



MIRJANA MATIĆ-HALLE — Born at Solin on September 30, 1912. Equally well-known as playwright and short-story writer. Her works have been translated into a number of foreign languages.

Works: *Short Stories*, 1946; *Heavy Shadows*, a play 1950; *The Linden Trees*, short stories, 1957; *The Big Wave*, a play, 1958; *Town Without River*, a novel, 1964; *The Protectionist*, a play, 1970.

MIRJANA MATIĆ-HALLE

Jaka

SHE WAS GOING down the mountain in her leather peasant shoes to town! She was carrying a wicker basket on her head, her hair was red and wiry — golden tears of earrings in her ears and everything in her was trembling. Joy—and youth, and her breasts in the baggy blouse, and her gold earrings in the sun.

The curved ends of her shoes caught as she went down the mountain, the sun caught in the sky, the stones pulled away, broke off and rolled down the steep slope...

She shuffled with her big feet, kept stopping, one hip sticking out, shielding her face with her hands, her fleshy red fingers hung over her eyes in the sun and the blood throbbed in her cheeks.

Down below lay the sea... the roofs of houses, congealed, clotted red—on invisible strings boats were drawn towards the shore, slid, drew near—and everything was swarming towards the town.

Up there, beside her, it was quiet. Air—immortelles in the air, the clatter of the little stones under her shoes, a lizard's tail in the curls of the grass—blue air, a goat's bleat, a ram's lament, a pipe without a shepherd, wind—and more air...

She became a servant in town. She remained big, red, heavy, in a blue blouse, in peasant shoes and laughter.

Everyone knew her and called her:

»Where you been, Jaka?!«

»Jaa-kaa?!«

Stiffly dignified beneath the load of the bucket on her head, she would smile, her forehead furrowed under the weight of a jug full of water, she would raise her hands—her bare, white stomach would pant in the space between her skirt and blouse.

»Your belly always shows, Jaka!«

»Jaka, where's your belly button?!«

A yellow shawl thrown over her shoulders, dishevelled, splashed with water—her sides always wet, her legs spattered with wine and mud, healthy—she too found a young man.

She kisses his photograph at night...

Her pillow, square, blue, smelled of many bone combs and hair-pins, of stagnant nights, and sweat-filled hair, and under it: Marin's photograph!

The whole room trembled, when the candle's fiery tongue began to play, Jaka trembled too, and the walls—and Marin in the picture stood leaning on a white stand, without putting down the flowers he held in his hand. Small, straight, in boots—moulded—he looked at her...

»Oh, Marin...«

With her broad waist she lolled in his embrace...

His large, rough hands would play in her deep blouse—she would see the staring blue of Marin's eye—she would twist her belly, defend her hot, exposed flesh, and he would grind his teeth over her and thrust his knees into her creased blue skirt.

And she would cry, often. Marin is swaggering along the shore beside the sea—his cap is on one side, his square head held high, a damp cigarette butt in the corner of his mouth, his eyes fixed, half closed, mocking in the smoke—and a crooked smile.

She approached timidly. She always spoke to him breathlessly, her lips swollen and chapped — excitement trembling in her nostrils — the gaping pine boards smell strongly, the culled forest, resin, wine, ropes—and the great sunny morning.

»Ah, Marin, my Marin, how much must a person put up with.«

Marin raises himself and lowers himself again on his torn heels, his blue striped sweat-shirt grows, taut, Marin has put his hands under his armpits and is drumming on the sides of his distended chest with his bulging fingers, and everything about him has become taut:

»Now, don't you go blubbing to me too much, because...«

Then he goes away, surly, annoyed—his hands hooked in his pockets move away, his wrinkled blue trousers move away, his blue striped shirt is swaggering in the distance again—and a pool of spilt sun flickers before her eyes...

The blinds of the greasy kitchen return, a tear steals across her wide eye—the distant mountain peers through the torn slits of the kitchen windows—the hours go by looking at the blue paths of the sky from confined sadness.

