

IVAN DONČEVIĆ — Born at Trnava, a village near Garešnica, on November 8, 1909. His book of short stories entitled «The Nameless» about the unknown heroes of the Yugoslav partisan war has been published in more than ten editions. Ivan Dončević is at present the director of the «Zora» publishing house and chief editor of the literary review «Republika».

Works: *People from Šušnjara*, a short story 1933; *Haganj Stories*, poems, 1933; *Horvat's Daughter*, a novel, 1935; *The Ruin*, a novel; *Pearls and Pigs*, a novel 1939; «*The Nameless*», short stories, 1945; *The Punishment*, a play, 1946; *A Biography without an Ending*, a chronicle, 1948; *The Last Gipsy and Other Stories about the Nameless*, 1951; *The Peacemakers*, a novel, 1956; *The Sunken World*, a novel, 1963; *The Bloodshed at Krapina*, a novel, 1969.



IVAN DONČEVIĆ

A Damnedly Dreadful Day

FROM THE NOVEL «BLOODSHED NEAR KRAPINA»

A CROWD. I walk, my head high, whistling softly. I always feel good in a crowd. In a strange, agreeable way I feel free and alone, but not lonely, human faces flow towards me like a film strip: smiling, stricken, tense, but for the most part empty and indifferent human faces. How much unhappiness, disappointment and failure is hidden in those faces: How much distress, dissatisfaction, hatred and bad temper! It goes without saying that in the midst of this multitude I feel better than alone with myself, in my office or in any other place. As soon as you are in a position to make direct comparisons your own troubles become slighter and more supportable, do they not?

The crowd has gone from Zrinjevac Square. Old age pensioners are sitting on benches, airing themselves, frittering the hours away and waiting for their bed-time. Strikingly handsome young couples are walking down the avenues or standing embracing under plane trees. Chaos at the red traffic light because some drunk has been thrown off a tram. He is clenching and opening his fists over his head and bawling:

»Down with capitalism! Down with the rotten bourgeoisie!«

The conductor who threw him off is standing triumphantly in the doorway, wiping the palms of his hands on the trousers of his crushed, faded uniform. Passers-by stop, stand up on tip-toe, and stretch their necks inquisitively, doing their best to find out what it is all about.

»Down with the exploiter of the working class!« the drunk repeats persistently.

»What's going on? What are you shouting for, mate?« A guardian of law and order appears from somewhere straight away, but he comes up slackly, half-interested, chewing a blade of ornamental reed he has picked from somewhere in the park. He has evidently been musing on the pastures and woods of his willage, which is attractive, or perhaps not. »Well, what's it all about?« he repeats more loudly, coming right up to the man and spitting out the reed. It appeared that the man was not drunk at all.

»Nothing,« he replies, winking mischievously, »I just felt like it, comrade. Or perhaps I was reminded of a day seventeen years ago when I shouted these same slogans on this same spot with my Trade Union Branch.«

What could one say! The clown! The traffic lights turned green and the tram and people went off their own ways.

Seventeen years! I do not like it when people refer to years that have passed. It always puts me in an awkward position. On the whole people insist at all costs that their life-time should be spoken of only in the superlative. Humanity is making progress, they say. It is taking gigantic strides into a happier future. In a while human feet will step onto the Moon, or still further, onto Venus. Medical science will discover the secret of human life and increase man's life-span even beyond Old Testament norms, while technology and other skills will make this long-lasting life easy and comfortable. People will be big, healthy and beautiful. In the last seventeen years alone our average height has increased by two and a half centimetres. And so on. Naturally, if you do not happen to agree with this imbecile optimism there will inevitably be incidents. It is the easiest thing in the world to make someone old-fashioned, even reactionary, if that person does not accept the doubtful achievements of so-called progress. What is the good of an increased life-span, I could say, when this one is already too long for all those neuroses and psychoses with which modern society burdens a man? Or a journey to the moon? Magnificent. We cannot hide our narcissistic enthusiasm over what we are, we even lose oxygen and pant with exaggerated excitement. But what about the two billion coloureds, who by and large have nothing to eat and who are doomed to extinction in this splendid panorama? And so on. I could also say that the happiness, satisfaction and balance of a human soul are not achieved solely by means of technical, medical and other achievements. (I am naturally expressing myself archaically because these concepts and

others like them are no longer in use in contemporary language.) I shall not say that, however, I do not want to on any account, because there would be no point. Probably owing to the fact that I am not altogether sure of what I am saying myself — oh, yes, and that is the most tragic thing of all!—but still the narrow-minded clichés of paid optimists, who want to impose one particular set of beliefs on others for their own comfort, get on my nerves...

