

Zdeněk Jirotka

Saturnin

Translated by Mark Corner



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zdeněk Jirotka (1911–2003) was a master of comic prose, the author of radio plays, and the writer of *Saturnin*, a great favourite among Czech readers, a book translated into over a dozen other languages.

Jirotka joined the army as a young man and during the Nazi occupation worked in the Ministry of Public Works. After 1942, when *Saturnin* was published, he devoted himself exclusively to his writing. He contributed short stories and other pieces to several magazines. In 1940 onwards he began a close collaboration with *Lidové noviny*, and in the 1950s became an editor at Czech radio and edited the satirical weekly *Dikobraz*. He contributed to television and radio programmes and wrote a number of plays for Czech radio and television.

The works which managed to reach a wider reading public are the novels *Saturnin* and *Muž se psem* (Man with Dog), in which he was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon comic prose of writers like Jerome K. Jerome and P. G. Wodehouse. His leaning towards English comic writing represented a form of protest, because both books were written under Nazi occupation. Jirotka can also be linked to a tradition of humour characteristic of the Czech lands and of writers like J. Hašek, K. Čapek, and K. Poláček. Like them he criticises a small-town mentality, snobbish behaviour and pretence. His novels are composed in a characteristic manner, built up around the feuilleton style of writing – marked by extraordinary situations, heightened language and word-play – representing a parody of various literary forms and genres. Both *Saturnin* and *Muž se psem* have seen successful transitions onto stage and screen.

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Translator's Acknowledgement

I

*Doctor Witherspoon offers a theory
I engage a manservant
An incident with a burglar
Doctor Witherspoon expounds on common sense,
warning signs and Pythagoras*

I could not possibly say that all the parables and comparisons interwoven into Doctor Witherspoon's intemperate speeches were entirely to my taste. But I have to admit that there is something in his graphic tale of a fellow in a cafe with a plate of doughnuts. At the very least the story may serve as a rough guide to Saturnin.

Dr. Witherspoon used to categorise people according to the way they behaved in a half-empty cafe when confronted by a plate of doughnuts. Imagine some high-class coffee-house on a Sunday morning. It is a lovely day outside and there are only a few guests in the cafe. You have already taken breakfast, you have read all the newspapers. Now you are comfortably leaning back in some cosy nook, lost in thought and gazing at the plate of doughnuts. Boredom is slowly spreading into every inch of the cafe.

This is where it can be shown to which category of people you belong according to Dr. Witherspoon's theory. If you are allegedly a person without imagination, any dynamic passions or a sense of humour, you will subject the doughnuts to a dull and thoughtless gaze until perhaps midday. Then you will rise to your feet and take yourself off to lunch.

I have a well-grounded suspicion that Dr. Witherspoon considers me to belong to this first category. I think him somewhat unjust. We will not speak about humour and dynamic passions, but about his denying me any imagination. When I recall that he is well aware of my success in satisfactorily completing an official tax return, I have to say that his accusation surprises me. But we will let the matter

pass. Even if I really did belong to this category, it would be more pleasant than being in the other one. At the sight of the doughnuts a member of the second category enjoys reflecting on what it would be like if someone, quite out of the blue and without warning, employed these pastries as missiles and began bombarding the other customers in the cafe.

I do not understand how a grown-up, intelligent person can think of such things. At the same time I am in full agreement with the view that Dr. Witherspoon, as he himself admits, belongs to this latter category. For whatever inexplicable reason he is proud of the fact. He considers this second group of people to be spiritually more advanced. Of course I haven't the faintest idea what spiritual maturity has in common with doughnuts fragmenting around the heads of peaceful cafe guests. I cannot imagine it, but I have refrained from arguing the point with him. For I have a definite opinion concerning debates with Dr. Witherspoon. Whenever I let myself descend to such an argument, I feel like someone who has been foolish enough to smash a hole in the wall of a dam.

If fate had not brought me into the path of Saturnin, I would never have believed that a third category of people existed, the members of which are as rare as white crows. I mean those people for whom the idea of a doughnut whistling through the air is such an enticement that they get up and actually make it happen.

Such individuals Dr. Witherspoon holds in unholy esteem. He maintains that to carry out such a deed it is necessary not only to possess a marked sense of the comic, but also courage, a good temperament and who knows what else. In my opinion the task also calls for an unusual degree of lunacy. Indeed I cannot but feel that any reasonable person would be astonished to see people of this sort anywhere outside an institution established espe-

cially for them. Unfortunately I was fated to discover that such people actually exist and that no limits have yet been placed upon their personal freedom. For such a one is Saturnin.

