

Saturday, May 5, 1945

I woke up at about half past eight. Outside the sun was shining and it was hot in the room. I lay in bed. I had a slight headache and a bad taste in my mouth. I lay there and looked up at Rosta's portrait of me that hung on the wall by my bed. I looked very distinguished. He'd given me a huge head and narrow shoulders so I looked scholarly. And what was interesting about the picture was the contrast between that intellectual-looking head and the grimy collar of my shirt which I wore without a tie. I remember when he did it. It was once right after I'd got home from work at Messerschmidt. I was wearing a cotton shirt that was spattered all over with ferroflux oil. I looked at the painting and thought to myself, that's a nice portrait, and if I die, at least I'll leave one good thing behind. Otherwise it was a lousy morning. I closed my eyes but I wasn't tired enough to sleep any more, or even doze.

It was time to get up. So finally I sprang out of bed. If you've got to do it sometimes it's best to do it fast. I went to the window and looked out. Nothing. The town looked just the same as yesterday. No sign of the revolution. Who could tell if anything was going to happen? I wasn't so sure anything would. Things like that do happen but that it would actually take place right here in our own town seemed awfully unlikely to me. Revolution. I couldn't imagine anybody shooting. The druggist, or Mr Krocan who owned the factory? Crazy. Prema possibly. Prema had a killer's face and he had some weapons in his warehouse, that much I knew. And maybe Perlik, too. Otherwise the whole thing sounded pretty absurd. Completely absurd. I turned away from the window and switched on the radio. I waited a while and it irritated me. Waiting for the radio to warm up always irritated me. Some kind of Prussian march came booming out. So nothing had happened yet. Naturally. Nothing would. The Russians would come from the

east and the Americans from the west and they'd liberate us in a moment of glory, and then the glorious moment would be over. Or maybe it would more likely just get off to a start with all the city fathers puffing around pinning medals on each other's chest. What a farce! I went to the bathroom and turned on the water. I washed and rubbed myself briskly with a Turkish towel until my skin was nearly red. A terrific feeling. I went back to the room, opened the window, and turned back the covers. Cool air rushed in through the open window. The sun, already up, shone bright and new. I went to the kitchen and put on the tea kettle, got some rolls from the pantry and started buttering them. First one, then another - like on an assembly line. Then I looked out the window and almost fell over. Across the street, a Czech flag was flying from architect Bauman's house.

It gave me a weird sensation. Like when I was fourteen years old and we were celebrating our Independence Day, the 28th of October. That flag hadn't flown for six years and now all of a sudden, there it was - flying again. And it didn't seem new or strange at all. It was a beautiful flag, at least nine feet wide, freshly laundered, and the red and white colours were strong and clear. I thought of the radio, ran back to my room, turned it on and waited. Meantime I noticed that flags were flying in front of the hospital and official buildings, too. Somebody was just hanging one out at Vasata's house. Yes. It was starting to happen now. As though everything was already won. But the Germans were still here. The radio came on. Music. I listened, but it wasn't German music. Some march by Kmoch. I should have known they wouldn't have come up with anything better than some dumb oompah Kmoch. What a revolution! I listened disgustedly to the tinny music. It spoiled my good mood. Then I went back into the kitchen, ate breakfast and decided that, whatever happened, I was going into this in style. I took my dark brown jacket out of the closet, put on a white shirt and light pants. Then I put on my boldly patterned bluish-yellow silk necktie, tied a neat little knot, and buttoned the jacket. I took my perforated brown shoes, brushed them, and went to take a look at myself in the mirror. I was looking pretty sharp.



That made me feel good. I put on a light coloured hat, took one more look in the mirror, and left the apartment. When I got to the second floor and was passing the door of the Strnads's apartment, Mrs Strnadova suddenly appeared in the doorway.

'Danny! Danny!' she cried hysterically. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

'Good morning, Mrs Strnadova,' I said, took off my hat and gave her a big smile.

'The day has come, Danny! At long last we're free again!'

'Well, not quite yet!' I said in the same tone, as if I was saying, 'That's right! Free at last! Meanwhile I kept a polite smile fixed on my face.'

'Isn't it just wonderful? I'm so happy! So happy!' she yelled without even bothering to listen to what I was saying.

'Wonderful. Yes. Wonderful.'

'Oh, my word, I'm so happy I hardly know what I'm doing - aren't you?'

'Oh, absolutely.'

'It'll be a joy to live again. And as for those butchers - they ought to shoot them all!'

'They certainly should.'

'Yes. And not only them but everybody who collaborated with them, too. Mercy would be wasted on them.'

'Absolutely,' I said. I knew why the old girl was talking so wildly. Her neighbour's husband was a collaborator, and she couldn't stand her neighbour. So naturally she was all in favour of shooting.

'They all ought to be locked up. And anybody with a life on his conscience - no mercy for them. The firing squad's all they deserve!'

'Oh there'll be shooting all right,' I said.

'Oh yes,' she said avidly. 'You know, personally, I wouldn't hurt a fly, but when it comes to those monsters I don't have an ounce of pity.'

'Who does?' I said.

'You'd be surprised. There are some people around here who'd just like to forgive and forget. But I'll never forget. Not me!'

'How could you?' I said.

'Because if we forget now, then we'll have the Germans back again in twenty years. We've suffered long enough under them. It mustn't happen again.'

'That's for sure,' I said.

'What would our children say? They'd never let us forget how foolish we'd been, how completely irresponsible and how we hadn't learned our lesson.'

'Right,' I said. 'Excuse me, Mrs Strnadova, but I've got an important appointment and I'll have to be going.'

The old lady beamed at me.

'Aha, I understand,' she said. 'Well, I won't keep you, Danny, un along. And remember me to Miss Irena. She'll be so happy, too.'

'Yes, thank you. Good-bye,' I said sweetly, and trotted down the stairs. The old girl was omniscient. She snooped out everything. I would have liked to have known where she found out that I was crazy about Irena. Actually, though, it was simple. Irena was Berty Moutelik's cousin, and Berty Moutelik couldn't keep anything to himself. And Miss Cihak, the schoolteacher, was Berty Moutelik's aunt. And Miss Cihak was a friend of Miss Strnad. And the little Strnad girl didn't go around with anybody except her mother. That was how she'd found out. It was simple. I didn't care. I rushed out to the street.

There were lots of people milling around. Flags were flying from most of the houses by now, shining in the sunshine. Crowds of laughing people swarmed through the streets.

Everybody was grinning. I put on a scornful expression. All that gay laughter made me sick. A stupid happiness. One should sneer. Sneer about the Germans and the German Reich. I stuck

one hand in my pocket and ambled along with the mob. Old men and young thronged alongside me and everybody wore something in his buttonhole. Mr Petrбок, all dressed up in his band-leader's uniform, rushed out of his house and carried off towards the square. He was wearing white gloves and carrying a baton with a gold ball on the end. The idiot. This poor sap was the one who always made trouble about our permit to play and said that since jazz wasn't our national music it



should be prohibited. And now he thought he would welcome the Russians with his idiotic tin-can band. Well, we'd welcome them too. And we wouldn't make any concessions, either. Petrбок could bet his last cent on that. We'll welcome them with some real fine Dixieland, with Venca's throaty, hoarse trombone and Benno's sobbing trumpet. We'll welcome them. And not Mr Petrбок. And we'll play for dances down at the spa. And we'll jitterbug and have a party and hang up paper lanterns around the pool. I sauntered along and looked around. The sun was shining and the air was fresh and soft as May. Vladyka, the collaborator who worked at Dad's bank, was hunched up in front of the bank, all jittery. He was pale as a ghost and in his buttonhole he wore a big rosette made out of linden leaves and all sorts of junk as if he'd got himself dressed for inspection. He was shaking all over, so that even the rosette trembled. He looked around him in terror but nobody paid any attention to him. I made a face and went past him. I saw Pedro Gershwin at the corner by Novotny's. I headed towards him.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hi,' he said, and touched two fingers to the rim of his hat. He was leaning up against the anti-tank barrier that stood there and his legs were crossed with elaborate casualness.

'How're things?' I said.

'I'm just watching the crowds,' he said.

'Aren't you going on downtown?'

'No. I'm waiting for Haryk.'

'Where is he?'

'He went for some paint.'

'What for?'

'We're going to do some painting.'

'Huh?'

'Painting.'

'What are you going to paint?'

'We're going over the German signs.'

'Oh, I see. Then I'll stick around, too. Anybody else coming?'

'Benno and Lexa went for a ladder.'

'They're coming here?'

'Yeah.'

We were silent.

Pedro was cool as a cucumber and terse. He always was. He didn't have much between the ears, but what little he did have he doled out so carefully that he made out better than lots of kids who knew ten times as much.

'What do you think? You think there's going to be any shooting here?' I said.

'I'm afraid so.'

'You don't think maybe they ought to hold off for a while?'

'Sure.'

'I think so, too. Guys are rushing into this like mad without even waiting till they've got enough guns and...'

'Let 'em, if they want to push up daisies for the communists.'

'You think that's what's going to happen?'

'Why, sure.'

'That the communists are going to take over?'

'No doubt about it.'

'Well, I don't know. That'd be bad, all right. Yeah, but Benes...'

'There's nothing he can do about it.'

I didn't say anything for a while. Then I said, 'Well, what're you going to do?'

'Me?'

'Yeah. If the commies take over.'

'Listen, pal - but this is strictly between you and me...'

'Sure.'

Pedro looked at me quizzically.

'As soon as the highways are clear,' he said, 'I'm going to hop on my motorcycle and get the hell out of here.'

'Where to?'

'To the Americans, where else?'

'Yeah, sure,' I said. 'You're right. That'd be the best thing to do.'

'Greetings, gents,' somebody said behind us. It was Haryk. He was wearing a white druggist's smock and in one hand he held a can of paint, in the other a paint brush, and he was grinning.



'Hi,' I said. 'Well, congratulations and welcome to freedom. Same to you, same to you,' said Haryk.

'Man, did you see old Petrbo?' said Haryk.

'Yeah. With gloves and a big baton.'

'He's nuts. But just wait till this afternoon when he marches his brass band out to the customs house.'

'I hope he does. At least he could get mixed up in something out there and that would be the end of him,' I said.

'Right,' said Haryk. 'Only then we'd have to play for all the funerals in town instead of him.'

Pedro laughed.

'Yeah. Here everybody's celebrating victory and freedom and they forget the front hasn't got here yet.'

'You think it'll come this way?' said Haryk.

'Well, what do you think? The Germans are just going to evaporate?'

'Maybe the Russians'll catch up with 'em before they get here.'

'I wouldn't bet on it.'

'Why?'

'Because the Germans are running their asses off trying to get back to the Americans.'

'Maybe you're right,' said Haryk. Silently, we watched the crowds. Lexa and Benno emerged from the cinema Lido arcade. They were carrying a ladder. Lexa was dressed in his ordinary clothes but Benno was wearing a white smock and a hat made out of a newspaper. They came over to us.

'It's about time,' said Haryk.

'Old man Matejka didn't want to lend us the ladder. He was scared we'd break it.'

'Let's go. Let's do something,' said Benno. I looked at him. He didn't look scared. I went over to him.

'How're you doing?'

'Huh?'

'How'd you sleep?'

'Swell,' he said. 'You?'

'Me, too. Everything's running real smooth, huh?'

'Just wait. Dad's down at City Hall now.'

'Yeah,' said Lexa. 'So's old man Cemelik. From what I heard, they're going to proclaim an independent state of Kostelec at noon and elect Sabata president and declare war against Germany.'

'Or declare neutrality, maybe?' said Haryk.

'That's possible, too.'

'What the hell, let's get going,' said Benno.

'Let's go,' said Haryk.

'Where'll we go first?' I asked.

'First let's go over to our store,' said Benno. We started off. People looked after us and some of them were laughing.

'That's the spirit, boys,' some old-timer said. 'Smear it all up.'

'You bet. We're going to wipe it all out,' said Haryk.

'The whole past,' said Pedro.

'And all that suffering,' said Haryk.

