

## Southernmost Point by *Pavle Radonic*

### The Old Beggar

One guesses from the example of the chap turfed out of *Muthu's* dining room. Made it as far as the first table of young Chinese lasses opposite. The first meek, soft lad lightly clasped the old, bearded and barefoot man's elbow whispering in his ear from behind. Up front the cashier called out into the hall drawing from the back the stocky little fellow who had earlier intervened when the Soft was taking time to comprehend it was not sugar one wanted with the *uppuma*, but some *sambal* please. *Sambal....* Quick-step forward, intruder taken by the same elbow but now forcefully clutched and pulled back. *Come on Granddad, you know the schtick. Out you get. Away we go.* On the street onto the road and down the incline broad soles footing. The lass at breakfast had attempted to ignore the fellow. A minute more however he would have winkled something from her just to rid herself of the pest. One guesses from the example the standpoint in India proper teeming with beggars, the truly needy and then the practiced scammers maimed at birth and working for the cruel fiend. Old India hands, the flinty old Eastern Europeans recalled with their easy, settled and uncomplicated attitude to the beggar. Thirty years ago on Melbourne streets the first beggars had appeared as mythic creatures from the ancient fables. The Bible featured beggars and their staffs, some of the old school books. For two generations they had disappeared in the great Southern land.

Short soft chap turned out Lahorean; Stocky was Tamil. After two and one half years working in Malaysia the former has insufficient funds to marry. Five year plan now was study back home after the completion of his contract here first and hopefully thereafter.

*Shivaratri* a fortnight off, when better pickings could be expected for the beggars.

### Fortune-seeking

Shortly after nine the cut-through off Wong Ah Fook was unopened at that hour. Therefore the muddy, stony, broken path around through the construction on the riverside. The trannies on Ah Fook corner were still in their beds, many of the shops shuttered. Passing the side of a black parked car the furnace heat sent out a short blast. Around opposite the temple a single elderly beggar. Fortune tellers had already set up along the river, by the temple and along Jalan Turus. *Muthu* sat a hundred metres from the temple on Turus, the Sikh gurdwara behind. The fortune-tellers were a surprise so early, one regular beneath a blasted palm sat on the raised rim of the pot. It was her customer that drew attention this morning. The woman, the fortune-seeker, wore a crimson knit and was caught in passing hands clasped and eyes closed. The fortune-teller was also female, camped like many of the others on spread cardboard from boxes that had been flattened. Woman needing guidance had a partner accompanying. During the consultation it seemed this man's place was not immediately beside the other pair. Chap needed to remove himself, choosing to take a seat on a concrete block a few metres behind against the hoarding. *Here.* The fortune-teller tearing a piece of cardboard beneath her from a fold handed it over. *There you are.* It looked to be somewhat narrow for his bottom, but better than nothing. *Much obliged.* A single glimpse of the seeker had clearly shown the gravity of her situation.

### The Lesson of the Servant

Observing the relayed orders at *Muthu* from the stocky floor chief, to the waiter, to the *prata*-maker; observing the lads at the construction sites in Singapore, transported in the rear of the lorries and queuing for their meals at night; the maids escorting their ancient charges, running their shopping errands and cleaning shop windows and mopping floors, the injunction of the *I Ching* arrives with sharpest probing. The sages from three millennia ago teach: "... master the inexhaustible endurance of a servant."

Up in the former hill villages of Montenegro where these lessons had long been well-learned — not necessarily brought back from the Orient by the local lad Marco Polo (a Dalmatian by origin) — the old folk were wont to say, *Celjade trpi sto magarac nemoze* / Folk will endure what is beyond a donkey.

### A Book of Hours

A strange pass. Something like one reads about in glossy arts pages in the magazines and newspaper supplements. A book for which one would risk one's life rushing back into the burning house & etc.

This case weight considerations in the backpack was the factor on a little trip up the Peninsular revisiting old haunts from a couple of years past. The particular volume had previously been packed in one of the bags for storage at *Four Chain View*. After reflection it needed to be extracted. Hardback of only 140 pp and only a quarter remaining to be read. An unusual case. Hand on heart, each line, certainly each paragraph here held promise; the Introduction needed another close reading and the Notes at the end. Some of the pages reviewed again too.

