

SLAVKO KOJAR — Born at Palešnik near Garešnica on December 1, 1891, died in Zagreb on September 15, 1963. A distinguished short-story writer. Several of his humoristic satirical short stories describing social changes in the country were made into films.

Works: *Laughing Stories*, 1917; *We Are or We Are Not*, short stories, 1933; *We Are for Justice*, short stories, 1936; *With the Pen and Harrow*, short stories, 1938; *Back to the Moth-balls*, short stories, 1946; *The Patient People*, play, 1947; *Seven Men in the Cellar*, play, 1949; *Short Stories*, 1951; *On the Dolphin's Back*, a short story for young people, 1953; *Save Your Skin — That's what Matters*, short stories, 1956; *Master of His Body*, a play, 1957; *A Man of His Word*, short stories, 1960.



SLAVKO KOLAR

Mad House

IT ALL HAPPENED on a Saturday morning. For my money Saturday is the nicest day in the week. All credit to Sunday of course. I've nothing against Sunday. The Lord's Day, the Day of Rest. But after Sunday comes Monday, the day of hangovers, of getting up early, the daily grind, daily worries and tedious trivialities, and when on Sunday you remember all that is in store for you in the morning, you curse your rest and all the other holiday joys. Saturday, on the other hand, is *looking forward* to rest, to the next day's freedom and peace of mind, and in that *expectation* lie true rapture and delight. Saturday is the day, or rather it is not really a day, Saturday starts in earnest late in the afternoon, Saturday is the evening and the night of the

insignificant, the small townsmen (whom Marko Matic contemptuously calls the petits bourgeois) from cab drivers, porters, factory workers, proletarians of all kinds to civil servants like me. And that is why I like Saturday.

This Saturday began very confusedly. Until recently the war and everything to do with it had really passed me by. I watched it from a lordly distance, from my window on the second floor. Tanks rumbling by, soldiers marching, horrible things happening, and I go on thinking my own thoughts, even condemning it all in the close circle of my friends, criticizing it out loud, but when all is said and done, what has it to do with me. It does not threaten me personally... But now, somehow, the wartime storm seems to be gathering even over my head.

Say I were to get drunk tonight, and I shall do, I feel it in my bones, I have an inkling, or as the Turks say 'merak'. It's just that after a whole series of experiences in our mad house, I simply feel the need to get really drunk and give my heart and soul an airing. I shall not drink myself insensible, I never do, because I can take a lot and I have enough self-control, but I shall get drunk and then I shall come home, properly sozzled, but still able to unlock the front door and make my way upstairs to my second floor. Our hall has always been unattractive. Stuffy, unaired, always stinking of grocer's trade and dust. The walls are grey and dirty at night that resound like tin drums. So, I am in excellent spirits and I forget that our house is fraught with danger, this great concrete hole is charged with the latent danger of *high tension*. And so I go upstairs, but instead of stopping at the second, I charge straight up to the third floor. I try my key in the door of the engineer Radamec's flat. The door opens of its own accord, however, and I am greeted by policemen with pistols: »Come right in!« I smile and say, a little confused, because after all it is not much fun having a revolver aimed at one's chest: »Excuse me, I made a mistake! I live on the floor below...« They snigger cynically, in true police style: »Sure, go and tell that to the marines!...«

And if and when I manage to extricate myself from the snare, they can get a warrant to search my place. Because the police suspect everyone. That would not be nice. No, it would not be a good idea at all. That is the kind of thing that could happen to me. But still I will get drunk and I shall be careful.

If that engineer, Radamec, who is very likely not even an engineer (wherever did he dream up that Verdieque surname), if he has not managed to warn his people, someone is going to meet with a nasty accident, they will walk straight into the mousetrap. They must somehow be warned. But how?... I can't very well stick a notice on the door: Radamec is away!... and even if I did, there are police agents running up and down all the time, they'll take it down and then they will start asking who wrote the notice. No, that's not the way. But that little student, the only one of the engineer's visitors I vaguely know, I should still find some way of contacting him. I shall have to telephone his father at the Power Station. Yes, that is what I shall do. Only, whatever are those people called? I know that his father is some kind of technician, some kind of controller at the Power Station, I remember him from the time we met at the Bar-

ković's for dinner. I rang Barković straight away and he scarcely remembered: »Šegović was his name, Šegović.« Why did I need it?... I just need it that's all.«

I am alone in the room and I telephone the Power Station. After a lot of trouble I finally get him. I do not tell him who I am, or what I am, I only say:

»Go straight home, find your son, the student, or whatever he is, and tell him that his engineer friend R. from the third floor has suddenly gone away. Your son will know the street and the number and which engineer, he must not look for him on any account!...«

The man obviously cannot think what it is all about. He probably has not the remotest idea of what his son gets up to (parents never know!), and he is even angry with me, he thinks it is a joke.

