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THE AMERICAN WOMAN (excerpts)

I

I had said goodbye to love, had parted with it forever with too heavy a heart, for to me it was not life, but rather the objective of life. My troubles had disappeared, but something worse came, boredom and emptiness. All of a sudden, I felt all alone in this vast and cold world. I had no one to make me sad, no one to cheer me up. Indifference. And in such a mood, with no love or hatred, I set off into the world.

In a large European capital, the biggest city in the world, where millions hasten to a distressful and fierce struggle for existence, and where the morning fog looks like vapor and the evening sky like copper, I met an American woman. We met in our shared hotel, small and charming, which looks a lot like a comfortable, decent home, and where you feel as though hosted by your best friends, in a hotel the likes of which are many in this most pleasant neighborhood of the city.

She was a lady and was not there alone but with her mother, a surprisingly vivacious old woman with hair as white as snow, who from the very first days talked to me as to an old acquaintance, asking questions about my country as if it were one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Right from the start, even before I thought I would be able to meet anybody, I was interested in the American woman, for she was more interesting than all the female guests. Young, with her hair streaked with gray like silver or foam from the Ocean that she had crossed for the first time in her life. Tall and proud, in appearance she looked like a queen from the New World, which she had left and come to the Old World to reign over all women, or like a “dollar princess”. She dressed simply – every day in a different white blouse – and yet elegantly. Perfumed just a little – with lavender perfume – she knew just how much perfume she needed... She was not so beautiful, and yet how very beautiful! Her beauty lay in what you could convey with neither a paintbrush on canvas nor a photograph camera on paper: in her movements, where you could see dancing waves and hear their music, and in her voice, where all the colors of flowers and things overflowed. But what enchanted me, enchanted me the most, was her speech, surprisingly unusual, not American,

but specially hers. I compared that speech of hers now with the sound of an unknown musical instrument and now with the song of a bird I could not name. At one point she said: “Why has he a white hat?” and I exclaimed: “Voogah!” It seemed to me a voogah (oriole) was singing. But since the name of that bird in my language is very unaesthetic, as a matter of fact ugly, I never mentioned it again. And once, while listening to her, I thought: “A lark singing”, and then dismissed it altogether as banal. When seated – a common woman, almost even not beautiful; when she walked and spoke – beauty! Completely transfigured, so I would hug and kiss her every movement, every word like her hands or face...

Apart from this, she also enchanted with her posture and conduct. In posture a queen, in conduct a child. As free as a man, and as sincere and natural as a child. She, the new woman, reminded me of the old, first woman – before her expulsion from Paradise... Perhaps she was specially such, like her movements and her speech... Toward evening, in the guest lounge, she would freely lie down on a sofa, in front of everybody, to rest in a horizontal position from her stroll around that vast city and from the impressions that kept surging into her soul, to dream of hitherto unseen things, which she had seen that day; and as she lay with her eyes closed, the people, both young and old in equal measure, with their eyes staring at her, sat in silence... And when everyone was already out, I still sat not moving, not breathing, not taking my eyes off her, not taking my lips off her lips... In her, a woman perhaps for many years now, everything was virgin: her eyes, mouth..., and I wanted to kiss that. While she lay so still, what I looked like! I changed colors; her every movement made me start like someone who had just begun stealing or committing any other crime. Her feet in her shallow shoes, showing underneath her light dress, drove me insane... Only now did I see how corrupted I had become socializing with women who in front of men never forgot they were women, so that they adjusted their manner of walking, speaking, looking, and smiling, and blushed with his every look.

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Though as free as a man, she was the most serious and sensitive, therefore the most feminine of all the women in the hotel. She was intelligent and educated. She was from the most cultured state in North America called Massachusetts, or as she regularly referred to it in abbreviated form – Mass. Some afternoons, when she stayed to rest, she would speak of great English and American poets and was very comfortable with the fact that I too was familiar with these poets, particularly

because I read them in their, in *her* language. For this reason, I was her spiritual kinsman, so she asked to speak with me. And when we were silent, or when she spoke of other things, I was just a male... While enduring discomfort, I cursed my upbringing. In my country no one even imagines that things could be different!... From our conversation, she heard from me that in my country women never walked alone at night. She was indescribably curious. “Why?” And when I, seeing that I should not have said that, answered by shrugging my shoulders, she attacked me with her questions: “Perhaps they are afraid of the dark? Perhaps there are too many thieves where you come from, so you unleash dogs at night and let them roam the streets? Perhaps, when it gets dark, there are beasts coming down from the forest to your towns?” At that moment I felt as ashamed as I had never felt before at the thought that our women never walked the streets alone at night because of men. But had I told her that, she would have attacked our women as to why they had brought us up that way; she would have scolded, perhaps, our mothers; or, perhaps, she would not have understood. So I said nothing.

One day she invited me for an excursion. I was beside myself with joy. “Now is the chance to change our relationship”, I thought and rejoiced. But on the trip she was just the same as in the hotel: natural, free – with male fellow travelers she spoke as with her female friends, and to me she behaved as to a female companion; and when once I got carried away and almost lost the train, she took my hand and pulled me into the train, and then laughed at me. If only she knew why I had gotten carried away! And that the touch of her hand drove me insane: made me want to kneel before her, kiss her hands, her dress, and tell her the craziest sort of things, beg her not to leave me so that we should live together as husband and wife... But she brought me to my senses with her free behavior. As free as a man, she had all the traits of her female gender: to motherly take care even of those who were far older than her.

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And one day Oblivion will fall on all the things I saw in that vast city, on the churches and palaces and on countless magnificent structures, which Time has clothed in black soot and

decorated with green moss. Oblivion will fall on everything except for the woman I met there. She will remain in my memory forever. My mind will preserve her from everything external, even from the thing that changes everyone and everything, from Time. Her black hair will be eternally just streaked with gray, and her posture will stay proud and upright even when her back becomes burdened with old age. I will always hear the song of a bird in her speech and see the dancing waves in her movements.

...Now I finish my song and close my eyes... Today I re-experience all the things I experienced a year ago; I renew our meetings and conversations; I hear her good morning and her good evening; I hear her light footsteps and the rustle of her dress; I feel the lavender perfume; and looking deep inside of me, I see her in a white blouse, her profile shadowed by the palm leaves and with a sunray in her hair...

Translated by Goran Petrović

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