An unusually captivating volume in any circumstances. The first book of human civilization one could term it, in a new, gripping translation by a sensitive and dedicated specialist who had clearly committed to the life-work.

The *I CHING; The Book of Change* in David Hinton's translation. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$34 at *Kinokuniya* in Singapore. (The only place in the region where it would be available.) Hinton now would be the choice for revisiting Li Po and the T'ang poets and onward from there.

A sampling, brief in case of copyright infringement:

Some key-notes often repeated in the text:

"...yielding and devoted as a river...."

"...the dedication of a bird sitting on eggs.... "

"...heart-sight clarity."

"Move with composure, with awe in wonder, and there's wild bounty in having no destination."

"Throughout all beneath heaven, mountains: that is Solitude. Using it, the noble-minded keep clear of small-minded people — not in dislike for them, but in dignity."

“Practice heart-sight clarity constant as moon drift, or you'll learn to accept shame. And the difficulties of your journey will be inexhaustible indeed.”

“Restlessness constant as moon drift: that always brings calamity.”

“Have no suspicions, and you will gather friends as a hairpin gathers hair.”

“With inexhaustible women, family brings forth wild bounty.”

(In the *Thunder* segment) “Using it, the noble-minded examine and cultivate themselves by living with fear and dread.”

(In the *Stillness* segment) “Raise up succession, all that will follow you, or you'll never know contentment.”

### First Cousin Once Removed

The child of your first cousin is your first cousin once removed, Google answered the enquiry in under a second.

The mother, the first cousin proper, Mara, was the eldest of that branch of the family. As a girl Mara had shepherded with mother, her aunt by marriage, who was fifteen years older.

A quiet, perfectly dutiful girl Mara. One sees her counterpart here on the equator among all three racial groups; in half a century in the great Southern land almost never. (Perhaps early years, up-country and among the Aboriginal community the type was found.)

Once mother, the aunt, frightened young Mara.

The work was hard, unrelenting. Patriarch Pavle possessed the largest herd on Uble, the largest land-holding both up in the village and down on the coast and by far the largest ambition and drive. The work never done, always to do. In the heat of summer it was particularly onerous.

Up at the high summer pastures on Bastik at a spring the aunt suddenly suggested to her niece that it might be best to make an end of it there and then, jump in the water and be done. Young Mara, early teens she must have been, had been alarmed by the half jest and it had taken some effort to reassure and calm the girl.

Thirty years ago on the first stay in the village cousin Mara had suggested a visit to her daughter, who lived nearby. A flash of the briefest kind remained over the years of a small, bright-eyed woman staring a little shyly, before dropping her gaze and avoiding eye-contact thereafter. For the remainder of the afternoon visit Vase had kept up an unusual smiling countenance that she seemed to turn up to the room and all round; something like a steady candle-flame in a dim room in the middle of the day.

It was a divide impossible to breach; Vase had been a little daunted at the long-lost relative's appearance.

Vase from Vasiljka, feminine of Vasil. Saint Vasil was one of the two or three chief saints of the region. One swore and cursed most assuredly by *Sveti Vasil*.

Vase had married a brute named Dragan, a drunkard who beat his wife, it would subsequently be reported. The villain was sighted once briefly in passing and it seemed the chap might have assumed the reports had preceded him. There was a kind of encounter

that wasn't, no greeting or words offered, only a broad retreating back. As a newcomer and the male heir it was unclear whether there was an implied antagonism involved here; some wariness on son-in-law Dragan's part.

Six years ago, a quarter century after the first visit, after more wars of devastation that in this case had left Montenegro more or less untouched, the next visit to the village took place. Husband Dragan had long been dead, the two daughters married with children, one to a second cousin indeed. In earlier years a second cousin had been absolutely forbidden. (A famous case in the extended family involved a young man who visited the monastery in Niksic town in order to obtain final ruling.)

The odd regard of Vase's on the first visit had not been forgotten. Nedjo, another first cousin once removed, wanted to visit Vase, his first cousin, daughter of his eldest maternal aunt Mara. We went over to the house near Vase's mother Mara's, who was long deceased too.

