



MIRKO BOŽIĆ — Born at Sinj on September 21, 1919. His novels »The Kurlans« and »The Unshed Tears« possess vigour, rich language and dramatic authenticity. At present Božić is president of the Educational and Cultural Council of the Assembly of the SR Croatia. His novels and plays have been translated into several foreign languages.

Works: *The Bridge*, a play, 1947; *The Nine Bulbs*, a play, 1949; *The Withdrawal*, a play, 1949; *The Turning Point*, a play, 1951; *The Kurlans*, a novel, 1952; *Short Stories*, 1953; *The Unshed Tears*, a novel, 1955; *The Swing in the Weeping Willow*, a play, 1957; *Silk Slippers*, a novel, 1958; *Silk Slippers*, a play, 1959; *The Just Man*, a play, 1960.

MIRKO BOŽIĆ

## The Procession

FROM THE NOVEL »THE KURLANS«

BEFORE DAYBREAK on the eve of The Assumption, Perka wrapped her baby in a black shawl, covered his soft little pink head with a white handkerchief and set out barefoot for the town: in the cool of the morning before the sun grew too fierce. She would pray with all her soul to the Great Protectress of Krajina, who had miraculous powers of healing and forgiveness, she would pledge herself to Her for the salvation of her child. She, the Madonna, their Patron, was full of mercy for Her people: vows and prayers would save the devout penitents this time as they had before.

»Queen of mercy, soul of indulgence, our life, our hope. Kneeling and weeping I offer myself up to you from this vale of tears. Turn

your eyes, your merciful eyes, on me. Let me not be punished so harshly, restore my baby's health. I repent, Mother without sin. Forgive me, blessed Virgin.»

So she set out, barefoot, fingering the beads of 'Pater Noster' and 'Ave Maria' on her rosary, starting to whisper her prayers as soon as she had crossed the threshold of the house, as she had been told she should.

She scarcely woke from her devout reverie until she reached the town.

There is a three-cornered stone in the ground below the waterfall in the Ruda river, where no peasant would tread to save his life. That is the track where »the Evil One once crouched« when the Lord condemned him to eternal unrest. And an unfortunate stranger was shot there in Austrian times, because »no-one had warned him of the Devil's mark beside the road.«

Perka shielded her child from it with her breast and back, she avoided the Devil's sign circling round it.

But then she felt in her bosom the cold touch of gold coins. She thought joyfully of how she was going to donate them to the Church and God's chosen ones. Trembling, she hurried on thinking that she had felt the sinful conjunction of gold with the symbol of Lucifer very clearly near that stone.

She interrupted her prayer a second time as she saw Filip and the Upper Kurlans in the distance in front of her, driving donkeys with loads of ice in sacks with the water trickling out like brandy from a still. There would be a lot of people at the fair and they would be terribly thirsty. God grant that Filip earns something today, such poverty as this was rare: hard poverty where people grit their teeth and accepted all kinds of misery defiantly and obstinately as they watched and cared for their animals high in the parched mountains. Turn your eyes also on them, Holy Mother of Sinj!

Gavran was already ferrying people in his oak boat to the opposite shore of the clear languid Cetina.

»Well if I don't earn something today, the whole world can go to the Devil!« He rubbed his hands gleefully.

He spat on the palms of his hands and thrust one oar into the water, which normally ran only in the centre of the river-bed at this time of year but which was now lower than it had ever been. Then he would make his charge endeavouring to induce the passenger to give him half a dinar more, or ostensibly forgetting to return the pittance of change. He would row swiftly back with all his strength after pocketing the miserable extra. But usually the passenger he had cheated would be waiting patiently for the boat to reach his bank of the river again. And Gavran would then hum ditties condemning avarice and heartlessness, wave his great hand and bestow coaxing wishes of »all happiness«, »a well-lined palm«, »a full and flourishing house«, »a wealthy life« upon his client.

»Come now, brother, a dinar won't ruin you and it will save me! If you have it, you have it; if you don't—you've had it!«

That morning he had woken his whole household in the early hours:

»Come on, get up! Don't wait for manna from Heaven to drop straight into your mouths!«

And there they were, gleaning grain on the stubbly fields. Everyone had a little bag round his neck and Iglica was carrying a small sack which she would not be parted from.

All six of them were working in a row in front of her, but often their childish self-indulgence broke their ranks: they would chase each other and fight until she separated them, or until they were frightened by the thought of their boundless misery if they were to scatter the grain they had so painstakingly collected.

Jozo, who was on his way back from hospital in Split, more sobered by his importance in having seen the wonders of the city than by the pain he had suffered, was hobbling along on his left leg with a stick, approaching furtively on a stripped forked branch, on his first crutch, like some pathetic bird caught in lime, or a cage. He had been allotted a different, easier task—but now he was gaily accompanying his free pugnacious contemporaries like a real little beggar boy doing odd jobs round the farms. First of all tradition required that they go all round the village, relating his misfortune to his neighbours. He would have to satisfy their curiosity and take the bandage off his stump, which they would then touch (»does it hurt?«) with their hard earthy fingers and in the course of this »examination« they would remind each other of the swift wounds of war or past sudden bloodshed in drunken dispute. And Jozo would drum his technical know-how into everyone's ears: »When the lesion seals they'll turn me a wooden leg, if I can raise the cash.« And the ready money he'd get from begging would come in very useful—he should do well at the fair too. And tomorrow or this afternoon, he would ride into town like a lord in Bikan's cart, he'd arrange a little straw under his backside, for he'd be sitting a long time at the corner of the church and jingle small coins in his hat:—»Have pity, help me buy a wooden leg... Our Lady of Sinj will bless you today!«

But Jozo would still forget himself at times. He thought that his leg had wandered off somewhere (and it had been a real runner and no mistake!) but that it was bound to come back to its proper place again. He would wake with a start sometimes during that two month sleep, taut as a string on a fiddle: he would be rushing into a wedding dance, poor creature, but he did not cry out, did not complain, he only smiled and good-naturedly scratched the bristly tangled curls of his short hospital-cut hair.

And then he remembered his unexpected new position of responsibility: dad had told them all that morning: »You won't go hungry any more, our Jozo will save us!«

And he set off to beg.

When he had ferried Perka across, Gavran put on an awkward air and winked at her because of the other passengers:

»There, my lovely, I owed you twenty, now it's eighteen! May God grant you your heart's desire.«

Perka understood, looked at him vacantly and thanked him silently. The harvest was in full swing, bending willows looked at their reflections in the dark-green river, where the blue of the sky rocked in the eddies. And she sank again into a rapture of prayer, while the sun glittered on the fields and blazed lavishly.

