

Bitanga

Pictures of Zagreb life

Janko Polić Kamov

¹ Bitanga¹ is not a pseudonym. It's his real name. It was only his father who recently had it changed, to Bosnić, when he became a Principal, somewhere in Gorski kotar.² But in elementary and secondary school, they called his son Bitanga, to the enormous delight of his school-mates and teachers. Arriving at the university, he immediately made a great number of acquaintances: they introduced themselves to him, and he to them, for a lark, and so the students hit on the fine idea of being witty, while Bitanga arrived at the still finer one of becoming a humourist. Young people, to show that they were not quite so young, started to laugh at him, and since there is nothing easier than becoming a megalomaniac on no basis whatsoever, Bitanga began to believe he was amusing. Everything about him became ridiculous: shoes — regularly polished, teeth — never cleaned, nose — so modest in its demands that it didn't even need a handkerchief, two ears that were never cleaned in cold water lest they became red; nails — yellow, like those of all smokers, hair, short enough not to need combing, chin, beardless, and he didn't need to shave, and in short: everything about him was so inordinately usual that this very ordinariness became quite out of the ordinary. But on very first acquaintance he aroused mirth, and it is on first impression that the community and the individualities are formed. In the first year he took an eager part in all assemblies and speeches with just the most vulgar interruptions like

“Away with cliques, away with all universal electoral law, long live free and united Croatia,” causing merriment all round, for everyone recognized Bitanga's voice. And so he attained celebrity, and was the first to come out with songs, mottoes, protests... so that you might even have said that public opinion was Bitanga. The papers, it is true, called him the “leader of the studentry, representative of up and coming youth, Aleksija Bosnić” but intimately, face to face, and among ourselves, he remained Bitanga, to which he had to thank all his popularity.

But Bitanga, become famous, grew to despise fame. Having passed his exams in philosophy he forgot about his position and about the country. His father, reading his name in the papers, felt honoured to support him; his fiancée Ružica the teacher's daughter felt honoured to have him play fast and loose with her; the waiters that he should be in debt to them and the freshmen to treat him. High school girls coquetted with him on account of his future, and hucksters bought drinks for him in beer cellars. For convenience sake he slept with a widow in the first year, and slandered her in the second until they split up, leaving her a child; with the hucksters he went in for slander, i.e. politics, in the first year, and sleeping in the second, for they had become tedious. Zagreb was in general highly favourable to the building of his individuality. During the years he developed and grew like a plant that was carefully preserved and scrupulously tended in

the flower house of the Royal Croatian Botanical Garden, in a Zagreb cafe. And so, finally, neglecting everything, he grew lazy. He stopped reading the newspapers; he abandoned both politics and drinking; ceased to visit both the theatres and the houses of ill fame. The whole of the public was one big bore to him, while sitting at the side of a path or in a cafe brought his nature to a culmination of unheard of consistency: his entertainment became his profession, and killing time a battle for existence. If he had remained in his village he would have gaped over a fence; but as it was he caught flies and brought his art to a state of perfection.

And is there anywhere to touch Zagreb for comfortable sitting? Certainly, nowhere is it quite so difficult to get up as it is here, where there is nothing if not benches and chairs. Benches in the parliament, council chambers, schools and parks; chairs in offices, cafes and theatres. How many people from the coast come to the capital, are worn out by the smoke and the freight cars, just to sit down — in the cool of dew and foliage, where by day women's heels click on the blue sidewalks more piquantly than other places at night — in sight of the sleepy plains of the Sava and the merry student mountains that are the first to greet the arrival of the sun like a visiting artist It's like staying in the country, you don't have to look after your suit and you can drink bad wine, and only professional writers have a sense of the city, for here bad novels and good columns are written... The houses are small, like villas,

like lasses that seem to become little girls when they put short dresses on ...Here you sit long in taverns; if there is an assembly, still longer, for it's harder to get drunk. In the tram you sit long, for it's slow. And you sit long in jail too, especially if it is an Investigative Prison, and you are innocent...Zagreb is, in a word: a Seat. Only in this town could Bitanga have developed into a big-city dweller. This means first of all: belittling and ironizing the whole of the public to free himself of all those basic provincial prejudices and backwardnesses: to be interested and enthusiastic about speeches, first leaders, parliamentarians and writers; secondly, to stop visiting theatres and Kožarska Street and so to rid yourself of other provincial prejudices and nonsenses: like wanting to go to Zagreb just for them; thirdly, replying to long letters from your father and fiancée just with postcards — "Embrace you in haste — no time" — and so freeing yourself from the third provincial prejudice and lack of modernity: writing letters.