If I look back today at the short period of my life which I have recently lived through, I find many things to wonder at. In fact I wonder at how much happened during this period. My life was somehow condensed, events tumbled over one another and I could hardly follow what was going on. I was like someone who upon descending from a snow-covered hill steps onto a patch of ice hidden beneath the snow.

I have a feeling that at the time when I was sliding downwards as if on glass I hardly behaved in a very dignified manner. I think that this is understandable, and I would like to know who could blame me for it. Only a person with no knowledge of what it is to engage in a desperate battle to keep one's balance and not topple over would say that I could have left the ice patch at any moment of that undignified descent. Come to that it wasn't an unpleasant experience, and I even think that it was well worth it. I grew out of boyish dreams of adventure long ago and I like a quiet and sober existence. However, I think that a passing shower of unusual events does no harm to anyone. No one is drowned by rain and one is apt to forget the unpleasant things that have happened. A miserable journey through a snowstorm seems to have been an interesting adventure when recalled some time later.

Perhaps it was not altogether wise for me, a single and relatively young chap, to engage a manservant. I daresay it even seems eccentric and too like a character in a novel. Certainly no one can deny the fact that not many young men can be found in Bohemia who have their own gentleman's gentleman. Consequently the mere recollection of having done something so strange and unusual embarrasses my normally peaceful and conservative self.

Saturnin advertised in the newspapers for the position of manservant, under conditions which I felt able to accept, and he had several very good references. His appearance and correct manner were very much to my liking. I later discovered that he was the recipient of a systematic and by no means superficial education. His rather unusual name somehow rang a bell, but it was only recently that I first discovered the connection that had lodged it in my memory. A copy of a newspaper which must have been about two years old had come into my hands, containing an article about an attempted burglary at Professor Luda's villa. I remembered that we had talked about it at the time in the cafe. Saturnin was the hero of the hour, though the more serious-minded readers of the newspaper felt inclined to shake their heads at his behaviour. Incidentally, I still have the newspaper cutting:

EXCITING INCIDENT WITH A BURGLAR. During the night of Saturday, 5th August an unknown burglar broke into the villa of Professor Luda, historian and collector of fine objects, and tried to prise open the reinforced case used by Professor Luda to keep safe a number of valuable gold antiques. Before he could open the case, he was disturbed by a member of the domestic staff, Mr. Saturnin. What then took place between the two men is the subject of further investigation. When the police, summoned by telephone, arrived at the scene of the crime, they found the burglar unconscious from a serious head injury. Mr. Saturnin's testimony concerning the preceding events was somewhat strange. According to his statement the burglar had injured himself, making use of the mediaeval flail included in Professor Luda's collection. He persisted stubbornly with this curious explanation. The burglar recovered consciousness in hospital but claimed to have forgotten his own name. Initial investigations indicate the following course of events: the disturbed thief tried to frighten

Mr. Saturnin with a loaded revolver. Mr. Saturnin knocked the weapon from his hand and threw it out of the window into the garden, where it was indeed later discovered. Then Mr. Saturnin addressed the burglar with a speech of some length, in which he elaborated upon the notion that a duel between two unequally armed combatants was hardly cricket. He forced the intruder to avail himself of a weapon hanging on the wall, which the man describes as a pole with a ball and chain, and picked one up for himself. After somewhat confusing opening formalities the duel commenced, during which the burglar was wounded. It is of interest that the injured party does not exclude the possibility that the head wound was of his own doing. He says that the weapon in question was very difficult to control and that he had been forced repeatedly to dodge the swinging ball of his own weapon. Moreover, throughout the battle he was apparently in mortal fear of breaking the chandelier. On the whole the burglar admitted to being rather pleased at the outcome of his adventure. At the conclusion of the investigation we will not fail to provide readers of our paper with a full report.

I have already pointed out that it is impossible to argue with Dr. Witherspoon. Not only does he overwhelm you with a torrent of words, but he usually carries out an intellectual somersault and delivers a diatribe against something which you never had the slightest intention of discussing. This will somewhat influence the coherence of my tale, but there is nothing I can do about it. The unexpected speeches of Dr. Witherspoon will sometimes be responsible for the existence of a chapter treating of criminality at the beginning and criminality at the end, while being almost entirely filled with a discussion of trout fishing. The doctor is like this, and a fifty-year-old person is hard to change.

When I once asked him what a person with a healthy mind is to think about the events described in this news-

paper cutting, he replied that it is very difficult to decide, because these days no one has a healthy mind. He explained that we have all hitched up our brains to the service of narrow, specialised occupations and that we try with all our strength to let the other parts of our brains atrophy. As soon as this happens we are noticed by our superiors and begin to fall into a career. It is apparently amazing how even simple and straightforward considerations are already beyond the brain capacity of most people.