As soon as she reached the square, dusty, sweating, scratched and stung by the thorns and nettles in the fields, pale and weakened by her terrible dry fast and strenuous walking, she began to push her way through the crowd of pilgrims which was milling towards the church. All the bodies around her reeked of sweat, wine, and onion under the sultry pressure of the sun. People were parched, they thronged frantically round the only tap in the square and fought over every drop of drinking water. She barely managed to struggle her way through them, scraping her back against the walls of houses, through the bustling tide of the clamouring market-place, where the stall-keepers flourished their elbows like oars roughly forging a passage. Swept forwards by the mainstream of believers, in that violent friction, she clutched her child to her with one hand, and with the other protected him from the rushing pilgrims, who flung her round, crumpled and squeezed her, until finally they thrust her, like a wisp of straw through the wide open church doors. She was not able even to sprinkle her forehead with holy water before she was washed up and deposited somewhere in the depths of the church like some kind of soft object in a sweaty impervious human press. In this tense crush, she checked her breath and her maternal instinct helped her to predict each pulse-beat of the compressed human mass; she bent and quivered with every surge, shove, thrust.

The throng puffed like a thousand blacksmiths' bellows and sucked in the dense clouds of dust which its shuffling, trampling feet threw up by the altar and arches. This dry rain settled again on their faces. The dusty spray was seived through four beams of sunlight, which tumbled the spark-like grains like huge turbines from the rectangular windows below the roof to the carved wooden benches and dark corners of the altar. It was almost dark in the church. The whole bath of air gave out a mixture of smells of bad eggs, dripping wax and sweaty linen. From somewhere in the roof came the ghostly whispers of the devout, the murmur of praying lips; coughing, sighing and stifled moans which became increasingly frequent. In the vaulted ceiling that hundredfold sound of whispering, moaning, praying was rocked like a steady echo to the swaying, surging crowd of believers, their sighs smoked in the ceiling as though clouding over a great blue mirror with breath from a hundred mouths. This hazy, murmuring space was pierced by a profane clamour from outside: calls, curses, cries, pots clanging as they were knocked, dry sticks cracking, wood torches blazing, tops humming, the throng noistly joking as people gathered from all around for the church feast, the fair, or just a holiday. Now the polished glass and ornaments on the great hanging lamp were set alight by the blazing sun: it flared in rainbow colours like a divine votive torch. The altar of Our Lady of Sinj was richly and clamourously decorated. with the reddish rushlights of wax candles and the carnations of the townspeople, with roses and green leaves.

In front of the ornamented altar, in a space confined by the wooden pews, for hours and days already girls and women had been shuffling on their bare grazed knees which soaked up the dust from the stone paving. These were the yearly pilgrims who by means of this penance and self-punishment were begging for future grace and giving thanks for grace already bestowed. They crawled like this right on to the three twisting altar steps and to the foot of the altar itself, where the priest

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was kneeling before the sacramental chalice. They dribbled as they kissed the embroidered, lace-edged altar cloth with the words »Mother of God — pray for us« sewn on it in gold. They smoothed and rubbed the beads of the rosaries between their fingers, arithmetical aids to the countless sum of mechanically lisped prayers. They milled like ants, swaying, jostling, halting in their devout shuffling from end to end of the church, up and down the altar steps. They twittered, hissed, sighed, moaned, pressed against each other. They smelled of sweat and soiled linen. Their rosary beads clinked together. They gazed and stared like calves with lowered eyes and submissive faith in the holy icons. But a masochistic fervour hovered on their yellow faces.

A narrow arched passage half a yard wide had been dug out behind the altar, a little tunnel which the penitent had also to kiss. But as there was a danger on feast days such as this that people might faint and become wedged in the passage and so block the entrance for those behind, this holy 'kneepath' had been shut off. So that the penitent women were left only with the front of the altar and the ribbed edges of the steps for this strange, mournful vying in which they polished and rubbed the stone dais with their knees like patient termites some gigantic white skeleton.

Perka breathed deeply, her mouth open, carried by the prodigious flow up to the festival altar. She forgot all else. At first she opened her frightened eyes wide, and later she moved her bloodless lips noisily and called on Her to hear her righteous prayers. Her child had had a violent discharge again and she was ashamed, she doubled the shawl and hid all the soiled covers in it.

Suddenly she trembled before the holy image. It seemed as though this peasant Lady — with her dark skin, lowered eyes and arched eyebrows, tightly plaited hair and refined shapely beauty — could penetrate her completely, seeing right through her, and in her fabulous ornaments and golden halo she seemed ashamed of Perka and her sins. She was stunned for an instant, the gold of the icon piped in her ears with a rueful sound for a dazzling beam suddenly flashed through its richly ornamented pane, as though she had touched a key in the highest register (voce celeste!) of an organ. Perka was filled with rapture and terror, she trust her way through to the front and fell on her knees.

»My Lady! Forgive me!« she whispered aloud.

And then, displacing that living, suffering chain, she slowly inserted herself into its listless, fibrous, long drawn-out subtraction. She was carrying her child, instead of a chaplet, like some kind of heavy clasp and rocking him as she took small steps on her cold, tired knees. Her arms had grown heavy, she wanted to sit down somewhere but the other women's crawling forced her to beat and sweep the stone floor with her skin: it was sprinkled in many places with tears and wax and spattered with the spittle of coughing, gasping creatures as they stumbled painfully, fulfilling their vows with their last strength. Her leg kept slipping on the cold sticky slime which she dragged out with her knee making a nauseous trail like a slug. The sweat dripped from her brow on to her son's pale little face, and the swirl of the dense eddies of dust tickled her throat, making her cough violently from her chest.

The plump sacristian with his girlish face forced his way through the hypnotized crowd swaying like calves in a pen, stooped under the

pulpit and slipped easily into the ready-made consecrated circle. He stepped carefully over the prostrate form of a penitent sinner and kneeling and crossing himself swiftly with a supple bow and movement of his hand, he made his way to the third step of the altar and began his bursar's duties. From this decorated pergola, like some strange circus figure, like a wily merchant Manizelo in this year's carnival make-up, he took the collection. A dark red bag hung from a rod which he shook in the faces of the believers by the altar, and they began immediately sprinkling it liberally and making it jingle.

When the bag was full, he tipped its contents out on to the altar before Her innocent face, as though expecting her to be pleased with him. He kept coming, collecting donations and shaking the bag out on to the already considerable heap of iron and silver coins which rolled about and clinked as they gathered there.

Perka immediately thrust a trembling hand into the front of her dress and felt between her saddle-bags of milk for Andjelia's two gold coins. Without hesitating she dropped them into the cart which the sacristian was dragging over that murky gold-field. And as she did so she sighed with relief as though she had shaken herself free of all spells and sins and her ill-starred destiny. She glanced tenderly at the baby's face peering out of the shawl and humbly thanked the Virgin. She crept backwards, virtually in a sitting position, to below the last pew and leant her back against the wall. As though this relief too had been bestowed on her by the miraculous powers of the Mother, her face at last expressed well-earned respite and a sense of achievement, from the penance she had completed; — when it was all done — she felt sure — she would be granted the forgiveness she craved.

