It seemed to me now that the whole street was full of people. I looked around and saw a weird-looking crew in moss-green uniforms streaming across the square. There were slews of them. Me and my Englishmen stood there like an island in the midst of that sea of people. Lots of them had Mongolian faces and droopy walrus whiskers and they milled around, most of them without any knapsacks, and more kept coming in all the time. They all had big SU's painted on their backs with whitewash. 'Soviet Union,' I realized. Prisoners of war from the eastern front. The sun shone into their oriental faces and they had a queer smell which I rather liked. They streamed in and around like a great wave. Jesus, no wonder that the SS, even with death's heads on their caps, had gone under in a sea like this. Seeing so many I felt a strange awe, and maybe fear, too. The POWs must have mutinied somewhere in Germany. And now they were on their way west. I saw Berty Moutelik with a white armband and his camera dangling over his belly. He grinned at me from a distance.

'Hi, Danny. You an escort, too?'

'What do you mean?'

'What have you got there? Frenchmen?'

'What?'

'Well, you're taking them over to City Hall, aren't you?' Berty stopped and I noticed that a ragged little cluster of men with canes and knapsacks stopped behind him.

'Listen, Berty, what's going on anyway? I was sick in bed yesterday.'

'You mean you don't know? They're POWs escaping from Germany ahead of the front. They're all supposed to report to City Hall.'

'Why?'

'Well, for order's sake, I guess. And they all get a coupon for lunch at Lewith's.'

'Oh, I see. Who are those guys with you?'

'Poles. And yours?'

'Englishmen.'

'Englishmen?' Berty's eyes lit up. 'They're the first, then. There haven't been any up till now.'

'Maybe they are, then. You say they're supposed to report at City Hall?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I'll show 'em the way then. So long and thanks.'

'Oh, you're quite welcome,' said Berty and went on. I turned to my Englishmen.

'Listen,' I said. 'You're all supposed to report at City Hall.'

'Why?' the old sergeant asked suspiciously.

'I don't know. An order from the City Council.'

'And we must?'

'Well, it's an order.'

The sergeant studied me for quite a while. I could feel he was slowly beginning to trust me. Because I spoke English probably. It had probably been quite a while since he'd met anybody who did.

'You see,' he said, 'we don't like registering - anywhere.'

'I understand, but you don't need to be scared.'

'We aren't scared, laddie. We just don't care to register anywhere,' said the tall man with the hollow cheeks.

'Okay,' I said. 'Only you've got to. I'm very sorry about that.'

'Don't you think, sir,' said the sergeant, 'we might simply pass through town - without going through all these formalities?'

'But what do you want to do?'

'As I say, we want to reach the Americans.'

'But you can't get through to them. There's a revolution going on in Prague.'

'What?' the sergeant asked, shocked.

'A revolution.'

'The communists?' he asked in a tense whisper.

'I don't know. All I know is it's a revolution against the Germans.'

'Oh, I see,' he said. 'But then the Americans must surely be there by now.'

'No. They aren't there.'

'But we heard that the Third Army was already in Czechoslovakia.'

'They are. But they stopped at Pilsen.'

'Where's that?'

'About two hundred miles from here.'

'Great God!' said the sergeant. 'Why aren't they advancing?'

I shrugged. He turned to his companions. The men - there must have been about twenty of them - huddled around me and the old bowlegged sergeant told them something which I couldn't make out because he spoke too fast and too English for me. All around us the stream of fleeing men flowed on. The Englishmen stood in a tight group by themselves, keeping their distance from the swarm of others. They were English. Then the sergeant turned to me.

'Listen, friend,' he said. 'I take it we can trust you?'

'Sure,' I said with a real American accent, which made me feel good.

'Tell me then, is it true that war's broken out between the Russians and the Western allies?'

'What?' I yelled and this time I sounded even more American than before.

'A war,' said the sergeant slowly and distinctly so I'd understand. 'Between Russia and Great Britain and America. Understand?'

'That's nonsense,' I said, and suddenly remembered a nice expression I'd read once in some article about Ford. Ford, apparently, had used it about history. 'That's bunk,' I said.

'You're quite sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'But that's what they told us.'

'Where?'

'In camp.'

'Oh, they've been pulling your leg,' I said, this time in very

British English. 'That's the Germans for you. That would suit them fine - a war between Russia and the West.' I was surprised myself how well my English came out.

'Perhaps you're right,' said the sergeant.

'Of course I'm right. How long ago were you captured?'

'I was in the rearguard at Dunkirk. It's been five years now.'

'Oh, I see,' I said and felt respect for the old guy. 'Listen, you can trust me completely. I think the best thing for you to do is wait here for the Russians. You are welcome here in Czechoslovakia.'

'Thank you. Well then, I suppose we should stay,' said the sergeant. 'What do you say, men?'

The Englishmen started muttering among themselves.

'There wouldn't seem to be much choice,' said the Scotsman.

'All right,' I said. 'Then come with me.' I walked between the tall thin man and the sergeant as we headed towards the square. The stream of people swept us along. Flags were flying again from people's windows and the morning sun made their colours look brighter than ever. The white-lettered backs of the Russian POWs bobbed along in front of us and the sun brightened the letters. I noticed that the Englishmen stuck close together. You could tell they felt strange in that seething mass of people. I felt strange and different there, too. I felt there was danger in the air, as if all those heads were full of hidden violence, though I knew very well they weren't, and that all these poor Mongolians were thinking about was food. I was still subconsciously parroting the racial lines that Goebbels had drummed into us. As we passed the loan association building, a whole troop of police came out of a side street, led by Chief Rimbalnik. They marched quickly off in the direction of the ghetto. Mr Rimbalnik was pale but otherwise as pompous as ever in his corset and white gloves. The blue-uniformed police plunged into the dirty grey sea of prison camp fugitives and made their way over to the other side of the square. A couple of bearded, ragged old gipsies respectfully stepped aside for Mr Rimbalnik, probably out of respect for that corset of his. No wonder. That corset had made lots of people respect him. That and those gold epaulets on his uniform. An SS man

made a pass at Mrs Cuceova in her store once - she was the pastry shopkeeper's young widow - just as Mr Rimbalnik walked in. He had a crush on the widow himself and when he saw how that SS man was trying to feel around with her, he turned red as a beet and bellowed at him in perfect German and the SS man just clicked his heels, saluted, and left. Probably never seen a blue uniform like that in his life, with all those gold epaulets, and thought Rimbalnik was some kind of admiral. Or else that corset subconsciously reminded him of Prussian drills and he forgot all about race. God knows. Anyhow, after that performance, Mr Rimbalnik nearly fainted and the widow had to revive him with rum in her kitchen in the back of the shop. Though maybe Mr Rimbalnik was just putting on an act. He had a crush on her and finally, they say, he got what he was after.

We made our way past the loan association office as far as the square. It was bright with the sun and swarming with people. A long line of people, some in uniform and some not, stretched all the way from the City Hall to the church. Most of them were men but there were some women, too. And mostly they were the bright green Soviets, lots of them, with bunches of civilians and people wearing other uniforms mixed in. At the corner just ahead of us stood a handful of soldiers wearing blue uniforms. One of them, a swarthy little guy, came up to us and asked something in French. My bowlegged sergeant started talking to him. I couldn't understand a word.

'Wait here,' I said. 'I'll see what's going on at City Hall.' I took the army armband out of my pocket and put it on my sleeve. Then I started elbowing my way towards City Hall and the armband helped. People stepped back for me on both sides. I got through without too much trouble and also got a chance to take a look around. People were standing and sitting all around on the pavement, most of them silent. The Mongolians interested me. When I looked at them, they smiled broadly and their small eyes almost disappeared in the deep creases of their flat faces. Lots of them wore long, droopy Mongolian mustaches and all of them stank of straw or stables or something like that. It was as if they carried around the scent of

vast virgin lands in them though, God knows, it was probably just a concentration camp smell, I said to myself, because the Germans hadn't pampered these inferior races like they had my Englishmen, yet even in spite of living in those camps they'd somehow never lost that country smell, that smell of horses and straw. I wanted to say something to them but I didn't know what, so I said in English, 'Cheer up, boys,' which made me feel pretty heroic, and then I passed by a bunch of curly-headed Italians and when I said 'Cheer up, boys' to them they all clustered around and one of them, a handsome dark-skinned guy with a real beard already shaping up under the stubble, started jabbering away at me but I couldn't understand what he was saying until suddenly I realized he was mixing a few words of English in with a lot more Italian. 'Americano?' he said. 'Army Americano?' No, no, I said and kept right on going and finally there I was at City Hall. Two soldiers with fixed bayonets stood at either side of the door and between them was Mr Kobrt, wearing a white armband with a red cross on it. They were only letting one small bunch in at a time. Mr Kobrt was yelling at the weary, ragged fugitives in a mixture of Russian and German. They looked tiny in front of him because he had a hyperproduction of the hypothesis, or something like that anyway.

'Good morning,' I said.

'Good morning,' he said without even bothering to look at me. He'd collared a couple of gipsies and was bawling them out. I stood there watching him and gradually came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to get all caught up in this organization. I could just imagine that bunch of bureaucrats sitting around a table inside asking these bedraggled characters for their name and religion and all the rest of it so everything would be in order and so Mr Machacek would have plenty of material for his history of the Kostelec uprising. Then I noticed they were roughing a Russian around and decided then and there that I'd look after my Englishmen myself. I'd been an Anglophile for as long as I could remember, especially since the time I fell in love with Judy Garland, and now here was my chance to do something about it. And I knew plenty of people

around town. And suddenly I felt like taking care of these guys. And putting them up in the most comfortable houses in Kostelec. Sure. At Dr Sabata's. At the Mouteliks's Wholesale Notions. At Dr Vasak's. All sorts of places they could stay came to mind and I was convinced the ladies of the house would welcome them. Because they were Englishmen. Sure. The little Mongolians could sleep on the floor in Lewith's cafeteria but my Englishmen would snooze in Dr Vasak's guest room. I glanced over at Mr Kobrt and saw he was busy barking away at some muzhik in the doorway and I decided to skip the whole thing and turned and made my way back through the crowd. I was lucky.

Before I got back to my Englishmen, I bumped into Dr Vasak's wife at the corner by the cigar store. She was standing there in a white linen dress without any stockings on and the hair on her legs glistened like gold. She had a red stringbag in her hand and around her neck a string of big blue beads.

'Good afternoon,' I said, and smiled. She smiled back a very affectionate smile. Yes. Dr Vasak's wife was fond of me. I used to sit with her and her husband and my parents at Sokol Hall Saturday nights during the war, and while other people discussed the war, we just looked at each other.

'Could I ask a favour of you?'

'Why, of course,' she said with that same nice smile.

'Well, you see, the thing is I've got these Englishmen - boys who fought at Dunkirk - and I'd like to find a nice place they could stay for a few days, because ... well, you can see for yourself,' I said, gesturing towards the colourful, stinking crowds all around us. 'And, after all ... I mean, they're Englishmen.' I paused and looked at Mrs Vasakova as though she would naturally understand what that meant.

'I'd be glad to, Mr Smiricky. Of course,' she said. 'How many do you have?'

'Well, how many do you think you could take?'

The doctor's wife thought a moment. She looked at me with her pretty blue eyes and tapped the sidewalk with the heel of her little white shoe. My God, I thought, those guys are in for some welcome all right.

'Would four be enough?' she said.
'Why, of course. Four would be fine,' I said, and smiled at her.

She smiled, too, and then added quickly, 'And how many do you have?'

'About twenty,' I said. 'But I hope I'll find other people as helpful as you've been.'

'Wait a minute. Go to my sister-in-law's. Tell her I sent you, will you? Mrs Heiserova, the managing director's wife.' She looked happily excited, but when she saw I was still smiling, she blushed. 'I'm sure she'll take in a few too,' she said a bit more stiffly.

'Thank you very much.'

'Be sure to call on her. And say I sent you.'

'I certainly will. And thanks again.'

'And now where are these Englishmen of yours?'

'Would you mind coming along with me?' I said, and took her over to meet her Englishmen. They were still standing there on the corner and they saw us coming but it wasn't me they were looking at.

'Do you speak English?' I asked her.

'Unfortunately, I don't. But perhaps some of them know French or German.'

'I'm sure they do,' I said. We stopped and Mrs Vasakova smiled at the Englishmen. The Englishmen smiled back at Mrs Vasakova and the biggest smile came from the bowlegged sergeant.

'Listen,' I said. 'I've fixed it so you won't have to register. Now I'll take you around to some of the best families where you'll be put up for a few days.'

'Splendid,' said the tall, hollow-cheeked redhead. 'Thank you very much, friend.'

'Okay,' I said. 'This is Mrs Vasakova who's been kind enough to offer to take four of you in at her place.'

They all beamed again and Mrs Vasakova beamed back. I turned to the sergeant. 'Sergeant, pick four men, and it would be good if they could speak French. Mrs Vasakova speaks French.'

'I speak French,' said the redheaded Scot and turned to the doctor's wife. '*Je parle français, madame,*' he told her. The doctor's wife smiled again.

'Well, I know some French ways,' said a broad-shouldered, smooth-shaven Don Juan with a bandaged head. He grinned. '*Merci, madame,*' he said to the doctor's wife. She smiled and I glanced at the sergeant and saw he was following the whole scene with great interest.

'Two more, sergeant,' I said. 'Two more to go.' The sergeant snapped to attention and looked his men over.

'That's the lot. Nobody else speaks French,' he said and then turned and, with a glint in his eye, added, 'except for me.'

'Yes, but I'm going to need you. You're the commander here,' I said. Looking dejected, he about-faced, paused, and gave his order, 'Kilpatrick and O'Donnell, fall out,' and two well-built but wiry men emerged from the crowd. No doubt about it, he certainly knew how to pick a team for the doctor's wife.

'Aye, aye, sir,' said one of the men and grinned.

'That's it, then,' said the sergeant.

Looking very slim and pretty in her white dress, Mrs Vasakova stood there surrounded by the four Englishmen, and she laughed.

'Thank you very much,' I said.

'Not at all. I thank you,' she said with a wink. She'd stopped being so formal with me now.

'We'll all meet here tomorrow at nine,' I told the four and they mumbled that that would be all right with them.

'Good-bye,' said the doctor's wife with a friendly smile, and started off down the street flanked by her imposing escorts.

'Well, let's go,' I said and tried to think where to find places to put the rest of them up. We were walking along under the arcade when suddenly I had a bright idea.

'Would you like to go for a swim?' I asked.