»Do what I say, it's a serious matter and hurry up before it's too late!« I break off the conversation abruptly and put the receiver down.

Marko Matić came into the room while I was speaking and he says scornfully:

»Is that patriotism, or humanity on a small scale?«

»You do things on a big scale if you like. I am a small man, if you don't mind.«

»All right, by all means, I did not mean to offend!«

I should have said: »Take a revolver and shoot Minister Dida Kvaternik, for instance! You will rid the earth of a monster, a swine, our national disgrace!... That would be patriotism on a grand scale!...« But good answers often occur to you too late. I am not »schlag fertig«. And anyway I was not in the mood for arguments and rows.

I almost forgot about Tuna Tulipanović, for God's sake! I would not have dared look the lovely Lidija in the face. Come on, get back on the 'phone. I informed the office and the doctor, I have done my duty and kept my promise.

When I had done all that, I sat down at the table, dealt with a dozen papers, signed some accounts — so that no-one could say I was eating up the State's money for nothing.

I am angry with myself: I am extraordinarily restless today. I pride myself on my strong nerves, but today, they are strangely jangled. Our house really is a mad house. The lovely Lidija is right. There are dangers lurking everywhere from the cellar to the attic. There is the Fajdetic woman and her Damir in the basement (I know we do not see him often, but the fellow could become very awkward if he wanted to). On the first floor are Jurica Vrabec and his ghosts. On the second there is that German, it is true, but he does not look dangerous for the time being. Not to us any rate. The man is probably fully occupied with other important business. Finally, up on the third floor there is that strange engineer, or rather now there is a police ambush. I have the feeling that I am being hemmed in, as they say. Very unpleasant.

I try to talk Matić into joining me in the evening for a steak or pork chop at Peitler's. Peitler has good wine. I hear that he has recently got an exceptionally good Burgundy from Požega. But Matić is a strict teetotaller. He only drinks water, and that abstemiously, in small quantities. He says he does not want to overload his kidneys. Dreary fellow. He is built entirely of principles and rules.

I asked Barković but he is going to Samobor with his family. I have no decent company, and I cannot sit and drink alone, I am not a »solosaufer«, I am not a drunkard at all, and I do not go boozing every Saturday by any means, only when I get this inkling, when I feel like a drink and a bit of inn atmosphere and there is no stopping me. So I have to find decent company.

Only now do I remember Major Radočaj, from the Ministry of War. I should give him a ring. He promised that he would see what could be done for my son-in-law. I should have rung him this morning, I should have gone to see him, but I forgot. (If my Tončika knew there would be Hell to pay: you did not forget Tulipanović of course, as Lidija would say, you did not forget some little unknown student, who probably spends his whole time plotting attempts on people's lives instead of studying, but you did forget your daughter's husband!... She would be right and I would say: »I confess, I am guilty,« I would say: »only I don't like Emil, and it's easy to forget people you don't like. But, like him or not, he is the father of your grandchildren and if he comes to grief in Bosnia his widow and children will be your responsibility. However stupid Emil may be (and they say God protects fools and drunkards), he could still get a bullet through his head, and then I'll have had it as well. It is no joking matter, Emil must be saved! I must get onto a firmer footing with this Radočaj, and a Saturday supper like this is the best and most opportune occasion.

I pick up the telephone directory, dial, the porter or someone answers, I am looking for Major Radočaj. They try to find him. I wait. They tell me he went out half an hour ago. Naturally, it is gone one o'clock. It is Saturday, people slip out of the office early, there is always some excuse.

So I cannot do anything till Monday, because I do not know where this major lives. And anyway it would not be a good idea to try to find him at home. It would be too obtrusive. We shall have to leave Emil's fate to the good Lord and St. Anthony of Padua to whom Tončika and Mira probably pray fervently.

There are days like this when nothing goes right, and everything upsets you. In fact nothing terrible has happened, no special set-back, but still a dull kind of discontent nags at you.