Now the parish treasurer, the grey-haired, evil-smelling lay 'friar' Dujo, ran up reeking of kitchen odours, and scooped up the pile of money from the altar, as though from a market stall, with an indifferent croupier's sweeping movement, poured it into a little wooden chest, made a half-bow to the altar, and slipped off quietly on his wooden clogs into the friars' secret rooms.

It was about three o'clock when she finally dragged herself out through the little door, emerging from the gloomy church into the festival throng, and crouched by the high blind church walls. She unwrapped her soiled baby and cleaned him with straw from a broken basket. The child lay strangely still the whole time and sucked drowsily at his mother's empty breast. Perka was terribly hungry but she bore it, having vowed to fast which meant that she could eat only once a day and then only lenten fare. She bought half a kilo of apples and gnawed them eagerly. She did not dare buy the most expensive fruit, walnuts, because the peasants believed that they contained a speck of oil. She thought that the child had fewer purulent blisters, it was sleeping. Perhaps the All-Merciful had weighed down his eyes with healing sleep.

Urged by curiosity she then wandered over the teeming market place, which clattered and rang with the sound of clanging tin and iron tools, the high-pitched shrill clamour of women, jostling passersby, the bawling of stall-keepers crying their wares, the continuous hubbub of songs, men haggling, animals snorting, braying, cackling, quacking, whinnying, lowing, bleating.

The whole space around the church was crammed with little tables, benches, stalls, wide umbrellas; colourful heaps of pumpkins, copper vessels; displays of goods by merchants from Split; small-scale grocery, cardboard toys, whistles, balloons, sweets, dolls; baskets of eggs, apples, pears, green plums; hampers of pigeons, hedgehogs, rabbits; cartloads of melons, coal, quick-lime, hay, calves, lambs. Here little mirrors and pendants of silver filigree, elaborate brooches, cheap rings, little earrings and medals glittered; there rosaries, strings of walnuts and hazel-nuts, sentimental portraits of saints, model angels, and candles, prayer-books, lockets, incense, little candleholders, dried votive flowers. At one stall the upper Kurlans and Mrko and Surko were selling snow-water, half a dinar a glass; the local layabouts competed with them selling water coloured and flavoured with chemicals and called »orangeade« or »rasberryade«. Everyone was busy. Someone was roasting sucking pig on a spit; the hot fat was dripping through its crackling, bubbling skin. Peasant women had spread out a carpet of coloured bags and sacks and they were selling wood-chips, tinder, wooden combs, distaffs; and the Zelov people were selling carved boxes, knives, stringed instruments, bagpipes, pipes and pipe-stems; all around them people were twanging, squeaking, piping, scraping, whining. The copper-sellers banged on the bottom of their vessels with sticks, the melon-sellers split the ripe fruit with knives. Selim, the ice-cream seller tirelessly scooped the frozen milk into cones, calling his trade name at the top of his thunderous voice, glancing jealously around at the ice-cream cart of the 'intruder' from Solin who was doing an equally roaring trade in frozen water. Beside him men from neighbouring villages jostled with their casks, barrels, hoops and taps.\* The poulterers prodded their hens a hundred times as they held them by their bound feet and then they fluttered on to the dry earth. Frano Kulkić was stroking the ears of a white breeding rabbit which Pera would take home. The new town dustman, Berleš, was here too. He was noisily munching a slice of water-melon and scattering mouthfuls of black pips all around him like lethal shot out of his dribbling snout. His belly was quite swollen with the watery fruit he liked so much.

All this crowd was pressed together, rubbing against each other as in some vast, multi-coloured menagerie, and the whole scene was filled with all kinds of rubbish, garbage, straw and dust. White, red and striped colours spattered this fairground assembly of peasants and small-townspeople. The crowd spread through the fair and plugged all the holes, filled all the corners and ran round the town with a murmur of business punctuated by booming calls in the scorching summer heat.

The bells joined in the celebration and a wild song and folk dance started up. It became crazed as the wine boiled in the young men's heads. The arm movements of the swirling couples were exaggerated with a kind of masculine malice. The first gun shots burst out and the music rang out gaily. In the market-place people pushed and hurried to find places to sleep before dark and to watch the illuminations in honour of the Feast of the Assumption on the following day.

\* Sjekirica & Kero were selling iron buckles, which they made on the spot, as they walked, with pliers.

Swept along in this flow towards the square, Perka ran into Andjelia, her face inflamed and terribly emaciated, carrying her little son and protecting him from the flood of threshing arms. Her child too was drained by longlasting summer diarrhoea, his yellowish-brown cheeks sagged piteously, sweating under a tasselled woollen cap. Filip's heir was clutching a wild pear in his little hands; the fruit was black from inside and flies flocked wildly around, settling on the maggotty flesh. Andjelia did not realize, poor creature, that the fruit would only make him worse, and that it could indeed kill him. She was more obsessed with her misfortune in being unable to bear any more children, which was the reason for her pilgrimage that day. And now she was glad that she had met the friend who had delivered her child in all this press of strangers.

»Sister,« she said breathlessly, »where are you going to sleep?«

But Perka was already being swept away by the separating current. She could only snatch the breath to reply:

»Here, on the square, if I can!«

It was getting dark and the fireworks were starting.

Andjelia had never seen these sprinkling miracles of light before. Her eyes stood out in terror and wonder in the face of the One and Only Lady, who was the main cause of all this human madness around her. This was the Lady, the eternal mother, stretched on two posts like a picture, with a halo of coloured electric bulbs around her. Andjelia stood for a long time crossing herself, crossing her child and staring at the great shining picture, over which flocks of red, blue and green sparks burst and scattered constantly. Rockets flashed and hissed, crackling and exploding like ripe pomegranates in the starry sky. Andjelia then learnt from some other Andjelia that these Bengal fires would not harm her at all, for they were all under the omnipotent protection of the Lady. Her ears rang with the voices, music, this whirling clamour, which it seemed would not abate all night; her head gradually sank on to her bag. She wrapped the child in the folds of her skirts and fell asleep on the bare pavement crushed among hundreds of peasants from the whole region who were lying as she was, on the ground.

Perka awoke with the first chink of light. A great crowd of people was sleeping all around her in the street. She stood up, tied the ends of her shawl around her neck and waist: she would rock her baby in this cradle until she had completed the vow she had sworn, to crawl on her knees the full length of the pilgrims' way. Some strength had returned to her exhausted limbs. She crossed herself and set out first for the church.

In the intense, suffocating summer heat the tired travellers were lying snoring beneath the altar tabernacles and monstrances, their bare feet filthy and stinking of decay. She sighed softly, dipped her hands in holy water from the stone font, sprinkled it over herself and the baby, and then dropped slowly to her knees at the church door, hooking her crumpled skirt under the narrow string round her waist.