"Were I now in the country, sirs, I would only gawk," said Bitanga frequently, since he had no time for writing. "Dolce far niente in the country is just gawping. The pose of the shepherd, the moon-calf and the half-wit. This pose doesn't exist in the city. The city observes. In the country I'd be a shepherd, while here I'm a character. In the country I'd be a moon-calf, and here I'm up and coming youth. In the country I'd be a half-wit, and here I'm a critic and philosopher. The country gawks, the city observes."

"You can always spot a provincial. In the crowd he wanders and strays timidly, awkwardly and uncertainly like a forest animal. Even without looking I can tell how many provincials there are of an evening's walk. First: he doesn't know how to swerve. Secondly: if he does swerve he is bound to run up against someone else. Third: if he is intelligent he complains aloud about Zagreb people not being able to walk. Fourth: he looks at the shop-windows from the centre of the pavement; if a peasant, from the centre of the road.

Fifth: he walks with his nose in the air like an aristocrat, who is no more than him a man for the mass, democracy and the street. The city walks. The country steps out."

Bitanga educated his comrades with such like conversations. All the same, it seemed to both him and them that the subject was still too serious; that this kind of consideration could lead them to problems and something serious might come out of it. Bitanga, too, soon rid himself of suchlike errors and aberrations. For a month he thought about how to forget about provincials and metropolitans; then another month; he spent half a year actually forgetting; and then came autumn and the mud, and he finally did forget.

"How people walk in the mud, there sirs, plenty could be written about that, something psychological and sociological. I have been sitting here for several years now and I am amazed that in the face of such nonsenses I could have dealt now and then with the classics, politics and recently with the provincial. Look. Person one stops on the pavement. He puts out his leg, and at once pulls it back in again. He looks here and there and at once sets forth on his tip toes. This is a man who's got business and sound shoes. If he goes on his heels, then it's a student, who doesn't have soles. If he rolls up his trousers first, it's bound to be a bureaucrat. If he doesn't roll up his trousers at all and walks on his heels, then by way of profession he's either a tramp or a poet. For he has no socks. If he is neatly dressed, and puts it off for a long time, watches, starts off onto the street and comes back several times, then he's a wage-earner with a job; if he does the same thing without being neatly dressed he's a wage-earner without a job. If she lifts her dress up high, she's a lady from high society; the higher the dress, the higher the society, for she has nice stockings and lining. If she lifts her dress just a bit, a house-maid; not at all, a peasant woman. If she has a short frock, and still lifts it, a high school girl; if she doesn't lift her dress at all, she's actually a hermaphrodite, because the

woman doesn't exist who doesn't lift it, and there aren't any such dresses." How people walked when it was muddy was an inexhaustible topic: one, because they could refute Bitanga with obvious examples; two, because there was nothing else to see from the cafes; three, because there is really plenty of mud in Zagreb.

And so came winter. Bitanga and his comrades spent all that time sitting in the cafe, and since they had nothing else to do, they had to observe. This winter was filled up by guessing a woman's age from the colour of her nose. This started from one of Bitanga's general principles: if a Miss was not flattered in winter by a charmingly red nose then she had to be an old maid. Another of Bitanga's propositions, that you could tell a man's temper by his walk, that a walk was dynamics, and a nose capacity, statics, was met with the protest that it wasn't crass enough. He could tell people from the coast, people from the hills. The former had hollowed out noses, because of their attention to their angling; the latter had squashed noses because of the way they had to bend and breathe in while digging. He then termed the Croatian energy and type binasal — the field labourer's and the fisherman's.

But Bitanga could spend time in this kind of meandering only as long as he was convinced that they were utter nonsense, and then they were unspeakably amusing to him. But when he really found he could discover a man's mood by his way of walking; when this revealed downheartedness, joy, conscience, pain and the most secret of human thoughts and ailments, then in despair and out of an attempt to find diversion he would walk to the station as if he were meeting someone. But he did in fact meet an acquaintance once, who gave him hearty greetings and invited him to join his company; and so he stopped going to the station, realizing that not even this made any sense.

Henceforth he set off on great perambulations, wondering after seven years at the beauty of the surroundings of



Ljubo Babić: Terror, 1916

Zagreb, and telling the others about it. One day they set off for Prekrižje, and here Bitanga stunned them with a new discovery.

“We, sirs, thought that the wit of Zagreb lay in the mud of the streets and the nose of the passer-by. We looked down, and right in front of ourselves. We never looked up, above our heads. I have been here, sirs, seven years, and most of you were born here, and tell me how many times you have looked above yourselves, at the houses. Come on now, not once. Three years ago I stopped a flirt with a certain young lady because she lived on the second floor. It’s true: I live on the third floor, which means in the attic, but it also means that I am a big city dweller, though Zagreb is no big city. To climb up once a day, that’s not so much; but to walk about under the window, and crane your neck upwards every third

step! My one and only love is buried for this reason. Rest in peace.”

