

account of these ten crowns... I would be devastated if you should think that I wanted to take advantage of you..." Because of that letter, he became my true friend and benefactor, for, as he put it, he could see that I have character...

I am also vain. I read all the writers in order to be able to say: Oh, of course I read Maupassant, etc... in the same way I drink various wines, smoke foreign tobacco and go to see exhibitions... Actually, I am poor - I only take dinner at the inn. A neighbor offered me another serving, realizing I could not pay for supper, and I would have gladly eaten it, had I not been forced, in the name of civilization and tact, to say the following: "Oh, please! I could barely eat what was on my plate... I take sweets and liqueurs for supper. I cannot support other food. Nothing to be done about it! My stomach is very delicate... Nerves, my dear sir!" In a word: I am cultured. What impression I make on others, how they see me - those are the questions of my conscience, the pointers of my movements, the regulators of my life. The man who rapes a young girl, calls someone "an ass" to his face, calls a whore - a whore, spits in the theater... he is vulgar, he is not cultured, because he is honest, instinctive and inconsiderate.

They say: robbery and extortion are crimes of deceit, the defrauding of civilization. All that is rough, direct, open, heroic, becomes softness, hesitation, pretense and slyness; the acrobatics of the muscles become acrobatics of the tongue: murder - a lie, nudity - a suit, simplicity - shame, instinct - reason, tragedy - comedy: pure, great, full sentiments become a garrulous, artificial, small sensitivity, and fate, murder and war turn into adultery, scheming and jokes.

That is why I wanted to title these burlesques "Confessions of a hero of our times": the woes and secrets suffered and concealed by a man who would rather be considered...

The Earthquake

The first time it came unexpectedly: it seemed to me at first that a wagon was passing and that the dog was barking as it always did when it heard a noise at night. Then I met my brother's gaze (we were both in bed, and due to a cold I hadn't been out for three days) - a gaze smiling, sleepy and lewd, and I immediately realized that his physiognomy expressed mystery, spookiness, the heaving and lowering, swimming, swaying and bursting of the brain. It was an earthquake.

And every time - during the quakes or talks of spirits, or when a suspicious cracking was heard at midnight - I noticed on everyone around me a similar, lewd expression, as if something lascivious was being discussed or nudity watched, something like when old men ostensibly benevolently fondle or tug at a young girl while their palms bristle from her innocent hair. How come? Maybe at such moments passion equals fear: both originate directly from the instinct of self-preservation, and a mystery envelopes stories of ghosts, suspicious sounds, earthquakes and our disguised passion during benevolence, aesthetic observation of nudity and the cynical or innocent joking about sex. Our lips turn pale, our blood rushes, our spine bristles and our hairs move as if someone were pulling them the way an elderly teacher pulls a girl's hair, and she is frightened at first and turns pale with fear and would blush bashfully because of the embarrassing punishment, if she didn't sudden-

ly realize what the pulling really means, and then she blushes even more deeply.

Then one time we were summoning the spirits: a spinster, a young widow, a friend of mine and I. When the three-legged table began to rise, we looked mockingly at each other, stared at each other, and as our irises met stiffly for a moment, it happened that our eyes saw only themselves and we no longer looked at anything else: only these gazes spoke, moved and looked. At such moments you do not discern male from female; only the gazes exist: eyes wondering, fearful, amazed, laughing - and thoughts are scattered, the brain thin and you feel it rising lightly like smoke... And the inexplicable, the mystery of the moving table, which could easily transform into the moving of the ceiling, the walls and the floors - causes us all to become one: humans, weaklings, powerless in the face of a miraculous power, deity and volition; we feel like children in front of a teacher threatening us with a cane because of our disobedience and wantonness, which can be transformed into mocking the mysteries of the table and spiritism... Let a catechist catch his pupil in flagranti when she is writing a love letter and such gazes may be seen: surprise and fear which take on the colors of passion, when an illicit act enrages the culprit and the judge: the judge because he has a victim, power and submission; the culprit because he feels the power and resists it by playing up to the judge.