»Lady, help me!« she cried, and not knowing yet what to do with her hands, she began to edge forward on her knees, swaying from left to right like a cripple, like a heavy cow, big with calf.



She had not moved twenty yards on this calvary before she tripped and was forced to touch the ground with her hands. This gave her a bad fright: she could easily crush the child beneath her breast. Her knees were already torn and now she lifted them more gently and placed them with greater care on the old road which was scattered with sharp gravel. If only she had someone to hold the child. But no, the vow was only valid with him in her arms, otherwise he would not be blessed. So she prayed from the bottom of her heart to the Holy Virgin to redouble her will and give her just the shred more strength she needed.

Since early morning the pilgrims had been crawling on their knees from the church right round the town along the familiar route of the great August procession. Some sooner, some later, some quickly, others more slowly — they streamed along the dusty roads, like logs along murky canals, passing each other, catching each other up, falling behind, collapsing and raising dust with their skirts like heavily laden, sailed boats. They would sprinkle the carpets of dust with their tears and the blood from their bare, torn knees. But to them this was impure blood which they were sacrificing in torment not only to save their immortal souls, but also to heal their sickly, earthly bodies. Perka felt terribly tired when she reached the park. It was the tenth time she had stopped. She sat down and spat on to her knees which smarted and burned as she rubbed them. The top skin was peeling off them, pieces of stone were stuck to the bare pink flesh. All her joints ached.

While she was resting there Andjelia caught up with her.

They looked at each other tenderly, woefully, as though caressing each other.

»He's as slippery as an eel! I can hardly hold him!« said Andjelia. Her scrawny little son was wriggling about in her left arm and dribbling on her shoulder.

»Let's go on together for a bit,« suggested Perka.

»As soon as we've done the penance, we'll feel better, my pet: not like two broken branches any more!« she whispered into her shawl, as though encouraging her baby as well, along this path of endurance and perseverance.

Now they were both moving slowly and both praying for human justice: one for forgiveness, the other for fertility. They left long tracks furrowed behind them in the dust.

Andjelia was bleeding quite profusely, her face had shrivelled up with sickness and seemed to be made of dried white rose petals. But she continued to adorn herself with her soft eyes and seemed to signal with them as she withered so swiftly as one would wave a tearsoaked handkerchief at a final parting. A brown-patterned black scarf, its two knots hanging down her empty breasts, framed the sad oval of her sickly, suffering face.

»It's not far now, my darling. The Lady is watching us!« she murmured to her baby, who was climbing wildly about her with his little arms and legs like a baby monkey, and crying because he was wet and dirty again.

»Patience, sister! Don't Submit to the Devil: he would like us both to shun Our Lady of Sinj,« she said to Perka, and then began to pray from her heart:

»... Save us from sickness, hail, hunger,... make me conceive again... holy, most holy Virgin Mother, in your mercy and your goodness... hear us and comfort us... deliver us from eternal damnation... reconcile quarrelling brothers,... make me fruitful once more... save us from all sickness... help us, Mother of God! Pray for us! Help us!«

The procession wound up beside the little wall on Žanko's hill which would soon be studded with townspeople gathered to watch. From this vantage point Kero and Sjekirica were going to throw fragments of glass into the dust of the road where the pilgrims and a large number of barefooted penitent women were due to pass.

»Let the whores try walking here!« Sjekirica grinned.

»Let them try backwards!« replied Kero as he bustled about, his words echoing like a malicious refrain.

»My God, they'll scream, the loyal Congregation!«

»Crush the glass, come on, crush it!« Kero revelled in the thought of the women's screaming as his little glass knives pierced them. »If you go on talking we won't have enough glass... We must scatter it in five or six more places...«

Kero went on pounding the broken bottle, and the glass splintered and shot in all directions. Then he broke it up into sharp, pointed pieces.

»Hey!! Just look at the hill people! Don't they need a good walloping! With their babies at their breasts, like monks' idols!« muttered Sjekirica with a malicious grimace which revealed all the venom in his foxes face.

»They're like chimpanzees... in Tarzan films!« Kero added.

»I could rub their cheeks for love—until the skin came off!«

»They'll crush their kids...« said Kero.

»We should just clobber them unconscious and nick their money bags!«

»Poor little bastards...« Kero was moved to pity them again.

»Go on, scatter the 'petals'«, ordered Sjekirica.

»They'll collapse and the kids'll fall...«

»Scatter them, I said. We'll make them rear up. Bleeding hill people!«

Kero shrugged his shoulders unwillingly and began carefully picking up handfuls of the spiky pieces of glass and scattering them all over the dusty road.

The women were gasping like martyrs. Dark wet stains soaked through their white blouses from their breasts, under their arms, along their shoulder blades. They crawled on persistently, devotedly, their faces yellow with fatigue, their lips parched and noiseless, their huddled bodies stiffened in a mechanical movement. These shuffling machines with their eyes tightly shut as though they were drowning, utterly abandoned to the forces of destiny, their scarves lifted by the breeze like cocks' combs, flapping idly about their stooping shoulders — resembled human beings only through the weak little creatures that pomelled their wheezing chests and drove on their piteous solemn

vessels with their little whirling hands. And these sickly, toil-worn, tendrils, stunted with malnutrition, drained by diarrhoea, twined and wriggled round their mothers' necks like twisted vines round dead bent sticks.

»Here they come, crawling like lice!« Sjekirica peered over the little wall.

»Here they are!...«

Kero also peeped inquisitively at his 'minefield'.

But they came on slowly raising the dust like little boats under a shred of steam in the midst of the ocean. The flame-coloured rays of the morning sun made their foreheads bleed. Something pricked Andjelia just under her knee, but she went on without noticing it, staring at the magical sparks in the air swarming like microbes and seething beneath her closed eyelids. She only groaned dully, swerved to one side, blew the dust from her baby's face with a breath of decayed air from her hungry mouth and continued to redeem herself by the blisters on her pale grey skin. It was not until later than Filip dug the glass splinter out of her knee with a needle.

Filip was waiting in front of the church for Mrko and Surko, as they had arranged the previous night so that they should all line up in the procession. He had sold almost all his wooden goods, tied up his two pairs of donkeys in Rapoč's yard, and was feeling very pleased with himself. Old Mrko had gone to return the dented bowls he had borrowed from the long-winded Mrs. Tinka to pour fresh snow-water into for half a dinar.

But the procession had already set off and Filip found himself unintentionally swept along among its leaders, beside the first banner with its tassels and red and gold decorations.

