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Jan Neruda

Prague Tales

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Prague Tales

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Prague Tales

Jan Neruda

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Introduction

I happened to be in London in August 1968 at the time of the Soviet invasion – that is, I was in my favourite foreign city and a country I greatly admire – yet I decided not to stay. I remember justifying my decision to return to Prague with a comment that must have sounded absurd: most of London's street names have no associations for me.

It was not absurd to me. We visit any number of cities in our lives. We have walked through thousands of streets, seen all kinds of sights. We are inveterate tourists. Yet home is still the place where the streets and buildings have more to say to us than the eye of any foreigner can perceive.

Neruda Street is not only the most beautiful street in Prague; it has every reason to bear our author's name. The entire district of Malá Strana – indeed, all Prague, or, rather, its shape and history in the not so distant past, the spirit of the place – comes down to us largely through Neruda's words and images.

Not that the images are necessarily positive. Having returned to Prague after the invasion, I was often called in for questioning by the police. The first time I went

bearing the opening sentence of Neruda's *Police Tableaux* in mind: 'Above the rear of Prague's Bartholomew Street Police Headquarters, a run-down, destitute, gloomy place . . .' A century after Neruda's death, Police Headquarters is still in the same run-down, gloomy street, and that first time – and many times thereafter – I found a peculiar sort of comfort in the idea that the premises have retained something of the old Austrian monarchy, that is, of the days of Neruda.

Why is it that while in the twentieth century we Czechs have enriched world literature with a number of major talents, so little is heard and known of our nineteenth-century writers?

Czech literature evolved from its medieval origins along the same lines as most European literatures, and by the seventeenth century it had given the world a true genius in the person of John Amos Comenius, author of *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* and one of the most important European philosophers of education. However, political developments during and after the Thirty Years' War caused a sharp break in the evolution of the Czech state and Czech culture. Comenius died in exile, a fate he shared with a large number of the intellectuals and noblemen of the time. For the next hundred and fifty years the centre of Czech political, social and therefore cultural life shifted from Prague to Vienna, and the Czech Lands underwent a gradual process of Germanisation. The Czech

element declined, above all in urban areas, and Czech was reduced to a language of the countryside.

Paradoxically, the revival of Czech national and linguistic awareness came about under the influence of German philosophy, and in particular of Johann Gottfried Herder's late eighteenth-century theory of the nation as the most natural social construct and of language as the natural manifestation of a nation's genius. The first generation of national reformers consisted chiefly of scholars. They sought to reinvigorate the language, compile grammars and dictionaries, and translate certain world classics into Czech. The second generation, which dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century, included writers whose goal was to use the newly revived language as a vehicle for their own works. In fact, however, they were more patriotic dilettantes than creative artists. They came mainly from provincial, plebeian backgrounds, the first in their families to receive an education. Moreover, they were still very few in number, as was the audience they could expect to read their texts.

Who wished to read Czech at the time? Who, indeed, was able to? Apart from a handful of enthusiastic teachers, priests and remnants of the Czech nobility, the Czech reading public consisted more often than not of the simplest of countryfolk interested in such popular reading materials as calendar texts, morally uplifting tales and comedies or farces. Any poetry they might have read bore the stamp of folklore or the broadside. In other words, it was a time of less

than gifted writers and less than demanding readers, the latter holding back the former rather than spurring them on to creative heights.

Naturally enough, literature gave rise to literary criticism, but the critics, coming from the same narrow circle as the writers, wrote with the impassioned dilettantism of the literature they set out to judge. Enthralled by the mere fact that a writer used Czech – especially to translate such great works as *Paradise Lost* or the plays of Aristophanes and Shakespeare – they tended to be fulsome in their praise. The critics, then, did as little as the readers to encourage the development of talent and genuine works of literature. When the first true poet appeared among them, they not only failed to appreciate him; they thoroughly lambasted him. Thus, at a time when Goethe, Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens, Shelley and Gogol were all active – that is, two hundred years after Shakespeare, one hundred years after Swift – Czech critics were celebrating run-of-the-mill authors of the lowest of popular genres.