After lunch I tried to doze for a while, but I could not get to sleep. Can it be that I am frightened after all?

In the hall I met a character who looked at me as though I had killed his dad. He must be one of the people manning the ambush upstairs, so he suspects me too. Carry on suspecting, lad, you have good reason!...

Otherwise the house is quiet. No-one could have guessed what was hidden behind that peace and quiet. Miss Zorka and Mileva are nowhere to be seen and that is very wise. I do not know what is going on downstairs at Jurica Vrabec's place because Lidija has not been there for two days. Rozika told me that some workmen have come. They are thumping and banging something, I can hear them from my flat. Perhaps they want to barricade themselves off from the ghosts. They still have not got a new maid. I met Mrs Fajdetić as I was going out. I expected her to say something about the new situation in the house, but she was wisely silent. She did not even say a word

about the Vrabc's ghost, and she should have done because it has not appeared for three nights now, as though ghosts were afraid of the police too. Who knows, perhaps, the police have come partly to solve this mystery as well.

What freshness there was this morning has gone. A south wind has come up, blowing the dry dust and dirty paper off the streets and bringing stifling heat. The tram bells and horns of cars and lorries tear at the cars more unpleasantly than usual. I look up, but grey clouds are dragging and beaking across the sky. There will be rain.

It got dark earlier than usual. I am pleased about that because it does not seem right for a respectable man to walk into a pub in broad daylight. Not that I would have met a single person I knew. I have a thousand friends and acquaintances in Zagreb, but it seems that they have all disappeared this evening. I wander through Ilica, I have walked a dozen times near Ban Jelačić's statue, the walking place consecrated to Zagreb old-age pensioners, I see two or three familiar faces, but they are not only spongers of the worst order, but worse still dull as ditch water. No, I shall not be going to Peitler's with them.

»I'll go by myself! To hell with company!« I said to myself and I set off sulkily. I almost lose interest in the whole idea of eating and drinking. It is no good getting drunk when you are in a bad mood. And people often do drink precisely to dispel their gloom, to forget their cares and sorrows. But instead of driving away your troubles, it just stirs up the dregs and makes them boil over and seethe so that you might easily do something terrible.

I hesitated, I walked up and down in front of Peitler's once or twice. I am struggling with myself the whole time: whether to go in or not. Or whether simply to go home, which would have been more sensible, fry a couple of eggs, eat them with bean salad, drink a glass of mineral water, then sit down by the radio (covering it with a cloth) and listen to the sensational news from London and New York. You cannot force yourself to have fun!

Just then a young man bumped into me, or rather ran full tilt into me. He was quite tall, tousled, and wearing glasses. He stopped abruptly in front of me and took off his hat with a flourish.

»I respect you, Councillor I respect you!«

»Oh, come, come!« I say somewhat taken aback, surprised and startled at this unexpected gush of respect. I barely remember who this man is. Lidija introduced me to him last year. At the Švarcs! But he had scarcely acknowledged me since then, and now all this sudden rush of enthusiasm.

»I respect you, I admire you profoundly,« he assures me.

»Oh, er, glad to hear it, thank you very much!« I thank him modestly and simply cannot think what I have done suddenly to deserve so much respect. In fact the lad is quite squiffy, he reeks of wine and his eyes are clouded over with drunken rapture.

»Let's go to Peitler's!« He suggests, »do come, be my guest, I'm paying.«

I know perfectly well that there is no point whatsoever in trying to put someone sober with someone who is drunk, it makes communication difficult, I do not feel like going, I make excuses, but he

drags me, and I agree, weakling that I am, and console myself with the thought that it was fated.

We had trouble finding somewhere to sit. People are crushed shoulder to shoulder, head to head, round the tables in the low-ceilinged rooms. The faces are shining with sweat, and their eyes with enjoyment. Through the blue clouds of smoke come waitresses carrying full and empty bottles, dishes of steaming roast meat, plates and glasses ...

»Another litre! ... A mineral water! A portion of sucking pig! ...«
»I'll be with you right away, sir!«

A German voice joins in: »Fräulein, bitt schön! ...« and the girl replies dutifully: »Sofort, bitte! ...«

A real Zagreb Beisel, but a better class of Beisel, where you care about the quality of the food and drink, where the plump and well-to-do burghers come, craftsmen, shopkeepers, there are even engineers, doctors, teachers, the élite of our town. The air is heavy, all the smells collect and float upwards, wrapped in blue cigarette smoke.

