

67-8/8-9

PETAR SEGEDIN

The Marriage of Figaro

I HAD BEEN cowering in darkness for a long time, my dear G..., until I remembered you. Then I lit up the oil-lamp which my house owners, very simple peasants of the little island, had left to me, and have been sitting here at the rough-hewn table, with a small pencil in my hand, writing to you. I am writing, I admit, with a view to saving myself! Less and less do I think that I am exceptional among the crowd of beings around me: to myself I seem like a beetle. Indeed, I am sitting in the light of the oil-lamp, with the little pencil in my hand, writing signs a beetle could make. And this, well, should be the picture of my thoughts and state! What is this? I am afraid to follow the direction of the question, the reason why I am remaining among beetles. This isolation and simplicity has taught me many things.

While at this moment I am writing to you it seems as if I were at the bottom of a deep sea, with you somewhere up there, on the surface, in a quite different world, the world I myself belonged to in the past, where all I have learnt here would appear, I should not say funny, but, at any rate, deformed. Well, I am sitting and writing to you. Words, just small, short words, as if a beetle indeed strung them together in front of the oil-lamp. Your common sense has got lost here, but for that very reason I am writing to you. And I have already come so near everything living around me that it sometimes seems — oh, but forgive me, forgive! — How fine it would be if I stopped talking for good... And do not wonder at it. You are so far from me, up there, on the surface! How many days has it been like this? One month, two, or one year already, I do not know so lost I have become. My disease does not trouble me either, it has been forgotten. When the man and the woman whose stone house I have rented stand in front of me, I feel as though I were in the presence of big fish. They do not com-

prehend why I remain here so long, behaving so unusually, eating whatever they bring, asking for nothing in particular.

But I am not writing all this for the purpose of explaining to you where and how I am living; this is the last thing I should do. Reducing myself to the simplest, almost animal existence, suits me. I smile at everything that meets me and becomes my experience, I sometimes hum songs from my childhood, talking with the faces of my relatives, the acquaintances that disappeared long ago. And look, even this letter is one aspect of my life. I am not ashamed to tell you that now and then I even cry, but I do all this in a simple manner, somehow aware that it is no matter... Therefore, do not take too much to heart all that I am writing to you, if the letter ever reaches you. In a short while, perhaps, the moment will come when I shall laugh again, or fume. I have decided to write this letter for a reason which I do not understand, or better still, about which one does not know, whether it is exceptionally important, or just one in the order of those that follow simply and invisibly from day to day. Even if it were so serious it would not be important, but still... You are the only man I know who, I am sure, is interested in me directly and alertly, as if I were one of your closest relatives, yours, for which reason I have thought: well, it would not be bad if I let him know about this too. Let everything be open and above board: I have got it into my head that one of the beings I am living amongst might, quite easily and simply, gulp me down... This is not important, my friend, I know, I have already told you so, but, well, if I disappear, you will know where I have disappeared to. Please do not measure this light-mindedness of mine with the standards of your own surroundings, up there, on the surface! Different things happen here.

And see, I sometimes think the reason of all this is a newspaper that happened to reach here two days ago, in front of the stone-house yard where I am living. Tarako brought it and during his afternoon nap covered his head with it, defending himself from the flies that trouble us here. So I did the same myself the following day: covered my face with the old newspaper and fell asleep with more ease than usual. But when I awoke I remembered, quite unexpectedly, him, Mr. Arkadiyevich, a lawyer from Petrograd, born in 1867... Arkadiyevich, well; but you know nothing about him, and you should learn much from this letter. Much? Oh, all is relative, and I am so subjective.

I was so affected that I folded the newspaper, I must admit I had not read it, and put it away at once, behind the stone house. I covered it with a stone. Why? Not to let wind sweep it away, probably. And why should the wind not sweep it away?...

SO I WAS cowering alone in the darkness, filled with confused thoughts which, I know, will be incomprehensible to you up there. But, in fact, so they should be. Tarako with the paper on his face and on mine, and all of a sudden Arkadiyevich, born in Petrograd in 1867, his fate linked with mine, not just, »with mine«, either, all this overwhelmed me in a way I could not explain and well I, jumped out from my darkness, lit up the oil-lamp, and decided to write to you about everything, even if in the manner of a beetle. Now, look, I am writing in fact in front of the oil-lamp, and I am a beetle indeed. A

beetle... But I have to tell you everything about this Arkadiyevich, so you will understand even a beetle properly. So, I think, I had better explain these moments of mine. He is, as you see, the cause of this darkness. How all this is strange here: I see picture after picture so clearly, so clearly that it occurs to me that the pictures no more even correspond to what happened, which I am mainly afraid of... It sometimes seems to me as though it had not happened, that it forced itself upon me from somewhere, with the miserable thought that I could disappear into this waste. When today the house owner approached me, I thought he might be that Arkadiyevich from Petrograd, born in 1867. Because why should Tarako himself bring the newspaper here, to this waste in the middle of the sea? And even sleep under it! Well, such is one's memory when one is more and more alone. And the will to be silent for good! And the villagers call the one who rented the stone house to me also Kasket... Imagine! His wife told me so. Kasket and Tarako! What names! Of course, this also began to obsess me.

But you are up there, on the surface! Do I envy you at the moment? And I desired the solitude so much. While I am writing all this to you, I seem to emerge, because, as a matter of fact, Arkadiyevich, a man I met in my previous life, while I was still up, up... The memory envelops me so much that I think all this is here now, here in the darkness which this small oil-lamp is fighting against. Indeed, as if all this were happening now, and it began at the Gare de Lyon... Paris, here in the flickering of the oil-lamp... I was on a business trip, now I no more remember which, so much did the meeting with Arkadiyevich occupy me. Now, look, I see clearly a crowd of people there in the dusk, masks in the blackened Paris station. Mere faces you have never seen, but still seeming as if you have met them every day. Ensor!... And it, well, happened to me that I began to think about all these faces appearing and disappearing. All full of themselves! You see, this »full of themselves« means: full of their fates. Well, how nicely I am already beginning to speak in your manner and ways, because such a manner is almost equal to this one, but instead of men only animals encircle me here. But for this small oil-lamp, it would be night, pitch dark here. And how many are prowling now, while I am writing this to you, to get me! But let them only prowl with the forms of their faces and their souls. Nothing new this! It was the same, I say, up there... Already then, at the Paris station, I wanted to select one of the faces, to get more closely acquainted with it, which would tell me something and mean something to me. This is it, you see, looking for somebody, looking for somebody else, this does not leave me even here. I ran away from above, it seems, only because the search tricked me, and well, it is haunting me even here. But let us leave it alone! I began to stare at the faces at the Paris station, but one erased the other, and I could not select any. Here, I thought, this would not happen, but it has occurred all the same: then and here, among beetles, butterflies and fish, where only Kasket and his wife are! How afraid I am of this! This oil-lamp of mine is burning so peacefully, bathing me so mildly, I sometimes think it is the person I should meet! But, I say, let us leave it alone! From this light of mine to that traffic at the Lyon station!... Quite accidentally, so it most often happens, a rather fat old little man, in an old top hat, already unusual, accosted me and