I walked up onto the foot bridge over the station. Beneath me the racket of steel trains arriving and departing, shunting engines belch out smoke and steam in a fast rhythm, red lights signal in the distance. Perhaps it would be good to go away somewhere. I have always envied those enterprising people who are ready at any time to set off on a journey. Freshly shaved and scented, with elegant imitation leather suitcases in their hands, they arrive at the station at the last minute and jump onto the steps of the carriage when it is already moving. At some distant or not so distant destination they will find recreation, useful business talks, and what is most important, a good-looking young mistress who is pacing impatiently up and down the platform, chewing her lip. But no! I do not like travelling, all the same, I do not like it on principle. I consider that a normal, balanced, healthy and sensible man should live a complete life in the limited area where he was born or where he later settled definitively. Gadabout habits lead only to spiritual emptiness, barren bustling and superficiality.

A little square in the suburbs. A grey one-storey building with four windows and a front door with a porch. But you do not go in through that entrance. Through the glass door one can see sacks, boxes, cases and other packings, because there is a warehouse of a mixed goods company in the hall of one wing of the house. You go into the house through the garden. You have to pull a wire hanging from the wooden doorpost and a little tin bell will tinkle faintly somewhere in the distance.

Stefica appears immediately on the little path under the trees. I cannot make out her face or her figure clearly because it is dark under the trees. I make my way cautiously and feel my heart rising in my throat. Stefica says:

»Be careful, Mr. Kulinban, there are four steps here. But, give me your hand, that's simplest.« She felt for it in the dark, with cold, dry fingers, pressed it firmly and pulled me energetically after her. »One, two, three, four. There.« Only now do I notice the strong smell of jasmine wafting from her.

The room is crammed with furniture and stuffy, because the window is closed and covered with a heavy threadbare plush curtain. I have seen many rooms like this in my lifetime, I have even lived in them. Their owners are usually old ladies, spinsters or widows who keep on buying little things their whole life long but never have the heart to throw the old ones into the junk room or give them to a poor relative in the country. Pretty foolish in fact. In fact adequate proof of what an extremely melancholy affair life sometimes is. I was embarrassed. I must have made a really idiotic impression, my heart was still standing its ground desperately in my throat.

»Sit here,« said Stefica with a warm smile, pointing to a place on the sofa, »and I'll just quickly make some coffee.«

»Thank you,« burst from me as though out of a canon, and on purpose I did not sit down on the sofa but on an ordinary wooden chair by the table. On the table was a vast family photograph album bound in brown leather that was already quite dark with age. I opened it at random.

Stefica stops in the doorway. Her warm smile vanishes from her lips in a flash, and an expression of cold, forbidding animosity takes its place. Why had I refused so decisively to sit on the sofa? I feel as though all my blood had run to my head and is now boiling and swirling about there like liquid in a pan. I think I have not grown equal to situations like this. But, luckily for me, Stefica does not want to take it any further. She shrugs her shoulders and goes out.