The village returns to her memory... violet sage has swarmed over the grey stones... white hollows have sunk into the petrified cattle... Two loose clouds, their bridles undone, are running over the lawn of the sky—side by side, their bright manes flowing, the clouds have reared up—the sage smells bitter under their shadows, and all is violet-grey peace...

Jaka walks through the steep narrow streets of the town, each stone footstep resounds between the old walls, each word echoes dully:

»No-one, no-one would believe, none but God himself...«

House to house, street to street, stairways, heavy stumbling—shadows—and in the distance stands the mountain, always calm, one road only on it: the pure road of the sun, from one side to the other.

»Your Marin has no heart, Jaka, you see what he's like, what a wretch.«

»Let him be, Jaka—Cunkej is a rogue!...«

But then—nights come again, when their bodies cling in strong, bloody cords of arms, when veins start to quiver in the throat and in passion—wide open, blue, Marin's eyes look at her—and happiness.

The following evening Jaka takes a walk beside the open inn—her heart open beside the bright red scarf round Marin's neck...

Glasses knock and hands on the wet tables, elbows and wine bicker—a red handkerchief has hitched on a chair, a head lies drunk, a harmonica drizzles, oppressed—sings of Marin:

On Zagreb's flat plain,
there my treasure is lain,
there...

It all feels strange to Jaka. Wonderful and terrible.

The landlord is sitting in the doorway—red Vidas with a yellow cat on his outstretched belly, battered, heavy, the song grows, the darkness blinks in the cat's pupils, molten tar smells in the wind—Jaka stands and anxiety in her:

»Oh Marin, my dear, don't, my Marin! Leave it for today, there will be other days...«

The red handkerchief seethed before Jaka's eyes, Marin is getting up! His sagging trousers are standing up, his hand is coming up, blows fall:

»Caught you now, by God—haven't I, eh?!«

Jaka peers out under her flying hair—stunted lips are laughing in the doorway, red Vidas's belly is shaking, sailors are howling... Her skirt caught up between her legs, cringing like a bitch—her hands covering her face, Jaka drags herself along the walls. One weeps long and sweetly in the dark, and that is how Jaka too wept.

Then night passes on tossed sheets. Cats screech, roam, whimper through the streets—the clock in the tower strikes every quarter—and sleep does not come.

How insipid dying is—and Jaka's foolish, heavy waking at day-break.

Eyes wide open in the terrified dawning of the room—the clanging of the little street, clattering of tin buckets under the windows, the milk girls' talk and donkeys' hooves...

Her heart brimming with pain, disgust and fear—Jaka looked for Marin all day long. The peaks of the mountains rise up, drenched in light, they stretch, diverge, grow before her tired eyes, midday strolls above her head, her burning brain has turned upside down...

Towards evening the sun rolled down the hollow belly of the sky, speckled streaks bled on the beaten clouds—and Jaka knew that Marin would never come again.

It was so certain, inconsequential and terrible—without tears—with the bitter-honey smell of the dishevelled fig leaves through her fingers—and emptiness.

Perhaps people in the town pitied Jaka, but many of them mocked her too:

»Cunkej's gone off with the Arnauts, has he, Jaka?«

»Marin's sailed off with the melons, eh, Jaka?«

Golden waves of misery glared before Jaka's eyes, shame fastened to her. Leaning on the vineyard fence, by a sad mule, she mused for hours without going into town.

But—it is strange that things always happen differently from how one imagines, and that is how things happened also for Jaka.

Something gushed forth, caught her, snatched her, thrust her forward—and she fell...

Into embraces, into arms—shattered, weary—she laughed in great, guttural sobs, she kissed, leant against ropes, sat up drunk in strange sheets—straightened the covers of sailors' bunks—and lay down in gentlemen's beds...

Mornings came to sailing boats called: »Thanks be to God«—or »God's Blessing«.

Light came through windows in the great wooden bellies of ships, her hair spread out over the ropes looked red—Jaka was lying on it—and her heavy woman's arm—white round the sailor's neck...

By wells... behind walls—in the woods, where the branches rock—Jaka's madness rocked too...

She hugged under the firm, bright leaves of carob trees, kissed in the dark of stinking doorways—wine merchants dragged her by the feet, from below, down the steep wooden steps of boats...