casually asked where the Basel train platform was. I did not know where the platform was, and told him so, and he thanked me and departed. I was travelling to Dijon. Two or three minutes had hardly elapsed, when the old man returned and began to explain that there was no train for Basel then, that he would travel by the Orient-Express instead, and change for Basel in Lausanne. So he would still be at his destination two or three hours earlier than if he waited for the through train. All this as if we had known each other from long ago, as if he had to give me these explanations. He spoke very good French, with a slight foreign accent. I listened to him, and his face, already withered, with a small nose and narrow little eyes, with a mouth vanishing almost completely in a palish skin, all this was increasing, imposing itself more openly. I already thought then: You see, if you seek, it comes to you of itself... The face, yes, the face, I mean. But I did not reply to him, and he lost himself in quite unnecessary excuses, that he had to fetch his baggage. He left me. How strange: then again I felt alone, alone in the proper sense... Oh, how I should like to show, show this loneliness. This is the abyss which draws me, and has drawn me even here where I am now... Now I am floating among people. Yes, floating... Floating, I reached the coach, and when the train started, he opened the door, the one with the top hat... My whole life the word has persecuted me, like some of the beetles and vermin we avoid with disgust: top hat-cockroach, top hat-bug... He shut the door and sat down in front of me, quite naturally, as though it had already been arranged between ourselves, even with some superiority, which allowed him to behave almost condescendingly. I was sitting silently. We were alone. The train was already running through the suburbs when he introduced himself:

»I'm Arkadiyevich, a lawyer, retired financial adviser... But I still work, because I don't like to be idle. And you don't look like a Frenchman?«

»No, I'm not a Frenchman...« I answered quickly, afraid that he might think I wanted to introduce myself as a Frenchman. »I'm Croatian, temporarily in Paris. I'm on a business trip to Dijon...« I was telling him as if I confessed and excused myself, but then I became aware of the procedure, and resented it, but it did not help to establish my independence in relation to him.

So the conversation began. While he talked, I was looking at his fine, silk shirt, his small, well cared-for hands, and quiet, free demeanour: he appeared to me an experienced upper-crust gentleman. But I could not comprehend why he so easily brushed away some social conventions. He probably guessed my thoughts, since at once he began to explain himself so freely and in so superior a manner that he grew still more in my eyes. Each time he opened his mouth it seemed to cut itself anew in his skin.

»You're wondering at my behaviour?«

»No, no...«

»And justly so, justly so!«

I was looking at him with confusion, expecting further surprises. This man could do anything. He was watching me with his narrow little eyes, bit by bit, as if he tested whether he had been mistaken

when he had sized me up as a whole. Convincing himself, as it seemed, that he could possess me, that I was in no way dangerous to him, he continued freely, almost insultingly.

»But see, this is the characteristic of people without a homeland, people who always manage...« while his little eyes shut and opened, creating a disposition in me that I was listening to a frank and wise man.

»Hum, hum, hum...« I was ejecting the indistinct nasal sounds, saving myself.

»Everywhere we are looking for a foothold, a connection... We're always threatened, therefore it is as it is... And there are more and more such people, and it is ever more difficult to be such, since a style has been created... Eh, when I only remember: I was a young lawyer in Petrograd! The beginning of my career... How many plans and hopes! Since in my essence I'm not a gambler...«

And the more he talked the closer to me he was, and I began to open up with more self-confidence...

»Ah, Petrograd, Petrograd, the White Nights...«

»And you go in for literature too?«

»No, no, I'm interested only in one great name of yours! Banally, I know, I said "The White Nights"...«

»"The White Nights", I know, I know, so all think, but I'm a financial expert!«

»"The White Nights", "The White Nights"...« I repeated it, ashamed of this literary interest of mine in front of the expert in financial affairs.

He became silent, and my »White Nights« remained alone in the air, without producing any impression at all. How I should like, my dear G... also to show you this kind of loneliness, almost exasperation. Such loneliness surely looks to me like my fate... And, as you see, I am again writing about what I have not wanted to write. The silence lasted long, and discovered between us the lonely, naked clattering of the train, rushing through the yellow fields, woods on hill sides, across rivers — all clangorous and thunderous as if we precipitated ourselves somewhere... But we had already been delivered to each other, and we had to talk. Again he resumed cutting the withered skin on his face. But the conversation was becoming banal: as if Arkadiyevich closed some areas where I could not orientate myself, and opened those in which I could participate:

»And where do you eat in Paris?« Not even waiting for my reply, he undertook the role of my saviour, began to talk so much that I did not need at all to take part in the conversation: »I usually lunch at the restaurant 'Chez Fouquet', there near the Rond point des Champs Elisées, and if you desire, we could meet there. I am returning in a few days... We may need each other... You are alone in Paris?«

»Alone... Yes, I'm alone, alone in Paris... Why not, we can see each other...«

»I serve as an agent in many dealings...«

I did not want to tell him my dealings, I stood up, excused myself for a moment, and went out of the compartment. I felt as if he followed

me, and actually turned several times to check it. As he did not appear behind me, I remained in the corridor looking at the landscape that began to cover itself with long shadows of the setting sun. I like these moments: it seems they are ripening like fruit, ripening and vanishing... When the dusk was felt more intensively, I returned to the compartment, where I found Arkadiyevich in the same position as I had left him, leaning his head against the white cover of the back of the chair. He glanced at me like a relative, but looked somewhat smaller, paler now. We were sitting in front of each other again, as if fate had destined us for each other. And then I began to be aware that I was not the only one limited by naivety and ignorance. He at once looked so miserably limited by age, and it suddenly dawned upon me that he needed me, that he was probably afraid of his loneliness. My departure from the compartment impressed him like a threat. Looking at him, I thought: He will tell me of all this, perhaps with my own words: »Well, it seems this loneliness is my fate!...« But he did not speak — silence enveloped us for a long while.

Well, my dear G... How many little signs have I already strung up for you in this yellowish-greenish illumination! A beetle... And in the dusk I see all this clearly. Indeed, will you comprehend it? I am writing about Arkadiyevich to you so as to explain something that I do not know myself, that holds my throat and squeezes it. I had been cowering in the darkness so long, and startled when I remembered you, and now more and more I am afraid of these little signs which should mean something. A message?!... But I am returning to the clattering of the train, rushing through the late dusk. Now I see it clearly there in the twilight. Only when the lamp was lit over our heads, did Arkadiyevich resume his talking:

»Are you married?«

»No, no...« I said defending myself by a clever tone in my voice.

»That is, you are married, nevertheless!... This is good, good!...« he said. For the first time I felt that he wanted to complain. »I'm, unfortunately not, and I'm old... You wouldn't believe how old. The eightieth... And now I'm going to a woman... She lives in Basel... Tomorrow morning I must be in Basel. It's her birthday. If I don't arrive!...« he was talking as if he wanted to show how he confided entirely in me.

He approached me so closely that I began seriously to be afraid of the nearness, and I began to guess that he himself was afraid of the loneliness, of the same feeling that sometimes overwhelms me, immersing me in such a state as the one I am in now.