The old guy looked at us and you could tell he didn't know what to think. But we kept right on going. The people kept streaming along, up one side of the street towards the square and back down on the other side. Flags were flying everywhere. Mr Kodet was just sticking a bust of Benes in his shop window and his wife was fixing up the backdrop, draping the Czechoslovak flag into neat folds and then stepping back to see how it looked. Next door, the Shuberts had six flags in their store window. One for each of the Allies. They even had a Chinese flag. We kept on going. Mr Moutelik was standing out in front of the City of London department store, passing out tricolours. A big crowd was elbowing around him, mostly boys, and begging him, 'Me too, Mr Moutelik, me too!' Mr Moutelik was cutting out the tricolours and giving them away. Boy, was he bighearted! Man, was he a big patriot! He also owned the biggest store in Kostelec. He was absolutely bald and his head shone in the sunshine. When we reached him, he'd just finished cutting out the last piece. He threw up his hands and yelled, 'That's all there is. Don't push! You can see for yourselves I don't have any more.'

Haryk stopped.

'Want us to paint you, Mr Moutelik?'



'How's that, Haryk?'

'Do you want us to paint your sign for you?'

'Oh, that's it. Well, come on, boys,' said Mr Moutelik. 'Come on. I'll be much obliged to you.'

Lexa and Benno propped the ladder up in front of the door and Haryk slowly made his way up.

'Careful,' said Mr Moutelik. 'Don't spill any paint on the Czech lettering now.'

'Don't worry,' said Haryk and he expertly began to paint over the German inscription.

'Careful,' said Mr Moutelik, looking up at him. Haryk calmly went on painting. But all of a sudden, a thin trickle of black paint dribbled off the brush and dripped down the signboard over the Czech letters.

'Watch out!' shrieked Mr Moutelik. 'Wipe it off, Haryk!'

'I don't have anything to wipe it off with,' said Haryk.

'Wait a second,' called Mr Moutelik. 'Rosie! Hurry! Bring a rag!'

'Yes, sir,' said Rosie, looked up in amazement, then disappeared into the store. Haryk sat there on the ladder and didn't do a thing. We waited. Rosie didn't come. Haryk shifted the brush to his other hand and tried to rub off the paint with his hand. But he only made it worse.

'Careful! No! Don't do that!' cried Mr Moutelik. 'He comes Rosie! Hurry up!'

Rosie rushed back with a rag and handed it up to Haryk. Haryk took the rag and rubbed. The Czech inscription and Moutelik's huge signature were veiled in a grey film. Moutelik looked grieved.

'Wait a minute, Harry, old boy,' he said.

'It won't come off,' said Haryk.

'Leave it be.'

But Haryk kept on smearing the paint over the sign.

'Leave it!' Mr Moutelik said heroically. 'Anyway, I've got to have a new signboard painted. This is just temporary.'

'That's right,' I said. 'This is just a kind of symbol, right?'

'Exactly, Danny,' said Mr Moutelik. 'A symbol of the evil past.'

Haryk slid down off the ladder and Benno and Lexa brought it down on to their shoulders.

'There we are,' said Haryk. 'Sorry, Mr Moutelik...'

Mr Moutelik waved his hand.

'Ah, don't give it a thought. What do I care? So what? At a time like this! Thanks, boys. Thank you.'

'You're quite welcome,' said Haryk. We all said good-bye to him and then shoved off from the store. Haryk hurried on ahead. When we were out of earshot, Haryk turned to us.

'Man, I sure made a mess of that, didn't I?'

'You're telling me,' said Lexa.

'Wait and see, he'll send you a bill for his new sign yet,' said Benno.

'I wouldn't put it past him,' said Haryk.

We strolled on towards the square. I walked with Pedro. Benno and Lexa were in front of us, carrying the ladder. The square looked like an anthill. People were walking back and forth in their Sunday best, pretending to be very jolly. Some were. But lots of them weren't. At least not all that jolly. It wasn't over yet. Nothing was certain yet and God only knew how it was going to turn out. The Russians were heading this way from the east. Still, everybody was acting as if they were jolly. An incredibly long flag was already hanging from one church steeple like a red and white noodle. Another was just being hung from another steeple. They were shoving it out through a window in the belfry like an anchor rope. It was a yellow and white flag. Some guy next to me started to cheer.

'Long live the Czechoslovak Republic! Long live President Benes!'

He looked drunk. When the yellow and white flag flapped out, he stopped and stared.

'What's that?' he said.

I leaned over and said, 'It's the Pope's flag.'

'That?' he said, turning towards me. 'So that's the Pope's flag, is it?'

'Yes.'

Then the guy began to cheer again. 'Long live the Pope!'



Long live Jesus Christ! Long live the Czechoslovak Republic! 'Now then, everybody,' said Petracek. 'Let's help him off on

We made our way across the square. All of a sudden his long way down! Get ready!' The crowd was with him. From the crowd came a long, though it sounded pretty timid for a real cheer. I looked up and drawn-out 'Get setttt...' The man up there holding the bust saw a huge flag majestically fluttering from the turret of the castle. The Czech flag. The sun was shining on it and the cupola caught on too, and after lifting up the bust with both hands as high over the railing as he could, he waited. Petracek sprang off of the castle was bright red; the hill on which the castle stood to one side. Then somebody shouted and the whole crowd joined was bright with lilacs in bloom. It was like a picture on in with a thunderous 'Go!' and that same second, the man in the candy box. An extremely patriotic picture. A picture to tower let the bust drop. It fell through the crisp air and member! It would certainly inspire Mr Leitner to paint glittered in the sunshine. There was absolute silence. The bust working in a bunch of people in Sokol dress and the little girl sailed down and smashed on the pavement like a flower pot. It in old-fashioned peasant costumes, and over in one corner, Alo wasn't bronze at all, just some cheap ersatz material. The Jirasek. No. Alois Jirasek in one corner and Bozena Nemcova people broke into cheers. I could still recognize the tip of in the other. President Masaryk in the upper left hand corner Hitler's nose with the little moustache underneath, and then President Benes in the right and at the bottom Alois Jirasek and even that was gone as the crowd rushed forward and trampled Bozena Nemcova. And then he'd display it in his shop with the pieces to dust. dow. And Mr Machacek would use it for the frontispiece of *History of the Kostelec Revolution*. Yes. That's how it would be. Everything'd be worked in, everything would be preserved snapping in the sunshine. I suddenly thought of the Queen of Württemberg as I elbowed my way through the crowd. What In word and picture. The revolution was in good hands. It suited do you suppose the Queen of Württemberg was doing? She was in our town anyway. All of a sudden the crowd behind was probably scared. We made our way over to the other side started laughing. I looked around. People were shoving at already won. I didn't find it fun any more. We stopped in front shouting, 'Watch out!' of Manes's shop. Benno set up the ladder and started to climb. He looked like a big blown-up white balloon. People were still

'What's going on?' asked Haryk.

Somebody up front turned around and called, 'Watch out! They're going to throw Hitler out!'

I got the idea. We were standing in front of City Hall on the paved square where they used to have band concerts and speeches. I looked up. The building's main tower was very high and the top looked awfully small when you looked up at it from down below. Somebody was leaning out of the little cupola and holding something in his hands. He displayed it to the crowd below. It was the bronze bust of Hitler that used to stand in the main lobby of City Hall and the sun gleamed against it. 'All right, let 'er go,' somebody yelled, and everybody laughed again. Then somebody came racing out into the square. It was Petracek who worked out at the Messerschmidt plan. He was waving his arms and yelling to quiet the crowd.

'Let's go, gang. We've still got work to do,' said Benno.

We started off. The flag on the castle was still flying and snapping in the sunshine. I suddenly thought of the Queen of Württemberg as I elbowed my way through the crowd. What do you suppose the Queen of Württemberg was doing? She was probably scared. We made our way over to the other side of the square. Things certainly looked as if the war had been already won. I didn't find it fun any more. We stopped in front of Manes's shop. Benno set up the ladder and started to climb. He looked like a big blown-up white balloon. People were still streaming around.

'Hey, listen,' I said to Pedro, 'I'm going down to the post office to see if maybe they know what's going on in Prague.'

I said it because it just occurred to me that maybe Irena was on duty now, and because I wanted to be alone.

'Okay,' said Pedro and I turned and headed off the other way. Happy faces streamed against me and laughed in my face. I gave them a mean, squinting, scornful look. The flag was still flying from the castle. To hell with the Queen of Württemberg. To hell with everything. To hell with the Württemberg queen. She could go jump in the lake. She wasn't worth anything to anybody anyway.



I wanted to see Irena and so I walked towards the post office. Out in front, a crowd had gathered. I pushed through the crowd. There on the sidewalk in front of the post office was a platoon of German kids, armed to the teeth. It was a wild sight. They couldn't have been more than fourteen years old and their helmets were so big that only the tips of their noses stuck out underneath. And out of their helmets' shadows their little eyes gleamed scared and embarrassed and confused. You could see they were only little kids despite the potato-masher grenades and submachine guns they had draped around them. *Hitlerjugend*. They didn't say a word and they didn't know what to do. There was a wide space between them and the people who encircled them, swearing at them. I heard some really good swear words and saw clenched fists. I shoved my way up front. The Hitler kids wore mud-caked boots and they looked exhausted. Just then somebody jumped out of the crowd and tore a submachine gun out of the hands of one of the kids. Somebody else yelled, probably an order, and the cluster of soldiers bristled with guns. They peered around with their hollow black eyes and I felt an unpleasant tightening in my belly. Jesus. It was like I already had a bullet in me. I didn't feel good at all. I realized it must be pretty damned unpleasant to be wounded. I drew back impulsively, but suddenly stopped. Christ, what if Irena was watching from somewhere? I didn't want her to think I was scared. It was silly to be scared. I looked around, but I couldn't see Irena. Everybody was moving back now. I was standing all by myself between the retreating crowd and the bristling platoon of Germans. That was fine because now I could retreat too. I stuck my hands in my pockets and turned. I got that same feeling again only this time it was in my back. My nerves grew taut. But I wanted to act casual. I moseyed along after the crowd. A sharp German command rang out behind me and I stiffened. Again my impulse was to drop to the ground, but I controlled myself. Nuts. They'd hit me anyway. The thing was not to get scared - and, especially, not to let it show. I made a face at the people in front of me as they moved backward. They stumbled and pushed frantically against the ones farther back who couldn't

see and so didn't know what was going on. Nobody said a word. People gaped at me in amazement. I ambled after them nonchalantly, a prickly feeling running down my spine. Then, as if somebody had barked out an order, all those faces suddenly focused elsewhere and stopped retreating behind me. I heard the shuffle and scrape of many boots. I looked around. The German kids, their submachine guns trained on the crowd, were moving off without a word. The throng in front of them parted swiftly, like the Red Sea opening for the Jews.

'Take their guns away from 'em!' some brave soul yelled from the rear of the crowd, but nobody seemed to want to try. I watched the platoon go. Two little runts brought up the rear in oversized boots. A funny sight, that pair. Still, they had their submachine guns and the guns were loaded and that inspired respect. Again the curses began to fly. By then, though, the Germans had already disappeared around the corner. The crowd milled and followed. The post office square emptied out. I turned around and saw Irena, looking out the first floor window. She saw me and smiled.

'Hello, Danny,' she called. She was wearing a white blouse with a tricolour pinned on it.

'Hello, Irena,' I said and strolled over to the window.

'Did you see that?' she asked.

'Yeah.'

'Spooky, wasn't it?'

'What?'

'Those kids. Why, they're no more than children.'

'Oh, them. Yes, you're right. That's all they are.'

'Who'd you think I meant?'

'I thought you were talking about the people.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, the people.'

'I don't understand you.'

I grinned, 'All those big heroes.'

'Oh, them. But what did you expect them to do without any guns?'

'I know, but...'

'But you think of yourself as a hero, I suppose?'



'Naturally,' I said. Apparently she'd seen me after all. I'd have to make the most of it but the best way to play it would be to make myself look like a fool; otherwise I'd have to think up some logical explanation and I didn't feel like thinking logically. All I felt like doing was looking at Irena and kidding around with her.

'Well then,' she said, 'why didn't you do something?'

'I wasn't in the mood.' I raised my eyebrows and gave her my Clark Gable look. It always seemed to me he didn't know how to do anything except twist his mouth around; still that was enough to impress women. At least in the movies. I discovered in real life, too, that that's usually about all you need. In most cases anyway. So now I twisted my mouth at Irena and went on.

'Why should I act like a hero, anyway? What's the point?'

'Well - to ... to show you're not afraid.'

'And why should I need to do that?'

'Why, to prove you're a man.'

'There're other ways of proving that,' I said inanely, and waited to see how Irena would react. She reacted just the way I expected her to. She was dumb. But I loved her.