»What a hole! What a revolting hole!« my Marko Matić would say with profound disgust and contempt, and then he would ask with a grimace: »Doesn't it make you sick?!«

»No, sir, it doesn't,« I would say, and I did indeed say so once last year. »Not in the least. Because there are poetry and beauty to be found even here. Bars like this are the birthplace of songs like that drunken dirge: »Let's forget our sorrows! ...« It is not only mountains that are beautiful, there is beauty even in swamps. There is poetry even in the lowest dives. Ask the poets!«

»It's disgusting the way these people gorge themselves!«

»People are animals, you say so yourself, people eat like animals. People are carnivorous and omniverous. If a man eats according to all the rules of etiquette, it is still ugly to watch. Only little song birds know how to eat delicately. They peck so daintily that it is a joy to see. They don't even look as though they're eating, but dabbling at the grain with their tiny beaks for fun. Rabbits are very elegant in this way as well. Just watch them cropping at cabbage leaves, their little noses twitching prettily and silently (and rather comically too). Not a single English princess knows how to eat as elegantly as a simple country rabbit.«

However, it was not Marko Matić, the moralist and purist, who was with me now, but my unexpected admirer and patron whose name I could not for the life of me remember (to ask him would have been very insulting to him, and embarrassing for me as he is well-known in cultural circles). There you are, high-brow as you like, and he feels marvellous in this Beisel, this menagerie and this stench.

He orders in grand style, stressing for the fifth time that he is paying. I consent reluctantly. I propose that we split the bill between us. But he insists: I'm paying! I admire you, I'm paying! I do not like to be treated by anyone with whom I am not on particularly good terms. With this young man I am afraid that I shall pay dearly for it one day. But who would argue with a drunk? The waitress brings us roast pork and beer. We eat and drink. My benefactor eats like a pig, as though he has not seen food for a week. Although he is an aesthete I must say he eats most unaesthetically. I am a little squeamish about these things myself, and I try not to look at him,

but it is hard to avoid seeing that he has covered his face and hands with grease. We clink glasses and drink. At such moments it is good to drink.

There are some German soldiers at the next table. They have fallen with great gusto on dishes of roast lamb, and pork chops, the Bosch are having a whale of a time: you eat meat and plenty of it in Croatia, there are no ration card here yet, with the waiter counting you out so many grams of fat, so much margarine, so much sugar... Here you eat like the common people, to your heart's content.

»Have you seen our Bosch 'liberators' feasting themselves?« I asked my well-wisher, and he answered poetically enigmatically:

»The old God is dead! Der alte Gott lebt nich mehr: der is gründlich tot... Do you know who said that?«

»No, I don't,« I said humbly, and he replied with feeling:

»Also sprach Zarathustra!«

»Nietzsche?!« say I with surprise, not so much because I really am surprised, but to let the young fellow know that we are not as illiterate as he might have thought, that we do know Nietzsche (whom Hitler himself admires apparently -- I read somewhere) at least by name.

I try to steer the conversation, but without success. It runs in that familiar style: along utterly disconnected tracks.

»I was watching some Boschs today,« i begin, »they were bringing suitcases, ordinary imitation leather ones, out of a shop and loading them on to a German truck. They must have taken about a hundred of them. I'm not surprised,« I say, »that they don't have butter and have to have ration cards, but I am surprised that they don't have suitcases either... They'll clean us right out!«

But my poet benefactor replies:

»You must understand the value of the senseless. Let us look on life sub specie aeternitatis. Long live the Great Absurd!«

We clink glasses and drink »sub specie aeternitatis« the health of the Great Absurd. I can see that although he is drunk the lad is watching his tongue. He asks me for a cigarette. I give him a Neretva. It seems that my benefactor is one of those smokers who are permanently »momentarily« out of cigarettes. These are moreover the most good-natured smokers! They do not mind: Sava, Drava, Neretva or Drina. They are not prejudiced!

The meal was good, the wine is drinkable, but fairly potent.

I drink as though I want to catch my patron up, and he tells me how he is going to write a play in verse, a Shakespearean drama.

»You ought to write something to *stir the conscience* of the people, the conscience of humanity,« I say. »Can't you see what is going on here?«

But the poetic hero does not seem to hear.