I was looking at him there, all bathed in fear, thinking it would be a good thing if I came near him just out of solidarity. I wanted to tell him something myself about my feelings, but then such a fear began to seize me that I had to stand up, but, not knowing what to do so standing, I sat down again, even more confused. But he did not care too much for me, and for my thoughts. He must have been occupied with himself, which he had revealed to me to a certain extent, but more had still to follow. Night had already considerably grown in the windows of the train. I was looking at him there, in the corner, in front of me, as at a genuine miracle: a castle, old and abandoned, somewhere on the sea, a

strange being that, shut in its form, performs its mission, but then again an old man, alone, abandoned... Then his long life began to unveil itself to me: where and when he was born, to whom he went! But the question did not ask for a banal, mathematical answer: Petrograd, 1867, but rather for the lively concreteness that had been lost and was no more. Why should I look for it and try to find it? For is this now, this here, this light of mine, this scribbling of mine to you, you, my dear G..., is this something, or is it not? If this is something, what is it?! And will you ever discern from the signs this: THIS?... I am afraid. At that moment in the train it was the same as it is now bathed in the light of the oil-lamp, and I even had the urge to ask Arkadiyevich to explain to me: Where is this 18... of yours, where is what was and... Ah!... And I began to examine more closely the small, withered hands, the impeccable clothes, but nevertheless threadbare and worn here and there on the sleeves, greased on the lapels, and finally this head with all its experiences in the course of eighty years... Indeed: a castle where all kinds of things had happened and were still happening. A beetle performing its mission... I was looking at him thus from that great distance, and I was becoming more anxious because of him, his being lost, lonely. Eighty years from Petrograd to Tokyo, from Tokyo to Shanghai, New York, and now here he was travelling from Paris to Basel, to a woman, talking, looking for somebody of his own, but since there was none, adopting anybody who happened to be near him. He was talking, and whatever he was talking about increased his loneliness and loss. His narrow mouth was opening and words were following words as in a still unknown, unfamiliar being indeed.

»No, no, no, I'd even like us to meet in Paris... As soon as you have time, come to Fouquet, one eats well there, and there are interesting people there. I know Paris like my old pocket... It will be possible to arrange something with the publishers. I know them well... She herself writes, the one in Basel! If you only saw how nice a house she has! A clever woman, clever woman. You would not believe how a woman grows, you know: grows clever. Of course. And I'm afraid of her... She is severe, very severe... She can't forget. So, this time too I'll knock at the window, since her cottage is of wood... For this reason I call her Snow White...« He was talking, pausing sometimes, as if he were choking, but all along he was also smiling, glancing at me, as if examining whether he could confide something more in me.

»And what is she to you? An aunt?« I asked manifesting an increasingly open interest in his story.

»Hum... Aunt, aunt... My dear gentleman, life is huge, and you're a fly, nothing but a fly, one fly, or if you prefer it, let's say — a swallow... You fly through life and undertake many journeys, and you wouldn't believe that, nevertheless, in this vastness, this endlessness you, at the end of the account, cannot get anywhere, but once again... Yes, you return to the same place... I say, you're a fly, a swallow, well, be it an eagle, and what? There's no difference!... I say 'you', but only so, rhetorically... I judge it from myself! I've been alone, and I remain alone in this huge space, and here, I still fly, fly... They've always cheated me wholesale, and I've had illusions retail... Here, I'm a living humbug!... I know my face: a pure self-seeking... She used to explain

it all to me... And tomorrow, when we meet for her sixtieth birthday, it'll all be the same... Ah, ah, and I've such a weak heart already! The same subject of conversation for years! Do you know what this is? How old age dries things up and warps them!«

Nobody had come to our compartment. This man seemed to have been appointed by somebody to communicate, explain to me something I myself had been looking for, waiting in this huge space of his, but still so small that we had to return to the same places, to meet with the past situations and faces. The train was still rushing on through the night, and more than two hours were still before me. He had already quite given himself up, surrendered, and I felt so much obliged to him that I stood up and helped him take off his overcoat, hung it behind the door of the compartment. He thanked me, but somehow familiarly, paternally, giving himself up to me so much that he asked me to take out of the inner pocket of his overcoat the pouch from which he snuffed tobacco. Somewhat reassured, I mentioned »The White Nights« again, and he, taking snuff, answered quietly, as though he wanted to put all things to their proper places.

»Nothing, nothing... I was a young lawyer... A big town, sir, big town... And it wasn't so great a name either for us young lawyers... Fetyukovich!... Literature! Yes, only the death, funeral, I remember... Nothing, nothing... This is so far, so awfully far, and the fly does not recognize the past trips yet. You see, now I feel very well! And it's hot here, isn't it?!... But I don't know when I have to change trains from Lausanne for Basel... Hum, if I knock at the window too early, Snow White might even fly off the handle... The hardened swindler, turtle, turtle... She might tell me everything, even shout... If you only saw how energetic she is. But she doesn't intend any harm, any harm! She might even weep... I'm guilty to her! I am, I admit it and don't refuse it, but so it is, it happened, and it cannot be repaired... What a stain! And how many such stains, and why?! Because of self-seeking, I tell myself. And still I live self-seekingly! Life is long! Who says it's short?... From Petrograd to Tokyo, and from Tokyo to Shanghai... You sit in yourself and you don't rise. You're ready, like a beast, from your ambush to grab whatever you think possible, and you don't give yourself up for any price, you only put up your masks, you change them, now this one, now that one, this one with a smile, that one icy like a stone... And, here, you get to this conversation, to this trip to her! And she's so necessary to me... Believe me, I've been waiting for her birthday all the year long. I sit two or three days with her, tell her everything, look straight at her, but Snow White does not want me to stay with her... Hum... And this time I intend to win her over, but I know she'll not want... She has nobody, she's alone, quite alone, but still she doesn't want... I'm guilty, and all because of this loneliness, because of this self-seeking.«

— You're guilty before her?! — I interfered, myself immersed in the story, listening to the clattering of the train and looking at the darkness in the window.

»Would you kindly take down my trunk from the rack above? I'd like to lie down a little; it always comes in handy for under my head... You won't mind it... In the year, in the year...« And as if remembering something, he began to recite with the same weak, trembling voice:

No tam, uvy, gde neba svody
Sijajut v bleske golubom,
Gde tenj oliv legla na vody,
Zasnula ty poslednim snom
Tvoja krasa, tvoji stradanja
Isčezli v urne grobovoj
A s nimi poceluj svidanja ...
No ždu ego; on za tobój ...