'Now that's enough,' she said, so I'd understand that she'd understood. It never even occurred to her that she hadn't really. Apparently her head wasn't really equipped to understand. Girls' mental equipment is generally pretty primitive. It would have been nice to know there was at least one girl in the world who could understand something. Not just what a person says, but what he means, too. And that maybe he means something entirely different from what he says. And that he says it for completely different reasons than he says. It would have been nice to know there was at least one girl like that in the world. Anyway, then I switched over to the track Irena's little brain was running on.

'Or maybe you think there isn't any other way to prove it?' I said.

'Oh well, sure there is, but that's about enough of that now, don't you think?'

'The other proofs are more fun, though.'

'Danny, that's enough now. Just stop or I won't say another word to you.'

'Okay,' I said, and flashed her another one of my Gable grins. But it gave me a cramp in my cheek muscle and I had to hurry and hold my hand under my nose and massage it as though nothing had happened. Luckily, the cramp went away almost immediately. Irena hadn't even noticed it. It was all right.

'Well, so we've got our freedom back again, huh?' I said.

'No, now, be serious. You make a joke out of everything,' Danny, said Irena.

'No, I don't.'

'You do.'

'I don't.'

'Go on, I know you.'

'Think so?'

'Absolutely.'

'Well, I'm not so sure.'

'Oh yes I do.'

Irena was a grown-up young lady. She'd gone through puberty but not very far beyond. Breasts and periods and a whole way of thinking. So she knows me, does she? That was good, too.

'Well, that's tough,' I said.

'What?'

'That you know me so well.'

'Why's it tough?'

'Well - since you know me so well I can't have any secrets from you, can I?'

Irena laughed.

'I don't know you all that well, Danny. You don't need to worry.'

'But you know me pretty well, right?'

'Oh - pretty well, I think.'

'And what do you know?'

'Hmmm?'

'What do you know that's so special about me anyway?'

'Special? Well, you're awfully conceited, for one thing.'

'Aw, go on.'



'You are, Danny.'

I acted like this had really sobered me up, then I looked into her eyes.

'No, Irena. I'm not conceited. Not at all.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Well, I still think you're pretty conceited, Danny.'

'I'm not, though.'

'And I say you are, though.'

'No. And I'll tell you why you're wrong, Irena. Because there just so happens to be something I don't think is true about you and you know very well that it's true about me.'

'Yes? What?' she said. Her eyes lit up when I switched to this other tone. We'd just been kidding around before, but now I'd struck a deeper chord. Now I'd touched on something that lay beneath all that kidding which was serious. At least that's what her biological feelers told her. Her fine little biological psychological-acoustical feelers. I didn't contradict her.

'What is it?' I said slowly, and moved towards the wall. I lifted my arms and leaned up against the wall under Irena's window.

'You know, Irena,' I said.

She smiled wisely, the smile she kept handy for such occasions. It was a tender smile. Then she reached out and gently caressed the back of my hand.

'You know very well, Irena,' I repeated. 'I'm in love with you.'

She stroked my hand again. Then she whispered, 'I know.'

I held on to her fingers.

'Irena, I'm terribly in love with you. Everything I do is just for you.'

'I know, Danny.'

'Look, this whole war and the liberation and everything won't really have any sense for me if you...'

I stopped right there and, instead of talking, squeezed her hand.

'I know, Danny.'

'Irena, couldn't you...'

She pressed my hand, 'No, Danny. Shh! Don't let's talk about

'Well, why not, Irena?'

'You know I - it's simply impossible.'

'I know it is, Irena. But it's... awful.'

'Danny.'

'All right, I won't say any more about it.'

'But don't be angry with me.'

'I'm not angry with you. How could I be angry with you?'

'In matters like this, a person's simply helpless, you know that.'

'I know, Irena.'

'I think an awful lot of you, Danny, really. But -'

'You're in love with Zdenek.'

She looked straight at me. Now it was getting very serious. Now she was going to make me face up to the facts, for about the sixth or seventh time.

'Yes,' she said.

I squeezed her hand and gulped. I gulped so my Adam's apple would wobble and I made the corners of my eyelids twitch. I bowed my head slightly to one side and tears came to my eyes. I squeezed her hand.

'Okay, Irena, I know. Not much I can do about it, is there?'

'But you're not angry, are you?'

'No.'

'You mustn't be angry.'

'I'm not. I'm something else, though.'

'What?'

'I'm in love with you,' I said.

She drew back her hand and her smile changed. 'You...' she said.

'Terribly in love with you.'

'That's nice.'

'I love you and I worship you and I want you.'

Irena started to laugh. Then she spoke in a changed tone.

'Save some of your energy, Danny. Maybe you'll need it for something else.'

I could see right through her. I could tell it made her feel



good. Oh, I knew her. It flattered her, hearing all that over and over. It must be a nice feeling to know somebody's in love with you. But to be in love was also nice, which was why I was.

'Look,' said Irena all of a sudden.

'What is it?' I said, and looked up at her. She was looking out over my head towards the square. I turned around. The sun stood blazing above the castle, flooding the square with white light. The church cast a dark shadow on the cobblestones and as the crowd eddied around it, the women's dresses flashed as they moved out of the shadow into the sun. But that wasn't it. Something was going on. People were milling around on both sides of the church. They were running away from the square behind the church and jamming the streets on either side of the square. Something was going on behind the church but you couldn't see what. Clusters of people had stopped in front of the post office to stare. All I could see was the backs of people's heads, tilted hats, and dishevelled hairdos. Soon it was almost deserted on both sides of the church. I watched Mrs Salacova, the lame seamstress, swinging along fast on her crutches. My curiosity was aroused. From around the left side of the church a soldier emerged with fixed bayonet and the square grew silent. The soldier advanced slowly in his green helmet and jackboots, an ominous figure. A second one came out close behind him. Then from behind the other side of the church more soldiers appeared. They moved forward, fanning out around the church. Some held submachine guns, others rifles with fixed bayonets. They came on quietly, slowly, steadily. Behind them, the square was empty. The crowd silently pressed back into side streets and doorways. Mrs Salacova hurried along frantically on her crutches. I watched her go. Her body swung in frenzied arcs like a pendulum or as if she was doing calisthenics on the parallel bars. She was going as fast as she could, but not fast enough to escape the soldiers. The fastest slowed down behind her. I could see that the soldier who was driving her on didn't know what to do. He was embarrassed. He didn't know whether to pass her and let her go on behind him or wait until she'd hobbled into some doorway. He slowed down and soon the whole column came to a standstill. The

soldiers on the other side of the square were nearly half-way across it now. Officers with drawn revolvers moved up behind the soldiers. I heard them yelling something at the people who still hadn't managed to find a place to duck into. I looked over at Mrs Salacova again. She was nearly home. She had a little store in one of the houses on the left side of the square. The soldier with the submachine gun slowly trailed her. He looked like a Boy Scout doing a good deed, as if the gun was hers and he was just carrying it home for her. It was quiet, except for the officers yelling on the other side of the square and, in the distance, the squeak of Mrs Salacova's crutches. They were a couple of steps away from her shop. She made three more lurches and vanished inside. The soldier turned and hurried along the row of houses to the end of the street. Behind him came an officer brandishing a revolver in his gloved hand. The two advancing columns had already circled the church and joined up in a single row. The end men stopped at the corners where the side streets entered the square while the centre fanned out swiftly. The last remnants of the crowd dashed past me behind the post office towards the old ghetto and shoved through the doors into City Hall. It was quiet. Behind the soldiers the square was completely empty. Apparently they'd come from the emergency hospital behind the church where part of the Kostelec garrison was stationed. The rejoicing of the crowds had probably made them mad. The officers, anyway. My impression was that all the soldiers really cared about was clearing out before the Russians arrived. These last days anyway. They couldn't get out fast enough. But the officers wouldn't budge. Discipline to the bitter end. No matter how pointless – order and discipline right up to the end. And the soldiers obeyed. That much had been drilled into them. More soldiers appeared in the empty half of the square. They advanced in dead silence. They were sullen and ready for combat. Ammunition belts bounced against their chests and hand grenades jutted out of their boot tops.

'Danny!' said Irena nervously. I could tell right away she was scared.

'What?' I said without turning around.



'Danny, come inside!'

'Wait a while.'

'Danny, please come inside. You can't kid around with them.'

'Don't worry.'

'Don't be crazy, Danny.'

'Oh, don't worry, Irena. If I just stand here, they won't even notice me.'

'Danny, please. Don't be silly.'

I turned slowly and looked her in the eye. She was really scared. For me. I could tell she was scared, but on the other hand this was something I couldn't understand. I'd never been scared for anybody else. Just for myself. I didn't know what was to feel that way. I couldn't understand how anybody could care that much about somebody else. Whether something was going to happen to somebody else, I mean. If somebody else was in a bad spot, I felt bad too, but I didn't know what it was to be scared for them. What's the sense in being scared, anyway? After all, nothing can happen except what happens to me. And you can stand everything else. I felt completely alone. I wouldn't have been scared for Irena. Why should I ever be scared for her? I wasn't really in love with her anyway. Or rather, I was in love with her because there wasn't anything better. When it came to things to be in love with, there was always a chronic shortage. And so I was in love with Irena. She wasn't in love with me and I loved her, but it didn't really matter that much to me. I looked straight at her.

'Are you scared?'

'Danny, please, don't put on an act.'

'Are you?'

She looked over my head and there was fear in her eyes.

'Danny, come inside. This is no joke!'

'Are you scared?'

'Yes, sure I am.'

'On account of me?'

'Oh, please, Danny, you know I am.'

'But you don't love me?'

'Danny, please come inside.'

'But you don't love me, do you?' I said slowly.

Her eyes looked terrified. I was hamming it up. See, Irena, nothing matters to me. Let 'em shoot me for all I care, if you don't love me. Let 'em hang me, see? I gazed at her fixedly. All of a sudden her eyes started following something that was very close behind me. I could feel there was something behind me. And I knew what it was. I got the feeling again that I had a bullet in my back. And I also had the feeling that I'd put on a wonderful act for Irena, that I'd given a great performance. Irena's eyes followed whatever it was with terrified attention, her mouth half open. I turned, leaned back against the post office and stuck my hands in my pockets. I felt like the whole world was watching me. There in front of me, quite close now, stood a soldier aiming his submachine gun straight at me.

'Also los,' he said, but he didn't move. He had a broad, beefy face and grey stubble on his chin. He had a gas mask slung over his shoulder and the grey head of a German bazooka stuck up above his ear. He was an old guy. A hand grenade was stuck in each boot and he looked as if he didn't know what to do. I gave him a friendly, cocky grin. He stepped up close. There was fear and bewilderment in his eyes. He was scared. He was scared of what was going to happen today or within the next few days. But he was also scared of the officers behind him. He stepped up to me and said in a confidential tone, '*Schauen Sie, es hat doch keinen Zweck. Gehen Sie weg bitte.*'

Suddenly I felt sorry for him. He kind of trusted me. I don't know what I would have done if he'd yelled at me, but he had so much trust in me I didn't want to disappoint him.

'All right,' I said and took my hands out of my pocket. He stood there in front of me, waiting. I buttoned my jacket and figured I'd set off, slow but sure, around the corner.

'Well, so long, Irena, I'll be back,' I said, and started off.

But as I turned towards the side street which led past the post office, I bumped into another soldier. He was wearing an Iron Cross ribbon in his buttonhole. An officer. I raised my head and looked him right in the eye. He had narrow, cold, Germanic eyes. He looked as if he'd never had a human feeling in his life.



'Was ist hier los?' he said menacingly. 'Haben Sie nicht gehört?'

That made me mad. I knew these guys were done for. I didn't feel scared at all. Just that it was all over. The finale made a face.

'Shut up!' I said and squinted at him. I hadn't meant to say in English. It just slipped out. Funny. I always reacted in English to all that German bellowing. Even when I was working at the factory, only then I said it under my breath. This time I said it out loud.

'Was?' howled the officer.

'Shut up,' I said quite logically. I stood opposite him with my hands in my pockets again.

'Na warte, du Schwein, du!' screamed the officer, and grabbed me as though all his anger had gone out of him. Naturally he held hold of my jacket with his left hand. He was holding his pistol in his right hand. I grabbed for it. He jerked me to one side. He was awfully damn strong. I tried to get my footing but couldn't. He shook me back and forth. A mess. A real mess. He must have looked pretty silly. And Irena was watching.

I braced myself once again but had to spread my feet wide apart and let my knees sag. I looked ridiculous and what made it worse was that it all had to happen right in front of Irena. The officer gave me one more sharp jerk and let go. I lost my balance and fell over. I could feel I was blushing. Oh, God, I blushed to her mouth. I made a face and winked at her.