Yet the first two generations of the Czech reformers did make certain inroads. First, they managed to bring the all but moribund Czech language back to life, enrich it with a number of classics of world literature, and thereby make at least an indirect statement about what constitutes a truly creative work. They also succeeded in making part of Czech society aware of what it means to be Czech and in greatly increasing the

numbers of those willing to speak and think in Czech and therefore read and study the language.

One of the major tools of this consciousness-raising process was the press, the sole mass medium of the day (if a circulation of several thousand can be called a 'mass' medium). The reformers attached particular importance to it, hoping it would both propagate the ideas they so fervently advocated and educate a public they – only too rightly – found backward, stagnating on the periphery of Europe. Given that the Czechs had no state of their own and that Parliament met in Vienna (where the political life of the empire was to all intents and purposes concentrated), the press represented the only tribune where writers, poets and politicians might formulate their views, objectives and demands.

Thus, the mid-nineteenth century – to be more precise the early 1860s, when the political situation became more liberal – saw the rise of a series of political, cultural, literary and 'family' periodicals, and most recognised literati considered it their patriotic duty to contribute to them. This was the time that established the Czech tradition of viewing writers and even poets as more than literary personalities, as political personalities, creators of national policy, potential leaders. That this tradition has continued into the twentieth century is clear from the life and works of perhaps the greatest Czech writer of the century, Karel Čapek, and from the fact that at the very end of the century a

writer, Václav Havel, has been deemed worthy of serving as head of state.

One did not stick one's neck out in early nineteenth-century Czech society. For proof we have only to look at the tragic ends of Neruda's immediate predecessors. Karel Hynek Mácha, a Romantic poet who bears comparison with Europe's finest, died at the age of twenty-six, unrecognised, misunderstood, alone. Karel Havlíček Borovský spent his last years in exile, abandoned and all but forgotten, returning home only to die; he was thirty-five. Božena Němcová died at the age of forty-two, ostracised by 'high society' and reduced to such poverty that literary historians have speculated that the cause of death was sheer exhaustion.

Jan Neruda, who was born in 1834, belonged to the next generation, and his fate and the fate of his kind was less dramatic, less tragic. His father was an ex-serviceman and a remarried widower. Neruda recalled late in life, with characteristic sarcasm,

> Father *had to* remarry because his first marriage failed to produce anything, as we say, particularly distinctive . . . He may have carried about a marshal's cane in his pack, I don't know, but he certainly never took it out. For having helped to defeat Napoleon at Leipzig and occupy France as far as Lyon (yes, really!) he was granted the position of porter or supplier at various barracks,

> which position rewarded the honest man so richly that my resourceful mother had to work here and there as a servant to keep them solvent.

Like most Czech writers of the time, therefore, he was of humble origin, but unlike them (with the exception of Mácha) he was born in Prague. What is more, he was born in the magnificent, quintessentially Prague-like part of the city, Malá Strana (literally, the Small Side), amid the stately mansions of the aristocracy and the solid dwellings of the craftsmen, tradesmen and army of officials without which the administration of both Bohemia and its capital was unthinkable. He grew up in what is now Neruda Street. Because it climbs from Malá Strana Square to the Castle, it was the route Czech kings took to their coronations and the scene of numerous processions. Neruda was thus a true product of the city, a Prague patriot, and he immortalised his beloved Malá Strana and its denizens in his finest work.

Poor though his family was, Neruda received a decent education – in Prague's German schools. Moreover, he received his first experience as a journalist on the German paper *Tagesbote aus Böhmen*. Ironically, Neruda's generation of writers, which set itself the goal of freeing not only Czech literature but Czech society in general of its German yoke, found its main inspiration in the stalwarts of *Junges Deutschland,* the Young Germany movement: Heinrich Heine, Ludwig

Borne, Karl Gutzkow and Jean Paul were the favourites.

Still, at the age of thirteen he began attending lectures on the Czech language ('We sat there piously, as if in church; we were in rapture, in bliss') and went on to the finest Czech-language educational institution of its day, the Akademické grammar school, a centre of legendary teachers and – as the future soon proved – no less legendary pupils. There Neruda started writing his first poems and articles.

