Editor: **Mircea Petean**

Coperta: **Cristian Cheşuţ**
Ilustraţia copertei: **Marcel Olinescu**

Această carte a apărut cu sprijinul
Ministerului Culturii şi Cultelor
prin intermediul
Administraţiei Fondului Cultural Naţional.

©Editura Limes, Cluj, 2006
Str.Snagov, 3/19
40020 Cluj-Napoca
Tele / fax 0264/544109 ; 0723/194022
Email: edituralimes@yahoo.com
www.edituralimes.ro

ISBN -10-973-726-181-X
ISBN -13-978-973-726-181-6

ROMANIAN STORIES

English version by FRED NĂDĂBAN
and CRISTINA TĂTARU

EDITURA LIMES
Cluj-Napoca, 2006

CONTENT

WARNING

COSTACHE NEGRUZZI

ALEXANDER OF LAPUSNA 9

GALA GALACTION

CALIFAR'S WATER MILL 33

GLORIA CONSTANTINI 43

TO VULTURES 73

LIVIU REBREANU

YITZHAK STRUL – A DESERTER 87

THE CATASTROPHE 105

MIHAIL SADOVEANU

THE ENCHANTED GROVE 141

LORDLY SIN 169

MIRCEA ELIADE

DOCTOR HONIGBERGER'S SECRET 203

STEFAN BANULESCU

THE BUSTARD 251

THE WILD BOARS WERE TAME 267

WARNING

This volume is, in some ways, a restitution to world culture of several works or, in some cases, authors who, out of various reasons, have not yet been translated into English. We are, obviously, tributary to our likes and dislikes as human beings, since the operation of getting into somebody's skin and speaking to the world in somebody's voice is not only hard, but also, in some (obscure) ways tributary to our own personalities. Therefore, our choices in some way reflect ourselves. The stories by Negruzzi, Gala Galaction and Rebreanu have been translated (and selected) by Fred Nădăban. Since we both like Sadoveanu, *The Enchanted Grove* has been translated by Cristina Tătaru, while *Lordly Sin,* by Fred Nădăban. Although we think that translation is not a team sport, we experimented this on Mircea Eliade's text which was, perhaps, the ground of most debate during the translation of this book. Last but not lesser, the texts by Stefan Banulescu have been translated by Cristina Tătaru.

And, since someone had to do the toil in the library, the biobibliographical notes have also been written by Cristina Tataru.

The Translators

COSTACHE NEGRUZZI (1808 – 1868) was, in many ways, a pioneer in a diversity of fields, along with the main representatives of his generation. He was an outstanding member of the *Dacia literara/Literary Dacia* group, which edited one of the first literary reviews in Moldavia. He led, along with Mihail Kogalniceanu and Vasile Alecsandri, the first Romanian theatre in Moldavia. He was a member of the Literary Society, which was later to become the Romanian Academy. A poet, playwright and translator, he set the bases of the Romanian literary language, encouraged the beginnings of Romanian theatre, translated poetry (Hugo, Puskin, Byron, Thomas Moore) and adapted plays from world literature for the new Romanian stage. He wrote a series of *Epistles* and literary physiognomies in the best tradition of the *Tatler.* What persisted in time as a genuine value, though, are his *Historical Fragments,* culminating with his masterpiece, *Alexander of Lapusna.* The central hero, one of the voivodes of Moldavia in the 16th century has, at the same time, Romantic and Shakespearean features. He evolves in a strongly dramatic atmosphere, which has made many critics bring the novella closer to the terse, concise construction of a play, rather than a piece of prose, its chapters being assimilated to theatrical acts and scenes.

ALEXANDER OF LAPUŞNA[1]

Jacob Heraclid, also called the Despot, had died by the mace of Stephen Tomşa, who was now ruling the country, but Alexander of Lapuşna, after being twice defeated by the Despot's army, had fled to Constantinople, had obtained Turkish troops to drive away Tomşa, the usurper, and take back his throne, which he wouldn't have lost hadn't he been betrayed by the boyars[2]. He had entered Moldavia at the head of 7000 spahis and about 3000 soldiers of sorts. But besides this, he also had imperial orders for the Khan of the Nogai Tartars to give him as much armed support as he might ask for.