Instead of his eyes, Bitanga rubbed his nose at this, and continued:

“For three years I haven’t got drunk because I understood that that is the aim of our intelligentsia, the problem of our people and the purpose of our life. And so I never found myself on the pavement with my eyes pointing upwards. And it’s to chance I owe this discovery, the silliest that ever human genius has come upon.”

At this sentence, they all listened attentively. Bitanga continued:

“Listen. One day I was standing by a lamp. A country woman comes up to me and as they do shakes me by the sleeve. Where’s Pek the barber? Pek, and a barber. I at once started to read the signs and notices and found in it a rich, unknown, inexhaustible well of wit and interest. I found Suša³, who

sells spirits and beers, Kovac the barber, Igljić the confectioner, Kralj the rag and bone man, Brus the postcard seller, Gnjus the painter and Puh the wholesaler, who has that unlucky ambition to get in the city assembly.”

Only now did Bitanga realize that this was unmitigated nonsense, and it gladdened him and he began to swagger. He said he was going to write a dissertation, a contribution to the history of culture. For scientific purposes he would go all round Croatia, with government support, and would get into the university. That this was our satire and comedy and humour in these oppositions of names and professions; that it was here our style and our spirit started.

How strange! The bigger nonsense Bitanga talked, the more his comrades envied him. And when he got as far as literature, they called him a conceited megalomaniac, and as they had drunk the last litre out, and he didn’t want to pay, they practically threw him out. Bitanga was half drunk with delight and magnanimously called it a not very good joke. He said that they were jealous and envious of him; that he had invested the whole of his life, talent and education in the search for stupidities; that it was their every wish and thought to say something absurd; that they were vain and emulous in their avidity for absurdities, while nevertheless remaining his mere epigones. But he would still buy them two litres, because they had today shown themselves worthy of him and, to tell the truth, even more stupid than him.

And so he flattered them, and the carousal lasted until the dawn. About midnight when their throats were sore, one of them began to sob for the late king of Rome Tarquin, and the others after him. Only Bitanga kept quiet for he was giving the beat. After that, one of them began to throw up, and all the rest after him. When they left, the landlord opined that never in his life had he seen such intelligent lads and yet such pigs.

In the meantime, Ružica had received no postcard in return for her last letter and began to worry. Since her

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mother died, she had cooked, looked after the children, cared for her father and tidied the house; every day she read the paper from the leader to the adverts; she read two novels a week; every third or fourth day she wrote her fiancée a letter until after midnight. And thought nothing of it. There was none of that "I've no time." And so Ružica went to see old Bosnić. The old chap was busy all day long, in the town hall, in the fields, in the stables. He too read the papers, but since they no longer mentioned his son, he no longer read them, only two or three times; during that period he had made a beehive, whitewashed the walls and begun to write his memoirs.

"He isn't writing to me. What's going on?"

"What do you think? He hasn't got time. He doesn't write to me either. I wrote to him to send me a few good economics books, and nothing comes of it. What can you expect. No time. Zagreb thinks for everyone. For the whole country and people. That's our head there, the brains of Croatia! How'll he get around to our trivial little letters?"

In his naivety the old chap would muddle up Zagreb and his son.

"Zagreb, daughter, Zagreb has no time." And so he soothed her. But there was more pride and haughtiness in his voice than comfort and gentleness. Ružica could feel this, and ran back home to have a cry.

2

In the autumn of the same year, Bitanga was going through Ilica Street when he suddenly saw plaster and bricks falling as if a house were coming down. He looked; and the plaster and bricks fell. He was about to shout that this was an impudence when someone whispered to him: "Earthquake!"

Bitanga paled. He looked at the people: running, looking and all seeming to be whispering "Earthquake". Some were crossing themselves, and Bitanga thought he was dreaming, and wanted to wake up. Then he saw the cupola of a house, rocking like a hat on the end of a stick. It was ridiculous. He

finally pulled himself together and sensed that he hadn't been sleeping but that he had nevertheless woken up, that he had lost his voice and yet hadn't been shouting, that his knees hurt though he hadn't been running, that he was suddenly blushing, though from neither warmth nor shame.

"I was frightened, upon my soul," he murmured and hurried to the square, paling at the thought that he had been standing underneath roofs all that time. The square was full of people looking at the houses and laughing. It occurred to Bitanga that he had forgotten everything, and he lit a cigarette.

He felt tired and drained. The impressions seemed to be taking place outside his own consciousness, they were inconstant, fluctuating, as if he were parting with his own soul. His sequence of thoughts was different, without connection. He looked up at the cathedral tower and waited for it to begin to sway. The ground was as unsteady beneath his feet as the sea: it must be his knees shaking.