Later he studied law at his father's request, then abandoned it in favour of philosophy. Although he was unable to complete his studies for want of funds, philosophy may not entirely have suited his active nature. In any case, after trying to find a niche for himself first as an official, then as a teacher, he turned to the *Tagesbote* and was soon able to earn a living as a Czech journalist.

Because he made his entry into Czech belles-lettres with a volume of poetry (bearing the gloomy title of *Cemetery Flowers* and the contents to match) and because he subsequently published a long pamphlet in verse and four more collections of poetry (a fifth appearing posthumously), Neruda – an outstanding writer of feuilletons and fiction – was known and celebrated primarily as a poet. But remnants of the Romantic tradition also played their part: the Romantics placed poetry above all forms of literature and a halo above the poet's head. Even the most

accomplished prose writer could mount Parnassus only as a poet.

One way of understanding a work of art is to seek out the sources that inspired it, and they in turn are connected with the creator's personality, traumas, interests, fate.

Working years ago on a study of Karel Čapek, who used Neruda as a model, I compared Čapek's life with what might seem the incomparably different lives of two writers roughly contemporary to him: Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek. The only link I could find, in fact, was that none of them had a lifelong companion, none had a family life. Most of Kafka's works were stimulated by this lack; it sent Hašek from one Prague pub to the next or on endless walking tours through the countryside; it was one of the reasons why Čapek bound his life so tightly to that of the First Czechoslovak Republic.

Neruda's fate was quite similar, but while the causes of the other writers' lonely existence are not difficult to pinpoint (Kafka's fear of women compounded by the anxiety that marriage would prevent him from writing, Čapek's illness and Hašek's preference for male camaraderie), Neruda's bachelor existence, which weighed particularly heavily on him towards the end of his life, has no obvious explanation. There were a number of women in his life, and although he had what might be called two tragic loves (the first and possibly greatest love of his life was the well-

known Czech novelist Karolina Světlá, who eventually refused to violate convention and leave a husband she did not love; the second died before Neruda could propose marriage), the others seemed to stymie him. After the age of forty he began to blame a series of illnesses for ageing him physically and psychically before his time. The only discernible motive for his solitude was a rather clinging relationship with his mother, whom he loved dearly and celebrated in some of his finest verse.

Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that he filled the lacuna in his emotional life with a love for the Czech people as a whole. He more or less said as much in a speech thanking friends for their kind words on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday:

> We often lament having no friends or too few. Why this lament? It is completely gratuitous. We need no other friends than work and a love for our country. Work is an honest friend: honour her and she will never leave you. Likewise our love of country: there can be no nation so low that such a love cannot raise it up to victory. Thus the Czech nation, a nation of honest, tireless labour, will emerge victorious.

Here we find the values Neruda stood for: honest work, the concept of the nation, the basic principles of liberal democracy (for which he fought all his life), and finally the ideal of a socially just society (which led him over and over to bring the socially disadvantaged

and their problems to the attention of his readers, but which he never allowed to erupt into the revolutionary rabble-rousing or sink into the sentimental pathos of so many of his contemporaries).

For Neruda as for his time, however, the concept of the nation took priority. He served it with his work, and parts of his journalistic and even poetic output are marked by this bias. Not, however, the pinnacle of his fictional output, the stories translated here as *Prague Tales*.

Even though the tales are pure fiction, Neruda was first and foremost a journalist or, to be more precise, a practitioner of the very distinctive journalistic genre known as the feuilleton. The feuilleton consists of a short sketch reflecting everyday experiences and everyday concerns. It had its origins in France early in the nineteenth century, but soon enjoyed enormous popularity throughout Europe. Neruda cultivated it with great tenacity, developing it, refining it, expanding its thematic boundaries. He used the feuilleton as a vehicle for parliamentary reports, for book, theatre, music and art reviews, for travel notes, feature stories, miniature portraits of the famous and of vagabonds, servant girls, draymen, beggars and pub crawlers, for gossip columns, polemics and essays on current events or the latest scientific advances.