- Did you hear that? - my brother said then. - The dog had barked briefly and deafly. Mother had come to our room. My ears were buzzing. Then I was hot. In the meantime everyone gathered in our room: my sister and elder brother too. The maid stayed in the other room, breathing deeply and quickly.

I was ill; for my mother, that was reason enough to stay by my side. The others did not leave either: my sister said she was afraid to be alone; my elder brother mocked her; I advocated resignation.

- If it is to come, it is to come, whether we are in bed or on our feet.

But it was really fear that held us together, for that way we could chat, make jokes and convince ourselves that there was nothing to fear.

- You - I said jokingly to my elder brother - ran from your room out of fear, just like our sister did. We didn't. We stayed calmly in bed as if nothing had happened.

- Because fear rendered you motionless - he replied ironically, but the irony was so kind, gentle and hushed that I was pleased with it. Mocking generally calmed us. Jokes do not offend, caricatures please if through them the mysterious looses its magic like an exposed miracle-worker, and the terrible looses its strength like overanalyzed love. But at the same time, the irony destroyed us: we felt slightly guilty as well. For with joking at such times, when people feel weak and powerless like children, we are subjected to the same influences and impressions as children: to the stories of the wicked brats who ridiculed the holy man: "Come here, baldy!", thus bringing about God's rage and revenge in the shape of a bear - the stories which touch the natural childish "conscience" only with fear, but the unnatural, gone-childish conscience, with guilt as well. We were afraid that perhaps a situation would occur where walls would tumble down and our conceited high spirits, carelessness and poormouthing would end in a fiasco, and our fearful and ridiculed sister would have her moment of revenge... Precisely so. We had reduced our mood to primitiveness, our feelings to prejudice and premonitions and our muscles to powerlessness. With all our intelligence, we were unable to expose the miracle-worker and stop fearing him: and the fear immediately paralyzed our brains and all we had learned, and all that was left was superstition. Then the dog barked again. Our sister hadn't come to her senses yet. And my elder brother started explaining in detail that there was no reason for fear because the first thrusts are usually the strongest, that it would take a much stronger earthquake to bring down these houses and that after all our modern houses were built in such a way, and the elasticity of the bricks excluded the possibility of a catastrophe even in the case of a very strong earthquake.

He spoke very animatedly; he spoke like an expert. He knows what he's talking about, I thought, and that could have completely put me at peace. But I realized that he was elaborating so seriously mostly to calm down our sister and, apparently, himself. He was afraid of our sister's fear just like I was; her fear frightened him, because a woman and a mother can anticipate much more than a man and a brother... Eventually our sister did calm down. The dog didn't make a sound.

- Let's have some brandy, Mama - my brother said loudly - to celebrate.

He began to laugh. We joined him. He really enjoyed his liquor. There, I thought, he never misses an opportunity to indulge. That actually calmed me more: to be able to find, in such terrible moments, a mood so good that it dispels the mysterious and fatal... But as if to spite myself, deep inside me the opposite conviction grew: my brother is drinking only to forget, to become senseless, to get drunk...

We had a few glasses. We laughed. My brother wanted some more. We giggled. My sister was merry, the dog was silent, so we parted in a very good mood.

But inside me and inside everyone else there was the same unsteadiness and contradiction: a fear deep down which logically manifested itself as surface courage. All heroism is nothing but an attire with which fear covers its distasteful and skinny shape, and if men pretend to be more courageous than women, they do so because they are more cultured and as such must watch more over their good manners and a decent attire and costume.