The procession came out of the church at about ten o'clock and wound off around Sinj, through Livno Street, then down Tomašević Street, by the Barn, along beside the 'Bazan' Barracks, over Alka hill to the Manzan cross-road, then beside the law-courts into Petrov Street, through Hill Street, behind the Celmić's houses into Dalbel's crescent and finally down Boričevac back into the market square. It was formed of two ragged lines of peasants who strode one behind the other in a regular solemn rhythm along the edges of the open ditches on either side of the road. Between these uneven files, which looked as they walked like two blind single-file funeral processions, the banner bearers struggled with their heads thrown back, their bellies pushed out under the weight of the Lady's standard, taking little steps like school-children in white with their hands clasped under their chins like plaster statues, and the little orphan children accompanied by nuns of the order of St. Vincent with their white collars and winged starched coifs, and the friars straggled along, priests in their white ministerial modestly laced robes strolled beside them. The venerable sisters sang in high voices:

»Oh, Jesus, have mercy on us!« And the children joined in the choruses: chanting together a long drawn-out mournful two-tone melody:

»Through your holy wounds!«  
or they repeated together hypnotically naive verses:  
»Oh, Jesus, with your gentle, humble heart,  
Make my heart like unto yours!«

Behind the Immaculate ones came the Minorites, with black tulle veils, or thick lace shawls over their heads. Black or blueish-white pearl rosaries clinked in their hands, the white girdle of the Franciscan Order was tied tightly under their habits and on their hands they each wore a ring with an engraving of the Crucifixion. Many of them went barefoot as a mark of humility but many were carefully dressed, tainted by feminine pride and vanity. Their heads bowed and eyes closed, like blind creatures, they moved their lips soundlessly murmuring their prayers. Their absent praying in this languid voluptuous heat, their bare feet and awkward stumbling walk gave rather the impression of blasphemy. The most respected devout woman in the town read the Laurentian litanies in which every evocation of the name of the Mother of God was an eulogy and the rest of the croaking flock cackled. »Pray for us!«

Here was Pera who was apparently cursing her bad luck with Berleš. Her bare feet were blue with bulging varicose veins and she did not rub them together as the flies stung her, but covered them on purpose with a powder of dust to hide their imperfections. No-one was taking any notice of her, however. What is more, the unbelievers thought that at least this monster, a serving-girl in the town, who was lost among the people at the end of the procession, had some reason for being religious. But anyone suspicious could have seen clearly the bitter, spiteful expression round her mouth, which looked capable of criminal actions. Oh, how gladly and with what sunlit gaiety she would have sent those procurers Sjekirica and 'The Pipe' headlong into the jaws of Hell, to eternal damnation—if she only could! (And this is how prayers and oaths are composed: according to personal whims.) And now Berleš no longer cared about her. He had hovered around her like anything at one time... But afterwards... she had to give him the push—what else could she do? But that was only for show... as it were. Somewhere deep in her that sinful spark still leapt and lingered and it was in vain that she strove to extinguish it with 'pater noster's', and 'ave maria's': no sooner did she come to the end than it sprung into life again. And even on this day, in front of Her bright and holy image, and in the face of the great glory of the 'purification ceremony' the spark was stirring again, as dangerous as ever, and it would not let her alone. Yes, she would like to secure that original, sanctified peace—and then again, perhaps she would not, she no longer knew herself. The Devil was still tempting her with sweet murmurings which were blasphemous and shameful and the very thought of them was the worst possible sacrilege. And today of all days. But what could she do, when these whispers always made her blush all over again with wistful thoughts of her own home and the delights of her lust.

»Pray for us!« — she repeated hastily, mumbling something through the specks of spittle on her lips and blushed because she knew that

God was peering into her 'rotten core'. But still she was ashamed to make her confession to Him through his agent, the priest. Let Him forgive her Himself.

»Pray for us!« she muttered pleadingly for herself and Berleš.

»Pray for us!« she murmured and let her longing well up in her although she was supposed to have finished with such thoughts, and she took refuge once more beneath the rigorous wing of the Mother Church.

Fat Tinka Rapoč limped along in the first ranks, glowing like a kitchen-range blazing with live coals. You would be wrong if you thought that the good-natured and essentially religious Mistress Tinka, true to the Laurentian chants, was praying for a good commercial year for her husband, or that her pigs should keep clean and healthy until slaughtering time. In any case this daughter of Saint Francis would have prayed for such common things only at the second or third fingering of her fifty-nine beaded pearl rosary. She was simply at this particular moment longing that the procession should be over as soon as possible and she could pull off her tight new shoes and — as soon as she had done so — cut the whitlow on her left little toe. For some reason she suddenly thought of St. Lucy's day, the children's holiday, which would bring her heart's desire this year in the shape of a new comfortable pair of shoes.

»Pray for us!« she too twittered in the intense midday heat.

Stipan's thin wife, who kept bowing her sickle-like head as she walked, prayed that the Lower Kurlans should win their law-suit and not only make fools of the Upper Kurlans, but really give them something to remember.

And Luca, the scandal-monger, Surko's wife, and Mrko's old Katuša were calling on all the deadly spirits — who would soon have been exhausted had they complied with all their prayers — »God grant they be plagued with disease! God grant that snakes poison them! Let them tear out each other's throats with their teeth! No-one but You, Our Lady, can help us: cast them away from us and from our land forever! Let them sink through the ground like water, by God's will! And turn your eyes on us, Our Lady, for at least a while!« For both old Katuša and Luca, the jack-of-all-trades, knew that they did not have all that long to go...

»Pray for us!« cried the people.

Flags and carpets hitched up with pots of flowers hung from the windows. The bells rang ceaselessly, the silver clanging and falling heavily through the air as though filling a cupola in the sky over the town with sound. The 'festival' band struck up solemn ceremonial marches, which sounded altogether too mournful in their ancient brass horns. Behind the band twenty or so of the town's prettiest little girls in white with red and gold ribbons over their shoulders, were taking rose petals out of little round baskets wrapped in white crepe paper with striped silver bows and strewing them over the muddy cattle

tracks, with a simple movement of their arms from above their heads, then slowly towards the ground as though they were scattering grain to bring in hens. They spread their carpet of flowers before bare-headed priests in their ceremonial robes, with filigree rings, bracelets, gold brocade missals and caps, clean bare feet in light summer sandals; each carried in his hands a little spray of wild flowers and behind them all wobbled the fat parish priest in his black surplice.

And then the heavy truncated pyramid, the embossed silver mass in which was set the ornamental frame with the yellowish-brown »Image of Our Lady«, full of blackened ancient wrought-gold medals, floated behind and above them all as though on stilts. Six clerics bent their shoulders under the leather-covered handles of the enormously heavy supports, the sweat poured down their faces and dropped down their chins, along their wet necks. They kept changing over every hundred metres, their knees bent and cracking under their burden, their eyes clouded over.