An album like any family album in a suburban house. If there were no signs of transience on these faded, torn, finger-marked photographs they would make a hideously grotesque impression. Dear, God, what barbaric, what terrible faces! That naked baby on all fours for all the world like a well-washed and fed young pig! Stilted wedding couples with stupid, unnatural expressions! Some middle-aged woman in oriental veil, with sensual lips, wearing a Moslem woman's costume! Some terrible whiskered man with a hard hat and gloves in his hand looking like an executioner or a murderer whose regular employment it is! A family of seven sitting and standing in two rows! Some brat in its mummy's lap with a blissful smile on its chubby face and several double chins! ... My blood was slowly draining out of my head and the pressure was appreciably diminishing. I turned over page after page of stupid pictures mechanically. Now I see quite clearly that I should not have come here, adventure simply do not suit my nature, particularly not amorous ones, I am completely unskilled and unfit for any kind of adventure whatsoever. But now what? Nothing. Stupid. Utterly stupid... I turn the pages more and more quick, more and more agitatedly. I come to a series of Stefica clothed and unclothed, in every possible pose, close-up, with a girl or boy-friend or perhaps even a fiancé, but most often alone. In riding trousers and a knitted shirt clinging tightly to her body. Or in a bikini with her arms stretched vertically above her head before a running dive off a spring board. Then nude in profile in some rhythmic movement which had wound a cobwebby veil round her flanks. Or simply nude against a black background. There is no getting away from it, she has got a very presentable body: a gymnast's, skater's or some other kind of well-built sportswoman's... But to hell with it, that's enough of that! What an absurd situation! I close the covers with a bang and stand up.

Stefica finally appears with the ditch-water she calls coffee (it is amazing what bad coffee this woman makes) and pours out two cups without saying a word. But after all, a spark suddenly glimmers in my mind and I immediately feel better, what can happen to me, when all is said and done? Nothing. All I have to do is stay superior. Superior? Of course, and why not? Is it not possible to be superior to an ordinary shorthand typist with no breeding and no education? I simply did not give her a chance to speak.

»My dear Miss Pavlekočić, this has been a damnedly dreadful day for me. So dreadful that I would have to kneel contritely in front of some saint or other in a church the whole afternoon if I were at all

god-fearing. Unfortunately I'm not god-fearing and that's why things are hard for me. Dreadfully hard.« Very good, excellent, I told myself and my voice became a fraction firmer. »It began first of all with that charlatan, my namesake. I still don't know what he really wanted from me, it was obviously some fraud or other. It didn't work, naturally, he went off with his tail between his legs but my nerves began jangling first thing in the morning thanks to him.« I gulped the air eagerly, hastily, as though it were a question of a hundred yard sprint. »Then there was that sudden flood. More agitation, my dear Miss Pavleković, more nervous strain. You had only to see those honest, penniless people fighting devotedly against the elements, devotedly to the point of tears, and their boss arrives in a Mercedes and shouts and bellows like nobody's business. Who wouldn't feel a spasm of nausea in his stomach? Then some frightful bore who is quite capable of beating a man into the ground with tedium. And then my incredible dream...«

»Then, that is before that, your telephone conversation with your wife.«

»That too, of course.«

»I think that's the real trouble, isn't it?« The animosity in her face changed abruptly to malice. She sat down demonstratively on that damned sofa, arranged her bared knees in a cross, lowered her eyelids, and slowly raised the cup to her mouth. »Why beat about the bush? Your little wife has gone off free-wheeling and that is, obviously, a really dreadful thing. I understand you absolutely.«

»Of course,« I said with an icy calm that surprised me myself, »that utterly low and unexpected blow from my dear wife threw me off balance for a short time.«

»Is that all? Only for a short time?«

»As you can see, dear Miss Pavleković. And why not?« I threw my head back. Contrary to all expectations I must have looked very steady, very reasonable at that moment, like a man who knows how to behave in the most delicate situation. »If it were any other way, I wouldn't be here now. I would probably be a bloated corpse floating down the Sava somewhere in the dark.«

»Oh, in other words, you've quite got over your little pain?«

»Absolutely,« I reply resolutely.

I cannot afford at any price to let myself be the passive object of her intentions, I am not up to these things, definitely not, not now and I never will be, it was stupid of me to come here at all, but seeing as I have been so incautions and unserious as to come, I do not myself know why, but here I am, after all, I mean in this great, stinking shit, I must at all costs retain my distance, my superiority...

»Of course, dear Miss Pavleković,« I say, almost gaily, »everything in this unhappy life of ours passes, abates, heals.«

»And it's as though nothing had ever happened?«

»That, or almost that. A man always has the possibility of being wise and choosing what is most advantageous at a given moment.«

»Excellent, and can one get this recipe?«

»Of course, that is...«

Stefica was certainly not stupid. She was probably a malicious, unscrupulous, underhand, envious, spiteful and deceitful nymphomaniac, in a state of perpetual misunderstanding with her surroundings,

but really not stupid. She sips her coffee and puts her cup down on the table with a resigned gesture. She fixed her sharp, narrow eyes under their halfclosed lids on me for a really long time as though she were taking a photograph of me. Finally the little muscles round her nose and mouth began to twitch.