The voivode was riding at the side of Lord High Justice Bogdan, both of them on Turkish steeds and armed from top to toe.

"How doest thou reckon, Bogdan, shall we speed well?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Don't You doubt it, Your Highness" the courtier replied, "the country is groaning under Tomşa's yoke. The whole army will surrender as soon as higher pay is promised to them. The boyars, the few of them he has left alive, are only kept around him by fear of death, and as soon as they see You come with such power, they will flee and leave him".

"God forbid that I should have to do what Voivode Mircea did in Muntenia[3]; yet, as I have already told thee before, I do know our boyars, for I did live/fare with them before".

" This is for the high wisdom of Your Highness to decide".

As they were talking, they arrived near Tecuci[4] and pitched camp by a coppice.

A bailiff approached and said:

"My Lord, a few boyars who have just arrived are asking for permission to appear before Your Highness".

"Let them come!" Alexander said.

---

[1] Lapuşna – Eastern county of Moldavia
[2] boyars – local aristocracy
[3] Muntenia – Wallachia, in Romanian.
[4] Tecuci – small town in Southern Moldavia.

He was sitting under his tent, surrounded by his boyars and captains.

Soon, four boyars, two of them rather aged and two young, stepped in. They were Lord High Justice Moțoc, Court Marshall Veveriță, Sword Bearer Spancioc and Stroici.

On approaching Voivode Alexander, they bowed to the ground, but without kissing the hem of his garment, according to custom/as custom would have it.

"Welcome, boyars!" the prince said, forcing himself to smile.

"Good health to Your Highness!" they answered.

"I was told about the sufferings of the country and I have come to relieve her; I know the people are waiting for me with joy and hope".

"Don't You believe this, My Lord "said Moțoc, "the country is at peace, and Your Highness may have heard things the wrong way, it being the vice of our people to make a mountain out of a mole hill. This is why the community has sent us to tell You that the people neither want nor love You, and that Your Lordship ought to go back so that..."

"If you want me not, I do want you" retorted the prince, his eyes sparkling with anger, "and if you love me not, I do love you, and I will proceed with or without your consent. That I should go back? Sooner will the Danube revert its flow upstream. The country wants me not, you say? It's but you who do not want me, as I can see!"

" Heralds shall not be beheaded" replied Spancioc, " We are bound to tell You the truth. The boyars are all determined to wander abroad, to the Hungarians, the Poles, or to Muntenia, where all of them have kinsmen and friends. They will return at the head of foreign hosts, and woe to this poor country when we are waging wars between ourselves. And maybe Your Highness won't fare very well either, since Voivode Stephen Tomșa..."

"Tomșa! Was it he who taught thee to speak up so boldly? I do not know what stops me from smashing thy teeth with this mace here" he roared, grabbing the weapon from Bogdan's hands. "It was Tomșa, that scoundrel, wasn't it?"

" He who was found worthy of becoming God's anointed cannot be a scoundrel" said Veveriță.

" What about me then? Am I not God's anointed as well? Did you not swear faith to me too, when I still was only High Stewart Peter? Was it not you who elected me? What was my rule like? Did I ever shed any blood?

Whom did I ever turn away from my door without granting him justice and comfort? And now you don't want me, you don't love me?
Ha! Ha! Ha!"

As he was laughing, his muscles were twitching and his eyes kept blinking.

" With Your permission, Milord" Stroici said, we can well see that our homeland is going to be given away to these pagans to plunder. When all these Turkish locusts have done ravaging and laying the country waste, what will You be ruling over?"

" And how are You going to glut the greed of all these pagan hordes You are bringing along?

