

The Demon Barber of Prague

(A Tragedy in One Act)

(The barber, Mr Špachta, is in full flow. His victim has been thoroughly soaped and Mr Špachta has set about shaving him with all due ceremony. He chats to his customer as he works)

'So now the Turks are in for it at last. Those Turkish so-and-so's have pushed further and further and at last the Eyeties have said: "That's far enough!" Head right back, Your Honour, if you would be so kind. We old soldiers, Your Honour . . . it's just a little scratch, Your Honour: the lazy devil has forgotten to soap that little bristly bit there. Head back, Your Honour, that's it . . . We old soldiers know a thing or two about war. The Eyeties are very well armed, Your Honour and the Turks won't want to be far behind. I just hope Serbia doesn't get involved, Your Honour; it's all boiling up just now, down in the Balkans. It was nothing, Your Honour, just a wart. The thing to do with them is to cut them off with the razor and they won't grow again. The Great Powers won't like it, Your Honour. It's a powder-keg, the Balkans; all of a sudden, it can go off "Bang!" No, no, Your Honour, the skin's not broken; it was just one of those little pimples. You're much better nipping them off than squeezing them out. And you see, Your Honour, perhaps the Hungarians will open the border and let the Serbian cattle in, just so as the Serbs don't sell them to the Turkish army. But they won't do that. The best thing would be if the Turks died of hunger, but if they can't manage that, they'll drive the camels after the army. That's the way I see it, Your Honour. You've got to play it canny with the Turks. They're a fly lot, them Turks: they've given up Tripoli now, but they'll withdraw into the interior and get together with the Arabs and start a guerilla war, and then there'll be some cut and thrust - oh no, Sir, that wasn't a cut, just some little insect: can't leave that there. It'll be tough, Your Honour, a guerilla war like that; a lot of blood will flow. Oh no, Your Honour, you mustn't think that, it wasn't part of the lip, just a little bit of a cold-sore

that I've shaved off and that's a very good thing, Sir, believe me. You must have had a bit of a scare during the night, Your Worship, and who wouldn't feel scared these days? And if war breaks out right across Europe, there'll be cold-sores appearing all over the place and it will be terrible, Your Honour: brothers will be butchering each other . . . don't worry, Your Honour, just a slip of the razor, we'll soon stop the bleeding . . . there! all back to normal again! If only the Great Powers could say that, eh? I don't know what's got into this razor today, Your Honour; it's as if it wanted to go and fight against the Turks. Like quicksilver it is, and sharp with it. Believe me, Your Honour, if I didn't have a family, I'd be off to fight the Turks myself. And that's not because they're unbelievers. Nobody gives a monkey's about that nowadays, you can believe what you like. It's because they're Turks. They're filth, them Turks; just look at the Turks in Prague, Your Honour, look at the trousers they wear: it's enough to give you the shivers. And then, when instead of the knicknacks they sell, they stick a long knife into their belt and then a short one and then a pistol and then another pistol and one of those *khanjars*, those swords of theirs and you bump into one and he comes at you with all that lot . . . Your Honour, Your Honour, it's only a little piece of skin gone; just got to finish shaving that bit. It's no fun and games tangling with Turks; they're like dragons, the lot of them. And the Eyeties are like wild men: God help them all when the balloon goes up! It'll be a right dust-up, Your Honour. Oh my God! We'll soon put it right, Your Honour, believe me, it was only another of them beasties. It had to come off, Your Honour, there was nothing I could do but cut it away. Oh, and did you hear, Your Honour, that the Turks have cut the Eyeties off from the sea around Tripoli? They're sending the *bashibazuks* in; a right gang, they are . . . Just turn your head sideways, Your Honour, we're just going to shave under the nose now. Well, Your Honour, the Eyeties aren't hanging back either; they're sending in one regiment after another. But the Arabs, Your Honour, they're joining up with the Turks; they have the same religion and they're glad of the chance of a slash and a stab . . . For Heaven's sake, Your Honour, don't faint on me! Josef, just sprinkle some water on the gentleman and wipe the blood away from his nose . . . There now, Your Honour, everything's all right again. It wasn't the tip of your nose, just a wart. You had a wart on the end of your nose, Sir, a birthmark perhaps, and that had to go. Why, it was disfiguring Your Honour's face. Oh, and I mustn't forget: the Eyeties will have their hands full against the Turks when the

Arabs have risen against the Rumanians. The Arab, Your Honour, is a worse bastard than the Turk in my opinion; cut off your head, he will . . . Josef, give the gentleman a sprinkle! It's nothing, Your Honour, just a bit of skin, just a bit off the top. Skin's a nuisance when it won't give, so off with it, I say! I'll run off to Tripoli, on my soul I will! There now, Your Honour. Josef, bring some water! Now then, Your Honour, I'm going to give you a good wash, and then shave over again. No, really, Your Honour, I've got to, you've got to be done again . . . give me that new razor, Josef! What do you think, Your Honour . . . head well back now . . . who'd have thought the blood would start to flow again? No, Your Honour, I just caught that old wound; I'm very careful, I don't want any dissatisfied customers . . . you know, Your Honour, the whole world's turned upside down today. It doesn't matter where you look; there's rebellion everywhere and there'll be blood flowing before long and Great God in Heaven, Your Honour! Bring him round, Josef! The nose is intact, Your Honour, it was just the bit under the nose, only a tiny bit, hardly worth mentioning. Oh, what a lovely war there'd be if those Turks would just start the ball rolling! It's got me all in a tizzy, Your Honour. Josef, give me that bandage! It'll soon pass, Your Honour, cuts soon heal over; there, Your Honour, we'll just put a sticking-plaster on and now, if you wouldn't mind turning your head round so that we can shave it clean on that side as well . . . You know, Your Honour, man's a bloodthirsty beast! There'll be orphans and lamentations and weeping when the news comes in from the battlefield. Josef, wrap that ear up in a bit of paper . . . All right again now, Your Honour, you gave me a fright when you fell off the chair. Like a meteor, you were; soon have you right again. They say that meteors have started falling again; that means a war, Your Honour, it's a sure sign, an age-old sign. Right, then, Your Honour, we'll just finish you off under the chin . . . No, no, Your Honour, it's got to be done, please don't shift about like that! It's a terrible thing, war, especially in a savage land like Africa. Just do you under the chin now, Your Honour, soon be all over. Do you know, Your Honour, that those wild men down there cut their prisoners' throats? First, they catch their prisoner and then they take a long knife and they put it under his chin, just like that . . . just a little bit longer, Your Honour, nearly done now . . . just like that, Your Honour, and Snap! Off with his head! Josef, pick up that head and put it away somewhere . . .

(Pause)

‘Oh my Good Gawd, Your Honour, what have you gone and done?’

(Mr Špachta falls in a dead faint)