She slept, her skirt crumpled, thrown off—wine sticky on her hands, on the pillow—and a dirty dawn in the harbour.

Between midnight and morning she drew long-legged young men into her room—and laughed.

In the open morning she watched them go—water dripped from the yellowish linen hanging in the landlady's window, and dropped onto the young men's heads.

That is how it was...

In »God's Blessing«—in God's heavy, black blessing—in a cot of tar and oaths—Jaka conceived a son.

He was dead at once—dappled, sad and cherished.

Jaka wept:

»Oh, you — — you — — ... my little one, if you could make me happy when the maestral blew... I would make you happy in the calm...«

The maestra grew stronger—there was no calm.

The grasses grew in the vineyards. Small trees grew big, great woes grew into a vast sorrow... many years passed...

Jaka is no longer young. Her hair is dry, thin, dusty, and her large fat body sad, sagging.

Once there was loud talking at Jaka's—and heavy words—and great, raised elbows.

Now Jaka eavesdrops on herself—carefully, fearfully—her torn, moist eye grows red, a scar has gathered on her forehead, her heart has shrivelled up.

»Oh, Holy Mother—one must live, but I am so weary when evening comes that—as they say—I am loth even to confess.«

But still, when a man comes along, she looks at him askance in the dark—and does not raise her head:

»So you've come... Are you the one from yesterday...?«

And always like that: she comes down beside him, says nothing, and when morning breaks in the window, Jaka asks in the gloom:

»Are you still here?... Ah well, go, and God be with you...«

Through the shadows of the little streets, through the sparse patches of sun, Jaka drags herself.

Her blue skirt drags, quivers round her legs and people move aside.

Jaka's whole life has moved aside, without many tears, Jaka remains alone, and when heavy rains fall, the whole sky weeps in the darkness over the town.

Rain... from above, from below, from the side, in her heart,—everywhere... Wet fingers drum, knock on the windows—it is stifling, it roars—pine branches creak in the wind and loneliness...

When she fell ill, Jaka saw that she too would be able to rest in death.

She crawled out of her hole, felled in the sun, she trembled and drew her breath painfully. She dragged herself heavily along the high, hot walls, propped on her hands and on her wailing. She was in the blindness of pain, but as soon as her body was eased a little, a smile appeared on her face, that no-one had sought, nor seen, only warm air wafted softly over her emaciated lips.

At night, when the pain sometimes subsided completely, Jaka would forget all the endless chasms of her life, all the too abundant gaiety and dark joys. She would lie wearily, heavy, almost happy, like a newly delivered mother after her pains, and the moon in its splendour flooded her bed with light as it travelled over the sky to infinity...

Her face almost green, Jaka watched it go—watched it moving and growing over the tops of the dark trees, watched it roam freely over the clear, bright and wide...

Her illness was rotting; death was approaching outside time, dreamily, the west winds blew—dry—and in the damp south wind the sea rolled for whole days at a time in restless sighs.

She had grown so thin that the skin on her face moved and grated, as though it were too big for her, but Jaka was only afraid for the first time when people snatched her from her solitary, death-preceding peace.

They had tormented her enough in her lifetime. Now life had grown silent—Jaka already knew exactly how the leaves would rustle over her grave, but now some live people had come to torment her further.

In fact for a long time she did not grasp what they wanted from her. She did not resist them out loud at once, she only squealed wearily, wretchedly in her agitation. They dragged her, ill as she was, to the Town Hall and examined her about her illness.

No, she did not understand, she could not see at all, what was interesting about her dying. Old—at first she shrugged her shoulders childishly and became embarrassed: »—Ah—it's good to be well—ah, yes.«

Staring at the floor, she dropped her drooping arms completely. She had said that slowly and wistfully sincerely. All at once she noticed that the clerks were curious in an uglier way. She saw—that other thing—she recognized them. She remembered men and dreadful things! She strove with her horror, gathered herself for the last resistance, in her last hatred. Defiance flared up, the last panic in the face of life—her last wisdom awoke, and her heart wept in secret like a street urchin. Over there, the man behind the table there is waiting for her every word and asking:

»So—how many men in town have you infected?!«

»Speak!«

One of his eyes is quite pitiful—it must be sick—and the other is still quite merry in lascivious curiosity. He looks and enjoys life through that one.