Damn it. What a mess. I lay there on the ground. They caught me. Like a farmer catching a little kid stealing pears.

It was anything but fun. Damn it, it wasn't fun at all. I blushed with shame. I thought about getting up and jumping on the officer, but quickly dropped the idea. He was awfully strong. He'd just throw me again. Maybe he'd knock me around and that would be even more humiliating. Oh, I'd really messed things up. I looked up. The officer was standing over me and brandishing a pistol in front of my face.

'Aufstehen!' he ordered icily. I decided to preserve at least a remnant of decorum. I got up slowly and, as I rose, brushed off my jacket, taking my time about it. I felt I'd brushed off the bad impression I'd made, now that I looked decent again. In the movies, the hero always gets the first punch. Slowly I drew

myself erect. The officer was watching me with cold scorn. He raised the muzzle of his revolver.

'Hände hoch! Schnell!'

I knew how to do that. Like they did it in Chicago. I could see myself like in a gangster movie. I was glad I was wearing such a sharp-looking jacket. I grimaced and slowly raised my hands over my head. Taking my time. And not too high. I bent my arms at the elbows and raised my palms so they came to about my ears. Nice and slow. I stood there with my feet planted wide, watching the officer. I felt like Al Capone and the square looked like Bloody Corner after a gun battle with the cops. Soon the G-men would come and take me away. I stared the officer right in the eye. I held his eye but it seemed he'd had a steady diet of discipline, but after all, Hitler was ahead and the Russians only a few miles away. It seemed to me he was looking at me with disgust. I gave him a sneering smile. The officer turned away. Behind him stood two guys with sub-machine guns.

'Haftnehmen!' said the officer. The two guys stepped up to me, one on each side. I turned around.

'Los. Gehn Wir!' one of them said. We started off. I turned around to see Irena. She was standing in the window, one hand on her mouth. I made a face and winked at her.

'Danny!' she screamed hysterically.

'Don't worry,' I called to her.

'Los, los!' said one of the guys beside me and grabbed my arm. I tried to turn around again to see Irena, but he yanked me back. The other one grabbed my other arm.

'Let me go. I'll walk by myself,' I said in broken German.

'Na gut,' said the guy on my left and let go of my arm. I looked at him and saw he was the same beefy-faced soldier who'd talked to me before.

'Machen Sie keine Dummheiten, es hat doch keinen Zweck,' he advised me again in a confidential tone.

'Okay,' I said and went quietly with them. They led me to the church. A couple of soldiers and one civilian were standing in front of the door to the choir loft. We came closer. I recog-



nized him. It was Lenecek, the hairdresser. Another patriot, they'd picked him up too. He was pale as death and looked solemn. I winked at him. He smiled gloomily and then looked as glum as before. My soldiers put me beside him.

'What'd you do?' I whispered.

'I slugged one of them. And you?'

'Oh, something like that.'

We stopped talking. We stood by the church and the light shone down on us. The church had a nice, massive, flaking yellow-painted wall. Hell, I thought, they might stand us against that wall! But when I looked at Lenecek, it didn't seem possible. I couldn't picture him slumping over, crumpling up. Too crazy. Or me either. Crazy too. They'd lock us up and let us out in a couple of days. But it would be a damn shame to be locked up now. I looked over at the officers. They were conferred about something. Lenecek stood there, white-faced and motionless. The officers' conference broke up and they looked over at us. My heart was in my throat. They were going to lock us up against the wall. Jesus! Suddenly I was scared. Not for Chrissake, don't do that! Anything but that! One of the officers gave an order of some kind and the soldiers lined up in a group on each side of us. Oh God! Oh damn! They're taking us off now. Lenecek turned even whiter.

We started off. Oh God! Oh God! Oh Jesus! This was really bad. We marched out of the square at a brisk pace. You couldn't even take your own sweet time. I had to step along like in some kind of fireman's parade. Jesus! You ought at least to be able to go to your death elegantly. We turned off onto the street that led past the Sokol\* Hall. Yes. They were taking us past the high school. That was where the garrison was. And they were going to shoot us in the courtyard. Oh Jesus! The street was empty. Our steps echoed rhythmically. The doorways were jammed with people. You could tell they were scared. We went past them and looked at them, huddled and trembling in the doorways, and couldn't help making a face at them. The fools! Safe as houses and still scared shitless. And here we were, being led away to our execution. A chill ran down my spine. Just then I saw Lucie. She'd poked her head out of Manes's store. She saw me

saw how surprised she was - astonished. Good. I stuck one hand in my pocket because I knew that made nice folds in my jacket and I gave Lucie a big smile. Then I noticed Haryk watching behind her. And Pedro Gershwin's face above Haryk's head. One on top of the other, those three heads, and they were looking at me and didn't know what to say. I grinned and nodded my head at them. They gaped back at me stupidly. Then we passed them. Lenecek marched alongside me, his head held high. Almost too high. It looked as though he had a crick in his neck. Otherwise he held up well. We hurried down a narrow street and past the savings bank and around the print shop. Everybody was watching us. And past Sokol Hall. All our friends were watching us. We were national heroes. We marched along and everybody knew us and we were surrounded by silent Germans in their grubby uniforms, draped with weapons. St Matthew's Church rose beyond the viaduct and behind it the big yellow high-school building. My heart dropped, then rushed back up into my throat again. Boy, was I scared! Oh, Jesus God, this was all wrong! I certainly didn't feel like dying. Not even for my country. My country could get along without my life but I couldn't. Oh, this was bad. Now maybe Irena would reconsider. Now maybe she'd drop Zdenek and start going with me. It would really be dumb to have to die now. My God, would it ever!

We went past Welch's stationery store towards the viaduct. We were getting closer to the high school. I looked frantically around me. There was nobody there. Not a soul. And then all of a sudden my heart started jumping around inside my chest. Prema was heading towards us from under the viaduct. His pockets were stuffed with something and then he saw me and stopped. Behind him Jerry and Vasek Vostal appeared and a bunch of other guys. I could tell that Prema understood right away what was going on. He just looked at me and I looked at him. One glance was enough. Then he whirled around and said something to the boys. Prema! We turned off around the viaduct. Prema waited. By now it was clear we were going to the high school. I stared hard at Prema. Prema nodded and gave me the V-for-Victory sign. Prema was great. Then all the boys



ducked around the corner and started to run. The path behind shine and here and there a German face stared out. Inside the viaduct was the shortest way to Skocdopole's warehouse. You could hear the quiet buzz of many voices, just as though there were guns there. That I knew. My brain started working. School was still in session. It always sounded like that in high school during recess. Exactly the same. You couldn't even tell to the warehouse. Then how long it would take before it was German buzzing. We marched past the house where the Germans had led us into the big schoolyard and shot us. If the sisters of Mercy lived, straight towards the school gate. Their had some kind of ceremony first, the boys might just make it. Franciscan swans' caps shone whitely behind the closed window. Awfully risky. But terrific, too. So this was how things went. The sisters were probably crossing themselves. This made Kostelec revolution was going to start. All on account of me thinking of death and I started feeling pretty bad again. Christ, really. Yes. Great. I tried to picture how it would be when Christ! There were the four big windows of the chapel above boys would turn up. A shot. An explosion. Part of the high school entrance. Memories of how we used to go there every school blown up and falling in. We're standing up against the Sunday flashed through my head. My God, maybe there really is a wall facing a row of armed Krauts, and all of a sudden part of God. And hell and heaven and stuff. Oh God! And heaven's the high school blows up and boys jump over the fence in weeping now. It couldn't help but weep after all the sins I'd committed in the yard, carrying rifles and submachine guns. They had the committed. Ever since sixth grade. We sixth-graders used to sit too. Prema told me they'd disarmed a whole platoon of German the first row in chapel and we behaved ourselves pretty well in some place. I believed him because Prema didn't because we were still scared of the religion teacher. But by the time we were in seventh grade we'd already started sinning. I could just see them jumping over the principal's garden fence through the smoke and dust and hollering. And we'd moved back to the second row so they couldn't see us so the Germans throwing away their guns. Or, no - they'd figure out from the altar and we weren't so scared of the teacher any back. And the two of us would dash away from the wall, more, and instead of praying and singing hymns we fought and jump that officer and now he'd be all mixed up and I'd be soaked around. During every mass we committed one sin on him in the eye and take away his revolver and we'd move top of another. And then in eighth grade we were in the third on them from all sides. Lenecek would tell Irena all about it. Oh, boy! And in ninth grade and so on until we didn't sit afterwards when she'd go to his shop for a permanent. I could see downstairs any more. We had chairs on the platform up along just see those Germans huddled together and then moving beside the organ. And we'd think up dirty words for the hymns. against the wall of the gym and we'd be blasting away at the And we'd egg on Josef Stola who played the organ and he'd and they'd drop, one after the other. And then I saw Prema play a foxtrot from *Rose Marie*, for instance, during the elevation saw him taking an old egg-shaped Czech Army grenade out of the Host, or 'San Francisco', and the religion teacher his pocket, pull the pin, count three and pitch it, and it would even commend him for it. He liked those preludes so grenade exploding right in the middle of the huddle. German much that he recommended Joska to the choir-master at the fall in all directions, their weapons drop from their hands at cathedral but when Joska played there for the first time and had we move through the high-school yard, our guns smoking, at the nerve to play a prelude from *Rose Marie*, the choir-master, so the Kostelec revolution begins. ~~who played the fiddle on week nights in a town night-club,~~

We were getting closer to the high-school gate. I could recognize it immediately, kicked Joska out of the organ loft in the gatehouse that stood beside it. A soldier with his bayonet in the middle of the prelude, and told the teacher on him. So fixed was marching up and down in front of the gatehouse. Joska got a D- in deportment and he had to do a lot of row of windows on the side of the high school gleamed in the penance before he was allowed to play again, in chapel at least.



Oh Christ! That's how we'd sinned. And it was wonderful to remember the past – all those memories of high school wrapped in a sunny haze now. And now there the school stood in front of me, big and yellow, and the Germans were taking me in for my own execution. My legs balked and I got an absolutely crazy idea that I simply wouldn't go any farther. But I went. I still couldn't believe what was happening and how it was happening. The high-school gate loomed close. I looked over at Lenecek. He was white as alabaster now, but was still holding his head up. Christ! Why act like a hero on top of everything else? But why not act like a hero, after all? What's the point of being scared to death if there's no help for us any more anyway? Sure. It's better to stand up straight when you're facing a firing squad, and maybe even yell something. No, not that, though. Better not. That's the kind of thing Chief of Police Rimbalnik would do. No. Ask for a cigarette something like that. Except I didn't smoke. And when an officer raises his sword over his head, then make a face at him. If he actually does have a sword, that is. We stopped right under the school motto inscribed over the gate: *'Cultivate feeling, enlighten reason and, oh school, plant the roots of resolute character!'* Oh God! Or wouldn't it be better to just forget about being so resolute and get down on my knees and ask for forgiveness for all my sins. Except maybe there really was no God anyway, so why should I? I didn't want to make a fool of myself like that. Just like I'd never quite been able to make myself make a clear and obvious sign of the cross when I passed the church, like the priest always told us to do. I'd just kind of scratch myself on the forehead and then slide my thumb down over my face and scratch myself again on the chest. I cause there might actually be a God after all. But it's not so sure. If it was, then I'd fall down on my knees right here and that would certainly soften him up. But the thing is, you can't be sure. So a person's got to be scared all the time – of God, if there is one, and of looking like a fool if there isn't.

The officers went on past us and into the high school. 'Look,' said one of the soldiers and we followed them in. Light came through the row of windows and the corridor was clean and

bright. We turned off towards the principal's office and there we stopped. Only the officers went inside. The doors swung shut behind them. Instead of the old name plate, there was a sign there now with the inscription KOMMANDANTUR. I looked at Lenecek. I felt like talking to convince myself that this was all just a joke.

'Well?' I said.

'We're in for it now,' said Lenecek.

'You think they'll bump us off?'

'I think you can count on that, Mr Smiricky.'

'Jesus!' I said. All of a sudden the word sounded unpleasantly sinful. So I added, 'That's bad.'