»What is man that you raise him up?« He raised his voice theatrically. »Or why do you clasp him to your bosom?... That's what Job said. Patient Job. I shall write an epic about Patient Job.«

The din is getting louder and louder. People are singing. And the Germans have struck up one of their military pieces: one of their thousands of marches. My benefactor has already reached the stage where he cannot sit still at the table. He goes round the other tables

and I sit sipping slowly on my own. I take a rest from my benefactor's ideas and maxims.

»Long live the Great Absurd!« I hear him shout. Then he assures a fat cobbler that he is going to write a sonnet to a shoe and put it in his shop window.

»Don't pester us, mister!... We've got things to talk about!«

He goes on wandering about like this, but does not manage to make contact with anyone. People are either not drunk enough or they do not like his particular brand of wisdom. He did earn himself a few cigarettes, however. He comes back to me disappointed and morose.

»The gods themselves cannot conquer stupidity!«

He sits down for a moment, drains his glass, stands up abruptly and takes his hat off the peg. He wants to go. He glanced at me through the haze, but did not say goodbye. Not a hint of that »I respect you!« What is more the gentleman has forgotten to pay the bill, he has not even asked for it. This will never happen again. I grab him by the jacket.

»Young man«, I say. »You haven't settled the bill.«

»Bill?« He seems genuinely surprised. »What bill?«

»Excuse me, but you invited me. You kept insisting: »I'm paying, I'm paying« and now you'd wriggle out of it, you think you can just slip away. The bill has to be paid!«

»I'm not used to paying.«

»Then you shouldn't have invited me. In Croatia the one who does the inviting pays.«

»I don't respect folk customs. I think folklore is kitch.«

»Then pay your share,« I urged. (»You're not getting off that lightly, I think, furious at having let myself be talked into coming. There's no earthly reason why I should pay for you!«)

»Waitress, the bill please!« I call.

The waitress comes with her pad.

»I haven't got any money. I'm not paying!« says my benefactor conclusively and opens his wallet with absolute calm — it is empty.

Several agitated burghers' heads have turned towards us, they are gaping, fascinated.

»Then how could you order?!« asks the waitress sternly.

»I haven't got any money. I despise money!« he says to complicate matters and sways on his feet. »All right then, would you lend me a hundred dinars please,« he says to me in the tone a minister would use to his private secretary.

What can I do, I take out a hundred dinar note, he accepts it ceremoniously, spits on it with genuine contempt and — tears it up into little pieces.

The waitress cries out: »Oh, sir! Have you gone mad!«

»There, now you see how much I despise money!«

So saying, he marches pompously away with an air of enthusiasm and exalted triumph over all the banalities of this world.

The burghers gasp too: »Good God, did you see him! He's clued up, that one is!«

I should have slapped his face, but it is not becoming for me to brawl in bars. To Hell with him! I've learned a lesson. I sit down again in my place and order another half litre. To drown my misery. The waitress brings me the wine, she is utterly bewildered by my bene-

factor's gesture, and while I pay the whole bill — my head spinning with drink and anger -- she sighs:

»Just think! Tearing up a hundred dinar note! Why, he could have just about have paid for the whole meal with that, your meal and his.«

I drink up my wine and a black coffee, get up and leave. It is nearly closing time anyway.

There is quite a lot of life in Ilica. The war has not really reached Zagreb yet. The bars close a little earlier, it is true. But you only have to have a pass, be a reliable and respectable citizen, and you can eat well and drink well and have a good time with your friends... I had not made a great success of it this time. It was that sort of a day.

I set off home, I can feel the effect of the wine, it has not reached my legs yet, but I am beginning to feel the desire to say a word or two to the people. One should be able to say something to people. About everything that is happening to us and around us. Only how do you come across people? That is why it is best to keep quiet.

Whenever I get a little drunk, I am overcome by deep thoughts. Whether they are particularly deep, would be a matter for late discussion. They are quite troubled, these thoughts of mine, they come helter-skelter, chaotically. God knows what kind of people they are whose thoughts flow methodically, strictly logically as in school textbooks or military regulations. Thoughts come filing out of that kind of head like soldiers from a barracks marching onto the parade ground. Those must be very wise heads!... So I was beset by thoughts, dark deliberations (and that is why they seem deep to me.)...