" With your own riches, not with the money of the poor peasants you have been fleecing. It is you who've been milking the country, but the time has come now for me to milk you. – Enough now, boyars! Return and tell the one that/who sent you he should keep out of my way if he doesn't want me to make fifes of his bones and leather for my drums out of his skin!"

The boyars went out in distress; but Moțoc stayed behind.

" Why hast thou remained?" Alexander asked.

" My Lord, My Lord " Moțoc said, falling on his knees, " do not chastise us according to our crimes! Remember You art a native here, remember the Holy Writ and pardon the guilty! Spare this poor country, My Lord! Let these pagan hosts go back, come only with the Moldavians You hast around Thee and we'll warrant that not a hair on the head of Your Highness will be touched! And if You should need hosts, we all will take up arms, women and children included, we'll raise the country, our servants and serfs. Have trust in us!"

" That I shall have trust in you!" Alexander replied, seeing through his sly scheme. " Thou might think I do not know that Romanian saying " Wolves might shed their hair, but not their evil habits'. Thou thinkest I don't know you, and especially thee? Thou dost assume I don't know that you, the chief commander of my troops, as soon as you saw I was defeated, you gave me up? Veveriță is an old enemy of mine, but at least he's never hidden his feelings. Spancioc is still young, his heart might still feel true love for this country; I like to watch his stiff-neckedness which he takes no trouble to hide. Stroici is a child who doesn't know people yet, he doesn't know what bribery and lying mean. He thinks all that glitters is pure gold. But what about thee, Moțoc? Grown old in wicked schemes, used to

ingratiating thyself with all the former princes, thou hast sold Despot, sold me and now thou art about to sell Tomşa as well. Tell me, wouldn't I be a blockhead if I trusted thee? Yet, I will forgive thee for believing thou couldst deceive me once more and I promise thee my sword shall not be besmeared with thy blood. I will spare thee because I need thee to relieve me of a part of the people's curses. There are a lot of other drones the hive must be cleared of."

Moţoc kissed the prince's hand like a dog which, instead of biting, licks the hand that beats it. He was contented with the promise he had obtained; he was aware that Alexander would need an intriguer of his kind.

The envoys had orders from Tomşa that if they couldn't talk Alexander into giving up the campaign, they should proceed to Constantinople and, by supplications and bribery, should try to obtain the latter's deposition. But seeing, on one hand, that Alexander was coming with the very support of the Porte and, on the other hand, being afraid of returning to Tomşa empty-handed, the envoys asked for permission to abide by the newcomer. This in fact was Moţoc's scheme, so that he might ingratiate himself with the new voivode.

The permission was granted.

II

Motto: Thou shalt account for it, My Lady...

As Tomşa didn't feel able to stand his ground, he fled to Wallachia, and Alexander encountered no hindrance in his advance. The people were welcoming him everywhere with joy and hopes, remembering his first reign, during which he'd had no time to reveal his cruel character. But the boyars were trembling as they had two major reasons to worry: they knew that the people hated them and that the prince didn't love them much either.

As soon as he had arrived, Alexander gave orders that all the fortresses of Moldavia, except Hotin[5], be filled with wood and burnt to the ground; in

[5] Hotin – township and fortress in the extreme north of Moldavia, facing Poland in those times.

this way he intended to destroy any shelter for the discontented, who would often hatch plots and kindle rebellions behind the shield of those walls.

In order to put an end to the influence of the boyars and to crush the nests of feudality, the voivode started stripping them of their fortunes under various pretexts, thus bereaving them of the only means by which they could allure and corrupt the people. But thinking all this wouldn't do, he used to have them executed from time to time. For the slightest mistake in office, for the slightest complaint he received, the head of the guilty one was hung at the gates of the palace, with a note mentioning his real or forged crime. One head would hardly rot, when another took its place.