I took down, my dear G..., that old-fashioned trunk, and handed the overcoat to him. He began to settle himself, to arrange his things, reciting these lines for the second, third, and fourth time and the last line *»No ždu ego; on za tobój ...«* he repeated several times. He was settling himself and arranging all his things in such an old man's way, trembling, cautiously, that in the light of all that had happened so far, all that he had said, seemed miserable, lost. All those small narrow movements, touching things several times, and when he had put everything according to his desire, he took out a small box, drew a small bottle out of it, spilled two or three pills on his palm, threw them into his mouth, and murmuring, I do not know how many times, *»No ždu ego; on za tobój ...«* spread himself on the seat. Then I felt the old man was lost. Neither the fact that he ate at Fouquet's nor his acquaintance with the publishers, nor such a mouth of his, nor the fact that he somehow always made both ends meet helped him any more to keep himself on the level on which he had displayed himself in the first moments. I began to see the lonely isolation of the man, the lonely man from Petrograd, Tokyo, Shanghai, from Paris, from this moment, the man ... But, settling himself, he began to speak:

»Yes, yes ... Well, you see, now I feel well. My heart, my heart is betraying me. And to tell you the truth, I'm afraid of her ... Do I seem guilty to her?! You're a little man, she says to me. A little man! ... Heh, heh, heh, my young man! You travel through the world, you gather good and evil, and still you're little ... And she looks at me and smiles, and I begin to say it's already high time for us to be people ... And right then she frowns. When a man, she says, begins to talk of humaneness, beware of him: the beast has an evil intention ... I seem guilty to her, guilty!«

»Well, what are you guilty of?«

»It is a small story now, but then, then it was ... Oh, no, even then it wasn't anything ... And, you see, she's never told me a single word, nor thrown it up at me, never a single word, but everything that comes out of her speaks only of this. I hear it in each sound of hers as soon as I enter and greet her ... Would you like to know what happened? ...« he spoke lying, as if he soothed himself with his own words. I looked at him, so round, small, with his clothes sagging on him, with his mouth quite disappearing, so it was not known where the weakly, mellow, sweetish little voice came from.

»If you want to know it, it interests me ... You've built the picture of the woman in me, and we have met in the train, in fact, for the first time, and since I already know about you, it's true, not much, but still ... You're an emigrant ... To live the whole long life alone, without a home, without a country ... This has always troubled me ... The

feeling of loneliness is an awful abyss which swallows the whole personality ... I myself ...«

»Right, right, son! ... One lives in oneself and prowls after prey, and cheats one's neighbours with various tricks, sure nowhere? ... In empty space ... One's home may be an illusion, but still ...« Then he stopped talking, and I felt he repented having been too frank. So long a pause ensued, and the rushing of the train and the dumb emptiness came to expression again. And then, almost unexpectedly, when I had already accustomed myself to the clattering of the train, he resumed: *»I'll hardly fall asleep, and it would be so good to take a little nap, since ...«* He paused again, and I thought it would be best to let him fall asleep, so I should be left alone. Darkness began to flow in and a wind rustled. I started to look for myself in me, but could not tear myself from the woman somewhere in Basel, towards whom the old man was travelling, and was all this a fatal love, or more probably, a banal old-age affair this old man was dreaming about? I mused so and looked at the small, fat man, stretched on the bench, and thought my own thoughts: how in the heap of flesh lived a great life, discovered to me quite by chance, I could never more forget it, and I should like to get acquainted with the woman in Basel ... I should see her in order to know him better ... and not only them ... I myself toil and toil in my life. Ah, the thoughts following each other weave and discover myself at the end. And thus until he spoke up again: *»And you're interested in what I did to her? I know, I know ... Well, it's not very interesting either! ... I had returned from New York to Paris, and tried to settle in the town for good. When I remember the time I'm always ashamed of myself ... Hum, silly! One lives as one can, and one rationalizes as one can. To judge oneself and repent ... Who has now caught his moment, the one which immediately follows after the present? ... And she herself was in Paris then; a chorus ballerina! ...«* He began to recite verses again:

Tvoja krasa, tvoji stradanja
Isčezli v urne grobovoj —
A s nimi poceluj svidanja ...
No ždu ego; on za tobój ...

»I got to know her while helping a manager, a Russian by descent, in his international connections. She was an emigrant herself. After her morning rehearsals we used to meet in a small restaurant in the Boulevard des Italiens. Then I was almost fifty years old, and she was thirty. All was over with her career, and I had ceased hoping ... She opened herself to me, and I used the occasion skillfully, acting as if I opened myself ... A trick, a trick ... I'm guilty! ... How wonderful the cups of coffee were, the absinth, the beaujolaises between us on the table! And she has wonderful hands and the kind of blue eyes which always scintillate ...« He was talking simply, but all the same it seemed he had learnt the story by heart, it looked as though he was acting to me, as though it were arranged, and when suddenly he paused, I left him to his silence. But he stood up, took a small black box out of his overcoat, opened it, and showing me the contents that I could hardly discern, said: *»Please if I get a heart attack, inject this into to me ... I'll leave it beside you ...«* I was upset, but

he lay down again and all was as it had been: the clattering of the train rushing in the darkness and the darkness itself. And he spoke up again: »Yes, I wanted to tell you everything, up to the very end... In our stories we bared ourselves to each other: we showed ourselves lonely, abandoned, nakedly alone, and the thought about a common way we should follow, hand in hand, until the end, occurred to us by itself... So it happened by itself: to get close together and act together until the end of life: cheat the surroundings together, but remain faithful to each other... In the tracklessness of this icy universe this becomes the only value, the only sense of enduring on this earth... But I was wrong, I betrayed her!... How I deluded both her and myself!... All those later coffees, absinths, beaujolaises... The light and her hands... This is this, this is it: all those coffees, absinths, beaujolaises turned into weeping! I found another woman whose richness promised it would save me from eternal indigence... And she'd have understood it if I hadn't disowned her at one moment... in the Opera Café, when she needed me so much I ignored her... Yes: and for that reason she doesn't want to know me!... Well, I've been coming for her birthday for ten years now, and you see how I travel so as to rediscover the sense of walking together in the tracklessness, but she doesn't want to know about it... Well, this is it...«

He paused, and again I let the silence and the clattering of the train drown the evidently doctored story.

»Human loneliness shouldn't be betrayed!...« he spoke again.

»It shouldn't it shouldn't...« I chimed in in a voice strange to myself.

»Well, so I'll arrive tonight, I'll knock at the door, at the window, and she'll say again: He's arrived, he's arrived... How stubborn this little old man is!... But this light troubles me... Lend me your newspaper...«

I handed it to him without knowing what he would do with it, and when he opened it and covered himself so that a paper roof rose over his head, all seemed so crumpled in this life of ours. No order!... And the paper was FIGARO. The heavy type of the title stuck out so much on the side of the paper roof turned to me that I began to be interested in the word for the first time: Fi-ga-ro... What did it mean? It occupied me so much that I forgot to offer him to turn the light off. »The Marriage of Figaro«, came to my consciousness, Figaro qua, Figaro là, until the old man under the paper appeared like a strange kind of Figaro. Oh yes, I thought, this time the hurt old woman will finally take pity on him, and they will meet in their loneliness. This will be their marriage, »The Marriage of Figaro«, they will give hands to each other, and nothing from outside will be able to prevent them from believing in each other. Loneliness will be got over, and they will stand hand in hand facing the universe!... So I thought, in fact, dreamed their dream, and he, it seemed, had already dropped off. If I had listened more attentively, I should have heard his breathing. The paper roof was trembling over his head so that I feared more and more strongly it would slip down if the train shook more intensely this closed space of ours flying through the night. He had started twice already, but the FIGARO, like a wonder, remained over his face as if it knew: it belonged to him not only as a roof over his head, but