Close by the door against the wall of the old stone house where Vase had married a little animal pen had been raised, presumably by the drunkard in earlier days. Within the pen of weaved vines and branches goats rose up on their hind legs for the visitors. Down on the coast where most of the family had removed there was no longer any livestock. On the first stay in Boka and up on Village Uble there had been some tentative acquaintance with the remnant herd. Down on the coast uncle Petar had still kept cows, sheep and goats, chooks and donkey. On a couple of occasions the small herd had been brought home from the pastures.

On the second visit a quarter century after the first, first cousin once removed Vase busied herself over a hot stove. Guests needed to be fed.

— *Oh moj Nedjo*, Oh my Nedjo, Vase called numerous times with upturned face and bright eyes.

The pair rattled warmly about one thing and another, one person and another, Vase's attention divided between stove and cousin in his chair, but reaching out in her gaze. Nedjo had been in Switzerland many years. The mountain tracks and the villagers he knew from his youth. Again Vase could not manage direct eye-contact with her first cousin once removed.

Vase's ardent visage, her brief gleams and her tone of voice had in fact unexpectedly remained in the memory. An hour and one half acquaintance over a quarter century had left an indelible mark.

The short familiarity with the various herds of the family across those hills had likewise imprinted on the mind. Later with mother's stories where the various animals regularly featured—a prized cow well-sold to grateful buyers; an ox she had been ordered by her brother-in-law to slaughter; a mule that had kicked her in youth—the insight had slowly developed of the gentling that occurred through the course of animal husbandry. Vase's manner, including her manner with her goats and sheep in the pen against her house, had been an early indicator; information that could not be processed at the time. Over the years the intuition slowly grew. For the women and children in particular the relationship with the animals produced important effects; it was these two classes that did the bulk of the shepherding. The men slaughtered of course, but no doubt they too benefited, had been

calmed and soothed through the contact with the herd. In cities those familiar with dogs and cats had some access to this understanding.

In country kitchens in Australia one had seen that kind of look, that kind of regard and gladness for the esteemed guest and care over the food that Vase showed at her kitchen on Village Uble; that she had displayed in her person on first acquaintance. Vase and numerous others of her generation and way of life.

The second-cousin/son-in-law Zoran reported today here in Johor Bahru that his mother-in-law Vase was poorly. She could do nothing for herself now, Zoran reported. A couple of earlier mails of the last few months had conveyed the preliminaries of the illness. Now the two daughters with husbands and children were taking turns housing Vase and caring for her, doing all that she could not do for herself. The cancer had spread recently, the therapies were over; there was no pain and there would be none, Zoran reported the doctors' prognosis.

It was sad Vase could do nothing for herself, Zoran observed.

And *ziva se ne cuje*, Zoran also reported in the common phrase.

Literally, not a sound does she make. Not a sound of life—*ziva* is the feminine case for life. (*Zivo* the term for the herd — the live, which in the Anglo-sphere had one harkening back to a time before large-scale, industrial animal husbandry.)

This was no surprise. None whatever. It fitted.

It would pain Vase greatly to be a bother to anyone. Energetic, resourceful, dutiful woman rendered utterly helpless. The daughters were bad enough, but then sons-in-law and grandchildren burdened. This would pain Vase if the cancer did not.

Vase would die quietly, uncomplaining and peaceably. Death would not frighten nor alarm Vase. All Vase's dead lay up in one of the two church graveyards. The people of these mountains had seen animals slaughtered, sold and dying. Many had experienced the deaths of their lambs, calves and goats; all their many kin of course from earliest days.

One would have guessed precisely this kind of end for Vase and the few like her remaining in the village. The element of helplessness was sad misfortune.

Among mother's innumerable stories was one of a near neighbour returning home from the pastures laying himself down and lighting his own votive candle.

Note. The city of Johor Bahru on the Malaysian peninsular is the southernmost point of the Asian continent.

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Australian by birth and of Montenegrin origin, Pavle Radonic's two and a half years living and writing in a particular back-corner of Singapore—the old Chinese/Malay Geylang quarter—provided unexpected stimulus. Previously his writing has appeared in Australian journals and magazines *Wet Ink*, *Southerly*, *A Time To Write* (NMIT) and upcoming *Post Magazine*.

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