He arrived in Tuškanac. The plain of the Sava was before his eyes. A reddish dust hung in the air, and everything around was just one colour, one haze. The city was pale, damp, listless. The forest, with half fallen, half withered leaves, all yellow as if it had withered from waiting, from fear, as if it had suddenly gone grey over night. The sky was covered with sullied tatters, not at all like clouds. And these tatters yellowed and blackened like the bronze of the late autumn leaves. The light was grimy as if you were looking through cobwebs. A certain loneliness could be felt, the loneliness of all these houses and streets, of the whole of the city, which looked, in the midst of this great plain, under this sky, so small, deserted, abandoned. Occasional wisps of smoke wavered in the air, like fragments of sentences uttered in a delirium. The forest and the plain and the Sava and the hills had something feeble and faint about them, like a sick person who has just got out of bed.

Bitanga had the idea that the roofs were a kind of deck, and the towers masts, and it all rocked, just visibly, in

spurts, and then fell in the wave. It was all so unsafe, with the city like a ship. Zagreb is afloat, said this optical delusion and his unsettled brain to him. There he was upon the ocean, rocking, a wave would come and take him down... Why didn't he move from the spot, above which loomed the evil spirits of haunted Medvedgrad, with its evil currents and winds? Sljeme seemed him to a nest of ominous birds, and he feared those dark mountains like waves.

Sljeme is the shadow of our city, he whispered, and at once it was as if Zagreb were but a shadow of the mountain, that they were inseparable. And the longer he looked around, the more the mountains and the hills gave him the impression of swells and waves, the trees just images of gulls and ravens. His eye rested for a moment upon the Sava and his fear was still greater. Like a slow-worm, like a great fat snake, the river gleamed white, and distended, became suddenly wider, bigger, like a boa when it swallows a calf, and Bitanga for a moment thought that he and the city together were the calf... No. He couldn't look. Every leaf whispered: earthquake, and when the wind began to blow, the whole of the forest would whisper: earthquake.

Bitanga agonized. He was terrified by loneliness; and look! As if the whole of the town were in fear of the same loneliness. And Bitanga's eyes were filled with tears. He loved the city, felt it was the same as himself. Every house appeared before him, every bench, every lamp. He saw various streets and little houses and girls that excited him with their unformed femininity and beauty and perfect charm. He felt he had the town on his lap, he was stroking a kitten. And he knew that the town would collapse. He remembered certain dark voices saying that the ground rumbled on Sljeme, that the houses were built low because of the uncertainty of the terrain, and that underneath this girlish city there was a deep pit, and that its youth was as short-lived as innocence.

Bitanga did not know why he had never before thought of these super-

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stitutions and suppositions; neither did he know why so much tenderness and love were suffusing his breast; he felt tears, and he never, never cried, not even when drunk, and he had not gone to his mother's funeral only so as not to offend the proprieties with his dry grief. He had gone hard like meat from sitting without even knowing it and his feelings were so threadbare that they were as thin as cigarette paper that is used for rolling tobacco and jokes only to end up as a tab in the gutter. For several years he had felt no emotion. He was garrulous like a woman, but cafe society turned him into a manish kind of woman, with no tenderness of attitude or soul. In recent years he had actually despised women from an excess of philosophy, and would only mention his fiancée and her letters when the stove needed lighting. Stupidities had enthralled him when enthusiasm had palled, and when he had seen that work for the people needed to begin with petty work, that is the work of mediocrity. He had fled his village three times. Once when they had given him a role in the comedy *Power of Love* by Janko Ujak. Another time when they had wanted him to take issue with the priest in the papers about a certain wall. And once when the teacher in a public anonymous letter had mentioned him among the progressive X-ites who had carried out a real revolution by subscribing to a semi-liberal paper for the reading-room. That is why Bitanga grew to love Zagreb, for here provincials could at least be ironized.

Memories flew over him, and today he could hear that first whistle that announced they had arrived at Zagreb station. From far off he had looked at the towers of the cathedral, the two clasped, ascetic, Gothic hands, and a feeling of piety overwhelmed him. And then, coming in through the green squares, and the laughter and chatter in Zrinjevac, like the chirping of sparrows, never the song of the nightingale. On the first day he learned to love the whiteness of it all, and coming to Jelačić Square looked at a picture that moved him more than Bukovac's cur-

tain in the theatre. He held it against Jelačić that his horse was presenting its tail to new-comers, calling it indecent and lacking in tact for strangers. Later they explained to him that Jelačić's sword was symbolic and ambiguous, and Bitanga noted with pleasure that here you could have a good laugh at jokes about patriotism even. He felt the charms of Ilica in winter and when he got to know some of the girls he felt shudders of pleasure when he learned that they were called little geese. He felt at once that it was a kind of flower that grew and blossomed in the street and that his pleasure in the colour and smell could be spoiled neither by the dust nor the man with the sprinkler.