Nobody dared to speak up against him, so much the less to contrive some plot. A numerous body guard of Albanian, Hungarian and Serbian hirelings, men driven away from their own countries for various evil deeds, had found refuge by prince Alexander; as he paid them well, he could rely on them. The Moldavian army, with captains appointed by himself, was kept at the boundaries. He had also reduced their number by disbanding soldiers and sending them to their homes.

One day he was walking up and down the big hall of the princely palace. He'd just had a long talk with Moţoc, who was in favour again and was just leaving after presenting the plans for a new taxation.

The prince looked restive; he was talking to himself and one could see he was considering some new dispatch, some new harm – when a side door opened, letting princess Ruxanda into the room.

At the death of her father, the kind-hearted voivode Peter Rareş[6], who, as the chronicle says, had been interred with much grief and sorrow of all the people at Probota[7], the monastery built by himself, young princess Ruxanda was left in the care and guardianship of her two senior brothers, Iliaş and Ştefan. Iliaş had inherited the throne of his father, but, after a short and debauched reign, he went to Constantinople, where he took up Mohammedanism, and his brother, Ştefan, came to the throne. The latter proved still worse than his brother; he started compelling the foreigners

[6] Petru Rareş – illegitimate son of Stephen the Great, and the third heir to the throne of Moldavia.

[7] Probota - monastery built by Petru Rareş.

and Catholics to abjure their religion, so that many rich families who had settled in the country wandered abroad on this account. This brought about poverty to the land and a decline of trade.

The boyars, many of whom were related by marriage to the Poles and the Hungarians, finally grew angry and, getting in touch with the exiles, agreed on murdering him.

They might have postponed the accomplishment of their plan if his debauchery hadn't sped it up. " No lady, if beautiful, was safe from his lust" the chronicler says in his artlessness. One day, while he was in Tzutzora[8], the boyars in his suite gave up waiting for the arrival of the exiles; for fear he should escape, they cut the ropes of the tent he was resting under and, pouncing upon it, they killed him.

Now only Ruxanda was left from Petru Rareş's family; the murderers decided that she should be wedded to a certain Jolde, whom they had elected for a voivode. But Alexander of Lapuşna, elected meanwhile by the exiles, met Jolde in the field, defeated and caught him, had his nose cut off and compelled him to take orders in a monastery. Then, in order to conquer the hearts of the people in whom the remembrance of Rareş was still alive, he married Ruxanda, the latter's daughter.

Thus gentle Ruxanda came to be the booty of the victor.

When she now entered the hall, she was dressed up in all the pomp due to a wife, sister and daughter of princes. Over a gown made of gilded cloth, she was wearing a blue velvet robe lined with sobal fur, the sleeves of which were hanging behind. She was girdled with a golden chain buckled up with big clasps of jasp surrounded with precious stones. Around her neck there hung a many-stringed pearl necklace. Her sobal fur cap, set slightly aslant, was trimmed with a white plume fixed with a big flower of emeralds. In keeping with the fashion of those times, her hair fell loose on her back and shoulders. Her face possessed the kind of beauty which once upon a time used to make the women of Romania famous throughout Europe. However, she looked sad and pining, like a flower exposed for too long a spell to the scorching rays of the sun with no protection against them. She had seen her parents die, watched one brother forswear his faith, the other one murdered; then, first given away by the decision of the community to Jolde (whom she didn't even know), she was compelled by

[8] Tzutzora – name of a locality in Moldavia.

the same community – which felt free to dispose of her heart without even asking her – to marry Alexander. She honoured and obeyed him as her lawful husband, and she would have gladly loved him too had she but found in him any trace of humane feeling.

On approaching him, she bowed and kissed his hand. The prince caught her by the waist and, lifting her as if she'd been a feather, set her on his knees.

" What news, my beautiful lady?" he asked, kissing her on the forehead. " What made thee leave thy spindles today, which is not a holiday? Who hath woken thee so early?"

" It was the tears of the widowed ladies shed at my door, tears that cry for vengeance to our Lord Christ and to the Holy Mother because of the blood You've been spilling."

