

Landlord!
He was asleep by the door. I pulled his arm.

- Landlord!

He looked at me sleepily.

- Landlord! - I repeated more loudly. - Give me back my sixty fillers. I can't sleep in there. The bedbugs bit me; I lay on the floor, but then I had to fight the cockroaches.

He returned the money, sighed, yawned and said:

- What can I do? Nobody's slept there in a long time. All the other beds are taken. Come back tomorrow and I'll find you a cleaner one.

I broke out into the street, into the night, into the air. My shoulders twitched, I scratched my hips, ran my thumb along my collar. My back burned, so did my ears, my stomach bit. And on top of all that, the terrible smell of vermin, which hits the stomach more than it does the nose. I walked quickly. It seemed to me as if I had come out of a dungeon and a torture chamber, not from an inn and a bed. I didn't know where to go. There was no other inn to be found at those prices, and even if I did find one, I could be sure that the bed would be of the same quality. I went to the main street. I met almost no one, only a few guards and more cockroaches in formal, drawing-room black attire, walking on the pavement,

enjoying the poetic night and aristocratic promenade, when democracy rudely snores and prose very indecently sleeps. It was cold; the light from the lamps green and immobile; the sky deep and high; houses like shadows. There was nowhere to sit down, let alone sleep; the public gardens were closed; only one was sometimes accidentally left open during the night. But the guards often went there and, having nothing else to do, just to kill time, they would slowly wake up the homeless, one by one, all the while debating among themselves in detail and depth whether they minded the fact that they sleep there or were they just doing their duty. They would even become sentimental and whisper silently:

- Very sorry, but the law's the law, and we are the police...

The homeless replied as silently and sentimentally (they were still sleepy) and it frequently happened that the guards would leave them alone, but would return later, just out of boredom. Or maybe they regretted that they had met with no resistance: the time passes slowly from midnight to dawn, and the working day with sober people is real hell.

It was past midnight. I entered a café. The owner was usually busy at that hour. He respected me because he had seen me several times in the company of a young reporter, and he was impressed with newspapers: perhaps because he noticed that his guests pay for and drink his coffee only to be able to read them. Tonight he approached me immediately. He pointed out how favorably the Italian papers had written about the Balkan Slavs. So the subject was Pangermanism. Scratching all the while ostensibly because I was nervous, I replied immediately:

- Germany is our only enemy. She needs a big market-place to unload its industry, and we Serbocroats might as well be the greengrocers. She has no colonies, she works a lot, she breeds even more: she has to empty her bowels. That is, she needs to do it normally, regularly, every day! or else she will get a constipation that will give her a headache, for which she will have to take laxatives that will give her such a diarrhea that all the paper of her colossal journalism will not be enough... Economy should take hygiene as its main principle: eat every day and relieve yourself every day...

The young reporter arrived, the one on whose account the keeper respected me. He had noticed that I was per tu with a personality on the

editorial staff and correctly concluded that I too must know a little more than is allowed into the papers and past the censorship board. My friend was inadvertently surprised at what the Italian papers had written (I scratched nervously and said in a trembling voice that this writing is a bad omen and has a deeper meaning). His paper had published an excerpt and he knew nothing about it. The coffeehouse keeper was just about to comment shrewdly and maliciously that he, a reporter, was just pretending not to know, because he certainly knew much more, and my friend was about to confirm with a meaningful smile that he indeed only pretended not to have known, whereas actually he knew much more, when the keeper suddenly jumped up:

- Hold it!

His eyes restlessly examined my collar. I just smiled and, full of black premonitions, began to casually twitch my shoulders.

- Hold it! Hold it! Hold it! - and the keeper was already holding something in his hand. I was breathless. The keeper had lost his breath and when he wanted to inhale, he became sullen, he jutted his chin and went to wash his hands. He had finally realized that what he had found was a bedbug and that disappointed him. He didn't return. He didn't even say: get out. I understood and left of my own accord. As far as I remember, I just smiled bitterly, very bitterly. While I was "nervously" nestling on the chair and scratching, my conscience was clear; but when the owner found the bedbug on me, I felt as if I had been caught in flagranti. Imagine a husband who catches his best friend with his wife or a friend found with his best friend's wife - then you will be able to imagine me and the coffeehouse keeper.

He had appreciated my political opinions and my esprit, he actually enjoyed my talent. I knew he respected me and in a grand manner I pronounced judgments on foreign politics, speaking as if I were on close terms with Bülow, Tittoni, Izvolsky... the way my reporter friend was with me. Whereas now a single bedbug has rendered all my political lubrications rubbish - I was the same as some quack lawyer without a practice or a writer without a job, debating about politics in coffeehouses only to keep warm, sitting and passing the night without ordering more than a cup of coffee! But it isn't half as bad if you pester people with all that talk - what about when you start pestering them with bed-

bugs, when a respected coffeehouse becomes a dump for vermin - what will the guests say then? Are they paying for that cup of coffee more than they would elsewhere so they can enjoy the comfort, cleanliness, foreign newspapers, or to place in fatal danger their clothes, their skin, their noses, their stomachs - all of their existence and position? See the esteemed physician: his elegance, his haircut, his glamour - just imagine: he steps into this famous and refined café, he sits down and has a cup of coffee, tips the waiter and goes on to the drawing-room of some great personage, and suddenly it turns out that the thing on the doctor's coat is neither a butterfly nor a shield bug but a real, live bedbug!