»Now I get it,« she says and bursts into exaggeratedly loud laughter, »you are here because you've chosen the most advantageous solution? Why, my heartfelt thanks to you.«

There was nothing for it but to smirk in agreement.

»Your lady wife has gone off her own way, and you've come here, is that it?« She followed the clear thread of her logic, merciless as death. »From your point of view that's obviously the best thing you could have done. I've got nothing against it, of course, if I had I wouldn't have invited you, would I?« She rattled on in this style without a shred of restraint for a bit longer. For example, that we are alone in the flat at the moment and that we shall be alone at least until ten o'clock, because she has sent the aunt she lives with to the cinema. At that she winks impudently with one eye.

»Yes, yes,« I say, just for something to say.

The unfortunate thing is that I have had virtually no experience with women, particularly with women like Stefica. I envy my old friend from Kunjanin Street, he would never have got himself into such an awkward situation. He was obviously never out of breath, nor did his fingers tremble as mine unfortunately did now. I have missed a lot of things in life, I have an exceptionally good memory for facts from history, geography, literature, philosophy but I have never mastered the simplest rules of the game between men and women. Lidija even told me so once: »You are so naive and gauche,« she said kindly, friendly, »that I'm afraid you'll suffer for it one day.« I was suprised »But you won't be in any danger from me,« she added a little later, pressing her face lovingly against mine, »I shan't let anyone else have you.« That was in those days, of course. And today things have reached such a pitch that I have got myself into a perfectly impossible situation and simply do not know how to extricate myself from it. Naive and gauche? Quite right! You have to be very cunning, very inconsiderate and corrupt to be able to move around in this damned rabble unscathed...

A really stupid situation. I am running around in senseless, charmed circles, I want something but I do not know what, nothing that has happened to me in the last ten or twenty hours can be called good by any stretch of the imagination. An event from my childhood suddenly occurs to me. Some herdsmen found a ring-snake on the bank of the Bosut, held down its neck with a forked stick and crammed tobacco into its mouth. Then they let it go. The lovely grey snake, its underside shimmering white, shot sinuously towards the bushes and long grass obviously in order to hide. It did not make it. It stopped half way as though struck by lightning, lifted its head with a shudder, with another shudder raised its whole body into the air. The herdsmen clapped in delight and quickly made a circle round it. The slender body, sinewy as a steel spring, coiled, reared up and collapsed in such fantastically shapely curves as nothing in nature could ever reproduce. The poisoned snake danced crazily. The reflection of the sun's light was lit and extinguished in the two pearl grains of its eyes.

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The herdsmen panted aloud from excitement. Now the snake reared up onto the tip of its tail, beat the air like a stick so that it whistled, knocked its head madly against the empty space which offered no resistance anyway. My breath caught in my throat. It lasted a long time, a very long time. Gradually the convulsions became slower, the body feebler and covered in foam and mucus, finally it collapsed and lay in a limp coma. The herdsmen picked it up squeamishly on a stick and threw it over the bush into the river... That was the event that occurred to me at this particular moment, and evidently not without reason. Oh, Lidija, be damned for the rest of your life, what have you done to me, if you only knew...!

Stefica is sitting on the sofa, waiting. What is she waiting for? Obviously I know what she is waiting for. If it were possible I should act as is expected of me and any normal man in my place and in my situation certainly would do so. But I am evidently not normal. I am not the type. Unhappily. Stefica gets up and stretches as though she had just woken up. I lowered my head like a coward and stared blankly at the toe of my shoe. I feel her coming lightly towards me, on tiptoe.

»You know, only this morning, we were on quite intimate terms, we were calling each other by our Christian names.« She stopped just beside me, the warm breath of her voice tickles me behind the ear, the smell of cheap jasmine eau de cologne streams intensely over me. »So, why don't you call me Stefica any more?«

I could have said that I absolutely did not remember ever having called her by her Christian name. Equally I could have said, because my memory is excellent, that it was she who a short while ago had first used the more formal mode of address. But I am not going to say anything.