'Sure,' said the sergeant and then so did all the rest of them. Just the idea of a swim seemed to pick them up.

'Come on, then,' I said, and headed towards the municipal pool in the loan association building. The door was open and

there stood Mr Vimler, the bank janitor and furnaceman, and the old lady who sold tickets.

'Good morning,' I said to them. They looked at me and said good morning.

'These Englishmen here would like to go for a swim,' I said. The old lady looked at me uncertainly. 'But they're filthy!' she said.

'That's just why they want to.'

'Well, I don't know ...'

'Don't worry, I'll tell them they'll have to take showers first.'

'And you're going to pay for it?'

'Well, no. I thought you'd be kind enough to let them in free?'

'Free? Oh, we can't have that.'

'Why not?'

'Well, because I would be held responsible.'

'But look, these are Allied soldiers.'

'Nobody's told me anything.'

'Why should anybody tell you anything?'

'Well, because I'm in charge here.'

'Now, look, I'll make out a receipt for you stating that you allowed twenty English soldiers in for a swim and then you make out a bill for it, all right?'

'I don't know ...'

'Go ahead. Let 'em in, Mrs Maslova,' said Mr Vimler.

'There. You see,' I said.

'Oh, well, all right,' said the old lady. 'But you'll have to write out a receipt for me.'

'Of course,' I said. 'Come on in, boys. You can undress in the locker room and you're supposed to shower before going into the pool.'

The Englishmen filed in through the door. I led them into the big room where the old lady was already opening up the separate changing rooms one after another. You went in one side and the other door led out to the pool. I went out through to the pool. Shining through the tall frosted windows, the light made everything look clean and bright. The water in the pool looked green from the tiles at the bottom and the surface lay

smooth as glass. It was quiet there and empty and the light was pleasant. I stood by the window and leaned back against the wall, alone, while the Englishmen got undressed. I looked around the pool with its greenish light and memories started filtering in and I could see the place lit by evening light, the way it'd been on winter evenings during the war and there was Irena in a yellow bathing suit, and I could see her thighs, a bit flattened from the way she'd been squatting down before slipping down next to me, and Christ, they were lovely, and her knees and her firm little belly in that yellow bathing suit and her girlish shoulders and that red mouth and I watched her swimming, slender and nearly naked in the translucent water of the pool and then standing under the shower with a rubber cap on her head, stretching her arms, her suit glued to her body, and then going into the changing room and I knew that there, behind that white door, she was undressing and drying herself with a towel and I swam madly around the pool and suffered because I wanted her so. A long time ago, yet it had only been that winter. And now all that was over. Everything. And it would never be the same again because who could tell what would happen? We meet and we part and everything in life comes to an end, nothing lasts, and I felt like dying but then I thought supposing there's a heaven after all, and me with all my sins, and that got me off on to heaven and I wondered what it was really like and whether people there were the same as here when they died, which would be pretty stupid because, as a rule, pretty girls like Irena live until they're old and grey, but then I thought that in heaven everybody would have to look like they did when they were looking their best, which would make it quite a place to go, I thought. But then I wondered how things were arranged there when here on earth Irena went with Zdenek but in heaven, where people are supposed to be happy, would she go with me? But then Zdenek would be unhappy. But maybe Zdenek would go to hell or else maybe I would. Or maybe things are somehow secretly organized so everybody in heaven can go with whoever he wants to. For instance, Irena would somehow be split up into two Irenas. Only then it occurred to me that

she'd have to be divided into at least five because I knew of at least five guys who are crazy about her. But I didn't much like that idea. I was dead set against her being all split into pieces. I wanted to have her all to myself and Zdenek and all the others could just go to hell instead. And suddenly a door opened and out came one of the Englishmen, naked and hairy, and he looked around the pool curiously.

'There. The showers!' I called to him and pointed them out to him.

'Thanks!' he said and by now others were already coming out and running towards the showers.

The place echoed with yells and laughter. I looked at all those naked, wet bodies and just then right in front of me a short, naked fellow clambered out of the pool. He had tremendously broad shoulders, narrow hips, and a farmer's beard and he grinned at me and said happily, 'Wonderful feeling. Five years is a long time.'

He stood there in front of me and started slapping himself over all his body, then laughed, turned, and his white backside flashed in front of me as he dived back into the water. All over the pool naked men were racing around, giggling and laughing and romping like kids. I saw one funny little bowlegged guy tramping around the edge of the pool towards me and thought it must be the sergeant. It was. He told me it was really wonderful and he'd missed being able to swim for five years, and then the tall one came over to tell me the same thing – the one with the gaunt face. But it was only his face that was so thin. Otherwise he had the build of a wrestler. A really fierce sight, with a big red scar on his chest. I watched them all and it was strange to see. It made you think about what they'd been through and where they'd go from here and what else they'd have to live through and it made me feel sad again. Then I heard someone calling me. It was the little old lady from the ticket office. She was leaning out the window of her booth, taking a sidelong glance at all those naked men. I went over to the window.

'Now then, write me out that receipt, young man,' she said and handed me a piece of paper and a pencil. I thought a while,

listened to the splashing and laughing behind me that filled the whole pool, and then wrote: *'This is to certify that on May 8, 1945, twenty soldiers of the British Army swam free of charge in the municipal pool.'*

I signed it and handed the paper back to the old lady. She read it, glanced over at the pool again, then shut her window. I turned and watched them for a little while. Finally the little sergeant climbed up to the diving board and bellowed something in such an ear-shattering voice that, coming from a bandylegged and nearly-old-man's body like his, seemed incredible and suddenly all those who were still in the water scrambled out and rushed off to the changing rooms. I went out and sat down on a bench out in the lobby. It was empty and quiet. I used to wait there for Irena and she'd always come out, scrubbed and pink in her blue coat with the white fur collar. Well, that was all over now. And on the wide staircase with its rubber matting there was always a flock of Kostelec matrons coming from their steam baths and massages personally supervised by Mr Repa, a professional masseur, who I was later assigned to assist at the Messerschmidt factory and whose hands looked like a butcher's and they always reminded me of the fat bodies of those women swaddled in white sheets and I could see Mr Repa's hands, tattooed with a heart and an anchor, mercilessly and with sadistic delight kneading away at those doughy bellies and thighs and buttocks. A limp palm tree stood at the foot of the stairs and the light coming through the frosted glass had a warm glow. The tub baths were upstairs where Prema used to go with Benda to look at the girls because at the top of one of the compartments you could slip out a pane of that frosted glass so they took turns crawling along the concrete beam at the top and taking a peek.

The door of one of the changing rooms opened and a fellow came out in a beard and wearing an Australian sombrero. I saw it was the big-shouldered guy who'd got such a kick out of the pool. He grinned at me. Then the others started coming out. They looked refreshed and were in a fine mood. I got up and led them out. The street was in shadow but the rooftops stood out bright in the sun. It was a real spring day. I wondered

she'd have to be divided into at least five because I knew of at least five guys who are crazy about her. But I didn't much like that idea. I was dead set against her being all split into pieces. I wanted to have her all to myself and Zdenek and all the others could just go to hell instead. And suddenly a door opened and out came one of the Englishmen, naked and hairy, and he looked around the pool curiously.

'There. The showers!' I called to him and pointed them out to him.

'Thanks!' he said and by now others were already coming out and running towards the showers.

The place echoed with yells and laughter. I looked at all those naked, wet bodies and just then right in front of me a short, naked fellow clambered out of the pool. He had tremendously broad shoulders, narrow hips, and a farmer's beard and he grinned at me and said happily, 'Wonderful feeling. Five years is a long time.'

He stood there in front of me and started slapping himself over all his body, then laughed, turned, and his white backside flashed in front of me as he dived back into the water. All over the pool naked men were racing around, giggling and laughing and romping like kids. I saw one funny little bowlegged guy tramping around the edge of the pool towards me and thought it must be the sergeant. It was. He told me it was really wonderful and he'd missed being able to swim for five years, and then the tall one came over to tell me the same thing – the one with the gaunt face. But it was only his face that was so thin. Otherwise he had the build of a wrestler. A really fierce sight, with a big red scar on his chest. I watched them all and it was strange to see. It made you think about what they'd been through and where they'd go from here and what else they'd have to live through and it made me feel sad again. Then I heard someone calling me. It was the little old lady from the ticket office. She was leaning out the window of her booth, taking a sidelong glance at all those naked men. I went over to the window.

'Now then, write me out that receipt, young man,' she said and handed me a piece of paper and a pencil. I thought a while,

listened to the splashing and laughing behind me that filled the whole pool, and then wrote: *'This is to certify that on May 8, 1945, twenty soldiers of the British Army swam free of charge in the municipal pool.'*

I signed it and handed the paper back to the old lady. She read it, glanced over at the pool again, then shut her window. I turned and watched them for a little while. Finally the little sergeant climbed up to the diving board and bellowed something in such an ear-shattering voice that, coming from a bandy-legged and nearly-old-man's body like his, seemed incredible and suddenly all those who were still in the water scrambled out and rushed off to the changing rooms. I went out and sat down on a bench out in the lobby. It was empty and quiet. I used to wait there for Irena and she'd always come out, scrubbed and pink in her blue coat with the white fur collar. Well, that was all over now. And on the wide staircase with its rubber matting there was always a flock of Kostelec matrons coming from their steam baths and massages personally supervised by Mr Repa, a professional masseur, who I was later assigned to assist at the Messerschmidt factory and whose hands looked like a butcher's and they always reminded me of the fat bodies of those women swaddled in white sheets and I could see Mr Repa's hands, tattooed with a heart and an anchor, mercilessly and with sadistic delight kneading away at those doughy bellies and thighs and buttocks. A limp palm tree stood at the foot of the stairs and the light coming through the frosted glass had a warm glow. The tub baths were upstairs where Prema used to go with Benda to look at the girls because at the top of one of the compartments you could slip out a pane of that frosted glass so they took turns crawling along the concrete beam at the top and taking a peek.

The door of one of the changing rooms opened and a fellow came out in a beard and wearing an Australian sombrero. I saw it was the big-shouldered guy who'd got such a kick out of the pool. He grinned at me. Then the others started coming out. They looked refreshed and were in a fine mood. I got up and led them out. The street was in shadow but the rooftops stood out bright in the sun. It was a real spring day. I wondered

where we should go now. Then I noticed Mr Moutelik's shop on the other side of the street. His sign hadn't been touched since Haryk had painted it over on Saturday.

'Wait here for me,' I told the sergeant, and walked into the shop. Nobody was there, not even a salesgirl today, just Mrs Moutelikova at the cash register. She was wearing big pearl earrings and her hair looked fresh out of curlers.

'Good morning, ma'am,' I said.

'Hello, Danny,' she said. 'What can we do for you?'

'Well, I've got a little problem, ma'am,' I said, feeling my way.

'Oh? What is it?'

'Well, I've taken charge of a few Englishmen, you see, and I have to find a place for them to stay for a few days, and you know how Englishmen are,' I said shyly, 'always want to have a bath, can't stand to be dirty, and I wouldn't want to make them stay in an emergency barrack or anything like that.'

'Of course not, Danny. How many do you have to take care of?'

'That depends, ma'am, on how many you think you could take.'

'For how long?' she asked cautiously.

'Oh, just for a couple of days. Until we can put them on a train to Prague.'

'Aha. Would four be all right?'

'It certainly would.'

'Well ... it's a pleasure to be of assistance.'

'Thank you very much, ma'am.'

'You're quite welcome. We've got to do our part. After all, they're our liberators.'

'Absolutely, ma'am. Thank you.' I would have loved to see what would have happened if I'd brought her four Mongolians with walrus moustaches, thanked her again and went on my way. I still had twelve left. We started down Jirasek Boulevard towards the station. The colourful crowds still kept coming towards us. They poured along the street in a cloud of dust and among them I saw various people I knew wearing white and red-and-white armbands. The crowd was still mainly green-

uniformed Soviets, but I saw a couple of guys in khaki uniforms, too, with NEDERLAND on their shoulder patches. Then a cluster of gipsy-looking Italians and some Frenchmen in blue uniforms. But I had my Englishmen – the pick of the whole crop, I thought. I was looking at all those different faces as we pushed against the tide and suddenly bumped into Benno and his sister Evka.

'Hi, Benno,' I said.

'Greetings,' said Benno.

'Hello there, Evka.'

'Hello.'

'Why didn't you show up yesterday?' said Benno.

'I was feeling lousy.'

'You're always feeling lousy.'

'Maybe so. Look, Benno, could you do me a favour?'

'What?'

'Could you take in a couple of Englishmen over at your house?'

'You mean they're English?' Evka asked, looking at my troop with obvious interest now.

'Yes. You can talk to them if you want to,' I said, feeling like a barker at a sideshow. Evka smiled at the Englishmen and I looked at them and they were all scrubbed and refreshed now and they were all grinning at Evka.

'How do you do?' said Evka in English.

'How d'you do?' they said in chorus.

Evka smiled and didn't know how to say what she wanted to say next.

'Take them with you,' I said.

'Yeah, all right. But not all of 'em,' said Benno.

'How many?'

'Well ... what do you say, Evka?'

'Well ... about ... about five, I'd say – all right?'

'Okay,' I said. 'Sergeant, five men with this beautiful girl.'

'As you wish, sir!' said the sergeant and grinned. He turned to his bunch of men and barked out the names of five men. One by one they stepped forward and saluted Evka, and Evka shook hands with them. I felt proud of myself. They'd better be

grateful, I thought – with me, like an angel of peace, providing them with deluxe accommodations, with beautiful young matrons and girls, after all those years of deprivation and hardship. I turned to Benno.

'You going to be home this afternoon, Benno?'

'Yeah. Come on over.'

'I will. Any news from the brewery?'

'We've got to be there tomorrow.'

'Why?'

'They put up an announcement that anybody who enlisted who doesn't turn up tomorrow will be treated as a deserter.'

'Honest?'

'Honest.'

'That's stupid.'

'They're stupid.'

'Are you going?'

'What can I do? We're in a big enough mess as it is.'

'You mean on account of Sunday?'

'Well, Sunday's enough, isn't it?'

'Oh, that wasn't so bad.'

'Don't kid yourself.'

'Well, we'll see. So I'll come over this afternoon, right?'

'Right.'

'So long then. Good-bye, Evka,' I said.

'Bye,' Evka said to me. She was already chattering away with her Englishmen.

'Have fun,' I said with a small smile that was half leer.

'I'll try,' she said.

'So long,' said Benno.