Memories flew over him, but the first day of his arrival stayed the clearest in his remembrance. Perhaps because the city was that day painted over in white for him; dark houses were a rarity. And now while he remembered the whiteness of his first impression, he thought of the disaster. He moved further up, towards Cmrok. The sun crept unwillingly from behind a cloud and the surroundings became still more mournful. Autumn with its red, yellow, black, green and white leaves lulled his thoughts, but he was not to be calmed. He looked at the colours of this early autumn, of a kind he had never seen before. It seemed that in these dense, solemn colours there was something of his own spirit that he had never even attempted to discover before. His thirtieth year was bending his spine, and he was left an old bachelor. Something rustled inside him, and it was so dry and speckled and just waiting for the snow to cover it. His feelings had dried up and he wouldn't even have felt them if he weren't watching now as life bore them away and tore them, tore them. Hadn't he kissed the teacher's daughter, pale dark-haired Ružica, who had received that first kiss with eyes turned down, as if it were the communion wafer? Hadn't he kissed the soul that had swum happy and sorrowful in those great eyes? Oh, that look. Only Madonnas had it. Raphael's mothers and babes, and Ružica, his old maid of

a sweetheart.

Bitanga was sorry he had no mirror with him. He had been accustomed to dealing with the holy only out of cynicism. But now he came to doubt his own derision.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" he exclaimed three times and ran his hand over his forehead. He went into a bar, sat down and closed his eyes so that the waitress shouldn't see them. In the other room they were talking of the earthquake. Bitanga couldn't hear. Now, he could understand the vision of Ružica and the vision of the first day he had arrived. This was because they were to be separated. For everything would be gone, everything, everything. They laughed in the other room. Bitanga tried three times to show his teeth, to stretch his lips wide, and did indeed get them open to a certain extent with his fingers, but there was no laughter. "What a scare I had, upon my soul." He went on again. He had no idea where he was or where he was going. He couldn't recognize himself. He would have taken himself by the hand, if Moliere's miser hadn't done it before him, thinking it was someone else. They were not his, these thoughts. This thought, it wasn't his. And these feelings, they were never his. But there you are: he loved Ružica, and he loved Zagreb. He was crying, suffering, hurting, grieving, and he couldn't even force himself to laugh. And he remembered his father. Even his father. Poor old man. Once he had scolded him for putting a newspaper cutting on the wall that said "Aleksija Bosnić, student leader..." and for hanging up his matriculation certificate too. Poor old man. Five years since, he had finished his studies, and still he was sending him money; three years he hadn't seen him, and four years he had written "I can't get a job, because of politics." And the old man organized the opposition and was considering resigning the honours of Principal. Poor old man. ... Bitanga rubbed his eyes. There were tears in them. This was obviously a parting. And the expectation of a great earthquake shook him again and he measured his length on a bench.



Vilko Gecan: Revolt, 1914

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In two hours he had forgotten the life he had lived for several years. There are cases of people falling on their heads, and becoming crackers if they are in their right mind and great minds if they are mad. Something of the kind happened with Bitanga. It was as if he had fallen on his head; whether he had become wiser or sillier he himself didn't know since he had forgotten what he had been like. He attempted to know himself, interpret himself. But he just couldn't distinguish the city from himself, the trembling from the fear, the earthquake from his mood. And if something had accidentally occurred to him, he would have perfectly melted from emotion.

What occurred to him was so simple and to the point that it couldn't make his way to his brain at once. To go home! His knees shook at the thought, it disturbed him deeply.

And Bitanga did in truth set off for the city, intending to go straight to the station. So passionate was his desire. Tomorrow he would sleep peacefully in his bed. He would rise at ten. He would be greeted by sunshine, coffee and cream, and Ružica's eyes. Lord! He sat down on the bench again. His heart was beating as if he had already put his foot over the threshold of the home of his birth. And he saw his father, grey-haired like a prophet. And his father burst into tears. And his heart broke.

"Well," said Bitanga aloud in his wonder. "This too has happened to me. Everything comes so unexpectedly.

He looked at the sky, and it had cleared, and the sun was gradually sinking towards the west and the Sava was flowing white and rose like a live crab. Down below there whitened the trunks of slim, supple birches, and still deeper in the dark green, St Xavier's, silent like a deserted cemetery. People started arriving from all sides, and Bitanga arrived in town at a rush. Once again he was driven by discomposure. One again his thoughts came and went and it seemed that they were taken by the wind like sawdust and he felt ill. He looked at the arcades in the cemetery, and saw his own thoughts. Ruin.

