

Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

It was already a good five o'clock in the afternoon when Juraj Vručić finally succeeded after great efforts in extricating himself from the scrub down by the River Dráva; the prickly juniper, long grass and young oaks with which the low ground by the river is overgrown.

He found himself on a better track, a sandy one, beaten flat by carts and trampled down by the hooves of cattle. Here, he also had a better view of his surroundings. The sandy track wound its way between low willow-trees which formed a vista down which he could see the outlines of a village: little white houses, the greenery of the fruit-trees, the red-coloured tower of a little church and in front of the village, fields of maize swaying in the wind.

Juraj Vručić drew a deep breath and sat down in the grass for a while. He looked at the village and smiled contentedly when he saw the blue hills rising in the distance behind it. It was from the vineyards up there that the red wine had come he had drunk that morning in Varaždín.

'That was a wine, that was! You drink one litre and you feel it pushing down into your legs. Then you drink a second and you feel it warming you up and merry thoughts come rising up out of your legs into your head. You drink the third, and you begin to sing; why, you even make up songs of your own. When you're on number four, every vein in your body begins to tremble and you feel like taking a header. Then you go outside and what you intend to do is drive home to Sudovčina, but you take a wrong turning and you find yourself on the road to Ormoz, heading for Styria. Then suddenly, you have a good idea: you're on a wrong track; you have to go by Štefanec, Semovec, Zamxak, Ebanovec and then on home to Sudovčina. You turn back to Varaždín, go round the castle, past the barracks and look for the road to Štefanec. You ask the way, laugh, sway from side to side, the people you ask laugh as well and finally you're somewhere or other, driving down towards the River Dráva. There are trails leading in all directions. There's a track somewhere that leads headlong down to the river. And that damned wine inside you seems to want to jump. You

find yourself stumbling and there you are with your hands in the juniper bushes and you're getting pricked. And no sooner have you stood up than you've got your arms round a little oak tree or you're falling about in the brambles. But here you are on a good road at last, thank God! and you can see the village!

Juraj Vručić said all that to himself as he sat at the crossroads. He took one more look at the village and then went on, gazing up at the blue sky: 'Today, friends, Juraj Vručić will be late home from market. In the morning, I hitched up the horses and drove to Varaždín. Well, it was a horse and a mare. There was a foal trotting alongside the mare. A lovely foal! I said to my farm-hand: "Ride quickly, lad, so that we can get to Varaždín and get a good price for the foal." So we ride and we sell the foal for sixty gulden. I send the farm-hand home and I go and have a little drink.'

Juraj Vručić stopped talking to the sky and turned to a bushy alder-tree. 'A beautiful foal, that was! Not like my neighbour's. That one ran itself into a post, poor thing, and ripped its stomach open. The doctor sewed it together again but it wasn't up to much . . . Well, praise be to my patron saint, here I am at last . . . And what a lot of pretty girls I saw at the market . . . and what a good market it was! I'll get up now and go on.'

Vručić clambered laboriously to his feet, crossed himself and felt carefully at his leather satchel.

'The money's still there,' he said, laughing, and walked slowly along the sandy track.

At six o'clock, he was in Štefanec. He might have got there earlier, but he had fallen into the maize as he was looking to see how big the cobs were. And he had delayed himself further by considering, as he lay there in the maize-field, which of the girls he would have chosen if he hadn't been married; which, that is, of the girls he had seen at the market. At last, he had got up and with a mumbled: 'Whatever you say, my dear,' proceeded into Štefanec.

He went slowly through the village until he got to the very end, where he stopped, his attention having been caught by a straw sign made of maize-stalks that hung over the gate of a house.

It wasn't the ordinary sign you see hanging outside other taverns, or farmsteads where you can get the farmer to draw you a glass of wine. This was a gigantic sign. It hung swaying on a bar, rustling in the breeze, and the longer Juraj Vručić looked at that sign, the keener his thirst became. He knew this place. Oh yes! There over the door was the

legend: 'The Jolly Anthony'. Any number of times he had stopped here, but now he saw something else written above the name of the establishment that he had never noticed before.

He took a few steps back, so that he could see it better, and read:

Here today, gone tomorrow,
 Holy writ decrees our sorrow;
 Where were you? the Lord would ask
 If you'd not drunk from Tony's cask.

'Here today, gone tomorrow,' Vručić said to himself. 'That's the sacred truth. Where were you? Strange, God would ask where you'd been . . . Oh, I see, it says: Where were you, the Lord would ask, if you'd not drunk from Tony's cask? There's a new thought: the Lord God himself would ask: "Why didn't you have a drink at Tony's place?" Sacred truth, that. It's a sin to pass by the Jolly Anthony and not have even a half litre of wine. Here today, gone tomorrow, and our Heavenly Father would be angry with us.'

Vručić fell silent and then, taking no notice of the crowd of village children standing around him, declared in a resolute voice: 'Juraj Vručić, you're going in for a half litre of wine!'

He went into the inn and in less than a quarter of an hour from the time of his arrival, he had an empty half-litre bottle standing in front of him.

'We're here today, and we're gone tomorrow,' Vručić pronounced. 'Landlord, another half-litre. We don't want our Heavenly Father to be angry with us. That's well said, what you've got written over your door.'

'And that really is a good interpretation of mine,' he thought, as he dealt with the second half-litre. 'Anyone who doesn't drink wine as good as this is guilty of a terrible sin. Our district priest now, he does say that if you drink, you give your soul to the Devil; but here, it says: "Where were you, the Lord would ask if you'd not drunk from Tony's cask." Here, you're a sinner if you don't drink. And why should I be a sinner, I, Juraj Vručić, with money to spare now that I've sold my foal for a good price? All right then, I'll have a full litre. Here today, gone tomorrow . . .'

It was eight o'clock in the evening when Vručić started out on his homeward way again. He took one more look at the inscription over the door, gave a grunt of approval as he did so and then set course with

tottering steps for Semovec. Night had begun to fall; the herds were coming home from pasture, all around there was the tinkling of cow-bells, the stamping of hooves and the cracking of whips. The mounted herdsmen, riding along on their horses, shouted at Vručić, who still kept on grunting: 'Here today, gone tomorrow.'

He ploughed straight ahead and rested occasionally, here on a pile of gravel with which he had collided, there in a ditch into which he had fallen in getting out of the way of the herds and the horses.

Finally, he lost his way. Unbeknown to him, he had turned off the main road on to another track which led, through meadows that stretched out between the bushes, towards the Dráva and split into a countless multitude of paths, reappearing when the latter merged into one single stream of white sand and finally vanishing, in the darkness of evening, into the mist that was rolling across meadows and bushes.

Oblivious of all this, he walked. On and on he walked, forcing his way forwards with the bushes tearing at his clothes.

In the quiet of that evening down by the River Dráva, there rang out from his lips, to an unknown melody, the words: 'Here today, gone tomorrow, Holy Writ decrees our sorrow . . .'

Close at hand, the darkness resounded with a droning sound, the sound a river makes as it roars and foams.

Without knowing it, Juraj Vručić was standing at that moment on the bank of the River Dráva, on one of those high banks which from year to year are being constantly broadened and hollowed out and crumble by day and by night . . .

'Here today, gone tomorrow,' the words rang out.

Juraj Vručić had reached the very edge. He burst into song once more. 'Here today,' resounded from the bank and 'gone tomorrow' echoed up from below and was drowned in the droning of the river.

Juraj Vručić was swept away by the wild current of the Dráva out of which, at spots like that, not even a good swimmer could have swum to safety.

Here today, gone tomorrow!