Lenecek didn't say anything. He was so pale by now he looked almost transparent. The Germans guarding us stood there mute and listless. I wondered whether I shouldn't say something to them. But what? I looked out the window. The schoolyard looked like it always did. Even the volley-ball net was up. The Germans had probably been playing volleyball. My God, so now it's all over. So now – and suddenly I remembered my Last Will and Testament. And then I realized that this was it. Instinctively. So now my will would serve its purpose. Irena could read it now. About how I'd never loved anybody else in my life, only her, how I didn't want anything in the world except now, as she reads these lines, for her to know that everything I've done and lived for was important only because it was all somehow for her, that I'd lived and died only for her, and that I'd loved her. And how nothing mattered to me, even dying, because there was no sense in living since she didn't love me. Tears came to my eyes. I could see her, see her walking behind the coffin and it would really be some funeral, too, because I'd be a hero and it would be a great feeling – only there wouldn't be any feeling at all! Now was the time for feeling, I suddenly realized, and afterwards, when it was all over for me, I wouldn't feel anything at all. Brrr! Not that. To hell with Irena. My Last Will and Testament was great when I wrote it. No Last Will and Testament was ever better. To hell with the will. I'd rather stay alive without Irena. She should try dying herself sometime. I didn't want to. Let Irena do it instead



of me. It'd be better if I could go to her funeral instead of being  
going to mine. That certainly roused plenty of feelings. Arranged. Just be patient.'  
what feelings! How sad I would be and crushed and noble and  
alone. Christ! I'd a thousand times rather be lonely than not  
at all. Absolutely. But soldiers with guns were standing around  
me and that was a bad feeling. I thought about Prema again  
wondering if he'd make it. God, let him make it! God, let him  
get here in time! God, please, please, God, let Prema get here  
time!

Just then the door opened and there stood Dr Sabata. My  
throat tightened from joy. I forgot all about Prema. Dr Sabata  
was wearing a black suit and he had his pince-nez on his nose.  
Dr Sabata. This was great. I felt safe immediately. I'd known  
all along. Of course. They couldn't shoot us. That was all a  
of nonsense. I'd known it right from the start. They couldn't  
shoot us, now that Dr Sabata was here. Dr Sabata looked at me  
sadly and said, 'Mr Smiricky, what in the world have you been  
doing?'

'Why, nothing, Doctor. I was at the square and they picked  
me up,' I said innocently. Now everything was all right again.

'You provoked them, didn't you? And you know what the  
situation is like. I'd thought we could at least depend on you  
students to be sensible.'

'But I really wasn't doing anything, Doctor.'

'Look here, Mr Smiricky. We're negotiating now with the  
Commander about withdrawing the troops from the town so  
there won't be any needless destruction and you students are  
making things very difficult for us.'

'I'm really awfully sorry, sir. I really didn't mean to...'

'Well, all right, I believe you. Mr Kuelpe promised me he  
release you but I had to give him my word of honour that the  
townspeople will allow the troops to leave peacefully and take  
their arms with them.'

I remembered Prema. Jesus! Dr Sabata's word of honour  
wouldn't be worth a damn now. Jesus! All I wanted was to go  
out of there fast. So I said rapidly, 'Thank you, Doctor.'

'Don't mention it,' said Dr Sabata. 'But please tell them.

ends not to do anything imprudent. Everything will be  
arranged. Just be patient.'  
Yes,' I said. Mayor Prudivy peeked out of the principal's  
office. The Kostelec city fathers were negotiating. I knew it. I  
could see the revolution was in good hands. Dr Sabata shook  
hands with me. 'Thank you, Doctor,' I said.  
He smiled humbly. 'You're quite welcome. I'm glad I could  
help you. Remember me to your father.'

'Yes, thank you, I will.'

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.'

I turned around. Lenecek came over to me. Dr Sabata hadn't  
taken hands with Lenecek. But Lenecek didn't mind. I noticed  
he wasn't so pale any more. We hurried down the stairs to the  
main floor. It was all over and now I could start living again.  
and it'd certainly make an impression on Irena. And maybe  
there'll be shooting anyway. Now all of a sudden I felt like  
shooting again. Now that nobody was going to stand me  
against a wall and shoot at me. I had a terrific urge  
start shooting. I ran down the steps in front of the high  
school and there I was, out in the bright sunshine. I waited for  
Lenecek.

'Are you going downtown?' I asked him.

'No, I've got to go home. My old lady'll have the shit scared  
out of her already by now. They've probably told her.'

'Well, I'm going into town,' I said.

'Take care of yourself, Mr Smiricky,' said Lenecek.

'Well, good-bye,' I said with a smile and held out my hand.  
He pressed it and his palm was still wet with fear.

I walked along Rampart Street in the direction of Skocdo-  
hole's warehouse. I saw them as soon as I turned the corner  
and they looked terrific. Vahar was carrying a flag and the  
others were clustered around him with Prema in the lead.  
Prema was holding a submachine gun, all polished and oiled,  
and he had a leather belt strapped around his waist over his  
coat with a couple rounds of ammunition in it. Hand-grenade  
pins stuck out of both pockets. I raised my hand and waved at  
them. The boys slowed down and stopped.



'What is it?' called Prema.

'They let us go,' I said and hurried towards them. Vahar the flag staff down on the ground. The boys stood there and the butts of their guns down on the pavement. They were pretty well armed. Perlik had two bazookas and Jerry would have hand grenades draped around his neck like a rosary. I saw Prochazka and Vasek Vostal and Benda and Kocandrla. Benda and Vasek had submachine guns and Kocandrla and Prochazka had automatics.

'Thanks, guys,' I said.

'So they let you go, huh?' said Prema and he sounded almost disappointed.

'Yeah. That is, Dr Sabata got us out of it.'

'Sabata was there?'

'Yeah. With old Prudivy. Maybe there were more of them.'

'They came there after you?'

'No. They were there when we got there.'

'What were they doing?'

'Probably negotiating with the Germans.'

'What about, do you know?'

'Dr Sabata said it was about letting the soldiers get out of town.'

'Jesus!' said Prema. That made him mad. 'What're these yellow-bellied bastards fouling things up for?'

'They're cautious all right. It doesn't surprise me,' said Perlik.

'What're we going to do?' asked Benda.

'Shall we go after 'em?' said Vahar in a bloodthirsty tone.

'I don't think it would make much sense right now,' I said.

'Thanks a lot for wanting to help me, but it'd be a pretty risky business now.'

'When do the Germans plan to pull out? Did Sabata say so?' asked Prema.

'No. He didn't say.'

'If we knew when they were going to pull out we could wait for 'em up on Sugarloaf.'

'Yeah, but if we don't know?' said Benda.

'It's simple,' Vahar said. 'We'll keep our eye on 'em, right?'

'That's about all we can do,' said Prema. 'You don't know what else they were talking about?'

'I don't know. But I guess you know that Sabata and Prudivy and the rest of them have some kind of an organization, don't you?'

Prema looked at me.

'We know about it.'

Suddenly I felt hot all over. I'd thought I was going to tell them something new and instead I'd put my foot in it.

'Are you in contact with them?' I asked.

'Well - yes. I guess it's safe to talk about that now.'

It was embarrassing. I knew Prema was mixed up in something. But he'd never really told me anything and I didn't want to pump it out of him if he didn't trust me enough to tell me himself. But now the opportunity had arisen.

'I want to join,' I said. 'Take me with you.'

Prema acted very grave. 'You want to join?'

'Yes,' I said.

Prema's face took on an expression like one of the Founding Fathers'. He was really pretty naïve. I had different ideas about the revolution than he had. I was more of a gangster, whereas he was a real rebel. But I needed a gun and they certainly had them. This was the easiest way to get one. I knew the boys had been playing partisans for two months already and they must have a regular arsenal by now in Skocdopole's warehouse. Prema shook my hand. Very touching. But I needed that gun. Mutely, I pressed his hand.

'All right, then,' said Prema. 'We can use everybody except pussies and old maids.'

I blushed. It was like something out of a grade-school primer. But I stopped blushing right away. After all, the main thing was that I'd have a gun. Once the shooting started, there wouldn't be time for a lot of speeches and sentimentality any more. And then it'd probably be great. Even with these guys in their corduroy pants and stubble-beard faces. Even with all this rebel talk. Rebelling had its appeal for me, too. Again I could just imagine the smoke and the shooting and, in the midst of the smoke, Vahar with the flag. It was good.



'Well, let's pack up again, right?' said Benda.  
 'Yep,' said Prema.  
 'Let's go,' said Vahar. 'We going to take it all back to warehouse?'  
 'Yep,' said Prema. Vahar picked up the flag and the boys slung their rifles over their shoulders. As they turned, I noticed that Vasek and Jerry had submachine guns slung across their backs, too. Apparently they had a surplus of them.  
 'Listen,' I asked Prema. 'How is it really? Is Sabata running the whole show or what?'  
 'Yeah. Sabata's running it,' Prema said.  
 'And you have things all planned out already?'  
 'Well, Sabata's supposed to give the order over the loudspeaker.'  
 'For the uprising?'  
 'No. Just for a mobilization.'  
 'And when's the uprising supposed to start?'  
 'As soon as Cemelik gives the word.'  
 'He's a colonel, isn't he?'  
 'Yeah.'  
 I was silent. Then I asked, 'And . . . and do you think Sabata will start anything?'  
 Prema shrugged.  
 'And are you really going to wait till you get the word?'  
 'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm beginning to have my doubts.'  
 'Did anybody tell you to collect all these guns and stuff?'  
 'No. We did it on our own,' he chuckled.  
 'Boy,' I said. 'I think Sabata's scared.'  
 'I think so, too.'  
 'I don't trust those guys anyway. All they care about is saving their own skins,' I said.  
 Prema didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, 'We've been known each other ever since we were kids, so I guess I can trust you, can't I?'  
 'Sure,' I said.  
 'We're in this together with Sabata. But if he starts fooling around, we'll take off on our own, see?'

'Yeah.'  
 'Because I know what a bunch of yellow bastards they are, oo.'  
 'Well, why did you get mixed up with them then?'  
 'Sabata has connections with Prague.'  
 'I see.'  
 'But if he starts something funny, we'll shit on the whole thing.'  
 'Sure,' I said. 'And how's the mobilization going to go?'  
 'Aw, that might not be so bad. The loudspeakers are supposed to tell the people to report to the brewery, where they'll all get guns, and there'll be instructions, too, I guess.'  
 'And you're going to be in on that, too?'  
 'I guess so. But if we don't like the looks of it, we pull out.'  
 I didn't say anything for a while again. I had to get a gun out of Prema somehow.  
 'Listen - you think there'll be anything for me?'  
 'What do you mean?'  
 'Oh, maybe a submachine gun or something like that.'  
 'Sure, don't worry. We've got lots more weapons back at the warehouse.'  
 'You're not saving them for somebody else then?'  
 'No. We thought we'd distribute what we couldn't use once things get started.'  
 'Well, thanks.'  
 We came to the warehouse. The corrugated-iron overhead door was pulled halfway down and Mr Skocdopole stood in front of it. When he saw me, he looked surprised.  
 'Well, so you did it, eh boys? How come you didn't have to shoot?'  
 'They let me go. Sabata put in a good word for us,' I said.  
 'Oh, that's different,' said Mr Skocdopole. 'Anyway, it'd still be a bit too early.'  
 Vahar rolled up the flag and crawled inside. The boys went in after him, one after the other. Prema stayed outside with me. Mr Skocdopole came up to us. He had a black patch on his left eye. He'd lost his eye in Siberia when he was in the Czech Legion.\*



'Now, just be careful, boys,' he said. 'The essential thing is not to do anything rash and to think things through. But when things get rough, don't get scared.'

'Wait a minute,' said Prema, 'I can use you.'

'Yeah?' I said.

'I'm supposed to meet the Lof kid at Serpon's place. Know him?'

'That's the redhead from Messerschmidt, huh?'

'That's the one. He worked in the factory.'

'Yeah, I know him.'

'All right, listen. He's supposed to bring me a report from Black Mountain. Could you go there instead of me?'

'Sure.'

'And tell him they're supposed to come here to the warehouse tomorrow morning. Got that?'

'Yeah. What time?'

'Oh, around eight.'

'Okay.'

'You'll go there then, right?'

'Sure. Have you got any password?'

'No. Just tell him I sent you. He knows you, doesn't he?'

'Sure.'

'So I can depend on you?'

'Sure. And listen - I can count on that gun, can't I?'

'Naturally. When they announce mobilization, come straight to the warehouse.'

'Thanks.'

'That's all right. And you bring me Lof's report back to the warehouse too, huh?'

'You're going to be here this afternoon?'