We left them and turned off to the left and took the path that leads around behind the spinning mill. I thought I'd take them to the expensive residential part of town where Mrs Heiserova lived. To the left, the castle rose high above us, its red cupolas gleaming in the sun and a flag fluttering against the blue sky, while below off to the right the spinning mill sprawled, with its fire reservoir whose oily water made splotchy rainbows out of the sun, and then the endless rows of warehouses which made the place look even more desolate

than usual – the barred windows crusted with dust, the point-less Renaissance ornaments writhing on grimy towers, the big gravel yard, the abandoned freightcars standing on a siding. The whole plant was surrounded by an iron fence which curved off in the direction of the workers' district, and on the slope below the castle the villas and mansions of the mill's directors and assistant directors caught the full slant of the sun. Mr Heiser was the general director and his house stood in the middle of a huge garden crisscrossed by sanded paths. It was a big two-storey house with a big balcony and a glassed-in sun-porch at one corner and the garage doors underneath it were green. We stopped at the gate. Vines arched overhead, and I pushed the doorbell under the brass nameplate with the inscription, ARNOLD HEISER, GENERAL DIRECTOR, UNITED TEXTILE WORKS INC., and we waited. The mansion shimmered against the green hillside and my Englishmen stared at it with open mouths. Then a voice came through the speaker by the gate.

'Yes. Who is it?' The voice sounded tinny, but I could tell it was a woman's, and I leaned up close to the mouthpiece and answered, 'Smiricky. May I speak with the lady of the house, please?'

'Just a moment.' I stepped back from the mouthpiece and we waited again. I looked at the yellow path that led to the sun-porch. A couple of birds were hopping along it. I could hear them chirping and there was also a soft rustling sound in the air, like wind blowing through a forest, but then I realized that it was a fountain. Everything was quiet here. I looked around at my Englishmen again. They were standing there with their knapsacks on their backs and when I turned they all stared at me. Then for the first time I noticed how wrinkled and torn and dusty their khaki uniforms were, how dirty their shoes were. The sergeant took off his cap. His head was shiny in the sun. He took out a red handkerchief, mopped his forehead and smiled at me.

'Hot,' he said.

'Yes,' I said with a smile. 'Awfully hot.' Then I nodded towards Heiser's house and said, 'Pretty, isn't it?'

'That it is,' he said and put on his cap again.

The speaker crackled, 'Come right in, Mr Smiricky,' and the door buzzer sounded. I opened the gate and stepped into the garden. The Englishmen remained standing where they were.

'Come on,' I said. 'You can wait for me in the garden.'

One by one they came through the gate and we all started off towards the mansion. Their heavy shoes crunched in the sand. The door to the sun porch opened and there stood Mitzi, the maid, in a short black dress with a white apron and little white cap.

'Good morning,' I said to her.

'Good morning,' she said and her voice, which sounded like metal over the speaker, sounded very nice in the flesh. The white bib of her apron was loosely pinned over her well-rounded breasts. All I could do for a minute was stare.

'May I speak with Mrs Heiserova?' I asked.

'Come in, please,' she said with a smile, and stepped a bit to one side.

'Wait for me here,' I said to the Englishmen, and started up the stairs to the veranda. I'd been in the big entrance hall before. It was full of potted palms and dark green rubber plants and paintings by Spala and Rabas hung from the walls. Mitzi went ahead and opened the door to the salon.

'Please go in,' she said to me with that professional smile of hers, except I was sure it wasn't just professional. The skirt she had on was awfully short and she was wearing silk stockings and high heels.

'Thank you,' I said and passed by so close I could nearly feel the warmth of her body coming out through her dress. I entered the salon. It was full of highly polished sideboards and china cupboards and alabaster figurines and Persian rugs and the sunshine poured through the big window and, filtered through an immense aquarium, fell on the wife of the general director, Mrs Heiserova who, stuffed into a silk dress with a string of pearls stretched across her balloon-shaped bosom, was sitting in an armchair next to the silver smoking-stand. Mrs Kramperova, widow of a Lewith Mill attorney, sat across from

her, a cigarette dangling between her fingers. Both ladies stared up at me, dumbly. I knew what they'd probably been talking about. And that they were both scared - Mrs Heiserova, because she was always scared of something; Mrs Kramperova, because of Krobe. Looking at her now, I couldn't figure out what Krobe had seen in her anyway. Krobe had been the chief German plant supervisor at the Messerschmidt plant, one of those blond, elegant, fanatical Nazis; during the war he had boarded and roomed with Mrs Kramperova. And obviously bedded with her, too. They always used to go around together - Krobe in his leather coat with a swastika in his buttonhole, and that tubby little widow on his arm. I came across them in the woods a couple of times and was always surprised at Krobe. So now the widow was probably scared on account of that and had come over to console herself with her best friend. Her bosom friend. The English expression occurred to me and, looking at their bosoms on display behind all that flowered silk, all sorts of wild and dirty thoughts ran through my head.

'I kiss your hand,' I said.

Both ladies inclined their heads.

'Mrs Heiserova, I have a request to make,' I said smoothly.

'Go right ahead,' said the general director's wife, and suddenly a mean bit of strategy crossed my mind.

'I'm in charge of a group of escaped prisoners of war,' I said. 'They've escaped from a camp in Upper Silesia and I'd like to place them somewhere for a few days until they can get a train to Prague.'

'Yes,' said the general director's wife in a neutral tone.

'Could you possibly put a few of them up for maybe two or three days?'

'You mean house them?' said the general director's wife cautiously, her face clouding over a bit. She was obviously already having visions of hordes of hairy Mongolians clomping around on her rugs in muddy boots and of her precious silverware vanishing piece by piece.

'I would be delighted to help you, but I don't quite see how I can at the moment,' she said slowly. 'You see, Mr Smiricky, I have guests. My brother-in-law is here from Ostrava, and then,

too, we already have some refugees staying with us – my brother from Brno and his family.'

'Of course,' I said. 'I understand completely. I just thought that the primitive conditions in the emergency barracks might not be so pleasant for these Englishmen.'

'Oh, they're English?' the general director's wife asked, clearly interested now.

'Yes. Prisoners of war from Dunkirk.'

'Oh, I see. Soldiers!' she cried as though the idea had just then crossed her mind. 'Well, that's different, isn't it? I could make room for one or two of them in the back room upstairs.'

'Fine,' I said in a respectful tone.

'As I say, I'd be delighted to help out.'

'Certainly. Well, if you could I'd be very much obliged to you.'

'Don't mention it. You're entirely welcome. How many would you want me to take?'

'That depends entirely on you, Mrs Heiserova.'

'Well, would two be enough? Two would be no trouble at all.'

'Two would be fine. And, once again, many thanks.'

'Not at all, not at all. It's our duty, after all. And how's your father, Mr Smiricky?'

'Well, you know ... with the way things are these days ...'

'Yes, well,' she broke in, 'the main thing is we're rid of Hitler at last.'

'Yes. Yes, of course.'

'Please give my regards to your father and mother.'

'I shall. Of course. And, once again, many ...'

'You're very welcome,' she said and lifted a hand.

She had pudgy little fingers and I kissed them between two large rings. One of them bumped into my lip. The hand smelled good. I turned and bowed to Mrs Kramperova.

'Mr Smiricky?' she said to me.

'Ma'am?'

'I might be in a position to take in one of your Englishmen, too, if you ...'

'Oh, I'd be very grateful,' I said quickly, and right away I

knew which one I'd give her – that bearded giant, the farmer from Australia.

'But, Mr Smiricky ...'

'Yes?'

'If you please ... I would prefer someone with manners.'

'Of course.'

'Not just any ... well, but I'm sure you know what I mean.'

'I assure you, ma'am – you can depend on me.' The one I'd picked had manners all right. Among other things, anyway. Mrs Kramperova would be satisfied. I could see his broad shoulders and narrow hips as he climbed out of the pool and I thought, you needn't worry, Mrs Kramperova, you'll be satisfied. But then I looked at her and wondered how satisfied the Australian was going to be, but at least he'd be glad to have a place to stay for a while and maybe gratitude would make him overlook a few defects.

'Shall I bring him over to your house, ma'am?'

'Oh, you needn't bother. I was just about to leave,' said Mrs Kramperova, rising from her chair.

'Oh, won't you stay on a bit, Olga?' said the general director's wife.

'I really must be running along, Rosa. And then Mr Smiricky would have to go to all the trouble of walking all the way over to ...'

'No trouble at all, ma'am.'

'No, no. I'm sure you have enough to do as it is, Mr Smiricky. And I really must be going.'

'When will I see you again, Olga?' said the general director's wife.

'As soon as I have a moment, Rosa. Don't worry, I won't forget you.'

'That would be nice – forgetting your oldest friend. You see, Mr Smiricky, we played together as children.'

'Really?'

'Yes. And we've been friends ever since.'

'That's wonderful.'

'Yes, and now that everything's going to be so much more pleasant again, you have to come over more often, Olga.'

'I will, Rosa, I will. Just as soon as things have settled down a bit.'

'You must come too, Mr Smiricky. And your parents. It's been ages since we've last seen you.'

'Thank you. We'll look forward to coming over, as soon as things have straightened themselves out,' I said.

'Of course, of course,' said the general director's wife.

'Well, good-bye now, Rosa, and remember me to your husband,' said Mrs Kramperova. The two ladies embraced.

'I kiss your hand and thank you again, Mrs Heiserova,' I said and bowed. The general director's wife smiled graciously.

'You're very welcome, Mr Smiricky. Do come again.'

I bowed and turned and followed Mrs Kramperova. We went out into the hall where Mitzi was waiting with her nice little smile. She opened the door that led out to the garden.

'I kiss your hand,' she said, curtsying gracefully.

'Good-bye, Mitzi,' said Mrs Kramperova in a completely different tone of voice than the one she'd used in the salon, and then stepped out into the sunlight. Now it was my turn to go by Mitzi's electrifying body again and suddenly I got this idea, though God knows where it came from – probably out of some movie or one of those novels – but there she stood with her breasts bulging out over that starched apron in the middle of all that luxury, so on my way out I slipped my right arm around her waist and tried to kiss her. She pulled away. I could feel her warm, supple back bending against my hand, and then I let go. I was awfully embarrassed, because actually I hadn't meant to try anything like that, it seemed the dumb kind of thing millionaires play around at, and I was scared stiff wondering how she would take it and awfully relieved when she pretended to frown but just laughed softly and whispered 'Shh!' So I gave her a friendly wink and said, 'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Mr Smiricky,' she said and closed the door right in front of my nose. I felt tremendously grateful to her. Though why, I wasn't quite sure. I had the feeling Mitzi wouldn't spoil anybody's fun. And that she understood me. That she'd be able to understand what there was in me to

understand. The fact that I didn't have any prejudices. That I longed to love somebody, somebody pretty like Mitzi or Irena, and that I simply went crazy when I wasn't given a chance to. Or when I bungled things badly. Right then, anyway, I was sure I could fall in love with Mitzi. That I was in love with her already. It seemed to me I loved her even more than Irena. And I realized how easy it was for me to fall in love with somebody else than Irena, that all it took was for me to be with a pretty girl, and I decided I'd give Mitzi a try as soon as possible. Mitzi was nice and she lived in nice surroundings, had a little room at the back of the Heisers's villa, curtains on the windows and a view of the castle and a moon between the turreted towers and the fragrant rustling of the woods at night outside the window – all this flashed through my mind as I plodded down the yellow path behind Mrs Kramperova and stopped beside my silent, dusty Englishmen.

'Well,' I said, 'you go with this lady,' I told the guy in the Australian hat.

'Very well, sir,' he said respectfully and took off his hat. His wavy chestnut hair shone in the sunshine. Mrs Kramperova smiled at him.

'You can speak German with him, ma'am,' I said and felt like a madam in a whore house.

'Yes? Wonderful! Thank you, Mr Smiricky.'

'You're welcome,' I said.

'Bitte, kommen Sie mit mir,' she said to the Australian with an irritating smile.

'Danke, gnädige Frau,' said the Australian, then turned to me and said, 'Thank you, sir.' He loped off beside Mrs Kramperova towards the garden gate. The sun shone down on them, he put on his hat again, and Mrs Kramperova's pink slip glimmered through her thin dress. She'll have a good time, I thought to myself, and thought maybe the Australian would, too. If even a beast like Krobe had. I turned to the sergeant and asked him to select two men.

'Burke and Harris,' said the sergeant, and the two men moved forward. That left me with only four now – the sergeant, the tall redhead with the gaunt face, then a pock-

marked runt, and finally a big fat guy wearing a checkered shirt under his battledress and a funny peaked cap with a little pinned-on Union Jack. His cleanshaven face glistened with sweat. I turned to the two who'd been picked to stay at the Heisers's.

'Come on,' I said and headed back towards the house. I went up the steps to the front door and rang the bell. After a minute the click of high heels came closer and Mitzi opened the door.

'Well! Have you forgotten something, Mr Smiricky?' she said. I felt like letting everything else go to hell and just taking her off to her room. But those two Englishmen were standing right behind me.

'I think, miss, you've forgotten you've got visitors.'

'What?'

'Here. I've brought you two guests for a couple of days.'

'Who are they?' said Mitzi, peering suspiciously at the dusty Englishmen. Two little parallel wrinkles formed above her nose.

'Englishmen. It's all been arranged with Mrs Heiserova. Could you show them in to her, please?'

'Goodness,' said Mitzi. 'We've got so many people staying here already, Mr Smiricky.'

'I know,' I said quickly, and didn't move an inch. Neither did Mitzi. We stood there face to face and eye to eye, but all I could see were Mitzi's breasts under that white apron.

'Well ... then ...' she said slowly.

'Mitzi ...' I said in a low voice.

'Yes?'

'Would you have any time this evening?'

She grinned. 'Well, I don't know, Mr Smiricky.'

'Please, Mitzi. There's so much I've got to tell you.'

'Yes? About what?'

'About how crazy I am about you.'

'Oh, go on. Since when, Mr Smiricky?' she said in a slightly sarcastic but still pleasant way.

'For a long time. Ever since we came here for a visit the first time.'

'Mitzi!' a voice called out from the salon. Mitzi stiffened, glanced around, then turned to me and quickly slipped her hand into mine.

'At the edge of the woods at eight - all right?' I said.

'Behind the house?'

'Yes. Will you be there?'

'I don't know. Maybe,' she said with a look that made my head spin.

'Well, good-bye now,' I said and Mitzi squeezed my hand and looked away. I was lucky. Like always. I was lucky with most women. Except with Irena. Jesus, it'd been going on like that for years already.

'*Kommen Sie herein*,' Mitzi said to the Englishmen. They went in. Mitzi winked at me and closed the door.