I realized at once that I my bluff had been called; from now on I wouldn't be able to straighten my tie, or to pull nervously at my vest, or to scratch indecisively the back of my head or to clean out my ear or to grab my hip because of pain, or my heart because of excitement - all the things I had done just a moment ago during our debate without feeling the need to explain my behavior, since we had already told the owner once that all reporters and writers are extremely nervous people... I was exposed. Depressed. In the night, out of town, drowsy, I felt as if my skin were peeling and burning on my back, stomach, neck, head, and hips. I didn't dare enter another café. Dawn was breaking. A cup of café au lait was waiting for me at an acquaintance's. But I didn't even have the strength to daydream about it anymore. What if they too found a bedbug on me? I felt contaminated, as if a signpost saying "contagious disease" was attached to me and it hurt more than the disease itself. A flea never makes that kind of impression. It is in its nature nimble, agile, prankish: it comes and goes. But a bedbug is worse than a louse, because it stinks. I became afraid - haunted by the stench, which enters the stomach through the nose and hits the brain - that it could show up on me in broad daylight, when I didn't even suspect it. And I actually had a rather clean collar on. I carefully guarded it, for based on all this it will have become clear that I had come to this city having no residence or occupation, but counting on free meals at acquaintances' houses. I was to visit some of them that very day. As a nimble and tireless orator, I was a welcome guest at dinner-tables; what's more, I had traveled quite a bit around the country and my traveler's impressions opened my hosts' appetite, goodwill and an extra bottle or two. But now! How could I go visiting! Me and appetite! And what if the coffeehouse keeper told another

er guest how I nestled nervously on the chair and how he found a bedbug on me and how there could be no doubt that I'm covered with vermin...

I scratched ceaselessly. Then, on the beach, I undressed and under the first rays of the red, cold sun I began to search all the seams, nooks and crannies of my shirt, my underpants, my socks - stark naked, shivering in the cold. And the smell of the sea salted all the stench I had to swallow, vomit and bury there.

To my great surprise, and even greater sorrow, I found almost nothing. I would have reverently closed my nails together like hands in an evangelical greeting. Sounds of bells, trains, roosters, milkmaids could be heard. All those milky, fresh morning sounds and colors. The landscape now looked clean and washed as if all gum had fallen from the corners of our eyes, all cobwebs from our brains, all fog from our planet and all vermin from our underwear. I got dressed. Rejuvenated. My mind got to work quickly and nimbly. With a great effort of will and a greater will of effort and strength, I felt how my thought grew ever faster. I went into town. Breathless. Merry. After a few minutes, this mute and enthusiastic mood of mine began to express itself and speak.

Rehabilitation!

No one had seen it but the coffeehouse keeper; others would find out only if he told them, so, let's neutralize him. If I told him in private: "Please understand, Sir, it was an accident... my room... because of my studies"... it wouldn't help. And, first of all, would I be able to summon the courage to approach him now? Wouldn't he indicate with some gesture that I wasn't to come near his establishment?... In any case, I haven't the strength to face him now. Is there a thief who would like to rehabilitate himself after his first theft when he cannot do it? When he is always surrounded by suspicious and distrusting looks? Is there a debtor who hasn't paid his debt and is asking for more money to settle the old debt, giving as collateral his promise that he will pay it all back? - And honesty in such a case is like a watch you take to the pawn-shop and cannot buy back and which will certainly be lost unless you extend the pawn - with many excuses, lies, shams, etc.

Thus I too must prolong the pawn, convince everyone that in my position, upbringing and feelings I am very far from bedbugs - in other

words, I must lie in such a way that my lies are accepted as the truth... That is to say, we shall have to write an article for the papers... For saying something in private is never the same as saying it through the newspapers or tribunes. I had already written several books of poetry and yet I am no poet because I was unable to get them published. So naturally, I am no poet for those who don't know that I write poetry; but neither am I a poet for those who do know of my poems and who actually read them. That is to say, not a real poet. Because everyone has poems tucked away like that, everyone who hasn't torn them up and who managed to pass to the ninth grade. Manuscripts are not literature, just like letters or inscriptions in others' scrapbooks aren't, or anything else that hasn't been published; like a discussion in private at a dinner table is not politics, if your thoughts and words don't reach the papers. Otherwise we would all be politicians, servants and street sweepers alike. And who would choose to agree with the opinion of a coachman over that of a quack reporter when we can only judge such an opinion with our ears and our minds and not with our eyes? You can say: "I am a count", but you will not be believed unless you can prove it with documents. And the birth-certificate, the identification card and diploma of a writer and a politician is the printing press; their vicars, godfathers and witnesses are the typesetters who have to be paid like all vicars and who, when paid and for the sake of money, can turn your lie into truth and turn a simple turnip, watermelon, beet, potato and cabbage into a poet, novel-writer critic and reporter...