also as a name, as if it knew it went to the old lady with him... Well, he did not speak for a considerable while so that I myself could lean and take a nap. We had a whole hour up to Dijon. I leant on my overcoat and closed my eyes. I probably fell asleep for a while. Opening my eyes, and coming to myself, I saw the paper was not over his head, and his right hand had slipped down off the seat and touched the floor on which the FIGARO lay. I stood up, took the newspaper up, told it like a roof and put it on his head and sat down again, but the hand which touched the floor troubled me, and I stood up again, reached for it carefully and put it on his breast, but it slipped down on the floor again. I smiled at it and caught it again and now intended to place it between his waistcoat and his shirt, but it seemed it resisted, resisted strangely. Then it struck me that the body itself behaved strangely, and without much thought, I took the paper roof from his face and looked closely at it. What?!... No, he breathed no more... A strange heat flooded all over me, I began to shake, but all was in vain, he did not move. I opened the door of the compartment, began to call the conductor, and run down the corridor, and only then it occurred to me he had given me the black box and recommended me an injection if he got a heart attack. I returned to the compartment at once. The train was already entering the Dijon station. I gave him an injection in the arm that had been touching the floor, but all was in vain. He did not come to himself any more.

I am not going to tell you about all the troubles I had because of the case in Dijon. I gave, of course, all the information I had to the police. From his papers we knew her address, we called her, and she arrived. She and I and some other persons, who, however, seemed to have nothing to do with him, were at his funeral. So I got acquainted with her. She was quite grey, skinny, with lively words and movements. I remembered her sharp profile, with something oriental in it. And if I knew the French language as well as mine, perhaps, my dear G... I should not be writing this letter to you, but to her, the old woman. But she is, however, already dead. We talked little. By and by we had no opportunity for this. Still I managed to tell her his and, probably her own story, but she did not want to give herself up to it, to the story... She listened to it smiling, answering nothing to the foreigner who found himself there by chance and wove himself unexpectedly into the fabric of their lives. But on the occasion of our leave-taking, she, nevertheless, gave me her address: to visit her, or to write to her...

How many years have passed since then? Neither many, nor few. Driven by my loneliness I came to this little island and to the stone house in the middle of the already dead vineyard. A quiet beach; winds on the sea... But nowhere genuine directness. Ah, the directness! It was the directness which drove me to this loneliness of mine... And you see, like a wonder, it seems increasingly that it is better without directness. Here it seems I should discover it in, if I neared it, horror itself... The one who prowls after me, peering from all the things... Listen, and understand well. Prowls!

The old lamp is already going out. Darkness will come again, and all will become a sense of hearing full of danger... I am on the bottom of the sea, and from a distance are looming beings with no other intention but to devour me. And how many they are! But what kind of an

emperor am I in this loneliness of mine! I defend myself with ease from all the beings! Only, it is true, the other day, when my house owner fell asleep again under the newspaper, a horror seized me that I should die sleeping under the paper...

There is still some light, the flame of the oil-lamp sometimes flickers intensely, giving me signs. Well, but why am I writing you about all this? At the beginning I had my own thought, but here his story has swallowed me... Yes, yes, with it I am writing you a message about the senselessness I discovered on the way of loneliness.

The oil-lamp has got out. Darkness. I am cowering alone. Time and the sense of hearing... A beetle!... But I see and know no more... And something keeps urging me to begin to swim in space and time, to look for him, Arkadiyevich, and for his time, his moment... 1867 and onwards, further and further... But? I know, I know, I am acquainted with it, I am listening to the depth, I am travelling, simmering in my sense of hearing, but all the same, nothing, nothing, nothing...

Translated by Branko Brusar

STJEPAN MIHALIC

The Late Poor Little World

THE FEAR

THE FIRST THING that drew itself out of the mist and became a small picture was the grey Sunday afternoon covered with clouds. He was standing on the path in his godmother's garden, extending his fingers towards the ripe currants. From the steeple across the River Kupa, re-echoing from the roofs, a dusky ringing forced its way towards him. He was small in the vast garden, alone, surrounded by trees and bushes, where unseen eyes crept. All of a sudden fear seized him. Screaming, he ran towards the people, stamping plants savagely. He ran into his mother who was gossiping with his godmother that enjoyed her dear cheese pie. Since the women were astonished and embarrassed, he burst out crying. He did not get rid of the convulsive, unrestrained crying until the very following morning. He started during the delirious night, shouted, fell from his bed into the darkness, and dear aunt Rozalija, the sage of the street, solemnly announced to her neighbours' council that Dragica's Benko had surely stepped upon it. What »to step upon« meant, he did not know. But so much excitement and mystery spread over the face of the reputable Rozalija that he felt, frightened by it still more, that it was doubtless the matter of dangerous forces. To be, without even knowing it, in relation with things you meet but do not see, things you cannot touch, this overwhelmed him like the severest fever in measles, when he would suddenly catch a glance of the familiar unknown one, peering at him from the hung up clothes. Always the same, and in the same way, he would creep into the room through the shut windows, winking to him that he was there. Clenching his teeth he would start buzzing. Then he would extend his hot arm, start to swing him.

place him on his buzzing, and with a sly smile rock him over the hairy edge of a heaving precipice.

Somewhere about noon his father returned from the country, pale, with his right arm bandaged. While he had wanted to pacify his discordant brothers, who, stirred up by their wives, quarrelled over the partition, he found the young bride guilty at which his younger brother, although he knew it was true, »defended« him with a pitchfork.

»Aha,« Rozalija, satisfied, rejoiced. »Didn't I tell it to you? Of course, I did. Benko stepped upon it at the same moment his papa touched death.«

THE GOLDFINCH

THE MURKY attic with old women. Hunched, maimed, lame women. Tired, sorry, forgotten women. The old woman Gojmerec had sighed upstairs totted up the days, months, years, suffered it for sixty years.

Alone, old woman Gojmerec coughed, humble in her mouse's hole, with her tiny mouse's face, under the sooty beams over the sooty holes. From dawn to dusk she wound cotton, from dawn to dusk she turned the spinning-wheel, ball after ball, today, tomorrow, hundreds and thousands of balls. Her hands moved, moved, moved, the old and yellow worn-out hands, and when not disentangling threads, they stroked her painful hip. It burnt, in her hip, glowed like live coals, in her meagre hip, the old woman became lame because of her hip, because of her hip, she wept while peering through the skylight, at the small skylight cut out from the tiles, the sign-posted path towards the clouds and the sun. She stared with her half-gone-out mouse's eyes, from which dropped, troubled tears, glided, crawled day and night.

Why did old woman Gojmerec live?

Swallowing his uneasiness, Benko was in pain cowering on the small bench beside her kitchen-range.

And what was rustling there?

It was knocking in him because of his strained attention, while the old woman would sit in the darkness, on her bed, on the straw covered with a patched yellow sheet, with a black Virgin Mother in the corner, crowned with paper marguerites grown yellow.

Could she be a witch? And what if she was a witch? His throat, dried up, choked from fright while the reflection of the fire drew itself through the small holes, skipping around, turning into curious feelers that looked for him on the small wall and on the floor.

It was usually after the pasture time, when little candles jumped on meadows and ditches, and over the stooped roofs of groundfloor houses, in the street, ringing descended from the air to reach the elect.