Over the years he cultivated the persona of a detached observer bringing together the most disparate of elements, their only link being his commentary,

the fact that he deemed them worthy of interest. The result was a fascinating collage still admirable for its diversity, caustic *aperçus* and unexpected juxtapositions. And because his goal was to instruct as well as entertain, he demonstrated a range of knowledge far beyond the journalistic norm. A series of feuilletons on the ballet, for example, includes scores of references to the history of dance from the classical period to the present, though here too aphoristic irony figures prominently. But he remains most effective and most lively for us in those passages where he is least literary, where he describes his native city and the people and mores of his time, giving free rein to his keen eye and wit.

Sharp observation and precise formulation were obsessions with Neruda, obsessions of which he was well aware. 'As my father lay dying,' he wrote in a letter to his first fiancée,

> I lay in a bed next to him, sleeping perhaps a bit too soundly for a son. At one point I awoke and saw he was nearing the end. I bent over him; he could scarcely breathe. I thought my heart would burst; my throat was so dry and tight I feared I would choke. Yet I kept studying how a man dies. You could never be happy with a devil like me.

What Neruda presents as a cynical confession is in fact proof of a writer's obsession – the desire to know and communicate or, rather, to know everything so as to communicate with the greatest degree of precision.

Journalism promotes stereotypes, and Neruda, who at certain points in his career published up to five feuilletons a week, was not beyond adopting a pose or stance that his readers enjoyed and had come to expect of him but that went against his principles, feelings or character.[1] This may explain why, as he grew older and more isolated, suffering not only debilitating physical ailments (at forty he had surgery for a malignant tumour) but deep depressions as well, he tried to maintain a smile in his articles no matter how biting or bitter their criticism. But it also shows how strong he was and how devoted to his work, his mission. (On the day he died, 22 August 1891, he wrote to an editor apologising for being late with an article – he was 'feeling poorly' – and only hours before his death he was fretting over what to give the editor in its stead.)

Neruda was without a doubt one of the major figures in nineteenth-century Czech society. He had an opinion on all its most basic issues, an opinion eagerly awaited by the reading public. Altogether he published 2,260 feuilletons, about ten thousand manuscript pages. They make up the largest segment of his collected works, which number forty-one ample volumes. Given the broad sweep of subject matter covered by the feuilletons, their diversity of genre is not surprising. It ranges from the essay or critical piece to reportage and the short story. The border between certain of the feuilletons included in his *Prague Tableaux* and certain of the *Prague Tales* is not easily established, nor indeed does it need establishing. Suffice it

to say that by the mid-1870s, when *Prague Tales* appeared, Neruda was both the leading Czech 'political columnist' and a greatly admired poet. He had reached the age when writers are at the peak of their creative powers, yet his mother's death and the subsequent self-imposed isolation caused him great distress, and he felt the need to return to the halcyon days of his childhood – a time when everything lay open before him, when the most minor episodes could be construed as events and every chance encounter with the people and things of Malá Strana gave rise to fresh insights – and to write a book dealing with them, a book that turned out to be his only unified work.

Altogether, the *Prague Tales* represent the culmination of Neruda's experience as a writer – the experience of a keen observer of people and the details of everyday life, the experience of a poet and journalist who knows how to smile, but who also suffers with those who suffer around him; indeed the *Prague Tales* tower over all Czech fiction that came before them.

Journalism taught Neruda stylistic diversity and the value of a punch line, but it also made him realise that the best way to reach his readers was not by haranguing and preaching but by telling a story. And that is what he does. If he shows a preference for the first-person narrator, he does so to give his stories a greater sense of authenticity. In any case, his narrator is nearly always an onlooker merely recording what he sees. Moreover, the incidents he records are invariably anecdotal, that is, they provide only a short-term account

of what are in fact long-term, deeply rooted problems. Thus, he tells of two men who sit year after year at the same table, linked only by their eerie silence, of a young woman betrayed by practical jokers or a young man betrayed by his pregnant beloved, of a shopkeeper and a beggar who battle against the prejudices of their conservative milieu. The tension between the apparently anecdotal nature of the stories and the undeniably tragic nature of the lives underlying them is one of the mainstays of Neruda's narrative art.