Nothingness. And there was blackness in front of his eyes. He bit his finger to see if it was really him, but he felt no pain, and he explained this by his not having the courage to wound himself.

"Coward!" he muttered to make it feel better. "I was really scared." And he was assailed by a wish to shout aloud that he had been scared. And at that his belly rumbled, reminding him he was hungry. "Better wake up, it's time," he said to himself, in the conviction that he was sleeping. And again his thoughts fluttered away. He could see only the city and the people as if there had been nothing.

Bitanga did not go away. Not because he so determined, but because he couldn't make up his mind. For the first time for many years, perhaps since his birth, he had to make a resolution, and that cut him up.

That night he sweated, waked, and feared. About three in the morning he heard a buzzing in his ears and realized it was an earthquake. He saw the walls moving, heard the floor squeaking. He was petrified by this moving of the floor, this shifting of the city, this inconstancy of the crust. The trembling shook him too; he lost sense of the ground under his feet and his consciousness that had been static for years and years like a pavement suddenly started to shift and plunge like wet soil. He ran out, and for the second time wondered why he couldn't make up his mind to go. For he felt that fear in every little hair on his skin; he felt he had curled up like a hedgehog and that his hairs had grown and hardened like a porcupine's and that he couldn't leave Zagreb. He felt, more, he believed that a frightful catastrophe was approaching, that it threatened him with death, with petrification, and just for this reason he couldn't leave. Fear drove him away, but curiosity kept him back. Was he not Lot's wife? Well, look here: since yesterday he had been as soft as a maid, as fearful as a little girl, as inquisitive as an old maid. Only now did he understand that you couldn't just disappear right before a catastro-

phe. And now look. The houses were bending like trees; gutters falling like leaves; walls were as covered with dust as country roads; roofs were snapping like branches, and the earthquake was roaring, roaring like a whirlwind. What a dreadful sight. People were running, the streets were full of them, people were being suffocated, beaten, tortured, they were wheezing, barking, cackling. It was hell. Everybody was out of their minds with fear. Women were frenziedly tearing their clothing and skin and searching for eyes with bloody fingernails. Men bared their teeth, snarled like dogs, and their eyes were as red as young rabbits'. Screams were heard; boys and girls were jumping from windows as if someone were playing ball with them. One last time, towers swayed and bent like infernal question marks; they shook like the line of a snake; and from the stones some kind of hands poked out, hair, jaws, just like frogs when the children flatten them with a stone.

Bitanga shook from this vision. His eyes filled with lust, and his mouth distended as if he were in chase of a girl. As a long suppressed passion is breached unknowingly and unconsciously by a need for sensation, effects, dimensions. For the ground, the base of his awareness was the everyday; when it was all shaken, his ground and his base slid away from him. Bitanga was flying, swimming. He tired himself out. He felt and thought. At the sight of this dreadful catastrophe he began to clench his fists, feeling how the knuckles cracked, and groaning while drinking off a quarter of litre of spirits.

Dawn. Cold, damp shadows ran through the streets like bats. A dog poked around in the rubbish, and you could hear his deep snuffing, you could see his tail bent down, and the blue of his paw. The sky suddenly began to pale. The east yellowed, and peals of bells flew through the air like a frightened flock of magpies.

Bitanga was carried away. He couldn't distinguish the excitement from the desire, nor the desire from the terror. He didn't sense the absurdity of his

own psychology. He lusted for a catastrophe that he was unutterably afraid of. He found entertainment in the earthquake that sent waves of terror up and down him. He drank from gloom, and this excited him. He began to feel and to be aware because he had been scared. He became soft from terror like a woman from whipping. Finally the spirits persuaded him in his presentiments.

Just like Sodom the black, the white city of Zagreb was about to fall into ruins. A white gull on the banks of the Sava, the white, silvery water-snake. Its green wings of parks bore it. Without its woods, Zagreb would be half-dead, mutilated, a fright. Now it seemed to him like a girl at her first communion, with the scented greenery her unbraided hair and her white dress the darling houses. She would never get into long dresses, for the whole of Croatia petted it like a gosling, and it had become pampered and spoiled, longing for new dresses, hats and shoes to show off in.

Bitanga bewept its early death and short youth. Croatia would mourn it as an only child, and Bitanga could stand no more. Emotion got the upper hand of him, sleepless, frightened and drunk as he was, and as his thoughts began to dance around like a tongue, he saw that it was impossible to think now, and that crying was in order.

At first he sought his handkerchief. Having found it, he looked to see if it was clean, sought out the the most cornery cafe and retreated into the most distant corner. Having retreated into the most distant corner, he looked around to make sure that no one could see him, and began to sob. When he couldn't summon any tears, he ordered beer, and got a waitress drunk so that he didn't have to go home to sleep.