The procession was followed by four rows of representatives of earthly power, the superintendent, the mayor, a colonel — the district commander, the more 'refined' gentlefolk and their adherents and minions, and finally the clerks. Frano Kalkić and Vjekoslav Zrnić, the legal and political figures of the town pranced along in top hats. They spent the whole time laughing at the plump little doctor, who, whenever the ranks closed up, would secretly pinch the virgin Mary's spinster daughter, the representative of the Christian and moral women's society »Catholic Action«. She was not altogether keen on it, but the doctor did treat her after all, and »if he felt like it« she could »put up with some things.«

And finally came a whole host of people on foot, walking simply, but in a funeral rhythm, like the rear-guard, like the protectors of this pompous parade and pilgrims' progress.

Vjekoslav Zrnić suddenly turned round and said to his brother-in-law:

»Just look at them from behind... Just look at all these people!«  
But the band drowned his words.

At the head of the procession, like a great tent of thick tousled hair, like thousands of crude birch brooms, swarmed the pilgrims who were the real reason for the whole pompous ceremony. The flock rushes headlong behind The Lady, its first rows straining against the cordon of policemen and constables who had linked arms tightly to form a chain and were endeavouring to restrain the great surge with their backs and slow it down. But they had the greatest difficulty in withstanding the onslaught staggering under the pressure of the throng like flimsy yielding flood-gates. This swarm, which seethed somewhere in the middle like a whirlpool with the impact and inner pressure of the clamouring crowd, this swarm which stretched like skeins of wool and caught on the rough surfaces of walls and the sides of houses, this swarm was ruled by a strange law of hoarse calls, hurrahs, curses and cries of pain. The flanks of this hundred-headed mob trudged through the open, shallow ditches, wedged themselves against stones or heaps of rubbish, but the flood of feet behind them swept them up and carried them off like swirling straws. In this simmering mass many

people lost consciousness, floating along, their legs dangling like wood held by a pair of tongs, and they came to in the tight grip of chests and backs of the other captives in their headlong onrush. Their faces were twisted in torment: there was on way out, no place to rest, there was an eternity behind them, and an eternity before them. Eternity in the form of earthly suffering.

Mrko and Surko found their way into this chaos but the whirling tide soon separated them. Mrko watched Surko for a long time and called after him like a drowning man, but eventually lost sight of him. He tried several times to force his way out into the open, to the fresh air, to freedom. »The Devil take these women and their foot-slogging« but the blind and deaf main-stream, the fanatics, would always sweep him on again. Finally he abandoned himself to it and looked carefully around him for an eventual way of escape into the shallows and the shore as soon as the current might overflow. He had to wave his arms as though he really was swimming. He was filled with dust which irritated his inflamed eye, swollen now like a bull's. Old Mrko's temper wore thin and he lashed out around him with his feet.

»Goats! Scum! Get out of my way or I'll wallop you where it hurts! Scram, damn you! Watch it, mind where you go, for God's sake...! ...Ah! Keep in line, keep in line! Take smaller steps, don't leap all over the place! Like this, look! Your legs will take you by themselves, slowly, slowly, you donkeys! Ooof!«

Old Mrko moaned and held up his trousers which kept slipping down. Every now and again he'd get an elbow in his ribs, a kick in the shins or a thump on the back. He took it out on those in front of him, however, and began a grotesque game of 'pass it on'. And whenever some young girl with swaying breasts would jostle him, he would shove his hand vindictively between her legs. Then he cheered up and broke into a spasm of coughing from the excitement until he was finally knocked violently on to his back and thrown about in a wild dance, that pulled him to and fro.

What is this? Sjekirica is walking beside Mrko. How did he ever let this thick, swarming net grab him. But of course, he's no fool, he knows every cranny of the town, he's already disappearing through some rusty gate-way.

Both women had nearly collapsed with exhaustion when they reached the law-courts in Petrovac street. They could not go any further, and in any case a large number of the pilgrims had gathered here to wait for The Lady and the consecrated flowers that would be kept for years in prayer books or stuck into the frames of icons.

Andjelia crawled up, withered and drained from the exertion, and lymph was trickling from the rough blossoming wounds on Perka's knees. Andjelia could no longer feel the splinter of glass in her leg.

They sat down lifelessly and waited, out of breath. Their children stirred feebly and sleepily.

Just then Filip came past with the forefront of the procession. He was spinning his cap around in his hands behind his back and

rocking steadily up hill in the funeral pace of the company. On the left hand side of the road, at the corner of the Court building, he caught sight of the two women with the babies at their breasts. He saw Andjelia's child every day but he wanted to see the other one, Perka's, which he had never seen, but it was hidden by a shawl—and the procession was moving on.

»There's my Filip«—Andjelia stared quietly and somewhat ashamed.

Perka stared for a moment, then suddenly covered her head in her shawl.

»Pity us, Lady.« she murmured contritely.

»Don't tear your knees any more, do you hear?« Filip called, reprimanding them.

But then he thought that he had perhaps been too soft and that the peasants around him might hold it against him and laugh at him. And then he could have given himself away by advising them so incautiously to stop torturing themselves. With strange, baffling feelings of male pride and vague remorse he thought of that four-cornered bundle of women and children towards which he and his strength directed their lives. A rough, flat knot of tiny nerves and muscles twitched on his chin like the impression of a seal, his sinful, stubborn thoughtlessness, without which his miseries would be even more acute, and then he would have to take them on his shoulders as well somehow. So he turned his mind abruptly and decisively to thinking about winter supplies, and such human cares of great seriousness.

Now they have brought the Lady's image to Petrovac. The devout tumult begins to subside as though it had suddenly been put to simmer on a low flame.

Instead of that familiar child's puppet of Justice on the Court building there was a large square stone slab built into the middle of the stone roadway. (There were in fact several of these stones in the Krajina area—the marks of Saints or the Devil, and there is one place on the rock face bearing the print of Sarac's enormous hoof, held incontrovertibly by tradition to have been left by Kraljević Marko when he once rode through the nearby village of Pavići.)

This was where the blessing 'urbi et orbi' was made, to the four corners of the world in honour and memory of Her medieval miracle.

»Here Our Lady will smile or weep! If the people are good, Our Lady will smile on them. Smile, Lady!« begged Andjelia the righteous, naively, continuing the legendary dialogue in the tower of which she had encased herself.

»They say that she smiled twice in Tsar Franjo's reign,« said Perka piously and quietly.

»God grant it should be so again this year!«

»Heaven forbid that she should weep!«

Teardrops like glittering stars, like tiny diamonds appeared in the corners of Andjelia's eyes.

The friar bearers lowered the holy silver frame cautiously and respectfully on to the traditional stone, covered now all over with flowers and with trembling limbs they turned Her miraculous image slowly round to bless the four corners of the world.