Realism was the prevailing school in Czech literature at the time, and for all his stylisation Neruda remains a Realist. What is new in *Prague Tales* is, on the one hand, its urban setting and, on the other, its author's refusal to impose a message, a moral. Critics were so perplexed that they responded with silence; readers were immediately taken with the work, and it has since been reprinted scores of times. To this day it is one of the most popular – and most read – works of Czech literature.

During my first visit to London, I sought out the places I knew from my beloved Dickens, and when I found the street where Mr Pickwick lived I felt – if only for the moment – at home. Read Neruda and visit Malá Strana in Prague and you too will feel at home.

Ivan Klíma

A Week in a Quiet House

1 In Night Clothes

We have the feeling we are in a completely enclosed space surrounded by sheer darkness. There is not the slightest chink to let in the night. The dark is so profound that if we imagined for an instant we saw something bright before our eyes, it would be nothing but the red nimbus of our thoughts.

When the senses are strained, they distinguish even the most minute signs of life. Our sense of smell informs us that the room is imbued with a grease-laden atmosphere, a jumble of effluvia: in the forefront we discern the odour of fir or pine wood, then tallow and lard, and lastly dried plums, cumin, brandy, garlic and the like. The tick of a clock strikes our ears – an old wall clock, most likely, with a long pendulum tipped by a thin and doubtless slightly twisted brass disc, for the pendulum occasionally falters in its monotonous recital and the disc gives a feeble quiver. But as even the faltering recurs at fixed intervals, it too forms part of the monotony.

Meanwhile, we hear sleepers breathing. We know there is more than one of them, because the sounds of their breathing intermingle, never quite falling together, one dying down while the other grows in intensity, one faltering like the pendulum of the clock while the other wheezes on. Then, from a different quarter, comes a sudden deep, stentorian breath, as if marking a new chapter of sleep.

Now the clock too takes a sudden whirring breath, and the pendulum seems to move more softly. One of the sleepers stirs, rustling the blanket; the wooden frame of his bed gives a creak.

The clock whirs again – once, twice, in quick succession – its voice rich and metallic. It is followed immediately – once, twice – by a dark-timbred cuckoo. The sleeper stirs again. From the sound of it he is sitting up in bed, removing the blanket. Now a foot grazes the edge of the bed; it swishes into a slipper; now both slippers are on. The figure stands and takes a few cautious steps. Then it stops, one hand groping along a wooden surface. Something rattles. A box of matches, no doubt.

A match scrapes several times; several puffs of phosphorescent smoke flare up. Then comes the sound of a stick splintering and the figure muttering. The scraping resumes, and at last a flame erupts and throws its light across a nightgown. Just as the flame seems ready to flicker, a bony old hand holds it up to a glass vessel of water and oil with a black wick floating on the surface in a cork. The wick lights up like a tiny star;

the match falls to the floor. The star suddenly grows larger, showing an elderly woman yawning and rubbing her sleep-filled eyes.

She is standing by a table next to a darkly varnished wood partition that divides the room in two. Since the light from the lamp does not reach beyond the partition, we see only a part of the room, but our sense of smell has not deceived us: we are in a grocery. The room clearly serves as both living quarters and shop. And as grocer's shops go it is stocked rather well, sacks of staples lining the floor, boxes and baskets stacked along the walls, and braids and clusters hanging from the ceiling.

The woman shivered in the chill of the night. She picked up the lamp and set it, down on the counter next to some jars of fresh and clarified butter just below the scales and the strings of garlic and onions. Then she sat at the counter, drawing her knees to her chin, opened a drawer and took out a box containing threads, a tiny pair of scissors and miscellaneous scraps of material. She removed it all and delved to the bottom of the box, where some papers and books lay buried. Passing over the papers, which were covered with figures, she opened one of the books. It was a dream book, the 'great' dream book. Soon she was utterly absorbed in turning pages. She stopped and read a bit, gave a yawn, but went on reading.

All that could be heard from the other side of the partition now was the even breathing of a single

sleeper; the second, awakened either by the noise or the glimmer of light, was stirring in his bed.

'What's going on there?' a wheezy old-man's voice suddenly grumbled.

The woman made no reply.

'Anything wrong, woman?'

'No, no. Stay in bed,' the woman answered with a yawn. 'I'm just cold.'

'Then what are you doing in there?'