Old woman Gojmerec, all beaten up by work, moved her stiff half-open mouth, talked with her consumptive fate, with her loveless and

joyless penury, sending Our Fathers and Hail Marys into abysses, without expecting betterment or dawn, and her long arms like mere bones, growing, turned into preying feelers, nearing the rickety small bench, the kitchen-range, and Benko, who, breathless, all in sweat, silent, withdrew deeper and deeper into the corner.

But stronger than fear itself was the wooden goldfinch on a Hawthorne twig in a recess facing the skylight. In fact, it would be his, after old woman Gojmerec died, after her last moment came, she had promised the bird to him. But when would it come? And how would it come? And what if she was a witch? Impatient, Benko yearned for the bird, feeling bitterness and shame for it. Shameful, he could hardly resist tears. He knew his desire was ugly, he seriously loved old woman Gojmerec, who talked to him about snakes and pilgrims, and for a reason — since he, because of the goldfinch, wished her to die, without, however, desisting from the inheritance — he had a twinge of conscience, he was looking at her sitting in her grave, upbraiding him, reproaching, threatening with her forefinger grown green, since now, dead she knew everything.

»Why are you silent? What are you thinking about?«

As if she guessed what was seething in Benko, woman Gojmerec shifted in her darkness, her voice became rough, harsh all of a sudden.

»Don't you hear the Ave Maria? Go home. Your mum will look for you again through the whole neighbourhood.«

The Ave Maria.

The deadline when one had to go home, because of the impure appearances prowling in the darkness. Jumping, he rushed through the attic like an arrow, jumped over three steps at once, crashed down upon the groundfloor, to avoid hearing steps behind him, and they were following him, surely, he heard them, listened to them, the echoes of his own stamping.

LA PALOMA

FOR YEARS Auntie Rozalija from the town slaughter-house had sighed over La Paloma, telling the story of Maximilian, Juarez, and Charlotte, and she used to weep, weep because of herself. Auntie Rozalija was important, the interpreter of everything appearing in the street, Auntie Rozalija with her golden spectacles, and she spoke through her nose, when she did not forget to do so. While she had been young, she had been beautiful, and because she had been beautiful she had kept refusing the enamoured journeymen, entertaining herself with students and serious secondary school pupils, and she had listened and listened and listened to uncounted serenades. Since she had also listened to La Paloma, she waited for her own prince, and in the romantic expectation of her prince she met the sleeking, gloating old age, and old age turned the former fastidious beauty into an obtrusive spinster, Auntie Rozalija, as Benko himself called, her, who was withering in the cage of remem-

branches, withering, gossiping and endlessly philosophizing. As the sweetest dainty, the »food for her mind«, which she still nibbled with yearning, two big books stood on a little table, a novel of four thousand pages, a big novel, great novel, the story of the guiltlessly condemned and persecuted, of the luckless Gvozdanović and his Jelica.

Perhaps for the reason she had ogled with them, town magistrates, or their majority, with two Prague philosophers at their head, who remembered the far-off chirping, made efforts to provide for her, to insure her until her death, and they furnished her, settled her in the town slaughter-house, laughing in their weighted stomachs at how they revenged their young failures. There, in the rough empire of slaughter, powdered, velvety, with a lace collar, with her remarkably bandaged, painful head, with her feverishly blue eyes, she carefully cooked honey-biscuits, fried liver, eggs with brain, sipped šiler and soda, shouted at the apprentices to keep to the house regulations, and fought courageously with her helper, the savage blasphemer, old Kušić. To blaspheme and bite, with reason and without it, was for Kušić, his own master in the past, now a servant, sweeper in the slaughter-house, the dishevelled one, the last passion.

At night, when Kušić left work, Rozalija locked the huge gate. Without lighting the lamp, she would sit beside the window, staring for hours down the empty street, waiting for any movement or step, and as well as in old woman Gojmerec's attic, but here because of the Gvozdanović and Jelica books, Benko would cower and wait together with her. All shrunk on the little chair at her feet, he would listen to the ballad about the shot prince, admire Juarez who beat the emperor, and when Rozalija would approach the gramophone so as to hear Maximilian's last wish, he abandoned himself to the attractive calls from out of the night, and silently, trembling from something unknown that carried him off, he dreamed of adventures on seas and lands. Tearing down the moist covers of the roof, the calls would entice him away from the hoops of the street, raise him like a little feather into limitless space, where life overflowed into a luxurious dream.

When grown up, he himself would strike, fight for all who weep and suffer. He was just galloping on a foaming white horse, when all of a sudden a scream called him from the jungle.

»Halt,« he shouted, reaching for his mace.

In front of the oak-trees, the giant with Kušić's head, hairy, bloody, grinning scornfully, was dragging Milka, the street beauty, into the thicket.

ĐUKA

ĐUKA KNEW about a hundred stories, and when they got tired of heroic wrestling, they would draw themselves under the covers of Đuka's bed, listening to the old clock ticking. It regularly happened before the full night, before the street sat down to dinner, when the old street lamp lighter, with his ladder on his shoulder, just began to light the petroleum lamps on the corners. A fire was merrily crackling in the stove, somewhere under the wardrobe a cricket sang, on the attic beams mice ran, and Đuka told about two coins, about Sindbad, the Boors, about the headless man, inserting, according to circumstances, his own into what he had read, with talent, trying to enliven the event, to make it grow, he contributed excitement and thrill to it, using his voice as a fiddler uses his violin. Although he was only a paid journeyman, Đuka was like a son in the house. Tidy, and not like some others, who were looking eagerly forward to their Saturday pays, so as to play at nine-pins or cards until Monday dawn. Đuka wore good suits of clothes, took walks, talked, went to the cinema, and read not only newspapers but also books, as seldom any of some twenty journeymen in the street. A stout well-knit boy, transpiring calm, second to none in work, not even to the oldest master, he sang in a pure ringing tenor, he wrestled with Benko, as an equal with an equal, without showing him he was a child, and still as with a child, satisfying him with stories.

Then beautiful Milka, with her silent, mild smile emerged, and it was the idyl's end. Instead of wrestling and continuing about Sindbad, Đuka forgot himself with beautiful Milka in front of the door. Frail, as if made of the finest crystal, up to then Milka had passed the window looking around herself with her wonderful eyes, a flower sentenced to an early death, but one morning Đuka looked more closely, and he blushed embarrassed. At noon, as soon as he dropped the spoon, he stood in front of the door looking towards town, and in the evening, as if he were hers, beautiful Milka was standing with him, charming him, the poor one, with her almond glances.

»Đuka,« Benko called impatiently, looking at his mother, and mother smiled.

»Đuka! Đuka!« he called the following day suppressing moans in his weighted bosom, there where the struck heart beat, oh, how he would weep, he ought to weep, but how should he humiliate himself weeping in front of an enemy?