I stood there staring into the big mahogany door and then turned and looked out over springtime Kostelec. I could see the grey factory buildings down below and the backs of the apartment houses in town, the river, the railroad embankment, and then the little houses strung out at the foot of Black Mountain and the woods and the hills and the blue sky above them and over to the left and the red roofs of the new residential section beyond the slums, and the air was clean and wonderfully fresh. Then suddenly, from a long way off, came a hard, low, steady coughing sound interrupted by louder repeated booms. The front - machine guns and artillery - and spring had come and the Protectorate was over. The remaining four Tommies stood there on the path, looking at me. The fat one was sitting on his knapsack, his shirt unbuttoned at the neck, his cap in his hand. He had a crew cut. I walked down the stairs and over to them.

'Shall we go?' I said, and we started off down the path towards the garden gate. I looked back at the mansion. Against all those green plants and shrubs it loomed up white and shining, with bits of mica glinting in the stucco and the windows bright with the sun, and in the garden the fountain spouted its plumes of spray into the air. I dragged myself away from the sight and strode along with the Englishmen, the white fence flickering by on the side. My destination was the Vevodas,

where I planned to commit my last act of malice. The sidewalk dropped sharply down towards the creek, then went through Shanty Town and on up towards the new residential section beyond the factory-workers' district. Shanty Town was just a colony of old freightcars jacked up on to concrete blocks. Goats grazed and snotnosed kids were playing in the grass; blankets and bed linen lay draped over racks to air out. We crossed the creek above the weir and clambered up towards the newer houses. I told the Englishmen to wait at the corner for me and then headed for the building with the lion's head over the door. That was where District Attorney Vevoda lived with his sour, dumb shrew of a wife. I rang the doorbell. Nothing happened for a long time. Then I heard a faint noise as somebody first opened the peephole. They opened the door just a crack. I could only see a sliver of Mrs Vevodova's face.

'Madame,' I said, 'I kiss your hand.'

'Good morning. What do you want?'

'Madame, I'd like to lodge two English prisoners with you. The town is full of refugees and we're trying to put our Englishmen up with some of the better families.'

'Prisoners?'

'Yes. English soldiers. Prisoners of war.'

'Well, I really don't know ... my husband's not at home.'

'I'm sure your husband won't object. Dr Vasak's taken some, and Director Heiser and the Mouteliks and ...'

'And ... uh ... how many did you say there were?'

'Just two.'

'Well, I'm not sure my husband will allow it. There's little enough room as it is.'

'Oh, he will. And if he does object, you can always phone us,' I said. I was eager to unload my two prisoners on her as fast as possible.

'For how long would it be?'

'Just two or three days.'

'Well ... what sort of people are they?'

'What do you mean, ma'am?' I said, playing dumb.

'Well, I mean ... are they ... they're not filthy, are they?'

'Ma'am, if they miss their daily bath, they get sick.'

'Yes, well ... I just don't know what my husband's going to say to this.'

'No need to worry about that, ma'am. Thanks very much. I'll bring them right over.'

'Well ...' said Mrs Vevodova, but I'd already gone.

'Go right in. She's waiting for you,' I said, shoving the fat one and the runt towards the door. I caught one last glimpse of the runt's dirty boots and the fat guy's greasy rear and then turned and hurried off towards town with my last two Englishmen. Just the thought of the mess those soldiers would make of Mrs Vevodova's place made me happy and I hoped they'd do a thorough job of it. I really longed to see them turn her house into one big pigsty. She was one woman I just couldn't stand. And so I prayed they'd really mess it up for her. We went down to the main street and headed off towards home.

I took the two Englishmen - their names were Martin and Siddell - upstairs. Mother opened the door and I said they'd be staying with us for a couple days and then I took them to the bathroom so they could wash up. Here in the house, they both suddenly seemed very shy. I left them in the bathroom and went into the kitchen. It was two o'clock.

'What should I give them to eat, Danny?' Mother asked.

'Oh, anything. Boiled potatoes would be all right. Anything.'

'But I don't have any meat.'

'That's all right, Mother.'

'How am I supposed to talk to them?'

'They know German. You have any lunch for me?'

'It's been ready for a long time, Danny.'

'Could I have it then? I've got to go out again right away.'

'My God. Where are you going this time, Danny?'

'I promised Benno I'd come over.'

'Danny, be careful. I don't want you to get mixed up in anything dangerous.'

'Don't worry, Mother.'

The sergeant appeared in the doorway.

'Sit down,' I said, and got up and brought them into the room. Embarrassed, they sat down at the table and rested their

hands on their knees. Mother brought in plates and bowls and served us soup.

'So, *bitte*,' she said.

'*Danke, Frau*,' said the sergeant.

We finished the soup off and Mother brought some meat and potatoes.

'Danny, do you really think I can serve them this?'

'Why not?'

'It's horse meat. I don't have anything else.'

'They won't mind.'

'*Bitte*,' said Mother. '*Es ist nur Pferdefleisch*.'

'*Danke sehr, Frau*,' said the sergeant.

We ate.

'Where're you from?' I asked the sergeant.

'London,' he said.

'And you?'

'Liverpool.'

'Married?'

'Yes,' said the sergeant. 'I've got three kids.'

'Well, you must be glad you're on your way home.'

'I am indeed,' said the sergeant. After a while he said, 'This is the second time.'

'How do you mean?'

'This won't be my first homecoming.'

'How do you mean?'

'I served in the first war, too.'

'Oh, I see,' I said.

'And I'd go again if there were ever another one.'

'Really?'

'Yes. You see, I hate the Germans.'

'I see,' I said. I didn't know what to say to that. The sergeant, chewing away on his horse meat, looked at me soberly.

'Well, fine,' I said and turned to the other one. 'Are you married too?'

'No,' he said, making a face as if he'd stepped on a nail.

'Well, then you've got something to look forward to too, don't you?'

'I should say so.'

'We've got some pretty girls here, don't you think? You like them?'

'Oh, very much.'

'They're pretty, aren't they?'

'Yes. But then, you see, I haven't had a girl for five years now.'

That kind of shocked me. He said it the same way a man might say he hadn't had anything to eat for a week.

'Well, you can have one now.'

'Really?' he said with interest. 'But I don't have any money.'

This time I made a face.

'You don't need money,' I said. 'Our girls are good patriots.'

The Englishman chuckled. He was a big, redheaded, husky guy. I thought about Mitzi. Maybe I should do a good deed and let him go to meet Mitzi instead of me. No. If he'd held out this long, he might as well hold out a little longer.

'Well, I've got to be going now,' I said. 'I'll see you this evening. In the meantime, get some rest.'

'Thank you,' said the sergeant.

'Well . . . good-bye for now.'

'Good-bye.'

I got up.

'Will you make up their beds for them, Mother?' I said.

'You're going already, Danny?'

'Yes.'

'When will you be back?'

'Tonight.'

'Be careful, Danny.'

'Don't worry. Good-bye, Mother.'

'Good-bye.'

I went out the door and hurried downstairs. When I got to the landing I looked back and saw Mother standing in the doorway watching me. She looked worried. I blew her a kiss. She smiled and waved. Then she turned away. I hurried downstairs. Out on the street everything still looked the same. The same grey crowd as before except now, somehow, it seemed to me they were moving faster. I headed down towards the

station but after putting away all that horse meat, walking wasn't easy.

'*Gnädiger Herr,*' I heard from behind me. Somebody touched my arm. I turned and saw an incredible filthy ugly woman in a striped dress.

'*Bitte, wo ist das?*' she said and held out a piece of paper. Behind her stood a whole flock of other women wearing striped clothing like hers. You couldn't even tell whether they were old or young. Hunger stared from their eyes. They looked like ghosts. I glanced at the piece of paper. On it was a type-written message: '*For Lewith factory cafeteria: Serve lunch to fifteen Jewesses from Schörkenau concentration camp.*' At the bottom there was a round rubber municipal stamp and somebody's signature.

I handed the paper back to the woman and said, 'Come with me. I'll show you the way.'

The woman held up a bony hand and said a few words in a shrill voice to the others. I turned and started off. The whole group followed along behind me. I turned to the woman with the piece of paper and slowed down.

'You just got out of a camp?' I asked. She looked up at me respectfully, then came to me as meekly as if I were her master. We walked on side by side.

'Yes. From Schörkenau,' she said in an almost reverent tone of voice. I didn't know what to talk about. She trotted along beside me, alertly and expectantly, and I could tell she was ready to tell me anything I wanted to know, but for the life of me I couldn't think of anything at all. Just by looking at her you knew everything. I'd heard a bit about the camps. About Schörkenau especially. Some of the guys who'd worked for Luft-metal had told me about the Jewish women from the camp who were laying a spur line there. So I'd heard about the place already. The Jewish woman limped along at my side, her bare feet caked over with dust, her striped clothes hanging on her like on a skeleton.

'A good thing it's all over now, isn't it?' I said, and as soon as I'd said it I felt how dumb it was. I was sure it must sound insulting to her. I felt guilty. I wasn't sure why but I felt guilty

anyway. For no good reason maybe, but there I was walking with a full stomach in front of all those women and then, in that same obsequious voice, the woman beside me said, 'Yes. Yes, it's a very good thing,' and then went back to being as alert and attentive and cautious as before. It was embarrassing how servile these women were. Hell, if I could only have told them they didn't need to act that way any more, that they weren't in a concentration camp any more and that they had just as much right to everything now as I did or something like that, but I didn't know how to tell them and I had the feeling it was impossible to, or that maybe I didn't have any right to tell them things like that, so I didn't say anything and just kept on going, wishing we were already at Lewith's. We'd been walking along the sidewalk on the right hand side of the street and, crossing over to the other side in front of the Grand Hotel, had to make our way through a swarm of people. The mixture was still the same - Mongolians, French, Italians, Serbs, and clusters of people in rags - but it seemed to me there were more people than ever now and that they were moving faster. Every once in a while the sea of people parted and a wagon creaked by loaded with children or a skinny nag clomped past with two or three kids on its back. Sometimes somebody on a bike wove in and out along the fringe of the crowd - usually a man in uniform, a Frenchman, or a guy with a NEDERLAND patch on his shoulder - but the main current of that human flood flowed steadily by on foot, surging westward through the heat and swirling dust. I cut across that current, me and my Jewish women, and we walked on towards Lewith's cafeteria. The white concrete building of the new spinning mill - which the firm of Lewith had finished just in time for the Germans - gleamed in the sunshine like a palace and there was a line of refugees, standing or squatting, that stretched the full length of the iron fence. Small bunches of them, led by kids wearing white armbands, were being let into the cafeteria. I took my armband out of my pocket, put it on and turned to the Jewish woman.

'Could I have your paper now?' I asked. She handed it to me. We walked down the sidewalk, rows of squatting and ex-

hausted people to each side, towards the factory gate. Two guys from the Red Cross stood at the gateway. Without a word I handed the paper to one of them. He read it and handed it back to me.

'Where's the cafeteria?' I asked.

'Around the corner to the left,' he said, and the next minute he was already busy with another group.

'Follow me,' I said to my Jewish women and led them around to the left between the fence and the white factory wall. Around the corner there was a little yard bright with sunshine and full of refugees sprawled out on the grass. We passed a long row of big windows until, almost at the end of that side, we came to an open door in which two women in white coats were standing. I handed the paper to one of the women.

'Fifteen lunches,' she said to two other guys wearing arm-bands.

'Come on in,' one of them said.

I told the Jewish women they could go in and one after another and each one looking as solemn and as close to dying right then and there as the other, they filed in past me.

'Jesus,' the guy said to me as he counted them, 'they must have just got out of a concentration camp.'

'From Schörkenau,' I said.

'Aha.'

And just then, drifting in with the rattle and clink of spoons and the foul smell of cafeteria food, there was the sudden wail of a strange kind of music, a twanging, keening sound, something like mandolins, only much better I thought.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Russians,' the guy at the door said. I listened. I couldn't see all the way inside, but I listened. It was one of those peculiar Russian melodies, sad but not maudlin, a melody that sounded detached and uplifted, above it all.

'Can I take a look?'

'Sure, go on in.'

I slipped into the cafeteria and looked around. It was a big place with benches and tables, full of smoke and bad smells

and food. Tattered POWs were sitting around the tables, stuffing themselves. Aproned women were clearing. A long queue stretched back along the wall from the serving window. I walked between tables towards the music. The room was L-shaped and around the corner another big hall opened up and there I saw a Russian orchestra seated on a platform, playing this song. Actually they weren't Russians. They were Mongolians or Georgians, men with wide flat faces and walrus moustaches. About eight of them sat there, smiling broadly and incessantly, twanging away on all kinds of odd mandolins and balalaikas. In front of the platform, where a couple of kids stood gaping at the orchestra, benches and tables had been cleared away and a handful of French soldiers were dancing with girls from Lewith's kitchen. The girls' cheeks were bright red and they looked like they were dancing in heaven. I squeezed my way up close to the orchestra and stood there. The Mongolians sat straight as statues, but every single one of them was grinning from ear to ear and their small hands flickered skilfully over the strings. You could hear the smooth, drawling, full-blown, mournful melody with a bass underneath and the little, high-pitched, tinkling tones of some sort of mandolin. The Mongolians played without stopping and without notes, grinning the whole time, blissful and mute and motionless in the midst of all that stink and clatter and talk. I watched them and listened to their song and wondered where on earth they'd come from and how they'd ever managed to wind up here and what a tremendous thing music was – how it was better than everything else put together and how, just because of their music, I felt some sort of fraternal feeling with these dirty mujiks, and as I listened to them, I watched their hands, the way they played, wonderfully, their fingers moving over the strings with a marvellous calm and precision. For a few minutes some of them would stop, take a breather, then join in again, right on the beat, whether they were all playing in unison or harmony. Every once in a while a couple of them would play a lower-pitched plunking melody and the others would come up with something like trumpet riffs in jazz. I listened and forgot about everything. Then the

orchestra stopped and a young kid played a solo on a huge bass balalaika or whatever it was. He played a low-pitched tune and the deep plunks of the balalaika sounded so weirdly and fantastically beautiful that it was almost like a miracle, almost as miraculous as when Armstrong sings 'St James Infirmary' and Kid Ory answers him on a muted trombone, and then suddenly that whole grinning and speechless bunch started singing and they sang a wild, wailing song in those Oriental voices of theirs and my hair stood on end and I felt they were lifting me straight up to heaven. The Frenchmen whirled the girls around the floor till their skirts flew up and you could see their silly pink panties and when the song was over one of the dancing Frenchmen yelled at me, 'Vive la France! Vive les Soviets! Vive la paix!' and he smiled. I smiled back at him and wanted to yell something, too, but suddenly I was embarrassed. I would have liked to holler something back but I couldn't. The best I could come up with was a grin and I waved my hand and was furious that I didn't know how to shout like that and it ruined the music for me. I couldn't shout, 'Long live Czechoslovakia!' or anything like that. I just couldn't. Maybe because Czechoslovakia is such an awfully long word. Still I might have yelled something shorter like 'Long live Peace!' But I couldn't do that either. I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wasn't spontaneous enough. Sure, naturally it was good that the Germans were gone. But it didn't even start to make me feel ecstatic enough to holler. I'd never been able to holler or shout when parades went by or yell 'Welcome!' and stuff like that. It was all very fine but, damn it, why couldn't they leave me out of all that? Why couldn't they just leave me alone? I wasn't dying to yell whatever it was I felt. I felt mad at that Frenchman. The damn fool. Why should I holler just because he had? I was glad the Protectorate was over but I didn't feel any urge to go crazy just on account of it. And I couldn't stand the feeling that somebody was standing there just waiting for me to go crazy.