»Why is man a wolf to other men? Homo homini lupus?... Why?« I ask myself and the dear Lord. For two thousand years we have been told to love our neighbour as ourself. Sorry, it is not quite two thousand, somewhat less. It does not matter. But can a man in fact really love his neighbour as himself? You might find yourself in a position were you cannot love him as yourself, but either a little more or a little less. A law must be clear and precise. But this one makes for misinterpretation. What am I waffling on about! Other people must have come to the same conclusions... »Are you so much cleverer?« I ask myself. »Do you think the way people have thought for a hundred years, the way thousands of others think, or do you think like no-one else! Are you so much cleverer?... What kind of ideas are these? Are they ideas at all? ... It is just a lot of nonsense! ... It's a jungle! ...«

»Europe is a jungle,« I say. »A jungle!« — I even shouted that out loud. No-one heard me, but I say it again, aloud: »A jungle!«... I am appalled by the barbarism that is rife today, and again I think: if only I had a bomb! ... Shut up, Naček, bombs are not for people like you! There is no order in your head! ... None!

My God, that poet really had me! ... »I respect you! ... I'm treating you! ...« and then pay up, M. Councillor! ... He despises money and tears up my hundred dinar note, mine, not his own! ... Ha, ha, ha! What a bloody nerve!

I laughed out loud, heartily, and a »gentleman« of about my age glanced at me in amazement: »My God, you've had a drink or two,« he thinks. But what do I care? I have a pass from the Commissioner of Police, I have one from the Home Office as well, and even one from the German Command. Excuse me, but I am a respectable citizen, with

a respectably and trustworthy position in society (and what I think is my own affair, if you don't mind. Long live freedom of thought!).

I have reached home. I have stopped on the opposite side of the street. I am standing (possibly swaying slightly, the fresh air makes it worse) and looking at this house of ours. I look at it critically as though I intend to buy it or pull it down. A long-legged concrete building, no style, no colour, standing in the night with its fifteen dead eyes, fifteen windows, gaping black holes or covered over with blue paper. (Wartime!) There is a shred of light from the Vrabec' bedroom. They are not asleep yet. Perhaps they are waiting for Mr. Goldberger. It is completely dark at Zorka and Mileva's, but I know that in the corner behind the wardrobe there is a votive candle burning in front of the icon of St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker, their patron saint. (But, my dear, St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker cannot do much in this day and age, and nor can St. Anthony of Padua — other forces govern the destinies of mankind!) Right at the top, on the third floor, all the windows to the left and right are dark. They say nothing. This whole mad house of ours says nothing, apart from the new placard downstairs »Josip Jurinac, dealer in mixed goods«.

There it stands, that house of ours, two storeys higher than the ones around it, long-legged like a stork among chickens. There it stands in the night, silent. A sombre, troubled sky above.

I would like to chat. I am in a very communicative mood. If only I had another half litre of wine, some mineral water, a cup or two of Turkish coffee and a congenial companion, we would have a good long natter. I could ring Zorka and Mileva's bell for instance. They do not have any wine, they probably do not even have any coffee, but they might have some brandy and they would make me some tea. I could have a little chat with them. It is good to be a kind of mentor as I am to them, a protector or even a saviour (it flatters even a modest man), I would amuse them as best I could, make them laugh, cheer them up — I am probably not so drunk that I would annoy them. But God forbid! It would be dreadful to ring their bell now, at this time of night. The women would die of fright. And even if they were not frightened, they would be terribly shocked to have a *man* come at this time of night. I would offend their delicate principles and ideas of decency. (What would mother or Aunt Sofija have said, God grant them rest?)

I could go to the wonderful Lidija and her Tuna for a talk. They do not have that kind of scrupule and are almost certainly not asleep yet. Tuna Tulipanović's nerves and insides must have settled down. Lidija would be overjoyed at the surprise and would greet me with open arms. But still, I shall not go there, I feel like an open, honest talk and I do not altogether trust the most beautiful girl in our house and the whole street. She is all woven through with sweet and dangerous lies. Besides it would not be a good idea to go up to the third floor. I might ring the bell on the right instead of the left-hand one. Beware the third floor!

I concluded that there was to be no more talk, no more drink or coffee. You may be plastered, Vatroslav Sušković, but be sensible!