'Yeah. We've still got to clean the guns.'

'I'll be there. Is that all?'

'That's all.'

I gave him my hand. He shook it.

'Well, cheers.'

'Cheers, and thanks,' I said.

'That's okay.'

'Good-bye,' said Mr Skocdopole.

'Good-bye,' I said, and turned.

So I had a gun. But that thing with Lof was a nuisance. Only there wasn't much I could do about it. One good turn deserves another. I went under the viaduct and headed back towards the square. It was only then that I noticed there were people standing on the opposite sidewalk looking towards the warehouse. And they were watching me, too. It gave me a good feeling. So bad I hadn't had a gun when I walked up to the boys. But maybe it looked good that way. As if I was their superior or something. I hurried towards the square, feeling fine, and forgot about Lof. The sun wasn't shining any longer because, in the meantime, the sky had grown overcast with rain clouds. They had blown in from the north and covered the sun and soon the whole sky was clouded over. I turned into Jew Street. It was narrow, cobbled, and deserted. Flags hung out from a few of the houses. I looked at my watch. It was already past twelve o'clock and people had probably gone home for lunch. Not even the revolution could interfere with that. I turned the corner and passed the post office on the square. People were already walking around normally again, but the crowds had dispersed. Flags flew from the church and the loan association office and it looked like noon on the 28th of October.\* The flags gave me a kind of frustrated feeling of emptiness. It seemed to me you could almost smell nice, fat geese roasting in the ovens in all those houses. That was it. Roast goose. You could bet on it. That's how things go. Fear, cheers, brass bands, speeches, and roast goose with sauerkraut and dumplings. Everything would be the same again. Nothing would ever change. A couple of exciting days and then the same old bowl of oatmeal, stiff and gummy like it always used to be. And pelching after lunch. I'd been feeling fine a little while ago, but now all of a sudden I was fed up. At least I had jazz. But even that didn't help just then. At least I'd be going to Prague, to the university. That didn't help either. Christ! Irena, at least. Nothing. I felt completely numb, stunned. I felt like I'd gone lame or blind and that I'd never see again, never feel again. Nothing, either pleasant or unpleasant, just this dull monotony of a life without any future. Quick! Look forward to some-



thing! Be glad about something! Love something! Or a few old ladies were sitting in the pews – quite a few, more furious at something! But nothing happened. I stood at an usual. A white light poured in through the windows and corner by the post office and I didn't feel a thing. It was as if I had dissolved into a little puddle of cold twilight. God, why doesn't Suddenly my life had no goal whatsoever. All there was to have stained-glass windows? But they'd taken them out on was to lie down and sleep. But I wouldn't be able to fall asleep count of the danger of air raids. Three arched Gothic windows behind the main altar had just turned frigid in the unpleasant chill. God! The whole church was bright and clean. I tried to imagine her and I couldn't. You couldn't do anything here. You couldn't feel a imagine her, but nothing happened. Nothing but numbness. No bright. You couldn't do anything here. You couldn't feel a have to see her in the flesh. Maybe that would help me, at least in this church. How in hell could a person imagine God Yes. See her and kid around with her. At least that would help such a light? And I needed to feel something, quick. My eyes I rushed into the post office. The frosted window was closed over the altar that had been ridiculously restored and The room was quiet. I went up to the telephone window as all polished up. The pewter baptismal font stood by the knocked. The window slid up and behind it sat the big, no-frills altar. That's where I'd been baptized. Next to it rose the girl with bleached hair who alternated with Irena. Irena was a pillar supporting the side wing of the choir loft. I looked there any more.

'Has Irena gone already?' I asked hurriedly.

The girl peered at me curiously and nodded.

'Thank you,' I said and hurried out of the room. The heavy door gave me a hard time. My God! When I opened the door and a couple of old ladies stared at me. I knelt in front of Irena? Where's anything? The sky above the square was completely overcast by now. A chilly light lay over everything. The lightest I'd ever seen. I closed my eyes and imagined mine red in the flags had faded and a handful of people were lost instead. She had red lips and green eyes. Like Irena. In fact, she was around the church. The church! I clutched at that bulbous just like Irena.

steeple as if it was a lifebelt. Its windows in their deep niches. 'Hail Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life and desire,' I began. I and its blind sun-dial on the wall. To the church, fast! Felt the Virgin Mary was actually listening to me. And she was something, say something to wake an echo in me, to break our hope, we the outcast children of Eve, call out to Thee this numbness, to find some sort of resonance inside. An empty vale of tears.' The Virgin Mary listened and watched a desolate life. What did I care about Irena? About jazz. 'Speak. Speak to me,' I implored. 'My God, say something About anything? My whole life. I practically ran into it. I'll be able to feel something at least.' church. The doors were ajar. I burst inside. There was a little table in the vestibule with religious brochures and a cashbox. I never said a thing. All she'd ever done was listen dumbly like At the left there was a crucifix and, on the right, an old granite

stone of some nobleman or other. I panicked, afraid that the glass doors into the main nave were locked. They usually were. I turned her lovely eyes towards me and that was wonderful I grabbed the latch. They weren't locked. I went inside and it excited me and her pretty ruby-red lips were parted and churchly chill wafted over me. I dipped my thumb into it. It was night and her eyes were half closed. Maybe she'd holy water and made a damp sign of the cross on my forehead. Consider and marry me after all. It wouldn't be bad at all to and on my chin and on my chest.

er there. That was what I was looking for!

It was dim there. There was a little altar with a Virgin Mary front of which a little red lamp burned. There at the least it

was dim. I went over. My heels made an awful noise on the floor and a couple of old ladies stared at me. I knelt in front of the altar and looked up at the Virgin Mary. She wasn't the prettiest I'd ever seen. I closed my eyes and imagined mine red in the flags had faded and a handful of people were lost instead. She had red lips and green eyes. Like Irena. In fact, she was around the church. The church! I clutched at that bulbous just like Irena.

But she didn't say a thing. All she did was listen. But she

Turn upon us Thy gracious gaze,' I pleaded, and I could see her lovely eyes towards me and that was wonderful it excited me and her pretty ruby-red lips were parted and it was night and her eyes were half closed. Maybe she'd consider and marry me after all. It wouldn't be bad at all to get married to her. It would mean an end to everything, to all



my plans and so on, but then plans never work out anyway. She probably hadn't. It wouldn't be good for her if she and being married to her would be good. Good. Very good. And she was nervous and had high blood pressure. I unlocked God! To sleep with her and make love to her, but then what door and went into the apartment. I expected something to happen. But Father and Mother were just sitting at the table in the dining-room.

What the hell else can you do with Irena? You can't talk to her. All you can do is kid around and I'd soon get fed up with all that all the time. Nuts. I'd just as soon she wouldn't. 'Hello,' I said.

consider, that she'd just go on making Zdenek happy. Sure. 'Greetings,' said Father. 'Well, what's going on outside?' be better off without her. A lot better off. There're probably dozens of Irenas in Prague. Nuts to Irena. She's not bad, but 'Nothing. Dr Sabata's negotiating with the Germans.' that's only because there wasn't much choice. I looked up at Mother. She hadn't heard anything. That was good.

the altar and remembered I'd wanted to pray. 'We will. Don't worry,' I said and sat down at the table.

'Our Father,' I began, but what was it I'd wanted to pray? Mother got up, took the soup tureen and filled my bowl with about? Oh yeah, to feel something again. But I was already aluminium ladle. It was beef broth.

feeling again. I didn't need to pray any more. I had lots of 'We spent the morning painting over the German signs,' I feelings now. About Irena and all those other Irenas in Prague. 'So I heard. And tell me, what happened at the square?' And how I'd fascinate them with my saxophone - the sexophone. A real honey pot for girls. Father said.

instrument there is. Sexophone. A real honey pot for girls. 'Nothing. The Germans just made everybody go away and wanted to hurry through my prayers and get out of the church. They left.' because everything was all right already but first I had to pray.

about something. At least an Our Father and a Hail Mary. Mother said. 'You were there?' be God wants us to get bored saying our prayers so he can tell 'Yes,' I said. Then I quickly changed the subject away from us that way and find out whether we're willing to do something that had happened at the square. 'Listen, what's with Vlad- thing for him or not. I started in on the Our Father bka?'

couldn't get through it. I kept getting it all mixed up with Irena. Father made a wry face. 'Nothing, for the time being. This and saxophones and Prague and night clubs and all those girls. Ignoring we told him to go home and wait for further deci- and then the revolution and Prema and guns and where I win.' 'I saw him in front of the bank. He was wearing a tricolour supposed to go this afternoon to meet Lof, and I couldn't finish his buttonhole as big as the side of a barn.'

the prayer. Finally I concentrated so hard my head ached, but 'Really? Oh, he'll be a big patriot now, you can be sure of managed to get through to the end. I sighed with relief and what.'

crossed myself hurriedly. My conscience bothered me a bit, but 'Will you make things hot for him?' not for long. It disappeared as soon as I was out in front of the church. 'Well, I could, I suppose. But it all depends what the other church again. The cross I'd made on my forehead felt chilly. 'Well, I could, I suppose. But it all depends what the other and it was like I still had a drop of water there. I quickly wiped men at the bank decide,' Father said.

it off so nobody'd see and headed around the church toward Father was a soft-hearted man, a good man. I knew him.

home. There were only a few people out on the street and 'You really ought to,' I said. The soup was good. I didn't didn't run into anybody I knew. Slowly I went up the apartment-house steps. I remembered how the German soldiers had leave a drop.

taken me through the streets. I hoped Mother hadn't found out 'What's next?' Father asked.

'Roast sirloin,' said Mother.



'Horse meat?'

'Why do you ask? You know very well there's nothing these days.'

'Oh, I'm not complaining. Horse sirloin is even better the real thing.'

Mother went into the kitchen. I picked up a book which on the radio. *Bread of the Sea* by Willibald Yöring. I opened it and was bored right away. This Yöring was interested in the life of Norwegian fishermen. I wasn't interested in the life of Norwegian fishermen. I put the book back. Books are awful most of them anyway. Records are better. I was interested in food. In life, too, or my own life anyway. Mother appeared in the doorway, carrying a casserole on a wooden tray which she set down on the table. Father carefully lifted the lid.

'Aaaah,' he said.

Then he served himself a nice big helping of meat and poured gravy over the whole plate. He dunked six dumplings into it. Father was a nice guy. I liked him. He was a good guy because he didn't pretend to be something he wasn't. The reason why I liked him. I'd noticed a long time ago that whatever a man lives by, or for, becomes the most striking feature of his anatomy, his physiognomy. That's strictly according to Darwin, or whoever it was who wrote about the effect of habit on the adaption and development of characteristics. Maybe it was Spencer. There's nothing funnier than a big-mouthed, big-brow intellectual. You can tell right off which it is they want with more - their brains or their bellies. But Father didn't mind any pretences. He had a beautiful big mouth and jaws, his cheeks were like pouches and when he ate - and he always ate with his mouth closed - you could hear how everything was being ground up and mashed and kneaded and pulverized inside that great big mouth of his, even though he didn't smile with his lips at all while he ate, because he always kept his mouth closed. Otherwise he was jolly and full of fun and he knew how to tell awful jokes and he kept on telling the same ones over and over, and the funny thing was that he always made a big hit with them. Those jokes seemed pretty lousy to me, but I guess other people didn't think so. I used to think that nothing

could move him, but when Aunt Manya died he bawled all day and when he tried to talk he sobbed like a little kid. Yes, he was a good guy and I liked him. He didn't understand me but I didn't care. The main thing was, he gave me my allowance and let me do whatever I felt like doing. That he did.

I helped myself to the meat and dumplings and gravy and polished it off in a couple of minutes. It was awfully good. I'm not surprised that there're people who live just to eat. If I could have food like this all the time without going to a lot of effort to get it, and if I didn't have any digestion problems, I could easily live for food too. The fact that I ate to live, instead of the other way around, was just because most of the time Mother cooked meals that weren't worth living for, because of the food shortage. That's why I had to think up other reasons for living.