I couldn't fall asleep for a long time. The dog was silent. That finally reassured me and lulled me into sleep. The day dispelled all prejudice, premonition and excitement. But as night returned, so did they. I knew that earthquakes usually occur at night. And night magnifies everything precisely because we cannot see; our sight is powerless; the dark may conceal within it a villain, a viper, a scorpion - we see nothing; but the dark may also conceal nothing - and then we see everything: ghosts, spooks, monsters - everything is tabula rasa: the night, the soul, and nothingness...

It was winter; I was waiting for the spring. At night, I awaited the day. I suffered from insomnia. I got up from bed: a walk, a game of chess, staring at the street, all that melted my stiff soul and expanded my constricted thoughts. Living that way, closed within the same walls, with one fear, I grew ever more stiff and the earthquake haunted me. So I began pinching the maid. I lingered in the kitchen, trampled on her feet, held her hands. I had to find another strong sensation which would diminish the earthquake; and another thought which would paralyze that night of creaking and wavering walls; and another fear which would push aside that of a sudden death, the dog's barking and the mysterious gazes. Thus I grew interested in and preoccupied by the maid: I had to be careful so my mother didn't catch me, I had to find an opportunity to

seduce the woman - and one afternoon I found it... Half an hour later I realized I was in trouble: I had tied myself to a woman living under the same roof... A child! There!

So now the fear of a child began to push out the fear of an earthquake and I tried to convince myself that she is quite experienced and that I wasn't necessarily the only one who had taken advantage... My elder brother, for instance, could be a suspect, because he slept in a room far away from ours and he fondled the maid very often under the pretense of examining the texture of her blouse. But I could not convince myself. The image of that small, plump, good woman who succumbed to my passion without protest, joyfully and submissively, always hovered in front of me. When I looked at her, she blushed, blushed with confusion, joy and fervor. When she brought in dinner, she looked down and the steam from the hot soup left beads of spring dew and summer sweat on her apple-like cheeks. How sweet she was when she spread her arms resisting my embrace, her fingers sticky with dough, her nose powdered with flour, and her lips full of sugar and chocolate which she secretly stuffed into her sweet, delicious, juicy mouth. Could she have belonged to someone else too? Could she have given herself to her lover's brother? Was she all chocolate, dough and flour - with not a trace of idealism, decency and pride? No! In that closed, warm kitchen where the smell of steak and grease lingered, our kisses echoed like mortars preparing the Easter roast. Sweet, good, humble and warm like a loaf of bread, she warmed my teeth and my heart and her breasts sizzled under my fingers like apples fried in wine.

In describing her so rapturously, I only tortured myself even more: How could such love not bear issue? And the idea of a child scared me: all my life and future would get stuck and stop. And then my mother, the scandal, honesty and rascalry - all of this began to kick around my mind, and I thought of - the earthquake. It was the only thing that could resolve everything. That's right! It would come suddenly and - kaboom! one wall would fall on her head, the ceiling on mine, the clock on my mother's, and the scandal, the honesty and rascalry - would all be buried... And after all, if you think about it: what could such a small, everyday event - a child - mean in comparison with an earthquake which kills thousands in just one second? And, all things considered, why should I torture myself with the trifles of our lives if we must all eventually die?

Thus my resignation became more sincere. I calmed down and added: "What is the use of all this? It's too early to think of a child. I didn't notice any sign of her being a virgin on that occasion. Everything had gone so smoothly - why invent unnecessary complications, plots and bumps now?"

There were more earthquakes. Usually at night. The dog would always announce them with brief, deaf barking. I thought of love again. I felt the need to forget, to unbutton, unwind my tense nerves even if I had to wind up my muscles. Insomnia tortured me. The dog with its presence and its premonitions upset, scared and angered me. If it were to perish! I thought so many times. Now its barking upset me every time. At night we usually took it with us to the dining room. As usual, it pricked its ears at every shush; with its ears, my nerves pricked. It usually sniffed around; with its sniffing, my heart beat faster. It would bark now and then, if someone was going up the stairs, as usual, but at such times I felt more than ever that the dog was pronouncing my death sentence. So when it barked, I beat it.