In a fog he thought: anyway, it's safer here than on the third floor. I won't go crazy from fear anyway if I do get frightened....Anyway, I'll be in Zagreb if I pass out...Anyway...

He had an unclear awareness that he was under the table, and peacefully closed his eyes.

3
So much spiritual effort and violence had to end in disappointment. A few weeks passed and Bitanga was more and more convinced that nothing would come of it. He started reading the papers again, and found there the words of experts who were resolute in their denial of there being anything catastrophic in the Zagreb quakes. And one of them gave examples to show that such things were only common along the coast.

Now Bitanga began to be ashamed. In his everyday behaviour he was a different person, quite different to his holiday and spiritual-ecstasy self. And this everyday Bitanga began to be ashamed of this other. As if he had sobered up and seen what he had done in his drunkenness; at first fear, then emotion, then tears, love for the city, Ružica, his father, excitement following fear, weeping... All the biggest feelings were put to shame before the most minuscule: getting bored, killing time, cynicism.

He was afraid lest in his drunken stupor he had said to someone everything that had been torturing him those two days, and he became suspicious. Bitanga, crying! Bitanga, loving! Bitanga afraid! Bitanga excited! What good would it be for him to call it slander? To foul-mouth whoever it was, give him a slap, beat him, all that would show that there was but too much truth in the slander. To laugh it off? But he no longer had the strength to laugh.

Bitanga was also suspicious of his own mind. He knew that these feelings were now abnormal. Shame was a sickness, and that he was ashamed of his own shame showed it was catching.

And he was. He was ashamed of his own shame. He felt the irresistible horror of this feeling, and saw, what's more, where it was leading to. His psyche was wriggling in paradoxes, living in absurdities, and what was disastrous was that paradoxes and absurdities were the exclusive content of his mind. Why should he be ashamed of his fear, his tears, his love? And if he was ashamed, why be ashamed of that? He could go no further. No. Self-analysis

was not for him. He was for sitting, looking and talking, and now he got up, closed his eyes and began to think. Now he was blind. The blackness in front of his eyes was thicker and thicker; sometimes this blackness yellowed, reddened, whitened and greened, but this was only when you closed your eyes really hard or got a thump that made you see stars. He couldn't make anything out. And then he felt the same thing as that day when he had wanted to protest about the bricks falling upon the passers by and someone had whispered that it was an earthquake. And now too someone was whispering while he was protesting: madman. And he went hurriedly, thought of the past, and it seemed that all his getting upset, being terrified, sobbing and loving because of a catastrophe that didn't take place, wasting his dormant mental energies in illusions, throwing the only richness of his soul upon nothing, all this was like using banknotes to light a tab-end. Now he felt better.

So. He had been terribly afraid, and all those feelings derived from this fear; even his curiosity had been a mere mask; and he had stayed here because you couldn't run from fear, and then he had convinced himself that it wasn't fear that was keeping him...And now this illogicality angered him: he was unhappy because nothing had happened, and in his fear wished that something would happen.

In vain did Bitanga start to study the noses and way of walking of the passers-by: it seemed to him now that they were looking at him, observing him.

There, he muttered, entering the forest, this is what it means when your thoughts get around your soul. I could have done anything at all, only not think about myself, consider myself. That is suicide.

Not even when the gendarmerie had shot at the people and killed ten of them, not when he had slept with someone else's wife, not even when she had told him she was pregnant, not even when he had concealed his child, not when his little boy had died, not

when the husband had wanted a divorce, not even when they had all moved to America, had he felt even a hundredth part of this present spiritual anguish which was all founded upon nothing. And this angered him still the more. He cursed whatever inspired the soul in man; he could feel it, he wept for it. Wasn't there a child, illegitimate, alive and then dead, on his conscience? Little, little, little... little... little.

Bitanga couldn't remember what his son had been called. Why he actually needed the name he couldn't tell. This threw out the whole of his line of thinking, as if it was the single stone displaced that caused the building to tumble down. The name. Dusan, Mirko, Jerko. Bitanga was in a sweat. The harder it was to think of it, the more he need it. He repeated all possible names and when he had no more words, then he learned that the need for that name had got into every fibre in his body. It tormented him like thirst that is quickened by the thought of water or the sight of just a single drop of rain.

Bitanga thought of the mother, of his mistress Anka. Of her husband, the agent, Ferko. Of his sister, Julka. All his family. He could remember all their names. But the boy. He could see him. He could see his first tooth. And the second. And the first word. And the second. Just the name. The name. He knew that he had started to walk on New Year's Eve. That he had died during Carnival a year later. He knew what kind of dresses he wore, what books he tore up. He knew it all. Just not the name.