Dr. Witherspoon continued to speak for another five quarters of an hour, and to this day I do not recall what he was talking about. He ended with a paeon of praise for Pythagoras. I did not challenge his views, but concerning his contention that no one today has a healthy mind, I rather think that Doctor Witherspoon should speak for himself.

II

A peaceful old house

I do not use proverbs on principle

The peculiar ways of Saturnin

We live on a boat

I agree to recapture Marcus Aurelius

No man can abide doubts about his courage

I would like you to imagine how quietly I used to live before Saturnin came into my employment. I inhabited a fairly modest flat in one of those old town houses whose individual charm always had an effect on me. I felt most content there. The atmosphere of these houses - facades filled with ornamental stucco, well-trodden stone steps, intimate corridors that never saw the full light of day, high panelled doors - is so much closer to my heart than the uniform surroundings of modern buildings. I somehow feel that a pleasant and reassuring twilight is part of what makes a person's home homely.

Dr. Witherspoon says that such sentiments are inherited from our ancestors who lived in caves. Whenever he expressed himself on the subject of my flat at this time, he did so in a derogatory manner. He simply did not understand how I could choose to live in this house. He said that as soon as he stepped over the threshold his heart missed a beat and his soul filled with depressing thoughts of human tragedies. Apparently all the people who had lived there before me had taken their happiness away with them, leaving pain, sorrows and despair behind in the building. He claimed that every corner of the house was soaked with tears shed during unhappy nights, after which there was someone who never saw the dawn. In short, he claimed that terrible things must have happened here and that it was a place where he felt everything collapsing about his ears.

So far as I know, nothing terrible ever happened here. Once some scaffolding fell down, but not in any way onto Dr. Witherspoon, but rather into the courtyard. Nothing untoward took place and there was no reason for anyone to be unhappy. Dr. Witherspoon then said that he would prefer sadness to land on his head than scaffolding. Such is the manner in which he runs away from every serious discussion.

So I lived like this in a small, peaceful flat, the walls covered with faded wallpaper and pictures in broad and ancient frames. The tune on a musical grandfather clock marked the passing of time during my quiet evenings, which I whiled away in a huge winged armchair.

Yes, I would spend plenty of time at home, particularly if faced with inclement weather outside. On dark autumn nights, when the heavens open up and pour streams of rain onto the earth below, a whirlwind tears the leaves off the trees, and the shrieks of a howling gale encircle the towers of old castles and mingle with the cries of frightened crows, when lonely riders gallop along paths caked with mud in pursuit of dubious ends – these are the sort of nights on which I used to sit beside the stove and read the romantic novels of Václav Beneš Třebízský. Afterwards I went to bed and dreamt of a mistress crying, the crackling of burning roof beams and oaths of revenge. Then in the morning I was filled with wonder at the fact that trams were still running along the streets of Prague. Indeed I was surprised that the coffee which Mrs. Sweeting brought to me had not been laced with poison.

This Mrs. Sweeting was an elderly lady with black hair parted in the middle and she showed quite a maternal concern for my welfare. I lacked nothing and had nothing to complain about, which perhaps was exactly what I was annoyed about. There is a proverb about this, but on principle I don't use proverbs and maxims. My soul cries out against

them. When you have learned about my Aunt Catherine, you will understand why.

And then one day Saturnin entered this peaceful environment and considered it his duty to stir my life up as much as possible. You shall see for yourselves how he succeeded in doing so.

Insofar as I can recall the circumstances, I would not want to claim that Saturnin was not a good manservant. He had all the qualities which a gentleman's gentleman should have. He was a handsome fair-haired fellow, honest, reliable and very intelligent. I always had the impression that he could just as easily have been the manager of some international concern as a butler. Of course he could not have had himself transferred from one managerial job to another in quite the same way as he moved position as a manservant.

When he produced his references, I couldn't help observing that he lacked a report from his last place of employment. Later I learned why he couldn't have one. He'd abandoned the position after an almost absurd scene. He was thrown into some kind of tantrum where he supposed that he could no longer tolerate the behaviour of his employer. In a fit of rage, which I have reason to believe was simulated, he caused inexcusable damage to the furniture of the apartment and, taking his employer by surprise in a park, threw her into a fountain. Only then did he calm down. I will not give the name of the lady concerned, even though I know her very well, but I would like to make the observation that my own experience of this lady partly explains and perhaps even excuses Saturnin's behaviour. I mean by this that I know a considerable number of people who would be quite happy to throw her into a fountain as well. Of course none of them would complete the task in quite the same manner as Saturnin. When this lady emerged waist deep in water and fixed a look of utter incomprehension upon the wrongdoer, Saturnin bowed stiffly