After lunch Mother cleaned off the table and Father went to lie down on the couch in the kitchen. I got up from the table and sat down in the armchair by the radio. You could hear the clatter of dishes from the kitchen. I switched on the radio and looked out the window. It was nice to let all sorts of thoughts run through your head after lunch. Clouds were piling up over the town and it started to rain in the valley. All I could see from the window were hillsides and woods and houses, but no people. The people were out of sight, down in the streets. The set had warmed up and a desperate voice rang out from Prague Radio: 'We are calling all Czech police, constabulary, and national troops in the region to report immediately to the Radio Building! The SS are trying to kill us! Report immediately!' My heart jumped into my throat. This was sensational! Nothing like this had ever happened before! An uprising set off and directed over the radio! I wanted to be in on it too. Well, so it'd already started in Prague. So they were already shooting inside the Radio Building. That's on Foch Boulevard, the place guarded by a Kraut wearing a tin half moon on his chest. So they were shooting there. Maybe they were already dead. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. A guy in a sharp-looking suit with a rifle, crouched behind an overturned streetcar. A smooth-looking guy in a light tan hat,



carrying a submachine gun, crouched behind a lamppost. The weather helmets tumbling out of the tank turrets, falling in the mud and racing off across the fields and the little green Spitfires going after them, diving low. Uniforms were something for the Germans. This was more like it – the zootsuits, as the German magazines scornfully called them, all dressed up and chewing gum. This was the way to stage an uprising against the Germans. To hell with uniforms, I went on listening. Just music now, no voice. Then it came again. My spine felt chilly this time. Maybe things were really bad in Prague. Maybe they'd blow up the whole city. I felt like fighting. The Old Town Hall was on fire, they said. The best place to be would be on Kobylisy Hill where you get a nice view of Prague, kind of an unusual one, and from up there the town looks grey and flat, just chimneys and little turrets still rising up above the flat mass. And now I could imagine columns of smoke rising up towards the rainy skies and the wind blowing and shifting the smoke, and the fires springing up all over the town as far as Vysehrad, and as dusk fell over the city, the fire burning brighter and brighter and huge flames licking at the Museum and the little towers and the Liben gas works, and the distance the fires burning, smaller and smaller, while black columns of smoke wave and twist towards the stars. Prague was in ruins and there I sat in an armchair and I had a funny feeling in my stomach and in my brain, too. And it was entirely unpleasant, either. So we weren't going to get by scathed after all. So we weren't as spineless and weak as some of us thought. We were going to have it like they'd had it in Stalingrad, in London, in Warsaw. Prague, too, is burning. I turned up the radio and the announcer began reporting excitedly that German tanks were approaching Prague from Benesov and then he said in Czech-accented English: 'Attention! Attention! German tanks are approaching Prague from Benesov. We need air support! Attention, Allied Air Force! We need air support!' That sounded great. Then he repeated in Russian, but I didn't understand that. And I could see the huge Typhoons and Thunderbolts with machine guns jutting out of their wings diving through the fine rain above the Benesov highway and blowing up the whole column of German tanks. I could just see those Tigers and Panthers burning and SS men

I felt fine. The room was warm and dim, the score for 'Yellow Dog Blues' lay open on the piano, lunch was over, and outside the window the flags hung limply in the rain. I sat that way for quite a while daydreaming about it all, and then a bit about Irena again, and all of a sudden the clock struck in its nice deep tone and it was nearly three. I'd have to go meet Lof. I was glad. It felt good now to put on a raincoat and leave the warm room and go out into the misty rain on a conspiratorial mission to the castle drive, while everybody else'd still be digesting lunch and waiting till things blew over. Setting off alone to prepare for the uprising. It was great. I went into the hall and put on my raincoat. The glass door into the kitchen was closed. Then it suddenly occurred to me that I ought to change my clothes. I still had on my best clothes and it was raining out. It'd be too bad to get them wet. I took off my raincoat again and went into my room. I took off my brown jacket and pants and opened the closet. I got out my everyday suit – a dark blue double-breasted pin-striped suit – and put it on. I carefully hung my best suit on a hanger and put it back in the closet. Then I went out into the hall again and opened the storage closet. It was called the maid's room actually, though we hadn't had a maid for a long time. But it really was a maid's room. At least nothing else would fit into it except a maid. It was terribly tiny and it didn't have a window, just sort of an airhole that opened on to the corridor, so it was almost completely dark inside. The maids must have gone crazy in there. It was like a dungeon in a castle. It didn't surprise me at all that our last maid had thrown herself in front of a train. Boy, living in a hole like that would drive me crazy, too. Maybe not to suicide, but I'd have given notice. Only that had been during the Depression and she'd found out she was pregnant and so she was in a pretty tight spot, I guess. I opened the shoe cupboard and took out a pair of my most beat-up shoes. I took off my good pair, stuck in the shoe trees, and put them away in the cupboard. Then I put on my old shoes and came out of the



closet. I put on my raincoat by the coatrack and fixed my hair in front of the mirror. Then I opened the kitchen door.

'Well, so long,' I said.

'Where're you going?' Mother asked.

'Over to Benno's probably, to listen to some records,' I said.

'Be careful, Danny. I wish you'd stay, though, just to be on the safe side today.'

'Don't worry.'

'Now listen to your mother, son. And be careful,' said Father from the couch.

'Sure. Don't worry. Good-bye,' I said.

'Good-bye, Danny,' Mother said.

'So long,' said Father.

I closed the door and went out in the corridor. I hurried down the stairs without getting stopped this time. Old Lady Strnadova was probably washing her dishes. As soon as I was out on the street, I headed towards Serpon's mansion. There were still clusters of people milling around on the streets, decked out in tricolours and cockades. Only it was raining, so a lot of them had stayed home and were just looking out the windows. Most of those who were still outside were young kids in raincoats, the same faces you saw out strolling around every Sunday. They must never eat lunch, since no matter when you go out they're almost always there. I hurried along and a thin rain drizzled on my head. It was chilly against my face and felt like at the seashore. I got into my part right away. I was hurrying through occupied Paris in the rain with important documents for the Intelligence Service. The rain drenched my face and I walked quickly down the street towards the square. It was practically empty. I crossed it and doffed my hat as I passed the church but made it look as if I was just adjusting my hat. I turned off the square, went past the drug store, and turned right at the loan association office towards Serpon's place. I soon saw it. It stood on a little elevation among a lot of rose beds which weren't in bloom yet. There was a high wall with spikes on top all around the whole property and behind there was a rock garden and a bit of French-style garden. There

was a huge iron gate which always reminded me of a cage in a zoo, and a little booth for the gate-keeper. I knew him. He had two boys who'd gone to grade school with me. He lived in the big house and I always envied him on account of the gate. He had a daughter, too, besides the two boys, and just recently his wife had had another child but it had died. A wide sandy driveway led from the gate up to the house and ended in front of an imposing-looking row of columns that supported the balcony. Above the columns the windows of the banquet hall were a grey gleam. It was a modern mansion, almost a palace, built in the 1930s. Inside, there were potted palms, a winter garden, a fountain, a ballroom and a music room, and lots of bedrooms and bathrooms. Lada Serpon had his own three-room suite on the top floor of the tower. There was a wonderful view of the town from there and you could see far beyond the frontier. Lada had a piano in his room and a phonograph and a huge ten-tube radio set. We used to go up there sometimes during the war, generally in spring, because the tower was flat on top and you could dance there at night, right under the moon, and since there wasn't any railing around it, it had a special kind of charm, as if you were dancing on the edge of the world. Lada Serpon was crazy about Irena, too, but she didn't care about him either, because he was as ugly as a Habsburg. I liked Lada. Now the windows in the mansion were dark in the rain. They stared boldly up at the next hill where the old castle was enthroned. Through the trees you could get only a small glimpse of the ramparts with their old gun emplacements, a couple of windows, and the turret. The hillside was steep so I saw the castle from a very sharp angle. Greyish-white clouds scudded low over the top of the turret, but the top itself stood there motionless.

The rain grew heavier and fell with a soft murmur on the trees in the drive. I turned up my collar and it made my neck feel cold. I quickly turned it down again. Why hadn't I had sense enough to turn it up when I first went out? Now I wouldn't be able to any more. I started off on the path that ran along the stone wall of Serpon's place. The path was filling up with puddles and I could already feel mud underfoot. It was



raining harder and by now it was almost a downpour. Lof quarters were all just a joke. You couldn't expect any help from up there. The whole thing was nothing but a joke. The trees, but the rain was coming down too hard and the boys were just playing war. A bunch of fools, that's all they weren't many leaves on the trees yet. I looked at my watch. Quarter past three. I was late. I'd have to wait here. I dawdled along up the drive. I could feel I was rapidly getting soaked and I could feel my cheeks getting hot. That was always a sign you were coming down with the flu. Damn fools! Why couldn't they fix a meeting in some better place? I could have kicked Prema in his teeth. And all the rest of them. What the hell do they need Lof for? Lof in particular and Black Mountain. There were dozens of villages all over the mountain, but no – he had to come here. Christ Almighty! Goddamn! I swore and whipped up my anger. The worst of it was that I had to stay put because I couldn't just walk off. I had to keep my idiotic promise. Prema set great store by that. Christ! I couldn't just drop the whole thing. And meantime Prema was sitting inside the warm warehouse with an electric light in the ceiling, oiling guns with the rest of the boys. And here I stood in the cold and wet, waiting for Lof who wasn't going to show up anyway. But I had to wait. A disgusting life. Nothing good ever lasted long. You climbed out of one mess only to stumble right into another. I was so mad I could have bawled.

I looked at my watch again. Twenty-five minutes to four. Ten more minutes. I decided to think about Irena. So I started thinking about her and it worked. Like now she was probably sitting at home in her bathrobe reading. She had a nice plaid bathrobe; I'd been at her place once when she'd been taking a bath. Her mother told me to sit down in an armchair in the living-room and left me there. But I could hear the splashing from the bathroom and the rush of the shower and I could imagine Irena naked and soapy all over and how she was rinsing off the soapsuds with the big sponge, how her pretty naked body was glistening with the water and how she was completely naked except for a red shower cap on her head, and I got so excited, sitting there in the armchair, that I had to cross my legs so if anybody came in they couldn't tell. And there I sat inspecting the gilded backs of the *History of the Czech Nation*, and collected works of Alois Jirasek, and Russian

I was cold. That crazy Lof still didn't come. I looked at my watch again and it was half past three. I decided I'd wait till quarter to four. Anyway, Prema and his Black Mountain he



Adventures by a local councilman, telling about his experiences in the Czech Legion, and then I looked at the artificial bananas and plums on the flowerstand by the window and the flourishing, thick-leaved rubber plant and some kind of green mess around it and at the various pictures and the bust of Jirasek on the bookcase and Kramar's\* autographed photograph and a big yellow female torso by Lebeda that Irena had bought in Prague once when she suddenly got interested in art. And then Irena had come out with her hair tied up in a kerchief, German-style, wearing that thin plaid bathrobe, and she walked, the bathrobe opened in front and you could see her suntanned thighs up as far as God knows where, and when she sat down, the bathrobe fell open and she left it like that for quite a while and I got a glimpse, but I couldn't get a good look so I had to stare like I was nailed to my chair and there wasn't anything I could do about it, and then she closed her bathrobe and crossed her legs and it was all over. I thought about that and I felt good. I forgot about the rain and about Lof.

When I finished thinking about Irena I looked at my watch and it was already after a quarter to four. I could leave now but I didn't feel like standing here until four o'clock either. It had been fun with Irena and maybe she'd think it over after all. Even if you can't talk to her about anything. But she's pretty. Awfully pretty. Prettier than the Queen of Württemberg. She's dumb, but then all girls are dumb. Girls just weren't put on earth for their wisdom and you've got to pay a price for everything in life. Like, in exchange for the pleasure of being with Irena, you also have to pay sometimes by being bored stiff. I didn't feel like leaving yet. Then I had an idea. I felt like looking down at the town from up here. Towards where Irena lives. At her house. I forgot about Lof, jumped off the porch step and headed across the courtyard through the rain. The narrow embrasures flashed past, one after the other, as I passed and went through the open gate into the second castle courtyard where there was a well. It was dim and I went up the stairs into a small stone courtyard surrounded by arcades on all sides with the base of the main tower rising from one corner. I went along a narrow passageway in the western gallery. There was no one around. It wasn't raining in here because the wind was blowing from the north and so the roof, supported by a row of sandstone columns, shielded the gallery from the rain. From the western gallery you could see all the way down to Karpon's mansion with a regular little lake on the flat top of the square tower and, below it, Koletovic's villa built in Alpine style on an artificial hill. Behind it was the swimming pool where Lucie went swimming in the summer time and where I sometimes went to sunbathe. Sokol Hall stood a bit to the left, white in the middle of a sea of shabby-looking little houses at the edge of town - New World, they called it - and the railroad tracks ran glistening alongside leading out from under the viaduct, and above, there was St Matthew's Church and the big yellow high school building.