Once I had curbed all my lurking desires and wishes so bravely, I opened the front door decisively, slammed the door and went upstairs rather noisily. The automatic light was not working and I had to light

a match on every landing. When I had read »Vatroslav Sušković« three times on the door I went confidently and fearlessly into my flat.

It is a horribly lonely feeling for a married man coming into an empty house: there is no-one waiting for you, to welcome you. Not even to scold you (as my Tončika would now). At one time you had to come in quietly because the children were asleep. But that was nice too. They were the people you loved and who loved you and filled your home with joy. And now it is all empty and hollow. Your footsteps ring painfully with loneliness.

I took a spoonful of bicarbonate of soda and drank a large glass of water. I glanced out of the kitchen window. You could see several more lighted windows on the courtyard side of the building. And the lights were on in the engineer's flat. So they were still in their ambush, waiting, watching... I looked down into the courtyard. A square box, bounded by a high wall. The iron frame for beating carpets looked like a gallows. If there had not been a few chicken runs it could have been a prison yard. The courtyards round about were all like this too, bare and ugly. Down my way, where I come from, the fruit trees are beginning to bend with the weight of their fruit, cicadas are starting to sing in the vineyards, a little breeze is stealing through the vines, and the earth is fragrant with life. I put on the light in the bedroom. The bulb in the yellowish-blue globe on its »gold« chain glimmers feebly and dimly. I took a key out of my pocket, opened the wardrobe and from the back of it pulled out — Adolph Goldberger, the very one who had caused so much dismay in Jurica Vrabec's new flat. He was wearing a jacket and striped trousers and was stuffed full of old rags, like a bird in a museum. Only he did not have any »halbets«. His pork-pie hat had rolled away. I picked it up and rammed it onto his head, which was made of my old shirts rolled up into a ball. There was a mask sewn on to the ball, a terrible mask of an old Jew: a long hooked Jewish nose, thick hanging lips, all bloodshot yellowish red. A hideous carnival mask.

I sat my Adolph Goldberger down in an armchair, and flopped into another myself and we sat like that looking at each other for a while.

»I must say, Mr. Goldberger you are a real fright. Even I, I who made you, might almost be afraid of you. No, don't be offended, don't misunderstand me. You weren't so ugly in real life, nothing like this double of yours. Besides you're all crumpled now. That was the rain, when you were caught in that heavy shower on the window sill. I can see you haven't really dried out yet. But we ought to be pleased with ourselves, you and I. Mrs. Vrabec felt positively literally ill with fear. That conceited Ustaša ragamuffin Jurica is furious because he cannot get to the bottom of the trick. I am only sorry for their girls, their maids. They really are not at all to blame. But it had to be like that. We had to disturb the crook's peace. You can be sure that the fright Mrs. Vrabec endured was not much less than that which you and your wife Ilona had to suffer. You got this hideous mask quite by chance. It was left over from some carnival or other. My son-in-law Emil, when he was still only engaged, hit upon the »brilliant idea« of dressing up as an old Jew and he bought this mask somewhere (possibly even in a Jewish shop, you Jews are very broad-minded when it comes to »Geschäft«!) This jacket and the hat and trousers all come from my late uncle Ferko. He was a shopkeeper too. That is to say he thought he

was a shopkeeper, but he had a very vivid imagination, a restless temperament, and he liked to enjoy himself. He liked women too, but women cost him an awful lot. He went bust three times, and for real. He died a commercial traveller, without a steady position and he left me his entire fortune: a shabby suitcase of clothes. And this hat is his as well. Look: the brim has come right away from the crown. All from frequent hurried taking off: Your humble servant!... I salute you!... Küß' die Hand!... Habe die Ehre!... Towards the end, when all his boats were burned, he was horribly obsequious, my poor old uncle Ferko...

There you see, Herr Goldberger, that's how I resurrected you — I said — we ought really to be pleased with ourselves, both of us. But now we have reached a dead-end. We haven't frightened anyone for three nights... There are policemen in the house.

»Es hat auch gar keinen Sinn, Herr Councillor. It has not point,« he says in his German-Croatian with a Hungarian accent.