»Well? Are you going to call me Stefica?«

»Of course,« I said.

»And?«

»And what?« I pretended not to understand.

I knew that we were now coming to the main thing. She would lean right close up to me (so close that I would feel the nipples of her breasts hardening and growing under her dress), hook her arms round my neck and look for my mouth with those excessively moist and soft lips of hers. I am frightened. So frightened that I would like more than anything to run head first straight down the steps and along the path through the dark garden. This is not my cup of tea, it really is not. No-one has ever seduced me (apart from Lidija, but that is another story), women evidently did not find me interesting, and in fact they never evoked any particular curiosity on my part either. And what is this all of a sudden? I know that at a critical moment I thought my only possibility of salvation was through revenge. Now I see that that was a fatal mistake. The salvation that I could find through revenge with Stefica is not and could never be any kind of salvation. The only thing that women like her enjoy is increasing numbers, collecting »victorious scalps« with no discrimination and no feeling. That is not my style, nor in accord with my principles, no, not at all. To hell with it all!

I jumped up from my chair with the greatest effort of will-power which I had managed to muster from somewhere. That was the first

thing I had succeeded in doing. Then I began laughing, I confess, laughing like an idiot. And walking energetically round the narrow space between the crowded objects. And talking, just talking.

»That incredible dream I had this afternoon is still worrying me, dear Stefica. It's making me terribly restless and nervous, irritated. It's a stupid dream, I know, but how can I get it out of my mind?«

Naturally I did not wait for her answer, I carried on talking, just talking. And she was standing in a pathetic position, her arms hanging by her sides, and following my resolute, abrupt movements, an expression of cold bewilderment in her face. That is good, I thought, encouraging the strength that had suddenly awoken in me. I must just go on without stopping, without stopping, without stopping. Just go on.

I described in detail the basement room in which the mysterious meeting was taking place. I even invented one or two things concerning its décor and atmosphere. But the strangest thing of all, I said, was that a world of superstition, with which I had never felt the slightest affinity, played a major role in this meeting. Is that not funny? Satan himself was there in the shape of a bat, imagine, Miss... excuse me, Stefica! Satan himself. And a lamp that talked nonsense in a sexual trance. Then some wizards and witches and other dark and mysterious persons. Incredible and stupid, dear Stefica. For example, a lawyer. I have been meeting this fat, bald gentleman for years and watched him stuffing enormous mouthfuls of the choicest food into himself with the greatest enjoyment, covered in grease from ear to ear, munching noisily and sighing with happiness, noticing no-one and nothing around him. And finally a glutton like that turns up as the member of a conspiratorial revolutionary organization like that under the direction of Hell itself! Incredible? Then some unwashed aesthete, scribbler, critic, or something like that. Then a mythological figure, then some butchers, village girls, noble ladies, young men with limp hands, café singers, strip-tease artistes...«

Stefica's face was becoming longer and longer. I see that I must hold out at all costs. At all costs. I move faster and faster between the chest and the side-board gesticulating more and more wildly.

»Then some historical figures. Do you realize, Miss, that is Stefica, historical figures! It is true that knowing historical figures and events has always been my strong point. I have a very positive opinion of history in general. History is, as is well known, the school teacher of life. But how and why does it crop up in my dream? Ban Jelačić, for example? What's Ban Jelačić to me? I do know that he saved the Croatian people from Hungary, but they cursed him roundly afterwards and exposed him to ridicule and shame. Nothing special, that, it happens to a great many people. Or Nikola Šubić Zrinjski? That brave, upright Nikola with the round beard and big moustache and hard, wild eyes under his otter fur hat shone for a long time in my childhood as an example, as a bright figure in the struggle against the conquerors. That's all very fine, but why the hell does he appear in a dream? And what's more in a tearful and consequently terribly comic role?«

Stefica's face has grown so long that it looks like a carrot. I know that a carrot cannot go on growing indefinitely. That is why I absolutely must ward off the explosion that I smell in the air.