'I had a dream about my poor dead father. I'd have forgotten it by morning. It was beautiful. Like nothing I've ever dreamed before. Lord, it's cold – and June, too!' She went back to her reading with a shake of the head.

There was a moment of silence.

'What time is it?' asked the voice from behind the partition.

'Past two.'

The breathing of the third sleeper was becoming less regular, the loud talk having disturbed his slumber.

'Come back to bed, will you, and let's go to sleep! All you can think of is your lottery!'

'Really, now! A person can't get a minute's peace here. Leave me alone and go to sleep.'

The breathing behind the partition ended in a mighty sigh: the sleeper in the third bed was now awake.

'That no-good son of mine stays out till midnight,' the old man went on, 'and two hours later I'm woken up by the lottery! What a life!'

'Leave me alone, will you? I work my fingers to the bone, and what do I get for it? Your lip, that's what. Well, how about trying it on your son for a change? I'm sick and tired of it all.'

'You try if you're so smart!' the man retorted. 'You try talking sense into that layabout.'

'What is it this time, Dad?' asked a young man's voice.

'Quiet! Not a word out of you, you layabout!'

'But I don't see – '

'There's nothing to see, you layabout!'

'But – '

'That's enough out of you, you hear?'

'Oh, he'll go on for ever,' said the woman, yawning again. 'Some son we've got there! A real comfort.'

'Son? He's no son! Stealing the best years of our lives!'

'Stealing in my sleep?'

'Not another word, you smart alec!'

'A real handful!'

'A real hooligan.'

'Layabout!'

The young man, still in bed, started whistling 'O Matylda!'

'Listen to that, will you! Making fun of us to boot!'

'God will send His wrath upon him,' said the woman, writing the numbers 16, 23 and 8 in chalk on the partition. 'We'll live to see it too, and then we can die in peace.' She put away the box, blew out the light

and trudged back to bed. 'He'll rue the day, all right, but it will be too late . . . Will you stop it!'

The young man stopped whistling.

'You'll do anything to bring us back! Dig up our graves with a pin! With a pin, I tell you!'

'Forget your pins, woman, and go to sleep. I need my rest.'

'It's all my fault, of course. What have I done to deserve this, O Lord?'

'You'll be the end of me, the two of you!'

'Like father like son.'

'People are at their worst in the dead of night,' the young man observed.

'What's that?'

'Who knows? He's always got a wisecrack up his sleeve.'

'Let's tip the wardrobe over on him or throw him out – yes, throw him out on the spot!'

'Will you stop it now! This is hell on earth!'

The old man muttered something; the old woman muttered something back. The young man lay silent.

The muttering and sputtering went on for a time, then gradually died down. The old woman fell asleep; the old man twisted and turned a bit, then fell asleep as well. The young man intoned 'O Matylda' again, this time in a soft bumblebee hum, but fell asleep before reaching the end.

The pendulum swished on through the grease-laden air. There was no other sound but the breathing of

the three sleepers. Their breaths intermingled, yet the sounds never quite fell together.

II Most of the House Begins To Stir

The June sun had cast its rays on the courtyard for quite some time before the inhabitants began to stir. Despite the din of heavy carts reaching the courtyard through the passageway and over the roofs from the street, the first steps still reverberated as loudly as in a vault. One by one, as if each were waiting for her predecessor to disappear, a number of women emerged from the flats, bareheaded and dishevelled or with shawls drawn low over foreheads to shield sleepy eyes from the sun. Bedraggled servants all, they wore loosely fastened dresses and floppy, down-at-heel shoes, and carried jugs that were either empty or newly filled with milk.

Gradually things grew livelier. White curtains vanished from windows; a window opened here and there. Figures appeared, looking up at the sky and Petřín Hill and turning back to comment on the lovely day to other members of the household. People greeted one another on stairways and balconies with a 'Good morning'.

A tall man with a blotchy red face and unruly grey hair appeared in the first-floor window of the front part of the house near the street. Resting his weight

on the window ledge, he leaned out so far that his shirt opened to reveal a powerful chest still wrapped in flannel despite the June sun. He glanced over at the window next door, but found its curtains drawn. Then he leaned back and said into the room, 'It's not yet seven.'