I turned and elbowed my way out of there. The Mongolian melody pursued me, growing louder and stronger. They'd started singing again, a bouncy, yelping, beautiful steppe song,

and a wave of sadness broke over me, a completely mindless and helpless kind of sadness, and I made my way blindly between the long tables. A sadness like when, out of the night air during the Protectorate, I picked up the Golden Gate Quartet or heard Wings Over Jordan singing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' or Leadbelly singing 'Cedar House Blues' or the Mills Brothers or Bob Crosby's full four-part Dixieland with the tenor sax and knew it couldn't last much more than a minute and that maybe I'd never hear it again and that there wasn't much chance I'd ever have a record of it though I knew that any fool over in America could get one cheap and easy and there I was, stuck in the Protectorate and aching because that music was so beautiful and in a little while it would fade out and I'd never – damn it! – hear it again. And now here I was feeling that same longing and heartache I'd felt so often in the past and it made me sick to think how helpless people really were and how stupidly the world was organized after all, a world filled with marvellous things most of which you never get around to seeing or hearing or knowing and, even if you do, it gets lost in no time leaving you with a hole of despair in your heart so you feel like dying. I pushed my way out of the cafeteria, crossed the lawn between the sleeping people, and went through the gate and out into the street. New clumps of haunted, hungry people were headed towards me, escorted by boys wearing armbands and looking very eager and self-important. The sun was scorching and everything looked dusty. I started up the street towards the station and then to the Manes house.

But suddenly I didn't feel like going there any more. I just wanted to be alone and to wander around in that sea of people, to walk around Kostelec in the afternoon heat and look at them, at those unshaven old men in rags, at those Greeks or Bulgarians or God knows what, at those dark-eyed and elegantly ragged Italians, at seedy-looking Frenchmen and reserved Dutchmen, at the girls of every shade in kerchiefs and rags, wretched, smiling, and dirty, at the endless waves of little Mongolians with their mute grins and the white SU on their backs – that's what I really wanted to do. I wanted to stare at it all and be a part of it. But I also knew that I'd twice promised

Benno that I'd be over and I couldn't just not turn up. Christ, everything in my life always gets fouled up. Always. Every goddamn time. I always have to go somewhere else when I feel like staying where I am and I've always got to stay when it would be wonderful to go somewhere else. Something always turned up to make things come out wrong. But that was me. Me all over. Maybe I just wasn't made for love or for happiness, for anything. I was just made to get through life somehow or other, to live it through and observe it and be a part of it, and to . . . But I didn't know why else I'd been made except I knew there must be some other reason, that I had to be made for something more than just that, like for playing the saxophone, maybe. That was the best thing I could come up with but maybe there was something else, too, something even better. There had to be.

I crossed the railroad tracks and went past Dagmar Dreslerova's house and saw her looking out the window, but I pretended I hadn't seen her and walked right on past that block of apartment houses with all those hopeless little mica stars in the stucco and turned off towards the Manes house. I rang the bell at the garden gate. 'Who's there?' said the mouthpiece. 'Smiricky,' I said, and the door buzzed and I went in and up the path and up the columned stairs to the front door. The path and the ground floor lay in the shadows of the apartment house next door, but the second and third floors basked in sunshine. It was a great place. Benno's grandfather had built it, the millionaire Manes, about twenty years ago and it had lost none of the charm of the style of that time and it never left me with that feeling of showy luxury I got from the Heisers's place. Maybe that was because I was so used to it. We'd often played there, either downstairs in the drawing room or up in Benno's room which was plastered with pictures of Negro musicians and was next to Evka's room with its big portrait of her painted by Rosta Pitterman. It was a great place. I went up the curving steps and opened the glass door. It was nice and cool in the drawing room. A potted palm stood at the bottom of the steps like at Heiser's yet this one looked different and there were two wooden bears holding an umbrella rack. I was about

to go upstairs to Benno's room when the doors into the salon slid open and there stood Mrs Dvorackova, the old housekeeper.

'Benno's in the garden,' she said.

'Aha. Thank you,' I said, and went into the salon. There was a piano in the little bay by the window. I went through the French doors on the right, through the dining room and out on to the sunporch which was drenched with light but not stuffy or hot. There sat Mrs Manesova and two of my Englishmen were sitting there in wicker chairs. The Englishmen - their jackets off, their green khaki shirts unbuttoned at the neck - looked very trim and clean as they sat there chatting in English with Mrs Manesova. Two siphons stood on the table and two bottles of pre-war whisky. I said hello and crossed the porch to the garden. There was Evka in a white silk bathing suit, playing ping-pong with one Englishman while another refereed. The ping-pong table was in the shade under a tree and Evka's white bathing suit flashed brightly against the shadows. Three deck chairs had been set up out in the sun and there lay Benno, Helena, and another Englishman. Benno was in his bathing suit, too, and with his bulging belly and female-looking breasts he looked like a Buddha. A couple of beer bottles stood sweating on a little table. Helena, wearing a two-piece blue linen sunsuit, was sitting in the second deck chair and you could tell she must be pretty chubby, too. There was a little sausage roll of fat between where her halter ended and her shorts began, so I looked around again at Evka's suntanned back and firm little fanny glistening in that silk bathing suit. The seam ran right down the middle so when Evka moved, each half glistened differently. The Englishman was sitting in his deck chair, smoking a pipe. He, too, had taken off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. I walked over to the deck chairs.

'Hi.'

'Hi,' said Benno.

'Hello, Danny,' said Helena.

The Englishman got up. 'Good afternoon,' he said.

'Well, how are you? Enjoying yourself here?'

'Very much.'

'Good. I just came over to see how you were getting along. I've got to be going though.'

'How come? Where to?' said Benno.

'Oh ... I've got some things to do and ... and I've got to pick up those snapshots Bertie took on Sunday,' I said with sudden inspiration.

'Hell, he could've taken our pictures, too,' said Benno. 'Sit down.'

I stretched out on another deck chair opposite them. A long volley of clicks came from the ping-pong table. I stared at Evka. She turned around to pick up a ball and saw me.

'Hello, Danny,' she said gaily.

'Hello. How do you like your Englishmen?' I asked.

'They're wonderful,' she grinned and, as she bent for the ball, I gazed down the top of her suit. Then she straightened up and turned and I went on staring at that two-piece fanny of hers.

'Hey, you dummy!' I heard Benno say. I realized he was talking to me. I looked over at him.

'What?'

'Can't you take your eyes off her for a minute and listen to what I'm telling you?'

I laughed.

'You've got a great sister, Benno. I envy you.'

Benno said nothing.

'I mean it. Evka's terrific.'

'Yeah, but she's awful dumb.'

'Benny!' said Helena.

'She's dumb and you know it.'

'Well, but there's no need to talk about it like that.'

'Anyway, she's terrific,' I said. 'She really is, Benno. I'm serious. Isn't she beautiful?' I said, turning to the Englishman. I must have broken some chain of thought because he sat up with a jerk and, quickly and without thinking, said, 'I beg your pardon?'

'Isn't she beautiful?' I repeated, nodding at Evka. The Englishman beamed.

'I'll say she is!' he said in ardent agreement, then started watching Evka, too.

'See, you fool?' I said to Benno. 'Even foreigners appreciate her.'

'All right, all right,' said Benno. 'I guess you've heard that the SS are supposed to get here tomorrow?'

'What?'

'The SS.'

'Who said?'

'They got word over at the brewery from Schörkenau. Somebody phoned. The old man told us.'

'What's going on, anyway?'

'Well, the German Army's on the run but the rear guard units are SS divisions. And they're still fighting the Russians.'

'Jesus.'

'We're really going to be in for it then.'

'You think they'll get all the way to Kostelec?'

'Why not?'

'Well, you don't think maybe the Russians'll finish them off first.'

'I wouldn't count on it.'

'Yeah ... well, maybe we'll see some action around here after all.'

'That we will.'

Neither of us said anything for a while. Then I said, 'What's your old man say about it?'

'He's scared shitless.'

'Benny!' Helena piped up automatically.

'He's scared, like everybody else.'

'You think the army's going to do anything?' I asked, saying the word 'army' sarcastically.

'Why do you think they're calling up everybody tomorrow?'

'Yeah. Right,' I said, and a chill ran down my spine. SS men! It was cool there in the garden with Evka bouncing around on the grass in her white bathing suit. So now things were really going to start happening. And suddenly I didn't want it to happen.

'What're you going to do?' I asked.

'I'll go over to the brewery tomorrow. Not much choice.'

'I guess not,' I said. We sat there, silent. 'Jesus Christ,' I said after a while.

Again we sat there in depressed silence. Then Benno reached over for a litre bottle of beer, snapped back the cap, and poured the beer into three glasses on the table.

'Have some,' he said to me and handed one of the glasses to the Englishman.

'Thank you,' said the Englishman. We drank. The beer was warm but tasted good anyway. I drank off about half the glass in one gulp, then set it back on the table. Benno was still drinking. His Adam's apple bobbed rhythmically and he tipped the bottom of the glass up to the sky. We fell silent again, then finally I said, 'Well, I guess I better be going,' and got up.

'Don't go yet,' said Benno.

'I've got to. I've got to do some things and I want to get a good night's sleep.'

'Well, then off you go.'

'You'll be there in the morning?'

'Yes.'

'What time?'

'Stop at Haryk's. I'll meet you over there.'

'What time should I be there?'

'Around eight.'

'All right,' I said. I said good-bye to the Englishman and he sat up straight in his chair again and said good-bye, and I shook hands with Helena and Benno. Then I called out, 'Bye, Evka.' She turned and stepped into the sunshine.

'Bye, Danny. Come back again,' she said. That warmed my heart. I thought yes, definitely, I will come back. In the sunshine, all her lovely curves radiated a dazzling whiteness. I made a V-for-Victory sign and the Englishmen grinned.

'See you later, boys,' I said. I went through the house and down the sandy path out to the gate. This SS business really got on my nerves. But I shook my head to clear it and felt fine again. I knew Evka was in her white bathing suit in the garden behind me and that Irena wasn't far away either in the County Office Building. The whole town was full of girls. And I knew I'd be coming back to the Maneses tomorrow or the day after

or a couple of days anyway. And soon it would be summer and we'd all be going to the swimming pool. Then I remembered Mitzi. Life wasn't so bad after all. Even if there wasn't anything but that – and there wasn't – life would be worth it. To hell with the SS. And maybe up in the mountains this summer or walking together through Prague, maybe Irena would give in, maybe I'd win her over yet. Or maybe I'd meet that unknown girl after all. Maybe life really wasn't so bad. Then I remembered Bertie and suddenly felt I had to have those snapshots. As if my life depended on them. So I could show off in front of Irena. So I could see how I looked with a gun. Snapshots were terrific. All they showed was what you could see in the picture – no words, no nothing, just the picture with nothing to get in the way. Pictures of girls always made a tremendous impression. If a guy shows some girl's picture around, it's kind of like a trophy, even if maybe he never got anywhere with the girl at all. It doesn't make any difference. All he needs to do is let his friends take a look at a couple of pictures and put on a mysterious look. His friends will take care of the rest. They probably know there isn't much to it and how it really is with girls' snapshots, how easy it is to get one, but they'll never let on because they like to show their pictures around, too, and it makes a guy feel good, a bit as if he'd really made out with all those girls whose pictures he had and that's a very nice feeling. And that's just how it was with that picture of me with the submachine gun. Nobody would know from my picture that they'd taken my gun away afterwards. I went through the park to Zizka Square and hurried through the underpass and took a short cut along the railroad embankment to Bertie's place. The side streets weren't so crowded, but when I turned off into the ghetto, I came up against a whole herd of ragged people milling around the synagogue. A truck loaded with blankets stood parked at the curb and four guys were busily unloading the blankets and carrying them into the synagogue. Moutelik's gleaming white apartment house stood at the corner, but their shop was closed. I went into their place and started up the stairs to the first floor. Through the stained-glass windows on the staircase which depicted various scenes of

merchant life, the light streaming in from outside painted bright pictures on the yellow walls. I stopped to look at some of the figures – the half-naked Mercury and a muscular blacksmith – and suddenly thought of Mr Moutelik himself who looked just like a billiard ball with a belly. I met Helena Reimanova on the stairs. She was wearing her tennis dress and the colours from the windows made pretty patterns as they poured over her. I rang the doorbell at the Mouteliks. Their aged maid opened the door and told me that Berty was in the darkroom. I went back downstairs and rang the bell at the back entrance to the shop. After a while Berty's brother Emil came to the door and let me in.

'Hi,' I said. 'Is Berty downstairs?'

'Yeah,' he said and went back to his toys and puppet theatres. I saw he'd been taking apart some kind of a little machine; it was spread out all over the counter. I opened the door to the cellar and turned on the light. I went down the steps and came to a narrow little passageway between piles of crates and sacks and bundles. A lightbulb shed a little light from the ceiling. I headed through the yellow gloom to the back where Berty had fixed up his darkroom. It was kind of a booth made out of beaverboard and covered with black paper. A sign hung on the door: NO ADMITTANCE. I knocked.

'Just a second!' someone called from inside and you could hear a rustle of papers and the clap of boxes being shut. Then Berty opened the door. He was wearing a black smock.

'Oh, hello. You came for your pictures?' he said, and he bared his teeth at me like he did for customers in his father's store.

'Yeah. Are they ready?'

'Sure. Would you like to see them?'