The jostling throng pressed around the Image and fell heavily on to their knees as though knocked down, beat their breasts, sighed, cried hoarsely: »Have mercy, have mercy!«

Suddenly someone shouted out:

»Look, she's weeping!«

From a thousand throats on the Petrovac cross-roads and the length of Bregovita street a steady murmur of alarm and a pious solemn cry hummed like a breeze in dry leaves:

»Lady, have mercy!«

The women wept, crossed their children and comforted them when they too began to howl in fright, hastily mumbled prayer after prayer, pleaded, pledged themselves, promised to burn a candle, »to pay for a mass«, to »have High Mass said«, to kiss the altar all over, to »reform«, to »sin no more«, they would earn Her forgiveness by their worthy acts. A large number of them were ready to swear that they had seen with their own eyes two large tears like pearls roll down the yellowish face under the glass, and that both the tears shone in the sun's soft rays. But others insisted that after all She had smiled towards the end of the benediction. In any case there was one more stopping place in front of the church doors, where She would declare Her divine decision once and for all, Her appraisal or condemnation, chastisement or forgiveness.

The friars hoisted their silver burden on to their shoulders once more and the procession began slowly to wind its way up Hill street. They began to sing the monotonous litany again, to recite their naïve verses, to chorus solemn oaths. As though an official, professional decanting of prayers, bewailing of blood and legend were being continued, after being held up for a brief breathing space. At the bottom of this tearful rivulet shimmered the real redeeming sediment—reward.

As soon as they had raised The Lady up from Her stone, the crowd fell on the broken, withered but blessed flowers. In a desperate rush of heads and arms people began furiously and treacherously snatching and trampling as if two Christian armies were fighting at the gates of Heaven on the edge of an abyss. They grabbed flowers from each other's hands, trampled them with their feet and crushed them into the ground. They even began pulling branches off nearby acacia bushes which they considered had also been blessed. They put the twigs in their blouses, under their shirts. And then they set off again rushing after the Lady into the dense fairground torrent.

Perka, too, wanted to snatch at least one blessed flower to cure her little son. At first she tried in vain to stop the tousled and dishevelled women who had been luckier than herself and pull them back by their skirts as they managed despite the great crowd to grab themselves a handful of the consecrated flowers, and to implore them to give her at least a petal or two. But each of them had so much illness and children and sin in their houses that they all snatched their hands, blessed as they sank into the blessed flowers, away from her and pulled themselves roughly from her. Then with her last strength she hoisted herself up and moved towards that legendary stone slab which was still seething, buzzing devoutly like a swarm of bees or an

ant-hill. Finally she managed to squeeze herself through the legs of the crowd almost as far as the heap of flowers which were scattered around as though everyone in turn had winnowed them. She was all broken, as though her joints had snapped, like a skeleton, brittle and buffeted in her dedication to pain because of her still unfinished vow. She could no longer stir on her knees and now she only longed for the blessed, healing flower, whose power would cure wounds and sickness. She stretched her right hand carefully towards the disintegrating heap of flowers, and with her left she clutched her child tightly to her breast as she bent forward. But they shook her hand and pushed her away as though she had leant on a mill wheel. She had to get down on to her hands and knees and try to reach a fragment of consecrated stem. She wanted to kneel down, but she could only totter and stumble hazily. Someone trod on her heel and she fell headlong, sliding into the dust dragging down five or six drowsy women on top of her under the pressure and shoving of the throng. At first she waited on her hands—she felt her baby slipping out of its woolen shawl cradle; she shrieked in horror, and then, collapsing under the weight of the lifeless women falling on her, as they trampled and choked her, she attempted to turn on to her back not to crush her baby beneath her. But her arms bent, cracked and gave like dry vines, her body lurched and fell heavily to the ground. She felt something wet and soft under her: the child only sneezed from the depths of his little chest. His fearful cry as she went down wrung her to the core.

She fainted.

When she came to she found herself surrounded by a ring of women from the town and surrounding villages, they were sprinkling her with water. Her head was lying in Andjelia's lap.

»And... the baby? Where 's the baby?« she stammered.

The women lowered their eyes.

»Let her take him to Her.«

»Follow our Lady, my dear, our Lady!«

»Take him quickly!«

»Find a place in front of the church!«

»She'll bring him to life! She can work miracles!«

»Come, my sweet, listen to the good people,« Andjelia advised her in a whisper. »Come, my dear.«

»Quickly, quickly!«

They helped her to her feet, and pushed the little bundle of flesh, of her flesh, completely wrapped in the shawl into her arms. The shawl was slimy, bloody and heavy. The women crossed themselves and sighed.

Perka began to weep convulsively coming to herself. But a feeble spark of hope sprang up immediately in her. Perhaps he was not dead. She should not even think of it. He had fallen asleep, the mother of God would waken him. Yes, She would waken him... gently, gently...

She set off slowly, unsteadily, carrying her cross in her arms. Andjelia accompanied her, supporting her.

She did not want to look at Andjelia's living child, who was wriggling in its mother's arms. And her little bundle weighed heavily,

heavily in her embrace. They said—she remembered—that dead children pull towards the earth. She thought this vaguely and quickened her pace. Nothing hurt her any more, not even those open wounds on her knees. That spark of hope smouldered deep within her.

»She will do it! Our Lady will do it!« Andjelia hurried her on her way.

»Peasant fools, take him quickly to the doctor's! Give him artificial respiration! Go on, what are you waiting for, Catholic sheep? Hurry!« Joško Mladar called after them from the stone pediment where he had been watching the procession.

But their eyes flashed with the fire of devout horror and pierced the insolent young man. To the church, to the church, faster, faster! There Our Lady, at her last station, will bestow the last and most important, the most potent blessing.

Crosses made of living people, thought the young man, spectres, shadows of some monstrous projections, projections from unknown and incomprehensible times. And there—just try anything, try saying one word of sense. Just try! You yourself become a shadow, a projection, an ass. Who would change any of this? And who was it who said: 'periculum in mora'? And what, what could be done? Should he rush forward and slap them all? Perhaps that was the problem: they should all be beaten in order to be saved. Burn all these pious creatures and the stake in their ceremonial robes. And perhaps burn that idiot woman with the mystic terror in her eyes, who had herself killed her own child? Or thrust all the peasants into gaol for a hundred years and teach them natural science by force? No, there was no answer, in these conditions. There were centuries behind us. Think, observe, that was all we could do. In February: dyonisiac libertinism, in August: ritualistic madness. Observation. And that was as far as one could go. And that was a lot, it would be a very great deal if it penetrated the heads of even a dozen people in the town. But it did not. And who knows when it would... There was altogether too little fire on Earth, and the only good that ever came from the sky was thunder! But what he most wanted to do at that precise moment was to give Vjekoslav Zrnić a really good thrashing, that was his most intense emotion just then. A really good thrashing... If only he could do that at least, dear Lady of Sinj!

»The third scene,  
The third scene,  
Will show you all  
Just what we mean,  
Oh yes, what we mean!«

Standing on tiptoe in his all-purpose summer or winter patent shoes, to reach the ear of his 'friend' Mladar, who was lost in morose thought, 'The Pipe' began to sing the tune from Kalman's operetta with great delight. But Mladar shrugged him off irritated by the »music-hall nonsense« of the boring town hawker. Why should he reflect in a place like this? On one side asses, on the other mosquitoes? One lot wailed, the others played the fool and got on your nerves.