Not a soul in sight. Not yet anyway. And Irena was sitting and reading in her little room with the desk and bookcase and armchair. I started back along the gallery and turned the corner. Somebody was sitting in the pergola in the middle of the gallery on the south side. I could see the edge of somebody's hat and the back of a green loden coat. I leaned against the stone balustrade and looked down over the town. I'd done that lots of times before. Black Mountain, the hillsides, the woods, the hospital, the Port Arthur, the commercial high school, the courthouse, the bridge, the county office building, and Irena's house behind it at the edge of the woods.

I could imagine the dim light inside and the armchair and the table set for supper. And me down there in that house with a paunch and how I'm eating. And Irena sitting opposite me and she's pretty and has a nice red mouth. I looked around and saw the same person still sitting in the summer house. I wondered who it was. One of the nobility, no doubt. Maybe it was the Queen of Württemberg, bidding farewell to Kostelec in the rain. I moved slowly towards the summer house. The person in the loden coat didn't move. I came closer and closer. Then I saw who it was. He was sitting there with Irena and they were necking. It was Zdenek. It was Zdenek and Irena. They were absolutely glued together and he'd been sitting



there kissing her the whole time I was looking out over town. 'Or else he decided he'd just skip the whole thing.'

I turned away and shivered. So that's the way things look reality. Just like that. I left. That was the way things stood then, and all those daydreams could go jump in the lake. hell with daydreams. That was Irena. And that's the way I stood with Irena. She wouldn't reconsider. I was absolutely calm. I was unhappy. Spurned – or whatever you call it. I'd like curling up in the dark under the blankets and eating my heart out. I didn't want anything around to take my mind off it, didn't want to see or hear anything, all I wanted to do was just eat my heart out. Boy, the way they'd been kissing each other! I could just imagine her wet mouth and saliva and her darting tongue and it got me all excited. And now all that was his. I'd never had it like that with Irena and never would. I just stand under her window and pretend to be her friend. That's all. I hurried through the little courtyard, then past the well into the second courtyard, past the stables and through the gate out into the drive. I walked fast and I tried not to think about it too much. The tree branches swayed and I suddenly felt a drizzle against my face. I loped past the wrought-iron gate of Serpon's mansion. Lof was nowhere to be seen. From the drive I headed straight for the loan association building. I wished I was already home. But I still had to go to the washroom on a corner of the table. house. Nuts. I decided I wouldn't go. I'd telephone Prema from Pilar's tavern. I went inside. The hallway was dark and full of kitchen smells. I used to go there every Wednesday for tripe soup when they still had tripe. Mrs Pilarova always let me use the telephone. I went into the taproom. The phone was beside the tap. I picked up the receiver and dialled Skocdopolno. My face was hot and I felt chilled, but it wasn't so bad number, 123. When Prema answered, I told him Lof hadn't come. 'That's bad,' said Prema. 'And you were at Serpon's place?' 'Sure I was. I waited there till half past three and then I walked up the drive towards the castle and back but he hadn't shown.' 'Well, I don't know. Probably something came up.'

'That's possible, too.' Prema was silent. 'Listen,' I said, 'is there anything else I can do for you this afternoon?' 'No. Why?' 'Otherwise I think I'll go home to bed, all right? I'm soaked and I want to be in shape for tomorrow.' 'Go on home, then. There's really nothing to do right now.' 'And ... listen,' I said. 'Yeah?' 'I'm supposed to come over tomorrow morning, right?' 'That's right.' 'And will you have that ... thing, that ... you know ... for me?' 'Don't worry. It'll be here.' 'Fine. I'll be there then.' 'All right.' 'Well, so long.' 'So long.' So. That was that. I hung up. Now back home and to bed and hell with everything. I stepped into the kitchen and laid a cloth on a corner of the table. 'Thanks, Mrs Pilarova,' I said, and grinned at her. 'You're quite welcome. Come in again,' she said. I opened the door and went out into the hall. A cat mewed and I could see its green eyes shining in the darkness. I went on down the street towards the square. It wasn't raining at all any more. My face was hot and I felt chilled, but it wasn't so bad any more since I could look forward to an afternoon in bed and was thinking about Irena and felt pretty good. And awful, too. I'd make myself some hot tea and take an aspirin and pull down the blinds. I hurried across the square. It was full of people again. It was Saturday afternoon and mothers were out with their baby carriages. I saw pretty Mrs Jurkova, Rosta Pitterman's sister, with her baby carriage and husband. She had nice wide eyes fringed with thick curly lashes. Her eyes looked



surprised and pretty and dumb. There were lots of flags hanging from the attic window as fast as he could. It looked as though the flag along Jirasek Boulevard. At Kaldoun's there was a terrible mess. A long piece of red and white macaroni. Away with that thing, fast. People to the ground. It was nearly sixty feet long. A real monster had been in a little too much of a hurry. Get rid of it, fast. Kaldoun's always had something unusual. Like that bronze statue of a naked Mercury that they had over their doorway. Wouldn't want to do anything to irritate the Germans. Have to keep this revolution safe. Everybody was playing it safe, all the only privately-owned statue like that in Kostelec. I hurried along and didn't pay any attention to people. Now all I wanted was to be alone, completely alone with myself and Irena. He watched the flag disappearing through the attic window

But just as I got back to our building, I heard somebody yelling. I stopped and looked over to where the noise was coming from. Some people were racing past the Hotel Granada, which stood on the corner. The Granada's manager was leaning out of one of the windows frantically trying wildly to yank the flagpole out of its holder. Finally he wrenched it out, then he

Pitterman was pulling his flag in through the window, somewhere. 'Los! Los!' yelled the officer. The poor soul in the attic struggled to work the flag loose. I hoped it was Mr Kaldoun himself. Fat, in his shirtsleeves and suspenders. It was probably the janitor though. Whoever it was, he wasn't getting any

over hand. He was in his shirtsleeves and wearing suspenders. 'Los!' yelled the officer, but the flag was stuck fast. The officer raised his pistol and fired a shot into the attic window. The shot made an awful racket and the revolver flashed. The red and white macaroni started tumbling back out of the attic window. Now it looked like a waterfall of cloth and it seemed to have no end. Either the guy in the attic had been shot or else he got scared and dropped the thing. That was more likely. That was it for sure. I hoped it was Mr Kaldoun. And that he got so scared he filled his pants. But if it wasn't Mr Kaldoun, it was probably just the janitor. The officer on the running board laughed and the car drove on. All the houses were flagless now and the street looked as if it had been swept clean. I ducked inside the door and peeked out through the window. The car drove past me, the soldiers sitting on the bumpers, stiff and stupid. They were holding their guns at the ready and they wore shiny capes of ersatz rubber. Their grey helmets glistened from the rain and water dripped off the edges. As the car went past, I noticed the muzzles of a couple of submachine guns sticking out the back window. There were two or more soldiers sitting inside and another behind, straddling the spare tyre. It must have been pretty uncomfortable. Probably he could feel a

'Los! Die Fahne weg!' he screamed if somebody wasn't hanging in a flag fast enough. The street in front of the car had emptied. Somebody was pulling Kaldoun's flag in through



bullet in his belly just like I had that morning. Except he was probably used to it by now. The car slowly moved on. I went inside. I got to our apartment and unlocked the door. As soon as I came into the hall, Mother ran out of the kitchen. She was frantic.

'Oh, Danny, thank heavens! I've been so frightened!'

'Why?'

'What was it? That shot?'

'That's all it was. Some German shot at Kaldoun's flag.'

'Was anybody hurt?'

'Hurt? No.'

'Thank goodness. Where were you, Danny? You should have gone out when things are like this.'

'Oh, I was over at Sepon's. Could you make me some tea?'

'You got all wet, didn't you?'

'Yes. I'd like to sweat it out.'

'You go right to bed. Otherwise you'll catch cold.'

'And you'll make some tea for me?'

'Right away.'

'Thanks,' I said, and went into my room. I took off the raincoat, counterpane and turned back the eiderdown quilt. Then I took off my shoes and set them out in the hall to dry. I undressed and dropped my clothes on the floor. I put on my pyjamas and laid my clothes over the chair. It felt good to have on a pair of dry pyjamas. My pants were sopping wet. I slid my feet into my slippers and took my pants into the kitchen. Mother was standing at the table. The tea kettle was on the hot plate. She turned to me.

'You're absolutely soaking, aren't you?'

'Yeah.'

'Hang your pants over the clothes-line.'

I tried to smooth a crease into the wet pants. They were wrinkled up at the bottom. When I picked them up, they made me shiver.

'Leave them, Danny,' Mother said. 'I'll iron them for you as soon as they're dry.'

'So I should just put 'em over the line?'

'Yes.'

The tea kettle started to hiss. I tossed my pants over the clothes-line. I shuddered again.

'Hurry up and get in bed, Danny. I'll bring you the tea,' Mother said.

'Thanks. I'll take it myself.'

Mother poured the water through a strainer into the cup.

'Do you want some rum in it?'

'Yes, please.'

Mother took the bottle of rum and measured out two spoonfuls. She still thought I was a little kid as far as my needs were concerned. Then she set the cup on a tin tray.

'Wouldn't you like a piece of sponge cake, too?' she asked.

'No, thanks. I'll just take an aspirin.'

'Yes, you do that, and cover up well. Do you want me to tuck you in?'

'No, I'm not going to sweat much. Just a bit.'

'You really ought to work up a good sweat.'

'No, I don't feel all that bad, Mother. I'll just pull down the blinds and sleep.'

'That's the best thing you can do. You're sure you don't want me to tuck you in?'

'No, thanks,' I said and smiled at her. Then I carried my tea out of the kitchen and into my room. I put the tea on a chair next to the bed, went over to the cupboard, opened it and took out a tube of aspirin, closed the cupboard, and opened the inside window. It was pouring outside again. A white curtain of rain veiled the river with a thin mist. I closed the window and pulled down the blinds. Now it was dark in the room and the window gleamed a yellowish brown. I went over to the door and closed it. I looked around. Tea, aspirin, blinds down, bed. I crawled into bed and propped two pillows behind my back so I could sit up. I took the tray with the tea and had a sip. The clock on the wall struck five. I took another sip of tea. It was awfully hot. I waited a while until it cooled and then I began to drink it. I left a bit in the bottom of the cup and set the tray and the cup on the chair. And now for Irena. I fixed up the pillows so I could lie down and pulled the quilt up



under my chin. Irena. But first I'd say my prayers. Dear Lord, please, and it went very fast. I rattled off the prayer and now I didn't matter that it wasn't very reverent. I didn't go back over it or repeat anything. And now for Irena. I thought about how I'd been at her place and she'd had on that plaid bathrobe and nothing underneath. I thought about that in every detail. And from there I went on to think about another time when I'd been at her place and Irena came into the hall in a blue Japanese kimono and held out her hand to me and I saw how her breasts pushed the kimono out in front and then it fell in a straight line down from her breasts and hung loose around the waist, and then Irena turned around and went into her room and she stumbled over the threshold and one of her slippers with a big blue pompon flew off, and she bent over to pick it up and as she did so her kimono opened in front a little bit so you got a glimpse of her naked skin, and how one winter we were walking down Black Mountain and Irena fell and her skirt flew up and she had awfully pretty knees and white boots. I thought about all this and started thinking about how one morning in tenth grade when I'd waited for her under the viaduct by Skocdopole's warehouse she came, and she was wearing her blue coat with the white trimming around the hood and when I looked at her from the back it fell in a nice way on her back, and I thought about that and about the beach and her bathing suit with the white string across her back and so on, about her hips in that swimming suit and the narrow valley between her breasts that I could look down into when she was lying beside me on her stomach getting a suntan. That was my life. That had been my life. Irena. And I'd got a kick out of it. Kostelec and the revolution and the boys and Irena and all. I'd got a terrific kick out of it and I'd enjoyed it all. Every last little thing. I burrowed down under the quilt and closed my eyes. A good, warm, snug feeling came over me. I forgot about how they were fighting in Prague and that the Old Town Hall was on fire. Maybe my cousins were dying on the barricades. Or more likely they'd crept down in the cellar of their house. I felt great. They were fighting in Prague. Sensational. I lay in bed and felt nice and warm. Everything was great. The whole world in general. And I was happy. Then I just felt good and comfortable without thinking about anything at all and then I fell asleep. And I slept for a long time and I dreamed about something, but I forget what.