'Well, if you'll show me – sure.'

I went inside. It was a tiny little room with a work table on which the enlarger stood and three basins for developing fluid, the fixing bath, and water. Over the table there was a shelf for bottles and boxes and, over the shelf, three lightbulbs: one white, one red, and one green. A little cupboard stood against the wall on the left. Berty opened the cupboard and took out an

envelope. The light of the low lamp on his work table, angling up from below, threw huge shadows on the opposite wall of the darkroom.

'Here you are,' said Berty. 'Come over here.'

We went over to the table and Berty spread out the snapshots. There were six of them – exactly the number I'd ordered. I looked at them. They were excellent pictures. Grey and sombre. You could tell the weather had been bad that day. There I stood with my submachine gun, my hair slanting down over my forehead a little. The submachine gun itself came out so clear you could almost count the screws and it had a real metallic sheen. I inspected the gun first and then myself – standing there in the foreground in just the right posture. Behind me and a little off to one side, you could see Benda with his submachine gun and fireman's helmet and Franta Kocandrle's back with a rifle slung across it. Over my left shoulder the long pale pins of a couple of bazookas jutted up. The background was a grey blur but I stood out sharp and clear against it, and I looked just like I really do and with the hair in my eyes and that submachine gun in my hands I looked pretty impressive. I don't think I'd ever seen a better snapshot of me – not even the one showing me with my saxophone because a professional photographer had taken that one and he'd practically flattened us with all his spotlights so we all wound up looking as if we'd never seen our instruments before in our lives. This picture was worlds better. It made a strong impression. Berty was an artist. Or at least he had a marvellous camera. Actually, I guess it was the camera that counted. Anyway, the pictures were great.

'Very nice, Berty,' I said.

'They came out pretty good, didn't they? Actually, I had to lighten it a bit at the edges but nobody's going to notice that.'

'I can't even see it myself. No. They're great. How much do I owe you?'

'Well, the charge for postcard-size pictures is two crowns and I'll throw in the developing free so that would make it twelve crowns altogether.'

I took out my wallet and handed him the money. When it came to money, Berty had no friends.

'Well, thanks very much,' I said.

'You're quite welcome,' Berty said, flashing his best salesman's smile. 'If it's nice tomorrow, we might try a few more over at the brewery. Will you be there?'

'Sure. It looks like you may have an awfully busy day tomorrow.'

'I took nearly one hundred and fifty pictures today,' he said with a satisfied smile.

'Really?'

'Yes. Refugees. Some day those pictures may be very valuable.'

'I'm sure they will be,' I said, remembering Mr Machacek's history. Those pictures would be a real goldmine for him! 'You know they're expecting the SS to get here tomorrow?'

'I heard - yes.'

'You going to try to take their pictures?'

'Well, I'll try anyway.'

'You better be awfully careful.'

'Don't worry. I've had experience,' he said in a slightly superior tone.

'I guess that's true,' I said. 'Can I get out by myself or do you keep the upstairs door locked?'

'No. Just slam it after you.'

'Well, so long,' I said.

'Good-bye,' said Berty. I started back through the passageway between the crates. I heard Berty shut himself back up in his darkroom. I went up the stairs, turned off the cellar light, and went through the shop. Emil was in the back, still fiddling around with that machine. It was a mechanical bear brandishing a little bottle with the inscription: DER TEUFEL.

'So long,' I said to him and went out into the hallway. I looked at my watch. It was after four. Four more hours till supper. I decided to loaf around on the street till six. I headed off towards the square. The crowds hadn't thinned out any. I stood at the corner by the loan association and watched them. By now the square looked like a gipsy camp. People, nothing

but people - around the church and everywhere. They were all either squatting or standing around or munching on stuff they pulled out of their bundles and, though I saw them talking among themselves, a hot weary silence seemed to hang over the whole square. The crowd was thickest where the square sloped slightly up towards the castle. The sun beat down on them and the brilliant flags flying from the housetops flapped listlessly and drunkenly above that dusty mass of humanity. The crowd was waiting. Waiting for what would happen next. Waiting for peace and trucks with red crosses and liaison officers to send them back to all those different countries they'd come from. Or, rather, from where the Germans had taken them. I looked at them. Next to me sat an old fellow with a dirty beard, his head cocked back, his eyes like slits. But his mouth was wide open and inside there were stumps of teeth. A boy sat next to him and I couldn't tell whether he had jaundice or was just dirty. Though he looked sick, again I couldn't tell whether it was jaundice or just the fact that he was a gipsy, maybe, or an Italian. Then I looked out over the square and saw the Frenchmen in their shabby uniforms and they all looked weak and sickly though the Dutchmen standing next to them looked strong and healthy. I don't know why, or even if it was true, but anyway that's the way they looked to me. There was a filthy-looking family a few feet away whose kids kept chasing each other around a soup pot and, a bit farther off, a hunched-over, bedraggled-looking couple - the girl wearing a concentration camp dress and about eight months pregnant, the boy with his head bandaged up and his face covered with bruises and scars - and then Russians and Mongolians with that eternal grin on their faces and looking so carefree and relaxed and even happy it made me furious. And then suddenly I saw Irena. She was just coming out through the bronze doorway of the post office. Slowly she made her way through the crowd towards the loan association office. Ah, Irena! She was wearing a simple dress, white with a pattern of flowers. Ah, Irena! It almost hurt to look at her. I leaned back against the corner of the loan association building and stuck my hands in my pockets. It was a completely automatic reaction; I figured it

would make an impression on her. Well, maybe not much of an impression but still it was better than nothing. It was the best I could come up with, and I was pretty sure Irena would like it. I waited until she was close up, then grinned my lopsided grin and said, 'Hi, Irena,' and looking her straight in the eye, I couldn't help thinking how few brains she actually had, but it was all the same to me.

'You're beautiful, Irena,' I said.

'Really? I'm glad you like me,' she said.

'That's not the half of it, Irena.'

'Hmm?'

'I mean, I don't just like you.'

'Why? Did I do something wrong?'

'Oh, you know what I mean.'

'No, I don't.'

'You know all right, Irena,' I said, drawing the words out.

'No. Really.'

'You want me to tell you again?' I said.

She didn't say anything. All she did was look at me with those big eyes of hers. I could see she was enjoying it though.

'I'd be glad to tell you again,' I said.

'Well, go ahead and say it then.'

'I love you, Irena.'

She smiled and slowly, very slowly closed her eyes. As if she was really taking it seriously, as if she was trying to show me that, even though the whole thing was only a joke, it was still a very serious matter, while as for me it didn't seem serious at all, just very pleasant, and if she'd had any idea of who she was really up against she would have said I was a mean fresh kid and walked off.

'I'm terribly in love with you, Irena,' I said, as if I meant it from the bottom of my heart and I uncrossed my legs and straightened up.

The serious look suddenly slipped off her face. 'Danny,' she said, 'you certainly do pick wonderful places to make your confessions.'

'I don't pick them, Irena.'

'Well, who does then?'

'You.'

'Me?'

'Every time.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, sure. Because you never have time except when we meet like this. Not for me anyway.'

'But...'

'I'd rather talk somewhere else, too. But you never want to.'

She took my hand again the way she usually did at about that point and then looked thoughtful, wondering whether she ought to give me any time this time or not.

'Danny...'

'Yes, Irena?'

'Look, Danny. There just wouldn't be any point.'

'That's what you say.'

'I know it.'

'Not for you, maybe. But it would for me.'

'No it wouldn't.'

'It would, too.'

'No, Danny.'

'It would, Irena. I know it would.'

'You just think it would.'

'Think? I know.'

'You're kidding yourself, Danny.'

'I am not.'

'Yes, you are.'

'Well, you can say whatever you want to, Irena. All I know is, it would mean something because I love you.'

Just as I said that, Mr Boucek from the post office passed by. I'd been talking pretty loud. Mr Boucek looked at me and grinned. Irena saw him grinning and blushed.

'Danny, you shouldn't say things like that so loud.'

'Why not?'

'Well, it's just not the kind of thing everybody should know about, that's all.'

'You think I care?'

'Well, maybe you don't. But I do.'

'You mean it bothers you that much?'

'Yes.'

'Just knowing that I'm in love with you?'

'No, not that. Just that you say it so loud.'

'So you don't want me to say it – is that right?'

'You can say it as often as you want just as long as there aren't a lot of people around.'

Aha, I thought to myself, and let out a good long sigh.

'Oh, stop sighing, Danny, and come along if you want to.'

I didn't say a word but just started off beside her. We went down Jirasek Boulevard towards the station.

'You're going home?'

'Yes.'

'What're you going to do at home?'

'Oh, lots of things.'

'Oh, come on. Like what, for instance?'

'Well, I've got to wash out some stockings, and then do some darning ...'

'Oh, that.'

'Why? What'd you think?'

'No, I just wondered,' I said. 'And when you're not busy with that kind of stuff, what do you do?'

'Think about you.'

'Oh, I'll bet. That must really keep you busy.'

'Honest. You can't imagine how often.'

'You're right. I can't.'

'When they led you away from the post office on Saturday, I was awfully scared for you and now I wonder if you even deserved it.'

'Honest, Irena? You mean you were scared they were going to shoot me?'

'Well, naturally. So then I phoned Mr Rimbalnik and he promised he'd see what he could do for you, and then I just waited and prayed for you.'

'Really?'

'Really. Though I'll bet you wouldn't do that, would you, Danny?'

'Sure I would.'

'You don't have to lie.'

'But I would. Really, Irena.'

'Sure, I know. And then Mr Rimbalnik called me back and said they'd already let you go.'

'And you were glad?'

'It made me mad that I'd gone to all that effort, because you're probably not even worth it.'

'Yes I am, Irena.'

'Well, that's what you say. Everybody thinks they're worth a lot. But whether it's true or not, that's something else again.'

'I'm worth it, Irena. And I'm awfully grateful for what you did.'

'Well, you should be,' she said, and suddenly I had an unpleasant feeling that maybe I really was a heel for playing around with her and that maybe she really was a lot better person than I was, worrying about me like that. I just flashed her my Don Juan grin, though, and said, 'And I am grateful – tremendously. For everything!'

Either I was a real devil or else just a bigmouthed fool. But so what, I thought. So I'm a fool. And if that's all you are you might as well make the most of it and be a really big fool. Maybe that's what I am then – the biggest fool in the whole wide world, and as soon as that crossed my mind I felt a big wave of relief, I felt a lot better, and the more I thought of it the more it struck me that it wasn't me who was such a big fool. No, I was as smooth as they come – a real operator – and if anyone was dumb it was Irena.

'Now, don't start exaggerating again,' she said.

'I'm not exaggerating.'

'But please tell me what else you're so tremendously grateful for.'

'Just for the fact that you're who you are, Irena.'

'I don't see why you should be so grateful for that.'

'You're my reason for living,' I said.

'Well, then, your life doesn't make much sense, does it?'

'I'll say it doesn't.'

'Well, thanks very much, Danny.'

'I didn't mean it *that* way.'

'How did you mean it, then?'

'I just mean my life doesn't have any sense because you don't love me.'

'And it would if I did?'

'Sure.'

'You poor thing. So the only thing for you to do is to commit suicide - right?'

I changed my tack and went on in a different tone of voice. 'Irena,' I said, 'you're just making a big joke out of the whole thing, aren't you?'

'No. I'm just telling you how things are, that's all.'

I stopped and let my mouth sag down so I looked really pained. We'd just come to Zizka Park.

'Irena,' I said. 'I can't help it. I'm in love with you. Really.'

Irena stopped, too. Her expression grew serious. She didn't say anything.

I waited a second and then added, 'Tremendously!'

'I know,' she said. There was another pause. Then she said, 'What can we do about it?'

'I don't know.'

She studied me. 'It's an awful problem,' she said and went on studying my face.

'Irena...' I sighed.

'Come. Let's sit down for a minute,' she said and took me by the hand. We went over to a bench in the corner of the park. It was almost completely hidden under the bushes. We sat down and Irena was still holding my hand. I took her other hand in mine and then laid all those hands in her lap and gazed at her. I gazed and wondered if I looked enamoured enough. Her eyes had their usual earnestness plus just a hint of affection. There we sat, holding hands like a couple of idiots, and just the thought of what she must be thinking made me want to burst out laughing. About how tragic our fate was, because how could she possibly make room in her heart for me when she was already in love with somebody else and in the meantime, as she sat there beside me with her breasts rising and falling under that white-flowered dress of hers, all I was really thinking about wasn't whether she loved me but whether she'd ever

go to bed with me. She frowned. Little wrinkles formed on her forehead.

'What can we do, Danny?' she repeated helplessly. 'Tell me, Danny, what can we possibly do?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'But it simply can't go on like this.'

'Why not?'

'Well, because it's senseless.'

'What - my being in love with you?'

'No. Not that, but ... Danny, I ... If only there were something I could do to help you ...'

'That wouldn't be difficult, Irena,' I said lewdly.

'That's what all the boys think,' she said.

'Well, would it be?'

Irena pulled a long, unhappy face. 'Danny, please. Don't ask me to do that. I'd do almost anything to make you happy, but not that.'

'Then how am I supposed to be happy?'

'There're lots of other girls around.'

'But you're the one I'm in love with,' I said, and suddenly felt a peculiar sense of responsibility. Christ, though, she was right! There really were lots of other girls and if I'd spent as much energy on them as I had on Irena there was no question about it - I would have made a lot more progress than I ever had with her. God only knew why I'd sunk so much time and effort into a girl that hard to get. It was God's business to know things like that. As for me, I wasn't about to give up.

'I don't even see those other girls,' I said.

'They're pretty, too, Danny.'

'Not nearly as pretty as you.'

'It just seems that way to you,' said Irena. You could tell she was flattered, though.

'No, it doesn't. Look at yourself. You'll see,' I said and pulled out a pocket mirror. The mirror trick worked.

Irena laughed and said, 'Oh, dear,' and then turned an awfully unhappy face to me, though you could tell by the look in her eyes that she wasn't so sure of herself any more, yet she kept up this act like she was going through a rough inner

struggle, as if she'd love to help me but since she was in love with somebody else how could she possibly – but why not? It would have been easy, the world was full of examples and not just the world – Kostelec, too.

'Irena,' I murmured and took hold of her arm just under the elbow. Her arm felt soft and feminine. She drew back a bit and stiffened. I kissed her. Her lips gradually parted and I could feel the tip of her tongue. That really got me excited. Then she pulled back, stood up quickly, and said, 'Let's go!' turned and hurried off. Swearing to myself, I started off after her. Her dress sparkled in the sunshine and the façade of the County Office Building was practically glowing with the heat of spring. We made it to the entrance in no time at all. Irena stopped and turned to me. I could tell she was waiting for me to say something. Though I was still pretty mad, I smiled.