Frowning gloomily, the prince released his hold on her. Ruxanda fell to his feet.

" Oh, my good Lord! My valiant husband!" she pursued, " It's enough! So much blood spilt, so many widows, so many orphans should do! Think that Your Highness art so powerful and that a few poor boyars cannot do You any harm! What doth Your Lordship lack? You art not at war with anybody; the country is quiet and obedient; God knows how much I love Thee, and Thy children are so fair and young. Think that after life there is death too and that You art mortal as well and will have to account for everything. Because building monasteries will not atone for bloodshed, on the contrary, it is just defiance to the Almighty to think that by setting up churches You can soothe Him, and..."

" Brainless wench " Alexander shouted, jumping to his feet, while by mere habit his hand went to the hilt of the dagger at his belt. Yet, mastering himself, he bent and, lifting Ruxanda, he said:

" My lady, don't thou ever again let such insane words drop from thy lips, because, indeed, I do not know what might happen. Give thanks to saint great chrism-releasing martyr Dimitrie, whose wake day is being now celebrated at the church we have raised in Pângărați, for keeping us from a sin by reminding us that thou art the mother of our children."

" Even if I knew that You would kill me, I couldn't keep silent. Yesterday on returning to the palace, a lady with five children threw herself in front of my coach, stopping it; she pointed at a head nailed to the gate.

" Thou shalt account, lady, for letting your husband slaughter our parents, our husbands and brothers...Behold, lady, this was my husband, the father of these children, now left destitute! Look!" – and she was pointing at that gory head, and it was glaring back at me in a dreadful way. Oh, my Lord, I've kept seeing that blood-stained head ever since and I am scared! I cannot find rest any longer!"

" And what is it thou wantest?" Alexander asked, smiling.

" I want You to stop shedding blood, to stop killing people, so that I don't see cut-off heads any longer, for they make my heart jump out of my breast!"

" I do promise thee that, from the day after tomorrow, thou won't see any" Alexander answered; " and tomorrow I will give thee a physic against fear too."

" How is that? What do You mean?"

" Thou shalt see tomorrow. Now, dear lady, go and see about thy children and about the household, as is meet for a houselady to do, and get them to prepare a fine dinner, for tomorrow I will give the boyars a grand feast."

Lady Ruxanda left, after kissing his hand again. Her husband saw her off to the door.

" Well, hast thou arranged everything?" he asked, hurriedly approaching the provost, who had just entered.

" Everything is ready."

" But will they come?"

" They sure will."

III

" It's Moţoc's head we demand..."

Since the evening before, all the boyars had received notice to gather the next day, as it was a holiday, at the metropolitan church, where the voivode was to be as well to attend the mass. Then, they were expected to come and dine at the Court.

When Alexander arrived, the holy service had already begun and all the boyars were present.

On that day, much against his habits, Alexander was dressed up in all the princely pomp. He was wearing the Paleologs' crown, and over the Polish cloth mantle of red velvet, he had a Turkish gown. He had no weapon on him except for a small gold-hilted dagger; yet, between the buttons of his mantle, one could notice a mail shirt.

After listening to the Holy Service, he stepped down from the princely pew, bowed and crossed himself in front of the icons and, approaching the shrine of New Saint John, he bowed again with much piety and kissed the relics of the saint. They say that at this point he was very pale in the face and the shrine of the saint is said to have given a start.

Then, returning to the pew again, he turned to the boyars and said:

" My Lords! Since my coming to take over my second term down to this day, I have shown harshness to many. I have shown myself terrible, evil, I did shed many people's blood. Only God knows that I did feel sorry and that I do repent. But you must know as well that I was driven to this by the wish to see the plotting and treasons of some of you stop, plotting and treasons that were leading to the ruin of this country and mine. Now things have changed. The boyars have recovered conscience. They've seen that the flock cannot fare well without its shepherd, as our Saviour says: " I will beat the shepherd and the sheep will scatter."