And while Mirko Kažela wagged his cheerful, greying head like an alarm clock, trying to provoke an innocent smile of approval from

Mladar, the latter's face was suddenly overcome with an expression of anger and disgust; before the other could blink, he jerked his arm and dealt the smaller man an awkward resounding slap in the face.

»Don't bray in my ear, you ass!« he said, and set off rapidly down the road.

The two of them were equally shocked. Mirko Kažela was completely and uncomfortably bewildered. First he looked carefully around and, seeing that this 'material insult' or 'offence to his honour and person' had passed without 'a single witness' (although people were still milling around on their way to the square) he promised himself that he would never forget the outrage as long as he lived. And now, confused as he was, his fear became mixed with a fitting element of lasting hatred.

For in this town only extremes met, and if something was not 'the most blatant idiocy', then it was 'genius'. And heroism was burnt out in a moment, and the hero reduced to a heap of quaking ashes.

At the Petrovac cross-roads Mrko too finally trod on the boggy ground and breathed heavily, like a bull riding a herd of cows. He ran straight up to the fountain and shoved his way to the front, pushing through the thirsty scramble. He thrust his grey bearded face under the thin stream of water, like a ram at a drinking trough, and then opened his mouth greedily, staring wide-eyed at the brilliant blue sky, lapping up the foaming mouthfuls with his tongue.

His left eye was as inflamed as a red-hot poker and he 'treated' it simply by rubbing it with his thick right thumb and washing it with a jet of water which sprinkled like a fountain in all directions from his hands, moustache and neck. And when he had filled himself up with water, he felt completely restored. He sat down, pulled his bag towards him, took out bread and a piece of bacon rind and reached for the knife he wore on his belt, but his hand accidentally touched his fatefully empty pocket, giving him such a sudden shock that he felt as though his trousers themselves had been taken and that everything was hanging naked to his despair, shame and ruin. Consternation made his heart beat so hard that he nearly thrust his great fist right through his pocket. But the cloth was strong and his pocket irretrievably empty. Somehow he staggered to his feet. And then—he dashed off at a frenzied pace, spinning round like a capricious whirlwind, dancing in the dusty streets. Everyone saw him. And if his old man's grey curly hair had not been tossed about on his head he would have looked even madder and more foolish. As it was he was followed everywhere by a mockingly sympathetic smile from the townspeople—like a pizicatto accompaniment to a grotesque musical turn.

»My wallet's been swiped!« he wailed, howling, as though racked by toothache. »Help me, my Lady...! Oh, help me!! Two hundred and sixteen dinars, help me, someone! Blessed Lady!«

And he raged like this round Petrovac for a while, then slowly, stumbling, he set off as though in a trance towards the church doors, still moaning hoarsely as he went.

There, a bluish haze of men and women was already crammed against the walls, waiting for the bearers of the miraculous image.

There were all kinds of cripples with filthy stumps of arms or legs, human monsters with great heads, miserable wretches swathed in bandages, with deformed legs, maimed beggars whose fingers had been bitten off their hands by pigs while they were still in the cradle, scabby, lame and ill, sickly, scrofulous children, little cripples from Imotski, from Aržan, warty Bosnian luetics, tubercular sufferers from Kastelan, and feverish paralytics from Vrlička. Little Jozo Budrov had installed himself among these miserable wretches, he would now be scratched from the army lists and referred to as 'Gavran's poor little martyr' or 'the begging pest'. All of them, according to the customs and requirements of their specious 'profession' were expecting a miracle, with fairly arrogant incredulity. Perhaps one of these professional rogues would be prepared to discover some miraculous mark on his own person which would bring him in dinars to his heart's delight. But on the whole these experts were impatient with the feverish sweat of waiting for the Lady's image, and they ground their hands or twisted their single, disreputable prop between their crossed legs—their caps, in which the clinking gullible alms clattered, dropped in by credulous and superstitious fanatics.

And at last the Image was approaching the church doors on the square, after the four-hour procession round the town. The people fell prostrate before their Lady, like sheaves of new cut corn. And the local housewives had run up for a moment to be blessed in their kitchen aprons which smelled strongly of onion. The marches were exhausted by their languid progress and the vertical rays of the sun. As though all their bodies had been drained and all colours bleached. Although this was a triumph, it had been bought by the sacrifice of extreme fatigue. As the procession wound its way back it kept up the hum of endless litanies in a weary monotonous refrain.

The bearers had stopped in front of the doors and were blessing the people once again with the Holy Image. Again the pious fervour ran through them, again the cries of the believers evaporated in the celestial heights. And again the miracle happened. This time the sign was good: The Lady 'did not want' to enter the church.

»She wants to stay with her people!« interpreted the plump, round-shouldered priest, and his words were immediately taken up by the crowd.

The friars who were carrying the Image staggered, vainly trying to enter the church. Her will was the stronger for some while. A violent explosion of ovations, and hopes newly aroused, and credulous sighs, and sins atoned for, and mercy granted filled and swayed the sultry air.

Various words could be made out and Perka and Mrko cried out at almost the same moment:

»Bring him to life, dearest Lady!« she stretched out her arms with the shawl coffin in them.

She collapsed once more onto her knees with her precious burden. She waited with her last anxious energy, with her uttermost peasant's persistence for that remaining shred of the Lady's dissipated miraculous powers which could be clearly seen on every face around her. Her eyes shone with trust and faith, washed and completely chilled by the

horror of the little cold corpse in her shawl. Still, still, she believed that the Image was alive and could give life—no, awaken!—alas—the dead! Her longing arms trembled...

»Blind him, Lady! Cut off his thieving hands!« Old Mrko cursed the robber.

»Oh unhappy creature to steal on this day of all days! May the wrath of God fall on his head!« The pious women around him joined in.

They spoke these words 'the wrath of God' in the same ordinary household tone as they sang that 'Pray for us!' in the laurentian refrains.

But Mrko had still concealed a shred of hope in his terrible curse. It was worth trying. She could, and no doubt, would, punish the robber. A miracle could happen. But, of course, like the wise old man he was, the words he spoke aloud were different.

»There's no justice for the poor. None, not even on this holy day. We'll lose our law-suit as well, you'll see, listen to Mrko!« He turned to his sons who had gathered around him, angry and saddened. »You'll see! Whose going to pay the lawyer now? Who? Two hundred and sixteen dinars! Our Lady of Sinj punish him! Treacherous thief, may his hands wither!«

Surko looked vainly round at the passers-by to see if he could detect the thief by his eyes, and Filip clenched his teeth and fists, for he trusted only in them. Three days of toil and labour in the snow-water caves had gone into a thief's pocket.

And at last The Lady sailed into her sombre harbour.

*Translated by Celia Williams*