I went into an isolated pub and wrote an article that went some thing like this:

"...This city is supposed to be a metropolis; suffice it to mention the hotels (the one with the elevator), the pastry shops (the newest one), the cafés (the one with separate compartments for smokers and for ladies and with the reading room), the public rest rooms (the underground one with a combing room, washing room and shoe-shining room - only the reading room is missing!), the public gardens (closed at night), the electric streetcars, the streetlights, public automobiles... and to list the city features: several daily newspapers, one library, half an art gallery... our papers are full of praise for our city's progress... The press thunder against great politics, and in matters of small, city policies, in judging the conditions in the city, it again forgets everyday life and is lost in the

grand issues... Only foreigners go to hotels; in daytime, only old people and children can go to the public gardens; not one hundredth of the population uses the public rest rooms at such prices; intellectuals go to those cafés only on Sundays, and to the pastry shops perhaps for Easter... These inhabitants of the city only enjoy what is municipal: the electric power"... "And the same press which sang praise to the great politics of our city and the small of our people, the same press purchased and put together by broad classes, from the editors to the typesetters, did not remember that this metropolis doesn't have what elsewhere even small towns have - a public university, library, reading room, theater, baths, kitchens, hostels and rest rooms... If a pauper looses control in the street, they will say: 'For God's sake, he's not a dog!' and he will not be allowed to satisfy his need like a man; but the man who maybe all day long only gave ten fillers for roasted chestnuts cannot afford the same as someone who spent five crowns for lunch alone... We hear daily complaints about the homeless who sneak through the rails of the gardens and about our famous police who sleep on duty. And nobody asks: where can these miserable individuals, attracted to the glitter of our city, lay their heads down, those who make two crowns a day, who earn their rent with hard day labor - can they pay for quarters more than they make, like those who, suffering from insomnia, spend their nights in orgies, in café-chantants, in separés, pay for rooms they never use?... You will say: "But there are hostels that cost only a few pennies!" Yes, you can get a bed for that much, but you cannot get sleep or rest! These hostels are a real embarrassment for all of us who are not forced to sleep in them. The author of these lines sacrificed a bit of his comfort to find out for himself whether it is possible to sleep in these hostels. And this is what he saw: bed sheets besmirched with yellow and red, that make one wonder whether to explain this with the lack of health or the shortcomings of women, or with the hyperproduction of slime, protoplasm and bedbugs; floors humid and soft like velvet, on which cockroaches feast; the air filled with rot and stench that would lead you to believe you think there are corpses all around you and you are in a grave, if you weren't summoned back to life by those little vermin that don't look like maggots... The author of this article wanted to peek into the soul of this city: the old houses, where its secrets, bodies, sheets and beds are uncovered, and whence he got one impression: stench - and a single souvenir: a bedbug."

I offered the article to a daily; the editor told me to come back in the afternoon. I thought of his kindness and of the royalties, so I forgot all about the coffeehouse owner. I did not go visiting, I lay in the grass and fell asleep. That night I was to sleep in the street again. I couldn't go back to that inn, for with this article and my public plea for cleanliness and against vermin I had made the same impression on the manager as I had on that coffeehouse keeper with the bedbug... In the afternoon I returned to the newspaper editor. The article was published and, in accordance with my express desire, my full name was in the by-line. The editor handed me ten crowns and offered me to work for him. He said he needed articles like that which expose all the rot of our city, signed by an outside contributor, to make the paper popular with the lower classes provided that the editor himself doesn't get in trouble with those above him.

I accepted. I was triumphant: rehabilitated in the eyes of the coffeehouse owner as a reporter investigating the conditions in the city and peeking into his soul; now I could sit in the lowliest pubs and sleep in the most smelly inns: bedbugs would now be trophies and proof that all I cared about was cleanliness and that I took my duty seriously.

But now I had ten crowns: I went to a café-chantant and at dawn walked into a hotel to sleep.

Since then I wrote more often: about the vinegar the poor drink as wine, the meat eaten by the working classes after even flies wouldn't have it - but I myself ate in the house of a widow of a higher official and usually drank beer in restaurants. After a year I got a raise, started writing editorials about the great issues of foreign politics and stopped visiting my old coffeehouse keeper; I became a permanent visitor of the great café with the smokers' section and today I needn't do anything but edit the enraged and needless comments of my younger colleagues writing for the city column... Yes, a new inn under city supervision has been opened; our paper praised it. My old reporter friend noted that there were more bedbugs in it than in any other inn, but I no longer remember what a bedbug looks like and I think his comment is motivated by malice and envy that now I am more influential in the paper than he is...

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Translated by Ljiljana Šćurić