At that moment, however, the neighbouring window flew wide open, and another man, equally tall though younger, came into view. He had black hair carefully combed in a decent, sober manner that suggested it varied not an iota from one day to the next. His face was round and clean-shaven, yet somehow lacking in expression; his body was swathed in an elegant grey dressing gown. He was polishing the lenses of a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles with a yellow silk handkerchief. He breathed on the lenses one last time and wiped the mist away. Putting the glasses on, he turned in our direction. Behind the lenses his face, previously so expressionless, took on a more definite character, as is often the case with short-sighted people. It was a kindly face, the eyes shining with a cheery, affable glow, though there could be no doubt that the face had been looking out at the world for a good deal longer than forty years. And were we to look closely, we could be practically certain it was the face of a bachelor. The faces of priests and bachelors are recognisable even in mechanical reproductions.

The bachelor made himself comfortable in the window seat, which had a snow-white, exquisitely

embroidered cushion. He gazed up at the blue sky and glanced over at the brilliant green of Petřín Hill, the jubilant morning mirrored in his face. 'The beauty of it!' he murmured. 'I really must get up earlier.'

All at once his eye fell on a second-floor window in the rear part of the house. Though shut, the window was clear and transparent, and he caught a glimpse of a woman's dress. The bachelor's smile brightened. 'Of course,' he murmured again, 'Josefinka is up and about in the kitchen.'

His right hand moved slightly, causing a ray of bright light to stream from the large gem on one of its fingers and bringing his attention back to his own person. He twisted the ring until the gem was firmly ensconced above the knuckle, gave his fine shirt cuffs a quick tug, and gazed with evident satisfaction at his plump, alabaster hands. 'There's no harm in their getting a bit of sun,' he murmured. 'It's perfectly healthy.' And he raised his right hand to his nose as if wishing to convince himself of his health by smelling it.

A door on the opposite balcony opened, and out came a pretty girl of eighteen or so. She was morning personified. Her figure was graceful and slender. The dark, thick curls cascading down her neck were caught up in a simple velvet ribbon. Her face was a perfect oval with bright blue, guileless eyes, rosy cheeks, a silken complexion and tiny dark-red lips – the whole giving a most charming impression, if not quite excluding the suspicion that certain features were less

than classically regular. Yet where was the slight irregularity to be found? Surely not in the dainty, exquisite ears, ears made to be kissed, though adorned by only small, modest silver earrings. Apart from the earrings she wore no jewellery. True, a thin black band hung round her white neck, but whatever pendant may have hung from it lay hidden between her budding breasts. Her dress – bright, with narrow stripes – was fastened high at the neck; its simplicity of cut and colour had a charm all its own.

She was carrying a brown jug with a tin lid.

'Good morning, Josefinka!' a sonorous tenor voice called out.

'Good morning, Doctor!' Josefina replied, looking over at the window with an amiable smile.

'What have you got in the jug?'

'Beef broth. From yesterday. I'm taking it to Miss Žanýnka. She's not well.'

'Žanýnka? Can't say I'm surprised. It must be like a dungeon down there. From one year to the next she never so much as opens a window, and then there's that horrible dog. Barking and howling the whole night again. Time to call in the dog catcher.'

'How can you say such thing!' Josefina exclaimed. 'She'd go mad with grief!'

'What's wrong with her, anyway?'

'Age,' Josefina replied sadly on her way to the winding staircase.

'A kind soul, that Josefinka,' the Doctor said to himself, fixing his glance on the first landing and then,

once she had passed it, on the entrance from the stairs into the courtyard.

Josefina crossed the courtyard, went up to one of the doors and tried to open it. It was locked. She rattled the handle and knocked on the door, but there was no sign of movement within.

'Rap on the window,' the Doctor advised from above.

'That won't help,' came a voice at the steps that led into the courtyard from the street. 'You've got to pound, not rap, and Josefinka here hasn't got it in her. Wait, let me have a go.' And in two bounds a twenty-year-old youth was down the steps and at Josefina's side. He was wearing a light grey summer suit, and his bare head was a mass of black ringlets; he had well-defined features and a lively eye.