Jaka says nothing. He does not shift his eyes, but begins restlessly scratching his nose, his head, his brain, and goes on questioning.

And Jaka's heart began to be heavy, she felt sick. The unbearably hot sun had lit up all her pathetic rags and bared every little thing on her to a point of embarrassing needlessness. At that moment she saw her whole life spread out in its misery, all the faces around her—that one at the table. He had come to her once as well, and now was waiting calmly for her last shame. An inquisitive ear stuck out among his long, sparse, grey hair which was unkept, already old, dead.

Looking only at him, that poor old man, who thinks he has the right to listen to her recounting his sins and that he can punish Jaka's wretchedness, she jerked her face backwards. She looked around them and smiled in a somehow horrifyingly female way. She was even taller at that moment, she drew herself up and all her pains paused. With an unfamiliar, ghastly excitement she wanted them to provoke her still further so that she could spit in their faces. She was prepared! This was her last revenge in life—in her greatest shame. Let him wait—they would hear her...

First she began to torment them and herself with obstinate silence. That chief one, who was doing the examining, shouted once dully, and did not raise his voice again—he was tired. The grey haired one with the warm, gay ear continued:

»Come on, come on, be sensible for once, Jake! Answer what we are asking you. It's an official question, you see, orders from above, and not some joke dreamed up by us. Nothing bad will happen to you.«

«Really,» said Jaka then: »really — — nothing? Look at him... treading on thorns and if I told him to put his shoes on, he'd be offended!»

She reached for a chair and sat down. Alone. She spoke at first carelessly, obstinately, hiding her mouth, pressing her lips against her forearm, collapsed against the back of the chair. Only occasionally would she raise her head to look at them and think further. She was still resting, serious, hideous. Something had gathered in her. She became more and more restless. Suddenly she pushed away the chair! She was standing again—dirty—raising her sickly voice.

And then she began—her words flowed... Her words were at times spittle and every memory Jaka broached was a disgrace for every one of them.

She is a miserable animal, and they, if they had not actually come to her, there are others now, younger than Jaka, and there are more now—thank God—than in her day.

She became more and more agitated from her life's truth, from remembering other people's lies, from memories...

They were not listening to her. It was not—the real thing—that their duty bade them wait for. Reluctantly, impatiently, they waited for the tedious woman to complete her whore's confession, and, half asleep, they stared at the long hot leaves of the eucalyptus in front of the Venetian windows. They yawned and not one of them thought to listen more carefully to the belching of this bloody womb—the hot bleeding of a human heart, which had wanted to love, and was still living—still, still enduring...

Only when they told her again, to count up once and for all the men from the most recent times—did the room come to life!

Jaka felt a painful emptiness, she had said all there was to say about herself! This time too she had spoken in front of people in vain, and everything was over for her, forever. Settled, not understood, finished; utterly.

Before her eyes only the mountain remained ecstatically pure, solitude—her last picture of life—the stone silence around her village—in the festival of blue sky and sage.

She answered their questions. It did not seem to be her life's truth any more—all those who had come...

»Who was there...?? Well, for instance Signor Tomazetič—the manager! Yes, him! His wife is eighteen years younger, and bigger than him, and good-looking—white dresses full of clean flesh—and when she holds him by the arm, it seems that he, the hunchback, is hanging on her healthy strength, that she is carrying him. In secret they called him: povero gobo (and look at him... Look at the little wild ram, who would have thought it...)

Signor Paško used to come as well, that tedious retired teacher, a happy father late in life and a voluble patriot. His little daughter Kosara flutters in little transparent organdy dresses, and the father is always looking for her, running, tramping after her, calling her, shouting along the shore: — Košara—lovey, come on home (but although he was a fool he always knew infallibly how to find her).

She remembered Filipin, the chemist, who in his confusion, used to talk to her rapidly, nervously, saying to her, who was so old and pitiful:

»Come... come, little one.«

He would break up that—come, little one—into little, breathless pieces, each letter would run in impatience.