'Take care of yourself, Danny,' she said. She held out her hand. I squeezed it.

'You too, Irena,' I said. For a while we stood there looking at each other. Then I gave her one last passionate 'I love you very much, Irena.'

She reacted just like I knew she would – gave me a radiant smile, squeezed my hand, let go of my hand, turned, and ran up the steps without looking back. I turned and moseyed back into town. I wasn't mad any more. I felt grateful to Irena. Tremendously grateful to her and to all the others, too. To the whole town, to all the pretty girls the town was full of, and to all the guys too – I loved them all. It didn't even matter that all the girls were so dumb. I loved them all anyway. The houses shone and shimmered in the spring sun, the sky was blue and high above the town, the castle rose with its lilac bushes and curving drive and there were girls everywhere and all these things made life worth living and beautiful. Irena must be home already, I thought to myself, talking to her mother probably but still, in the back of her mind, thinking about me, about how unhappy I must be, since after all she was only a girl and this was a man's world, a world in which women only served to provide pleasure and delight. I went through the underpass to Jirasek Boulevard and headed home. It still didn't

look as if the crowds had thinned out any, but the sun hung lower in the sky and it was already late – five-thirty – and I didn't feel like hanging around outside any more because I didn't want to run into somebody I knew and spoil the great mood I was in, so I went upstairs and Mother opened the door for me.

'Shh! He's asleep,' she said.

'Who?'

'The old sergeant.'

'And the other one?'

'He went out for a walk.'

'Aha,' I said. 'Can I have some supper?'

'Already?'

'Yeah. I'd like to go out afterwards.'

'Now where, Danny?'

'Don't you think you ought to stay home tonight?'

'Don't worry,' I said and opened the door to the bathroom. 'I'll be careful.'

Mother went into the kitchen, looking worried. I turned on the faucet in the warm bathroom and washed my hands. Then, with the towel in my hand, I went into the kitchen. Mother was cooking something on the hot plate.

'What's for supper?'

'Potatoes. The Englishmen finished up all the meat at lunch, you know.'

'That's all right. Potatoes are fine.'

'That'll be enough for you?'

'Sure. Don't worry,' I said, and went back to the bathroom. Suddenly I realized how short I'd been with her, that lately I'd just charged in, said what I needed to, got what I wanted, and taken off again. I realized I was behaving pretty mean towards her. It wouldn't cost me anything to talk to her a little bit, would it? But I didn't feel like it and so usually I only talked to her when I wanted something. Which made me feel ashamed of myself. Because I was fond of her. It was just that now there were so many other things and they were more interesting. Irena and Mitzi and the uprising. I wanted to say something nice to her though, just to make her happy and so she'd know how

struggle, as if she'd love to help me but since she was in love with somebody else how could she possibly – but why not? It would have been easy, the world was full of examples and not just the world – Kostelec, too.

'Irena,' I murmured and took hold of her arm just under the elbow. Her arm felt soft and feminine. She drew back a bit and stiffened. I kissed her. Her lips gradually parted and I could feel the tip of her tongue. That really got me excited. Then she pulled back, stood up quickly, and said, 'Let's go!' turned and hurried off. Swearing to myself, I started off after her. Her dress sparkled in the sunshine and the façade of the County Office Building was practically glowing with the heat of spring. We made it to the entrance in no time at all. Irena stopped and turned to me. I could tell she was waiting for me to say something. Though I was still pretty mad, I smiled.

'Take care of yourself, Danny,' she said. She held out her hand. I squeezed it.

'You too, Irena,' I said. For a while we stood there looking at each other. Then I gave her one last passionate 'I love you very much, Irena.'

She reacted just like I knew she would – gave me a radiant smile, squeezed my hand, let go of my hand, turned, and ran up the steps without looking back. I turned and moseyed back into town. I wasn't mad any more. I felt grateful to Irena. Tremendously grateful to her and to all the others, too. To the whole town, to all the pretty girls the town was full of, and to all the guys too – I loved them all. It didn't even matter that all the girls were so dumb. I loved them all anyway. The houses shone and shimmered in the spring sun, the sky was blue and high above the town, the castle rose with its lilac bushes and curving drive and there were girls everywhere and all these things made life worth living and beautiful. Irena must be home already, I thought to myself, talking to her mother probably but still, in the back of her mind, thinking about me, about how unhappy I must be, since after all she was only a girl and this was a man's world, a world in which women only served to provide pleasure and delight. I went through the underpass to Jirasek Boulevard and headed home. It still didn't

look as if the crowds had thinned out any, but the sun hung lower in the sky and it was already late – five-thirty – and I didn't feel like hanging around outside any more because I didn't want to run into somebody I knew and spoil the great mood I was in, so I went upstairs and Mother opened the door for me.

'Shh! He's asleep,' she said.

'Who?'

'The old sergeant.'

'And the other one?'

'He went out for a walk.'

'Aha,' I said. 'Can I have some supper?'

'Already?'

'Yeah. I'd like to go out afterwards.'

'Now where, Danny?'

'Don't you think you ought to stay home tonight?'

'Don't worry,' I said and opened the door to the bathroom. 'I'll be careful.'

Mother went into the kitchen, looking worried. I turned on the faucet in the warm bathroom and washed my hands. Then, with the towel in my hand, I went into the kitchen. Mother was cooking something on the hot plate.

'What's for supper?'

'Potatoes. The Englishmen finished up all the meat at lunch, you know.'

'That's all right. Potatoes are fine.'

'That'll be enough for you?'

'Sure. Don't worry,' I said, and went back to the bathroom. Suddenly I realized how short I'd been with her, that lately I'd just charged in, said what I needed to, got what I wanted, and taken off again. I realized I was behaving pretty mean towards her. It wouldn't cost me anything to talk to her a little bit, would it? But I didn't feel like it and so usually I only talked to her when I wanted something. Which made me feel ashamed of myself. Because I was fond of her. It was just that now there were so many other things and they were more interesting. Irena and Mitzi and the uprising. I wanted to say something nice to her though, just to make her happy and so she'd know how

fond I was of her. I went back into the kitchen and sat down on a chair. It took me a while to figure out what to say.

'Those refugees are really weird,' I said finally.

'I just hope they haven't brought all sorts of diseases,' she said.

'Aw, no.'

'Well, there were epidemics after the last war too, you know.'

'I know, Spanish influenza. But there won't be anything like that this time.'

'Goodness only knows. You never can tell.'

'No. They've got all sorts of drugs and vaccines and stuff like that now.'

'I don't know. All I can say is God spare us.' She lifted the lid and took a look at the potatoes. 'What did you do all afternoon?'

'I went over to Benno's for a while and then I just watched the crowds for a while and then I went over to Bert's and then I saw Irena and we ... talked for a while ...' I thought about showing Mom the snapshot but decided not to. That submachine gun might frighten her maybe and the war wasn't over yet and why get her all worked up over nothing? Then I remembered I hadn't showed my picture to Irena. How in hell could I have forgotten that! I felt so bad about that I almost felt sick to my stomach. But then I figured that I must have been saving it up for later, like an ace in the hole, and that made me feel better again.

'Oh, you saw Irena? What's she doing these days?'

'Working at the post office.'

'Did she say what she was going to do when ... whether she'll be going to Prague?'

'No. But I guess she will.'

'And what does she want to study?'

'I'm not sure. Medicine, I guess.'

'Medicine?'

'I think that's what she said once.'

Mother was interested in Irena because she knew how I felt about her. Quite a lot of people knew because, for one thing, I

hadn't made much of a secret of it and for another thing, Mrs Moutelikova had told Mrs Frintova and Mrs Frintova had passed it on to Mrs Baumanova and Mrs Baumanova had told my mother that Danny had picked out a very nice girl and Mother acted like she didn't know anything but was glad about it and Mrs Moutelikova told Irena's mother in the shop that I came from a good family and that Irena better hang on to me because I was such a serious and reliable boy and since nobody took this Zdenek seriously because God only knew who he was and where he'd come from. He was just in Kostelec on a labour brigade whereas I was young Smiricky and all the mothers took me seriously, even Irena's. Irena was the only one who didn't.

'What about you, Danny?' Mother asked me. 'Have you settled on anything yet?'

'Not yet.'

'You ought to be giving it some thought, Danny.'

'Well, sure. But it's not all that big a problem, is it?'

'Remember, it's for your whole life.'

'I know. Well, I guess I'll study English then,' I said and smiled. For my whole life? I couldn't believe it. For a couple of years maybe, but it seemed impossible that I'd always go on doing the same thing my whole life - like a job, I mean. Playing the saxophone, yes. I thought I'd probably do that for as long as I lived, and falling in love with girls and telling them how crazy I was about them, but then I figured I probably wasn't going to live all that long anyway, and I couldn't imagine I'd ever fall into one of those ruts older folks slipped into and never climbed out of. Maybe I'd die any one of these days. The idea didn't worry me at all.

'Well, it's up to you,' said Mother. 'Your father and I won't stand in your way.'

She set a plate of potatoes and a salt shaker down in front of me and sat down in a chair on the other side of the table. I started eating and the food tasted good.

'Then you'd be a teacher after you graduated?'

'Yes. Or I'd go on for my Master's.'

'Master of Arts?'

'Yeah.'

'Well – what can you do with a Master's degree?'

'It depends. I could get a job in a library somewhere or maybe as an editor – that kind of thing.'

'You mean you'd like to be a journalist?'

'Sure, that too.'

'I think you'd like that, don't you?'

'I guess so.'

'You've always been good at talking, I mean, and always got the best grades on your essays.'

'Well, we'll see,' I said. 'The main thing is, the university will be open again.'

'That's true,' she said. 'God grant us good health – that's all I ask. If only we can all stay well, we'll manage the rest somehow.'

'Sure,' I said and pushed back my plate. 'Well, time for me to be going.'

'Now, Danny, promise me you'll take good care of yourself,' said Mother, and her eyes looked worried again.

'I will. Don't worry,' I said and kissed her.

She stroked my hair and said, 'And come home, as soon as you can.'

'Sure,' I said and went out into the hall. I looked at myself in the mirror and, in the shadow at least, I looked pretty sharp. I opened the door and stepped into the outside hallway. Mother stood in the doorway.

'Well, good-bye,' I said and started down the stairs.

'Good-bye,' she said. At the landing, I saw her still standing there and blew her a kiss. Like I'd done at noon. Like I'd done every day for as long as I can remember. I decided to go over to Heiser's place through the castle grounds to make better time. I turned left and headed towards the square. By now the sun was shining only on the tops of the houses on the left side of the street; down below it was already twilight. Refugees were still camping in the square and flags dangled down at them from every side. The windows of the City Hall and the post office and the buildings on the left side of the square glinted in the setting sun, which bathed everything on the

square in a lovely yellowish light – the refugee families crouching on the sacks and bundles together with all their children and sometimes dogs, all chewing away on something, and the French soldiers, too, in their dusty blue uniforms. An organ sounded from the church and behind one of the narrow windows in the Gothic bay you could see the glimmer of candles. I went around the church. In front of the door stood a cluster of stock-still people, bareheaded and respectfully silent. The church was packed. They couldn't get in. As I passed the door, I could feel a wave of heat coming out from inside and caught a few words of some song to the Virgin Mary and the weak bleat of the organ. I could just see the choirmaster sitting up there in the loft going off into a trance over that sloppy music which he'd had to put up with for years, and even worse since he gave violin lessons, and now there he sat probably glad to drown out his fear in that music, scared of what could happen before the Russians arrived and scared of what would happen once they did. I'd taken a few music lessons from him once and always had to wait outside until the kids ahead of me were done with theirs. I only played the piano then, so I didn't have it bad, but the kids ahead of me scratched away on their violins and the choirmaster would prance around clapping his hands to his head and sighing or shrieking while those kids calmly sawed away, flattening the sharpening like so many tone-deaf mummies. That was our choirmaster. And up at the altar, the rector was working his way through his *trinitate personae et unitate substantiae* without believing a word of it, whispering it, mumbling it, whining it while the choirmaster went after those flat or deflated tones with his index finger on his organ, and everything about the priest was cheap and shabby – his cassock frayed, the monstrance battered – everything around him down at the heels, including himself in his medieval parish house with its weather-beaten image of St Anthony out in front, and still there was really something beautiful about it all and somewhere in the world, in Rome or New York or maybe even in Prague, there were brand new churches whose priests believed in all this and sang about it every day as though each day they were singing it for the very first time,

with reverent voices, wonderful, rich voices: *vere dignum et justum est aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper, et ubique gratias agere* It sounded beautiful all that *Domine Sancte, Pater omnipotens, Deus: Qui cum ungenito Filio tuo, et Spiritu sancto, unus es Deus, unus es Dominus*. I stopped to listen and I could actually hear the priest's rusty old voice croaking, *Oremus - praeceptis salutaribus moniti, et divina institutione formati, audemus dicere: Pater Noster, qui es in coelis* - and, oh, how I wished that our Father Who art in Heaven was really sitting up there, looking down at me and taking care of me as if I really mattered, but I knew the earth rotated around the sun and that the sun was only an immense disc belonging to the Milky Way and that it was spinning away in space in an orbit all its own and that, according to Eddington, there were about a hundred thousand million stars in any given galaxy and around a hundred thousand million galaxies in the universe and what good did it do me if the priest said *omnia per ipsum facta sunt, et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est* if I simply couldn't believe it? I looked away from the church and up at the castle, at its three rows of glittering windows, and I started past the parish house up the steep hill. Quickly and without looking back, I climbed the lilac-scented path up past the crumbling castle outer wall, and I didn't stop till I got all the way up to the circular drive in front of the castle. From there the square below looked flat and crawling with tiny figures headed every which way under the copper disc of the setting sun. There was something about that seductively blossoming May evening that made me feel so strange that I rushed over to the courtyard to leave that view behind. It was dark and damp in the first courtyard. As I passed the well, the door of the steward's apartment opened and out came Ema, the steward's daughter.

'Hello,' I said and waited for her. Her big, potato-nosed face broke into a grin as she came towards me in her pink dress.

'Hello,' she said.

'How're you doing?'

'Fine, thanks. And you?'

'Not bad. Listen, what're all your noble folks up to these days?'

'They're just getting ready to leave. You want to take a look?'

'Sure. You mean they haven't been jailed yet?'

'No. Why should they be put in jail?'