- Why are you beating him?

- Because he is barking.

- Let him bark. He's a dog.

- No. He shouldn't upset our neighbors. The landlady said today that the neighbors and other tenants have complained.

And I hit it mercilessly. The dog would stop, moan, then start again. Then I would play up to it with sugar, petting, sweet words: I wanted to bribe it! The moment it pricked his ears, I offered it a piece of bread. When it paced the room sniffing nervously, I'd throw it buttered bread...

"If it would only go away! The idiot barks so often and nothing is really happening. Why are we still keeping it?" Thus I badmouthed it to my mother, said it was full of fleas, that the other day it relieved itself in the house and that I cleaned up so she wouldn't be upset, that it tried to bite me and that the landlady said that some of the tenants have already given her their notice...

The earthquakes came again. The maid quit and went home. She wasn't going to have herself buried alive for ten florins wages! That

should have relieved me of all burdens and all the bumps and knots, because her departure relieved me of all responsibilities and eventualities. But at the same time it was an omen, like the dog's barking and pricked ears. The maid was a woman and a peasant, thus even more primitive than my sister. That enraged me: that something good must mean an even greater evil for me - and I was the more frightened.

The dog, however, didn't leave. I kept beating and petting it; I didn't think of the child; I mourned for my love in which I could relax and forget. We took another, an old woman. I was raging mad. She kept talking of doomsday.

One evening the dog was unusually restless. He sniffed around, then began to bark. I beat it and petted it and told my family that I was beating it only so he would stop barking, so the neighbors wouldn't force us to get rid of it. Nothing helped. We were all pale; we too breathed through our noses, squeezed our mouths, bit our lips and kept saying that he barks so often even though for three days now there had been no earthquakes. But the depression grew heavier, our teeth ever harder, our lips ever thinner. We momentarily forgot the quakes. We were preoccupied with the dog. We beat it mercilessly. I hit it with my foot and bloodied his tooth. I was ready to torture it, to kill it like a - dog! Out of fear, I became blood-thirsty; I hit it with a vengeance. And when he whimpered, I was happy: for that was proof that he was whimpering with pain and not with premonition... He squeezed his eyes bloodily: he was about to jump at me. I was numb. But I didn't let it go. The fear of the dog totally paralyzed the fear of the earthquake.

The following day our neighbors complained: it was too much, it was not to be borne anymore, they wanted their peace, the apartments were not for free, etc. So we sold the dog. I calmed down a little. But two days later there was another earthquake. I had had it. "Won't it ever stop? These diggings will eventually undermine the foundations of our houses, and even lighter earthquakes will have an impact... Our health is completely ruined. And if the grand finale suddenly comes? Ah! Ah!"

"There, now I cannot close my eyes in peace for even a moment. Before, we had the dog; it barked often and for no good reason, but at least, when it didn't bark, I could have a good night's sleep... Now I don't even have that!"

...Spring came. A new life. The earthquakes didn't return. In the summer we forgot all about them. They didn't return. But the maid did...as a mother. Thus the earthquakes did have an impact and that consequence, so now I regretted that they hadn't buried us all.

I cannot sleep peacefully. My conscience burdens me. I suffer from insomnia. I can't help, I don't know how, I don't want to. My life is ruined. My misdeed opposes all my feelings and plans and, without need or result, burdens my mind. I seek forgetfulness, but cannot find it: the child is, after all, mine, and I must respect my child's mother. But my position, my calling, my intelligence, my ideals - they require a woman in harmony with them, and them in harmony with the woman... I don't know what I'll do and how I'll solve the problem which came about because of my thoughtlessness and pure stupidity and - coincidence. And when I realize that, there are moments when I would like to leave the solution of this accidentally caused problem to an accidental earthquake and when it seems I would welcome the ominous barking of a dog like the bells announcing Easter.

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Translated by Ljiljana Šćuric