'Yes, please do, Mr Bavor,' Josefina begged.

'First let's see what's under the lid,' the young man teased, reaching out in Josefina's direction.

'Hm!' said the Doctor from his station on high, but calmed down when he saw the girl dodge the young man lithely.

'I'll do my own knocking, then.'

But the young man was already standing by the window, drumming at it with his fingers. The only response was a shrill bark, after which all was quiet again. They waited a while, but when no further sign of life was forthcoming the young man moved over to the other window and pounded on the frame with

all his might. This time the dog's bark was long and loud, but tapering off to a piercing wail.

'She'll be furious with us.'

'Never mind,' said the young man, banging again. Then he leaned his ear against the window frame and listened carefully. All he could hear was the dog whimpering.

Meanwhile, the racket had roused the entire house. The tall man with the blotchy red face looked out again, this time accompanied by the heads of two women, one middle-aged, the other young. The tall figure of Josefina's mother emerged on the balcony across the way; hobbling after her came the hunchbacked form of Josefina's ailing elder sister. Immediately below them stood a group of three people: a balding man, half-clothed, a woman about his age, also half-clothed, and a girl of nineteen or twenty, her body covered only by a petticoat and a carelessly draped shawl, her hair in curl papers.

There were also two plainly dressed women hurrying down the steps from the street.

'You stay in the taproom, Márinka!' the smaller of them, an agile figure, called back into the passageway. 'And don't let anybody in!'

In the other, taller woman we recognise our nocturnal interpreter of dreams from the previous chapter. Perhaps her crisp, white bonnet becomes her; perhaps all people look and are milder by the light of day. In any case, her whole appearance now seems perfectly pleasant.

'What's going on here, Václav?' she said to the young man.

'Miss Žanýnka seems to have died on us. I'll try knocking one last time.'

He pounded with all his might.

'It's no use, Mr Bavor,' the Doctor called out. 'You'll have to go for a locksmith. Quickly! I'll be right down.'

Young Bavor immediately disappeared.

Questions and answers resounded from all sides, everyone talking at once, though in subdued tones. The Doctor had barely appeared in the courtyard in his walking clothes and told the petrified Josefina she could put her jug down when young Bavor returned with an apprentice locksmith.

The lock was soon removed and the door no longer barred their way, yet for a moment they stood motionless. Finally Václav pulled himself together, stepped in bravely, and was followed at once by the Doctor, while the women crowded into the doorway.

The large room was dark and gloomy. The windows opening on to the courtyard and Petřín Hill were thickly curtained and let in only the dimmest trace of light. The air was stale, all must and mould. The ceiling was hung with large, black, dust-laden cobwebs, the grey walls with dark paintings wreathed by ancient, grimy, artificial flowers. There was no lack of implements, but they were all extremely old and outmoded and showed no sign of having been used for years. On the bed they saw two piteous, emaciated

hands, a desiccated, hairless head sticking out from under a dirty yellow coverlet, and a pair of faded eyes staring glassily upwards. An ugly, shaggy old dog bounded from the headboard to the foot, barking desperately at the intruders.

'Quiet, Azor!' Václav said under his breath, as if afraid to inhale the air.

'She must be dead,' the Doctor said gravely, 'or the dog wouldn't be howling.'

'Yes, she's gone to meet her Maker all right,' Mrs Bavor stammered, a large tear running down her cheek, 'and may God forgive her her sins and us our iniquities. Pray for us, Mother of God!'

'When a wedding follows fast on a funeral,' the small innkeeper's wife said to a still petrified Josefina, 'the bride will have a happy marriage.'

From a deathly white Josefina flushed bright red, then grew pale again. She turned and withdrew without a word.

'The first thing to do is get the dog out of the way,' the Doctor said, moving back a few paces. 'We don't want it to bite anyone. It might have the dead woman's germs on its teeth.'

'That won't take long,' said Václav, advancing towards the corpse's frenzied guardian.

Even though the dog knew all the faces surrounding it, it grew more and more frantic. Barking vociferously, it bounded back to the head of the bed as Václav approached it with soothing words. He reached out to the coverlet with his left hand and just as the dog