Bitanga felt the sweat freezing on him. There was a pounding in his temples, and the back of his head was burning as if his skin was beating. He tried paring his nails. Then whistling. He saw a dog, and called to it, so he could stroke it. But it ran off. Then he started throwing stones, pulling off leaves, breaking branches. But he couldn't remember the name. It was in vain that he tried to convince himself he wasn't even thinking about the name, that it didn't bother him. It tormented him like conscience. Pulled his hair. Tickled him

under his arms. Tingled in his neck. His eyes glazed. He tried to run, jump, sing, listen to echoes. He wanted to show that he cared more about everything than about the name.

What impudence. One name. To go numb for it, to sweat, to hear the blood rushing in his ears, his pores stiffening into needles. And the more clear it was to him that the cause of his trouble was quite trivial, the fiercer was his torment. The more he convinced himself it was ludicrous that a man should go crazy about a single name, the less he was sure, and he realized he could kill a man only for not at a given moment being able to remember what his son was called.

And this fired him with pain, shame and confusion. His soul rebelled against reason, and he believed in hell and the devils, in one conscious supreme Being who had breathed into a single man a soul, absurdity and paradox. How could it be that a man, created in the likeness of god, could suffer so much just because of a single trifle, lose his mind because of a single name and go crazy about nothing. And as far as he was concerned, the name could go to the devil, damned stupid name, but who was it that was hurling it back at him the more fiercely he rejected it. Who was it that was cynically fooling with human life and killing understanding like mosquitoes? And something was laughing in his face: "Look, look, how he would love to forget it. He went in for philosophy, philanthropy and the criticism of providence. Ha, ha, ha."

"There's nothing else for it, I must be going mad," he whispered and wiped away his sweat. His handkerchief was all wet. A way out gleamed dully in his mind. He could buy a religious calendar and read the names of all the saints, but he couldn't think where he could get one. It was all irrelevant. He was going to the gallows. Just let them get it over with, hang him, let him go mad. He couldn't tolerate this state of affairs. Oh, if he could only just go mad. He wanted one thing only: the madhouse. He was quite calm with this thought, and no longer thought of sui-

cide. He was going to Stenjevac. "I am, they'll say, mad. Look me up. I am mad. I, Aleksija, ah..." Something whistled past his ear like a bullet. The lobes of his ears trembled and he could sense laughter gusting against his forehead, his hair, his neck.. His son had the same name as him: Aleksija.

Bitanga didn't know what to do for joy. He was afraid of going mad for happiness like those poor souls who get a million on the lottery. And now! right now!

The sun was going down. Waves of clouds foamed with a red foam. The forest was smothered with lust and sighs. The sky was aflame with mortification. Bitanga had never felt so happy. His ears were full of voices, his eyes of colour, nose with smells, tongue with words, brain with images — it must have been as burgeoning as a jungle. He turned into nature: into hundred year old parrots, antediluvian mammoths, sky-tipping eagles, lithe panthers, multi-coloured snakes, and felt he had expanded like a balloon about to take off and burst.

This happiness was madness though. Here were his heels, stuck to the earth as if rooted. How could he flee. He had better cheat the madness. And he took off his shoes and socks. His feet had got as big as tree trunks. How was he to flee. Better cheat the madness. And he took off his trousers and drawers. Look how his body had spread and branched. How was he to flee? Better cheat the madness. And he took off his coat, his waistcoat and his shirt. Free. Saved.

And he howled with laughter, seeing the pile of clothing where it had fallen like fetters dropping off an arm or leg that has become too thin. Bitanga ran laughing at having cheated madness. He threw his hat in the ditch, and was sorry he had forgotten his handkerchief, for he could have wiped away those big tears that consecrated this first day of freedom, blessedness and victory. He gathered them in his hand and it seemed it was a great flower covered in dew. And then he felt the breeze turning his nakedness to goose-

flesh, and he thought that he was a star bathing in space.

He was still talking and giggling when the sentry brought him to the “red lamp” for public indecency. But they packed him off at once to the hospital. The police chief, a friend from the cafe, covered him with his coat, at which Bitanga was offended, and suddenly became serious, and never spoke another word.

Punat, May 10, 1910.

Notes:

- 1 Bitanga means: a lazybones, a scamp, a good-for-nothing. It is also an unusual but still current surname. I have chosen to retain the proper name in the text, instead of translating the word as a term of opprobrium, since the equivalent surname probably does not exist in English speaking societies.
- 2 Gorski kotar is a mountainous and even today somewhat inaccessible district standing between Zagreb and the northern Adriatic.
- 3 These surnames are out of key with the professions they are attached to; Susa, for example, might mean drought, an odd name for a vintner.



Vilko Gecan: The Lunatic, 1920