»Supernatural things have never interested me, dear Stefica, I've always considered that only the simple people's imagination takes

pleasure in such things. My mother, for example, believed that witches could steal the milk of the best milch-cows, that there are eyes that are bewitched and that the devil appears in human form except that he has hairy little tail which he hides jealously in his trousers. Utterly absurd, isn't it? Even then, as a child I used to laugh at all that, and mother would be angry. All right, I thought she is a simple uneducated peasant woman, and she has every right to be angry. But I? Why should I all of a sudden spend the whole afternoon struggling and grappling with occult forces? Well, it was only a dream, you might say, an ordinary, pointless dream. Of course, I reply, it was a dream, but Freud or one of his followers has already proved that dreams are never pointless. Besides, I'm not even quite sure, no, I'm not at all sure, that it really was a dream...«

Of course her face expands, contracts, is almost completely distorted. Fury, like a candle flame, flickers dangerously, deep in her eyes. A scornful »tosh« hisses out of her half-closed lips. But I am already prepared for far worse things.

»After all that and in connection with it, my dear Štefica, a man is inevitably driven to ask what in fact he is? I have never believed that man is anything particularly great and exceptional. Master of this planet of ours? All right, master of the planet, but a pretty pathetic and feeble master dependent on the sun and the rain, the wind and the changes of the moon, on the functioning of his own glands, digestion and the devil knows what else. And this pathetic two-legged creature has rammed it into his head that he has penetrated all the secrets that surround him. Absurd. Simple-minded conceit. Because what are radio-waves for instance, electricity sleep, hallucinations, no-one knows and never will. Man is nothing but limited, impotent and squalid scum, suffering from paranoic over-estimation, that and nothing more.«

Štefica hisses with loathing:

»Scum.«

»Of course. It may sound offensive, but man in general is in practice nothing other than a miserable wretch who doesn't even know where he comes from and where he's going. It goes without saying that I'm not excluding myself from all this. On the contrary, it is precisely with myself that I began in all these reflections...«

»Scum,« hisses Štefica, her suddenly pale lips smirking, and almost groaning. »That is directed precisely at you, Mr. Kulinban, Mr. Learned Solicitor.« An ominous threat, mingled with contempt flashed in her eyes. She was using my surname again.

»Certainly, but, that is, a man, I mean in connection with this the problems of humanity...«

»Shit on the problems of humanity! As if I give bloody damn about humanity. Just look at him and his reflections! First of all take a really good look at yourself, from head to foot, you poisonous pest, then blab on about humanity. Got it? Scum!«

I know that I have somehow to get through this outburst. I behave like a fool, I even smile a little. And say:

»That's what I'm saying, dear Štefica. None of us is an exception.«

»Naturally there are no exceptions in the league of cuckolds. Now I see absolutely why your wife went off all the way to the Krapina cave to have her fun. I pity her. I have always felt sympathetic towards those unfortunate women whose husbands are scum according to all

the laws of God and man. Filthy, jabbering scum.«

»But, dear Štefica, I...«

»What? If you really want to know, you are an ordinary windbag, slobbering in the most insolent way over something for which you yourself are exclusively to blame, and now you want to play the tragic Othello. Oh, oh! To play Othello, you have first to be a man, with real balls!«

Obviously she is going to stop at nothing. She is capable of saying and doing the most terrible things. That is why this is the moment to get out. I began to hint, fuss, fidget, and then I hit on the saving idea.

»It's gone nine o'clock,« I cried, »and the Director is waiting for me!«

She:

»Get out, you bungler, you gelding, you jabbering cuckold, you useless nonentity!«

I:

»The Director always gets angry when people are late.«

She:

»Oh, the Director? That fat pig is the biggest crook I've ever had to deal with! He knocks off women without the flicker of an eyelash, screws them and goes! He doesn't stick at anything to get what he's made up his mind to get! Oh, that trash! Yes, he's trash, and a crook, and a disgusting fraud, but he's not impotent scum, he's a real man, he is, it's a fact, it's a fact, he's a real man... Ugh! Get out, you bloody poof! Out, now, got it, now...«

She was still hissing and spitting in some primeval uncontrollable fury as I staggered down the steps and across the garden. My ears were burning as though someone had been pulling them the whole time with all his might.

Translated by Celia Williams