And the huge Harbour Master, who walked awkwardly like a monkey on its hind legs, and chuckled in his comic, blind lust:

»Ho—ho—ho...!«

And good master Mate—with his greedy eyes. When he grabs a woman, he pinches her bones, almost weeps and says nothing. He called her the last time, when she was already quite bent with pain, he enticed her under her window. He howled, poor thing, exactly like a dog on a hillside. And the ancient Pjero. That foolish skinflint and thief, who makes holes in sacks in the harbour with a gimlet, catches the corn in a pan and runs. He is afraid of hunger in his wealth, and when he is overcome by the thought of death, he walks half-dead along the streets, his moustache drooping; his shoes drag after him, he wails soulfully:

»Anche je tortorelle le me fa: aha, Piero mio, ti morira! Addio, gu-gu, ti morira! Ma-le-dette porche.«

And he wandered up to Jaka's. His voice gruff, always irritable and anxious, he begged from her a piece of bread—and the rest...

And there were others, still more comic. Absolutely comic. One little man used to bring his son, stood immediately outside the door, pressed up against the lock, guarding the entrance, and when his son came out, he would run up himself for a moment...

The renowned judge adored his pimply son. Since he had become a widower, he no longer travelled far afield... he had found Jaka, she was within reach. He and his son would go for walks, the two of them always alone, they would look each other over, examine each other, ask each other for their symptoms of sickness, and love each other. The old man had sharper eyes, and his every word was a gem of wisdom, and he pecked the air with his pointed beard:

»I'm sure that there is something wrong with your nose again. You keep blowing out.«

And if his son so much as tried to dissuade him, the father interrupted him sternly, crossly, as though he was going to jump right out of his small skin, but his thin voice was mild, and agitated:

»Don't tell me anything! That's just how my adenoids started. I thought: it's nothing, a trifle, while a whole growth of strange flesh had sprung up there. Don't start explaining things to me, that's all. You can't yourself be aware of how much you're blowing out, leave it to me, I need only to hear it.«

Jaka had listened to many of their comic conversations. They used to come regularly, exactly twice a month »to satisfy a little need« — they would say, they would both be gay, and the boy's spots really began to disappear.

Yes...

Her first, that Marin Čunkej, he had cut up her womb, and her heart, and pounded her brain, and torn out her soul. After him, she had seen nothing good. If she was a whore, then she was a whore, and nothing else... But she had still not met a man in her whole life who could teach her anything else. The cleverest, even those whom everyone respected—were the most stupid and the world thought them honest!

For a moment it seemed that Jaka had thought of someone else, but she stopped, restraining herself, without really herself knowing why. Somehow she decided as she was about to not to talk about that, not to start. Those jackals round the table had got a whiff of her hidden thought and fell on her!

Jaka felt strange. Wonderful and terrible — as once . . . She blushed with the last drop of her sickly blood, her eyes opened wide, green — they contracted, like a snake's and her lips let out:

»Padre Domko!«

How they all gaped — let them hear that too! Her heart felt lighter now. Yes, Pater Dominic, the famous, most reverend guardian of the monastery! The serious, frowning holy father. He was, but he could not fool her. She told him as soon as he came in — and she laughed, ha-ha-ha . . . she laughed from her heart at the sight of his wide skirt and great hot belly:

»You see, father,« she said, »an idiot met a cuckoo and said: 'why, hello, my likeness' . . .!«

He wanted to preserve his dignity at all costs, but he wanted to have her as well. He tried to find a way, shifted, coughed, pursed his lips and wrinkled his abundantly copious eyebrows. His mouth smelled of things most reverend, but he seemed to have been somehow offended, and said scarcely a word. He completed it all solemnly, as though from pure duty, from charity, and he sermoned her and chastized her . . .

She slept through his departure, he must have slunk off very early.

The church doors were wide open towards the green of the morning, the first holy mass of the morning had begun, the bell rang out, and Jaka found on her bed: seven dinars—and a rosary!

Translated by Celia Williams