And then he hid behind a corner and met her. He broke the barrier of hate in himself, called her to the room, since, he said, Đuka was ill and would like to tell her something. In the room, climbing a chair to be tall, he struck her face with his fist, but he froze at once, seeing how she suffered without budging, planted there like a statue. His father caught him, pushed him between his legs, lashed him with his belt, sighing. Mother wrested him from father's hands, all mad because of her only son's streaked buttocks, and Benko, tasting the belt for the first time, tumbled down to the Kupa River without a single tear, crashing into the friendly willows on the bank. They called him at noon,

he suffered hunger, but, no, never, there was no reconciliation, he threatened, withdrawing deeper into the thicket, revengefully thinking of death. Oh, to die, how he would punish them. All the afternoon long they were looking for him along the Kupa, not knowing what he was ready for, but by now he had crossed to the abandoned hen-house, tired, incessantly planning retaliation. If he could die, but to stay alive. He was looking at himself stretched on a black bier, with candles burning, they were sprinkling him with water, crying, and let them only, it served them right. To wear them out, so they would know how they hurt him, but then, all of a sudden, to rise from the casket, to laugh, and forgive magnanimously!

In the evening, all cold from the voices in the darkness, from the fright that through the cracks something was prowling after him, hearing mother's steps near there, he sighed in exasperation from the fulness of his lungs, so as to, as if casually, bring her on the track. He was already ashamed of his action, but he would not have admitted it for anything in the world if the beautiful Milka had not met him behind the corner, stroking his hair with sisterly fingers. Some ten days had passed from the blow, but only then he burst out crying. He forgave since he was forgiven, and Đuka, there he was, let her have him, he was giving him to her, and readily, but only as a gift.

PIG-SLAUGHTERING

HE APPEARED suddenly on the threshold, as usually when he had the idea to play a little with the moulder's scraper, but an inimical silence checked him there. Nobody uttered a single word, but Benko, following the beating of his bloodstream, as yet ignorant of human maddening, comprehended almost everything. Old Bežan was sitting on his bed grinning somehow wryly, motionless, motionless was also his smile, as if he expected something, but Benko thought the old man was not sitting, he was hanging lowered down to a span above the pillows, fixed in the air by an invisible force, and the same force nailed the wry smile on his wrinkled face. Mica, somehow awed, hunched in the corner, immersed up to her waist in the dresses on a hook, wiping her weeping eyes, waiting for the same thing as Bežan, transfixed herself, not able to wrest herself away, turned towards what was happening around the kitchen-ranger, trembling like a small poor bat, nailed alive, with its wings spread, for good luck, in the shoemaker's corridor. Mrs. Bežan, confused with hurry and fire, rather small but stout, in broad skirts, well-known for her sluggishness, but now a lightning, like a bristling crow attacking, gyrating like a top gone mad, after she had thrown a piece of wood into the flame, she caught a knife and ground it on the metal edge of the range, dropped it and caught a piece of wood again, and again the knife, looked at the pot, as if she wanted to drink up the steam, everything like a lightning, as in an illusion, sweaty, dark, dangerously new, and Benko thought whatever she did she did not

do it by herself, what she needed, but rather moved like a wheel under an invisible rod that made her turn like a very top. The fourth was the moulder, big, strong, with his full beard under a leather cap, in his blue working clothes, smoking a pipe on a three-legged stool by the window, as if he were all alone in the room, did not see anything, nothing interested him, he was just relaxing watching the roof. But still, it was evident he was most important there. Whatever was being mixed was being mixed because of him, the moulder knew it was being mixed because of him, but he did not like to get involved with anything around him, whatever it was it would be without him, he did not want to open his mouth, he did not let himself be drawn to any judgment.

Benko felt himself fixed, he did not understand that he had just broken the spell in which a moment ago a death had been prepared. But he would never forget Bežan, grey and wry, giving himself up to his fate, giving himself up to something he could not escape. He would never forget this woman, much younger, mad from passion, after she had already tasted the moulder's rage, wild around the pot of seething water, as if she were ready for December slaughtering, and she had been preparing herself indeed for a kill, imagining in her madness that Bežan was a pig, for him she had ground the knife on the range. And he would not forget the terrible moulder either, the guilty one, who, cold like a blue idol, having woken libidinous furies, was waiting to have a sacrifice burnt to him.

Benko was feeling with smells and colours.

The autumn dusks were yellow, smelling of quinces and tired waters.

Mrs. Bežan would remain black forever, smelling of mould in half-dark rooms. Whenever he would close his eyes, for a long while he would still see her beside the range with the extended knife, the witch from the tale of Johnny and Molly.

KUKU JANA

DIRTY, TORN, underfed, he had the accident while cleaning canals and ditches. Who knows when, but somebody had the idea that Kuku Jana, under the coat hanging over his shoulders, in the right sleeve, hid a knife. A long knife, razor-sharp, to kill lonely children when he met them in darkness or somewhere in fields. Well, just so, he brandished it, and slash! — your throat was gone.

«Kuku Jana,» it trumpeted around him, from above, from below, from the infuriated circle, as if a flock of angry sparrows attacked a hawk, but they were afraid to get near, they cursed and shouted from a cautious distance.

«Kuku Jana,» corridors were challenging him, and doors and windows and lofts and yards, wherever an opportunity to threaten without fear, while he, like a deaf man, hurried down the middle of the road.

Although it was apparent the victims were »Americans«, all of them half-literate peasants, uneasiness began to sprout in town, fear grew, hysteria spread, and as soon as the first dusk fell, an unexpected movement behind a corner, a step, a rustling, a cat on the roof, was enough to quicken the pulse, and the imagination, multiplying the bloody finds, began to locate them in a dangerous proximity, as if the person was everywhere, inescapable, and when a lull extended to weeks, probably until a new charge entangled himself into the guide's net, it was silently implored that it be over as soon as possible, since everybody considered himself the next one and the uncertainty marred his appetite and sleep. Then they seized him, by chance too, although it had been already gathered that he was such and such, tall, stooping, fortyish, hairless, olive green, taciturn, and generally unimpressive, dark as one should be in the insecure enterprise by which one wants to reach the dollar paradise against the regulations.

And now he sat in town gaol without losing his calm, as if people were the same as lambs enough of which he had killed and barbecued at church feasts. »Have you seen me?« he asked unexcitedly when his examiner presented him with the charge, as one who was accustomed to hearing all kinds of things, as if it were the matter of a misunderstanding soon to be settled between serious people. But when he closed up to him, pressed him with details, confronted him, seeing he could get nowhere, what they put on him was stronger than himself, and moreover, he was alone, and they put so much on him, without, however, ever admitting anything, he rolled a cigarette for himself and gave himself up to his fate. And streets, masters, journeymen, godmothers, yearning for monstrosities, formally stuck to the guards, bribing them in order to get near the one hidden from sensation, Jack the Slasher, but nothing out of it, a man like a man, there he was, sipping his black coffee, smoking, silent, without thinking of repentance, and what would it avail him, with the crowd of the murdered?