'Well, von Schaumburg-Lippe, for instance.' Actually I didn't really know either why they ought to be put in jail. 'What's the Queen of Württemberg doing?'

'She's here, too. Come on, I'll show you.'

'Oh, I know what she looks like. You showed her to me before remember?'

'That's right.'

'Still - so what? Another look can't do me any harm.'

Ema grinned. 'It'll be some day when Danny Smiricky doesn't have time for a look at things.'

'Well, you know me,' I said.

'Come on then,' said Ema. You could see her corset or girdle or whatever it was under that pink dress of hers. She had mammoth hips topped by an unusually short torso - a real steward's daughter type from the outside, anyway, she looked custom-made for living in a castle tower. We passed through the second courtyard and stopped in front of the stables. Three open carriages stood there, the horses harnessed and ready to go. A cluster of castle kids had gathered to stare. The count was already seated in the first carriage - an old guy, over ninety, with a neck like a giraffe and a head that wouldn't stop shaking. Next to him, her knees covered by a thick green blanket, sat the countess. They stared dully in front of them. Across from them sat two young girls as ugly as they come.

'Who's up in the first carriage with the count?' I asked.

'Countess Hilda and Countess Elis,' Ema said.

I looked at them, both redheads, and then over at the second carriage where a butler in ordinary clothes was just helping a fat, grey-haired old lady wearing a black shawl up and in.

'The one that's getting in now is the Marquise von Stroheim, one of the count's cousins,' Ema said.

The old lady sat down and as she did the carriage rocked slightly. Kozak, the castle gamekeeper, leaned out of a window over the stables and in his vest and with his sleeves rolled up settled down to watch the proceedings. His wife was at the next window and the two of them looked down without a trace of regret or respect. A young man with a little beard sprang up into the carriage, spread out and tucked in a blanket around the marquise.

'That's Count Hohenstein, her nephew. He's engaged to the queen.'

'Oh?' I said. He looked pale and ordinary and completely insignificant.

'I wonder what she sees in him, anyway,' I said.

'He's a nobleman. A blue blood.'

'Hmmm,' I said. Well, that kind of thing probably meant a lot to those people. And maybe there really was something appealing about locking yourself up in your own private world like that and gradually becoming extinct. Which reminded me that I had blue blood in my veins, too, and why my ancestors couldn't have taken better care of it was beyond me. It made me mad. So here I was now, just another ordinary mortal on my way to meet Mitzi down below this castle.

'The one sitting across from her is the marquis, her husband, and next to him is the Princess von Blumenfeld. She's an old maid,' Ema said.

The marquis was fat and redfaced and the princess looked pale and drawn. They were all bundled up under blankets and steamer rugs. Mr Kozak spat from his window and lit his pipe. The marquis called out in German to somebody in the house. Princess Renata came out of the door followed by her two little kids in loden coats. She looked German and bony and wore a transparent raincoat over her dirndl. The old butler lifted the kids into the carriage and then helped the princess up.

'What's keeping the queen?' I wondered.

'She's probably still busy giving instructions to the housekeeper. She's got more energy than all the rest of them put together.'

'Isn't the housekeeper going with them?'

'Yes. But the staff won't be leaving till tomorrow morning.'

Everybody was already seated in the carriages. They were all just waiting for the queen. The coachman of the third carriage was letting a harness strap out a notch. The ramparts cast their jagged shadow across the courtyard and the last sliver of the crimson sun shone from the edge of the horizon straight up to the door. I kept my eye on the door and just as the shadow reached the threshold, the Queen of Württemberg appeared, all made up and wearing a light brown suit, as beautiful as Greta Garbo, her hair shining in the copper glow, and said something in German to the housekeeper bowing behind her and then, with a few elegant womanly strides, went over to the carriage, jumped in, and called out in a firm, deep voice, 'Los!' The coachman cracked his whip, the first carriage rolled off, the second right behind it, and then the third. There was a creak of wheels and out they went through the gate and down the drive and in the last carriage I could see the copper-coloured hair of the queen who didn't turn to look back, and then there was only her glow as she passed through the gate and she was gone. She impressed me, that Queen of Württemberg, and I felt sorry for her. But Ema was standing beside me.

'Well, there they go,' she said, and giggled. Mr Kozak left his window and the castle kids rushed out through the gate after the carriages.

'Yes. Well, I've got to be going, too. Thanks,' I said, and shook Ema's hand.

'You're welcome.'

'So long,' I said, and walked quickly out through the gate and down the drive. I turned left, past the ball courts, jumped over a ditch, and plunged into the woods. It was almost dark under the trees, but as I went on light sifted through from the far side. I walked across the soft pine needles. At the rim of the woods there was a large grassy clearing. I sat down and looked at the Heisers's mansion and the factory buildings below. The sun still lit up parts of the town down in the valley; most of it was already in shadow though. In the shadow of Castle Hill the Heisers's place was turning blue. The long grey factory sheds

behind it were fading out in the evening haze. From a long way off, coming in from the east, I could hear a faint rumbling and the muffled bark of gunfire. The stars in the eastern sky glistened as if they were wet. In the west, the horizon glowed pink. Again I heard faint but distinct bursts of machine-gun fire. You couldn't see anything, though, just a piece of the silent town below and the Heisers's handsome mansion.

I lay down on my back in the grass and looked up at the moist little stars that had started to twinkle shyly in the darkening sky. Right over me and a bit off to the east, the beautiful constellation of Orion's Belt stretched splendidly out across the heavens, all laid out in the same great pattern as always. To the left I saw a feeble reddish little star – the red giant Betelgeuse – and it seemed very odd that there was that ball bigger than our entire solar system and thinner than air, shining up there calmly and quietly in the remoteness of space, like a drop of raspberry juice on a patch of green moss, while down here below me was Kostelec and revolution and every once in a while the sound of gunfire rolling in from Germany. The sky and its little stars were calm and still, but down in the town there was a stifled rustle and a peculiar kind of springtime tension, like just before a thunderstorm. I could feel the cool blades of grass under my head and the hard ground under my back. I closed my eyes and started thinking about life and how I'd live it and thought of Mitzi, but only as an overture or transition into the new kind of life I was going to start in Prague, and I thought about how I'd tell her, Mitzi, I'm crazy about you, but then it struck me I'd used that line on every girl I'd ever met and I wondered whether I'd use it again on the girl I was going to meet in Prague and knew I would because it was the only one I knew and I'd used it on everybody and it had usually worked, though it hadn't helped much with Irena, because girls are basically all the same and I had the feeling I was far superior to them all, that I was just playing around with them, secretly laughing at them, and I wondered whether I'd feel the same with that girl I was going to meet in Prague and I was sure I would because she'd be just another girl no matter how pretty and smart and amoral she was because I just

couldn't believe that besides me and boys and girls, there could be a fourth sort of people on earth or some kind of female counterpart of me. I mean, who'd come anywhere close to being a match for me. The whole idea struck me as being ridiculous, absurd. And then suddenly my thoughts got all tangled up and I was somewhere else and everything shifted and turned crazy and fast and I drifted off far, far away and suddenly I was cold and the sky above me was black and littered with cold white stars and I realized I'd fallen asleep so I sat up and I could see cracks of light shining out through the badly blacked-out windows of the houses on the hill and the dome of heaven was mirrored in the swimming pool down on Jerusalem Street and you could hear that springtime buzz coming up from the town and then I realized Mitzi had stood me up so I got up, even though I was half frozen, and said to myself, Mitzi, you bitch – so you didn't even bother to show up, did you? Well, that sure takes care of that, but it really didn't bother me now and I headed down through the grass towards the Heisers's. I looked in through the window of the salon which wasn't blacked out and saw Mrs Heiserova. She walked towards the window looked out into the dark, then turned and said something to somebody inside. You couldn't hear a word, you could just see her mouth moving. Mitzi wasn't in the room. The light from the window sort of melted away in the darkness. I turned and started back towards town. She'd given me the brush-off and now she was probably sitting up in her little room laughing at me. A machine gun was chattering away again in Germany. It was a warm night, more like summer than spring. Anyway, it served me right. Why couldn't I be faithful to Irena? Why did I have to turn to look at every skirt that went by, why didn't other girls leave me cold when I was so in love with Irena? Maybe that was asking too much of me. I wondered whether the sight of another girl would ever leave me cold and decided it wouldn't, ever. Or maybe when I finally met that girl in Prague. But I knew that even then they probably wouldn't. Anyway, that wasn't the point. The point wasn't to be blind to other girls. What point would there be to that? The trick was, not to be blind, but to

stick to one girl. That was what counted in life and maybe that was the way it should be. To stick to one girl, even though you liked them all, and be happy with her and have tender loving feelings for her and stay with her for as long as you lived. With Irena. Or that girl I was going to meet in Prague. I was in love with her already, just because she was alive, because she must be out there somewhere, just waiting for me, maybe. There must be girls somewhere who know how to love just one man, body and soul and always, and how to be faithful to him too.

I turned down the tree-lined street towards the workers' district and there, among the shadows, I saw the flash of a girl's light dress that was cut in half at the waist by a dark-sleeved arm, and as the couple strode quickly down the path towards the woods the starlight lit up a blonde head I recognized right away. It was Dagmar Dreslerova, but the guy with his arm around her waist wasn't Kocandrlle. I stepped back into the shadows and watched. They cut across the meadow towards the clearing in the woods where I'd dozed off just a few minutes before. The guy boosted her along up the slope and then all of a sudden they stopped and threw their arms around each other. His cap fell off and his red crewcut flared up in the starlight. I stared. He was wearing what looked like a wind-breaker. Then they pulled apart and Dagmar raced on up towards the clearing, the guy right behind her. He had narrow hips. Jesus! Of course. It was Siddell, my Englishman, the one who said he'd just gone out for a walk. Hell, he sure didn't lose any time. Less than half a day and more than half-way there already. The last thing I saw was the two of them tumbling down on to the grass and Dagmar's white knees gleaming in the starlight.

I turned and went on down the road through the workers' district. So that was girls for you. Well, so be it. Under the shadows of the blossoming trees small bunches of people, many of them in shirtsleeves, were standing listening in silence to the distant sound of the guns. From the other end of the workers' district you could hear a woman giggling and a man's laugh booming out through the dark. Some beginner was practising

on a bugle in one of the old apartment houses. I walked along next to the factory wall. Lewith's cafeteria on the other side was still lit up and through the barred windows I saw somebody's green-uniformed back. The doors downstairs were open and in the pale light of a single bulb stood a cluster of guys wearing caps, talking to some Russian refugees. I kept on going. The main smokestack of the power station loomed up in the sky. Betelgeuse stood balanced and glowing right on the tip of the lightning rod. Gunfire rang out again from the east. Mr Pitterman was standing in a doorway with Rosta. They were both gazing up at the sky and listening.

'Good evening,' I said.

'Good evening,' said Mr Pitterman.

'Hi,' said Rosta. 'Where're you off to?'

I stepped up into the doorway. 'Hear that?' I said.

'Yes. They're getting pretty close,' said Mr Pitterman.

'I'll say,' I said.

'They'll be here tomorrow. Dad's already got his red flag all fixed up,' Rosta said.

'Well, You know how it is,' said Mr Pitterman, embarrassed. We were standing in the doorway to Mr Pitterman's house. Besides that place, he owned five others on Jirasek Boulevard, plus a store and an electric mangle.

'Yeah. They may come in pretty handy,' I said.

'You have one, too?'

'What?'

'A red flag.'

'No. But we don't own our own house either.'

'Rosta thinks it's all just a joke, but it isn't,' said Mr Pitterman.

'They'll take everything away anyway, Dad. Because you're a bourgeois and a capitalist,' said Rosta.

'You keep quiet! You'd do well to learn where to just keep your mouth shut, Rostislav!'

'You going over to the brewery tomorrow?' I asked.

'Sure. Listen...' Rosta grabbed my arm and pulled me back into the hallway. 'I wrote one, too.'

'Huh? One what?'

'Well, what ... what we were talking about over at the brewery.'

'Oh, your will,' I said.

Rosta looked at me. 'You think maybe I shouldn't have?'

'Well, sure. Why not? You can't lose anything by it,' I said.

'Look, I know Dagmar's a tramp,' said Rosta. 'But still ...'

'If you know that, Rosta,' I said, 'you know a lot.'

'Well, sure I do,' he said. 'Still, she's a good kid and I'll bet if anything ever happened to me, she'd feel pretty bad about it, wouldn't she?'

'She sure would,' I said.

'Aw, hell, I don't know. She goes around telling me I'm nuts and that there're more important things to worry about now, but that's where I think she's wrong. It's the only thing - I mean, what's between her and me - it's the only thing that does count. Not for her maybe but it sure is for me.'

'Well then, it's a good thing you wrote it,' I said. 'Maybe you'll need it.'

'You think so?'

'I was just up at the castle. From up there Germany's nothing but fireworks.'

'Really?'

'That's right,' I said and then added, 'so maybe Dagmar'll be sorry after all.'

'I'll say she will,' said Rosta.

'Well, I've got to go. Good night.'

'See you,' said Rosta.

'So long,' I said and walked back out to the boulevard which was empty now. I got home, unlocked the outside door, and went upstairs. Everybody was already sound asleep. The door to my room was closed. Mother's voice came from the bedroom.

'Danny?'

'Yes,' I whispered.

'That Englishman hasn't come back yet.'

'I know,' I said. 'He won't be back for a while.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, I saw him,' I said. 'He ... he's out having a good time, that's all.'

'Gracious me,' said Mother. 'Already? And nothing happened to you? You're all right, Danny?'

'Sure,' I said.

'I made up your bed on the kitchen couch.'

'Fine. Good night.'

'Good night.'

I went into the kitchen and slowly undressed. Then I lay down on the couch and pulled up the blanket. The couch stood by the wall under the window and through it you got a wonderful view of the sky. I looked up and saw Betelgeuse glowing red above me again. It was following me. I started mulling things over again - Irena and then Dagmar and then tried to think about the revolution and shooting, but couldn't keep my mind on it and looked out the window at Betelgeuse which was almost directly above me and started thinking about that girl I was going to meet in Prague but somehow I couldn't quite picture her but that didn't stop me from thinking about her anyway and I was sure she existed, she had to, and I could feel she was there, coming towards me, like out of the sky and wearing that red Betelgeuse around her neck on a little silver chain, and exactly what colour her eyes were I couldn't say but she was wonderful and I saw her but didn't know a thing about her except that she'd probably turn out to be a bitch, too, and then I fell asleep, sound asleep, a sleep without dreams.