»Oh yes there is, there is a point! You are taking your revenge for your own death, for the ruin of your family, das ist die Rache, verstanden?!... Revenge!... And I am taking my revenge for the shame brought on my people by patriots like that.«

»Ja, ja, verstehe schön. Aber, how to say, it not enough serious. It a little kindisch, childish. This not thing for you, Herr Councillor, you are, sir, senior civil servant...«

»Ah, that's what my wife would say! Just that.«

»Real revenge make others better... who for that more are able,« he said getting embroiled. »Others make this better, mehr grundlich.«

»Perhaps«, I assent, although somewhat hurt. »Listen Herr Goldberger, I am not doing this exactly for you personally. To be perfectly frank, I did not particularly like you. Your life was nothing but commerce, profit, possession... I'm doing it because of all of this, everything that's going on offends me. It shocks me, it revolts everything in me, but I can't throw bombs. I don't know where one gets hold of them!«, I say. Do you know what *conscience* is, Herr Goldberger? Das Gewissen, that's conscience. You have to shake people up, shake up their consciences, put anxiety into their minds like fleas in their shirts...«

»I am pitying you, da ist alles sehr gefährlich...«

»We'll frighten them until they move...«

»Then come others. Selten kommt was besseres nach! Seldom come Better.«

»I know, I know,« I say, somewhat disappointed, »but still...«

»Ich werde Ihnen was sagen, Herr Councillor, leave the dead in peace...«

I do not know how long this conversation of ours lasted. Only I was terribly muddled. Jurica Vrabec took part in it as well, arrogantly and very patriotically clever, my Tončika got caught up in it too and Emil in some strange uniform... Mrs. Fajdetić just added an occasional word and Lidiya planted a kiss on my forehead, as fairies do. Someone called out »Long live the Great Absurd!«... and I woke up with a start. I cannot have slept long. It was still dark.

The house and street were absolutely quiet. A cock was crowing desperately and vainly somewhere in one of the concrete courtyards. There was not a single cock anywhere in this complex to answer him.

I had sobered up. My Adolph Goldberger was sitting in the arm-chair facing me, looking pretty hideous and terrible, but pathetic as well crumpled, pitiful... The cord on which he usually hung outside the window was stretched out along the floor. His empty eyes were staring at me deathly hollow and accusing. I could not look at him any longer.

»The joke's gone on long enough!« I said.

I ripped off his mask, threw it into the fire and set light to it. The sad face burned up in a flash, — cheerfully, it seemed. Then I took Uncle Ferko's torn, greasy pork-pie hat, opened the window and sent it spinning out. It landed in the middle of the street. I pulled the rags out of his jacket and trousers and shoved them all into the wardrobe. And so Adolph Goldberger was definitively liquidated at his own request and may he rest in divine peace. The joke had gone on long enough.

I undressed and got into bed.

Early in the morning the door bell woke me, unrested, heavy-headed, tired. What the Devil?! The police?... Where are my slippers? God knows where I threw them last night. I go barefoot. I do not suppose I shall start sneezing right away. Now the police can come. They can search the whole flat if they like, I have nothing to be afraid of.

It was Mrs. Fajdetić. Her eyes were shining triumphantly, with jovial malice:

»They're going, they're moving out! A furniture van came and there, they're going. The late Mr. Goldberger gave them something to think about. I told you so, didn't I!«

»I'm not interested,« I said non-committally. »You didn't have to wake me up to tell me that.«

I closed the door and went back to my room. I glanced through the window. Sure enough a huge furniture van was standing outside. Jurica Vrabcic is moving. He is leaving his flat, but not his things. People are dragging heavy wardrobes, cupboards, boxes. The concrete stairway rang with the din and their heavy shoes. Lidija's black tousled hair poked out of the third floor window, while Zorka and Mileva were bound to be peeping anxiously out from behind the curtain. (I sneezed once, twice, three times. I shall get a cold now, to cap it all.)

My Uncle Ferko's pork-pie hat was lying upside down in the road. I am amazed that no cars have run over it and I wonder: God knows, maybe Renata has seen it. Just then a dog, not much more than a puppy, came along, grabbed it and ran off with it carrying it in his mouth like a trophy.

I am satisfied. It worked!... It worked better than I ever hoped. You could say it was a victory. But still somehow I did not feel completely happy. It was all pathetic and pitiful and petty.

I was angry with myself (it is a bit cold, summer is nearly over):

»What exactly do you want, councillor? What do you want, Suško-vić... Don't be so ambitious. Anyway, you are tired and you've got a hangover, it's a grey morning and you can't tell what sort of a day it's going to be yet. It's Sunday today, the day of rest, go back to bed and sleep!...«

Translated by Celia Williams