»How could you do it?« a guard asked him, and he, Ikan, answered: »Have you seen me?« and »Have you seen me?« and »Have you seen me?« to all in a familiar tone, harping on the same chord, without regretting himself or those under the sod. Although they would have impaled him, roasted him on a spit, cut him into strips, if they had handed him to them when he had arrived at town, »Have you seen me?« had produced its effect, it had somehow lowered him from monstrosity into daily life, it had, in a way, returned him to people, perhaps through persistence, since it also meant hope, he hoped, which is human, if even without chances, because he would, and with right, grease the rope. Besides, newspapers wrote much about him. The whole world knew about it. In London, in Calcutta, in Johannesburg, Baltimore, everywhere telephones buzzed about him, and about them through him, about their town, as if they owed him something, they began to adopt him, claim him, call him »our Ikan«, make fun by »ikanizing«, »How are you, Ikan?«, shouting across the road, or »Shoot, Ikan« at the skittle-alley, or »Are you Ikan or are you not?«, drinking, forgetting how much they had been afraid of him, writing it off, as usual, as last year's snow.

When they lead him from the gaol to the station, to Zagreb, since they would sentence him there, they were angry, hurt, since he had to go away from them, and their performance was moved to Zrinjevac, they looked at him tied between two guards, crowding the pavements as if

for the carnival, or as if they saw off a Saviour, and Ikan, cleanly shaved, as though he went to a wedding, walked, calm, as he had used to kill, quiet, as he would accept death.

Standing in front of the crowd on the edge of the pavement, while his mother firmly embraced his shoulders, as if he could still tear himself away and as though a knife were still in his belt, Benko, shaking, regretted Ikan and waited for somebody who would rush up on a horse and announce that everything was a joke, that Ikan himself knew it was a joke, and that only for that, because he knew it, did he not now! and did not bite and did not fight with the guards, and did not clank his chains to strike at the silence, which led him towards the blackest pit.

SIESTA

BENKO WAS alone on the sunny bank, excepting the ducks and geese on the sands of the islands that emerged from the half-dried-up Kupa. The tired steaming of the sparkling currents poured into a dreamy gurgling overflowing into the satiated afternoon silence, and Benko, in pants, burnt down to the bones, satisfied, sank into the picture around him, into the blue and golden and red reflections which mixed with the greenery, overflowed into enchanting looking-glasses, pressing all this into one's tissue for the whole life. Ducks and geese, with their beaks under their wings, of course, were neither ducks nor geese, but adventurous fleets anchored in harbours, the Kupa River was an ocean, the islands archipelagoes, and the dark and bright tufts, bending towards the surface with traitorous spines, were underwater monsters prowling after prey, they would surely entangle you with their perfidious big tails, entice you into the whirlpool and draw you to the bottom. Flying from bank to bank, dragonflies seemed to leap, not fly, alighting on stones, branches, water lilies, wherever there was a short rest station, were horses with tiny women-riders, sitting not on saddles, but between the small glass-like transparent wings, also the beautiful riders' wings. He even saw one, for a moment only, when the dragonfly touched his stick, and the girl looked straight at his eyes, she was sitting in a swing inside a gaudy bubble. Swarms of small flies, dancing over the water, playing the whirly »I'm falling, I'm not falling«, not a single span from the swimming half-drunk seething little fish had just handed him over a secret message that tomorrow would also be a beautiful day. The small yellow and blue and orange butterflies, and white, and dark red, no bigger than your nail, pushed each other with their feelers in a circle on the mud, giggling. Benko even heard the giggling, the boys were from the close, invisible castle, thinking they had cheated Benko with their disguise, were just discussing where they would go at night. On the greatest island, farther from the middle, a stout warrior had dug himself in. The warrior had on an impenetrable tasselled cuirass, on his head a broken top, his helmet, and under his right muscle an umbrella, his mace, all, according to the tradition, had emerged from the Kupa. The warrior was the guarantee that the island was theirs,

the challenge to the hordes on the other bank, who killed him under the cover of the night, but they sent a new one as soon as it dawned, continuing the inherited vow of generations and leading the fierce war for two months. Throwing glances at the »grannie«, so they called him, the warrior on the island, both male and female, Benko felt his stare touching him beneath the tuft of grass. For that reason he shivered. His whole body shook like an aspen-leaf. The excitement came from the knowledge that the warrior was alive, and look, he winked and let him know that he was awake, and steady, and that he watched over the willow thickets, over the rafts under the houses above the pits between the currents, over the awry roofs, fences, supports, over the boats in shallow places and over the gardens on the slopes, over everything, all those bights, bays, lagoons, and Benko, overflowing into the calm around himself, would like that nothing moved or changed, that the moment stayed, when he was alone, with the line thrown into the current, enjoying the happiest happy world. After having got rid of the weights of time and space, near the siestas in yards, corridors which grinned with Jurck Cmok, or played at other card-games with half-litres under porches and trees, wiping out the poor everyday street, Benko kneaded whatever he pleased, into what he liked, and how he liked it, and wanted that from what was in him at the moment there was just nothing necessarily out of him, that there was indeed nothing outside him, and although he was ashamed, or wanted to be ashamed, that thus so he betrayed mum and dad, and the boys, his flesh creeping because he might do so, without turning, he sat down on the powerful carpet.

Translated by Branko Brusar

ZIVKO JELIČIĆ

Les Jardins Suspendus

ELLES SONT dans le jardin — j'ai attrapé dans l'oreille le chuchotement de Jerko. J'ai couru derrière lui, à petits sauts, sans respirer, mais je n'ai pas réussi à dominer le tremblement qui m'a pris à sa voix: on l'aurait dite parcourue de fibrilles de sang et les fibres éclataient une à une, se dissolvaient dans le sable en grosses gouttes rouges. Oh, si on pouvait allonger les lèvres en bec et les picorer comme ça, en sautillant! Elles sont dans le jardin. Nous les avons surprises devant notre petite maison: elles déplaçaient des briques par terre. La fenêtre de Tonka la tubard était fermée. Une branche de tamaris grenait: j'ai gardé les yeux dessus tandis que Dobrila baissait le tête par terre. Elle se tenait accroupie et elle hachait de la verdure avec un bout de verre. Son ombre s'est glissée comme un lézard dans la petite gouttière de la nuque, follette. Anka avait mis les poings sur les hanches, menaçante: **On a rien à faire cuire, on se taille si vous rapportez rien de la chasse, mais hein, surtout pas des mille-pattes, ça fait puer des mains. — Regarde** — dit Jerko en tirant de sa poche le bout supérieur d'une cigarette. **Laisse-ça, laisse-ça, faut arranger la maison, apporter de l'eau, vous êtes encore là, en avant, marche** — Anka attrapa une baguette et en se tortillant de tout son corps, elle s'approcha de nos jambes nues. Dobrila riait mais sans lever les yeux de terre. J'eus honte de ses longs bras qui étaient pliés aux coudes, ceux-ci piqués comme des becs dans le vide pendant qu'elle tapait sur la brique avec son bout de verre. Nous sautions la baguette avec laquelle Anka fouettait le sol. J'enviais Jerko. Nous avons couru le long du sentier, sauté le buisson, débouché dans le pré. Dobrila, quand elle se lève, démonte ses jambes l'une après l'autre, comme le photographe les pattes de son appareil. Elle a honte de ses grandes incisives, elle tire toujours sur sa lèvre pour les couvrir, et quand elle rit, elle baisse la tête sur sa poitrine. Jerko tira du buisson nos outils de chasse. J'ai défait la corde, j'ai fait un lasso, et j'ai galopé