" My Lords! Let us live in peace from now on, loving each other like brethren, because this one of the ten commandments: " Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", and let us pardon one another, because we are all mortal, and we all pray to our Saviour Jesus Christ" – and he crossed himself here – " to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors."

On finishing this odd speech, he went up to the middle of the church and, after bowing and crossing himself again, he turned to the people in front, to the right and to the left, saying loudly:

" Pardon me, kind people and my lords!"

" God forgive Your Highness!" answered everybody, except for two young boyars thoughtfully leaning against a tomb by the gate; but nobody took any notice of them.

" What doest thou think of this? " asked one of the two we saw had not forgiven prince Alexander.

" I advise thee not to go to his dinner today" the other answered. And they both got lost in the crowd.

They were Spancioc and Stroici.

At the Court, they had made great preparations for this banquet. Rumour had spread that the voivode had got reconciled with the boyars, and the boyars were rejoicing at the prospect that they would regain access to high public functions so that they might gather more riches from the peasants' sweat. As for the rank people, they stayed indifferent; they were neither expecting any good, nor fearing any evil deriving from this reconciliation. The people agreed with voivode Alexander's way of ruling the country; they would only cavil against his minister Moţoc, who was taking advantage of the credit he had by the prince to oppress them.

In spite of the fact that the complaints against Moţoc's plundering and fleecing would never cease, the prince either didn't answer or wouldn't even listen to them.

As dinnertime was drawing near, the boyars began to arrive on horseback, each of them accompanied by two or three attendants. But as they arrived, they noticed that the courtyard was full of armed mercenaries and that four cannons were pointed towards the gate. Yet, most of them thought that the cannons had been placed there to celebrate the ceremony by salvos, according to custom. Some of them may have suspected a trap, but once they had entered, they couldn't leave any more, as the gates were guarded and the guards had been given orders not to allow anyone to leave.

The boyars, forty seven in number, having gathered, the voivode took seat at the head of the table, having at his right Chancellor Trotusan and at his left, High Justice Moţoc. The fifes started playing and the dishes were brought in to table.

At that time, the fashion of fine foods hadn't yet been introduced in Moldavia. The greatest of feasts only included a few dishes. After the Polish borscht, there came some Greek dishes stewed with vegetables floating in butter; then there was Turkish pilaff and, finally, varieties of roast meat. The tablecloth and the napkins were made of fine home-woven linen. The trays on which the food was brought in, the plates and the cups were made of silver. Along the wall, there stood several pitchers with

Odobeşti and Cotnar wine.[9] And behind each boyar there was a servant waiting on him and pouring in for him.

All these servants were armed.

In the courtyard, besides two roasted bullocks and four roasted rams, there were three broached barrels full of wine. The servants were eating and drinking; the boyars too were eating and drinking. All heads had begun to grow hot, the wine was at work. The boyars kept raising their cups and hailing the voivode with noisy cheers, which the mercenaries would answer with lusty yelling and the cannons with their roars.

Now it was almost time to stand up from table, when Veveriţă raised his cup to the prince and said:

" May You live many years, Your Highness! May You go on ruling over this country in peace and God in His mercy should keep and strengthen Your decision to give up killing boyars and oppressing the people..."

He couldn't finish, as the mace of the Provost Marshall hit him right on the forehead and knocked him down to the ground.

„ Ha, you're abusing your Lord!" the provost shouted. „ At them,/Get them, lads!'

At once, all the attendants standing behind the boyars drew their daggers and stabbed them, while more soldiers led by the captain of the mercenaries dashed into the hall and rushed upon them with their swords.

As for the voivode, he had taken Moţoc by the hand and withdrawn to an open window whence he could watch the slaughter which had begun. He was laughing, while Moţoc, forcing himself to laugh in order to please his master, felt his hair standing on end and his teeth rattling.

It was, indeed, horrible to watch that bloody sight. One should imagine more than one hundred people, murderers and the doomed to murder, executioners and the convicted, within a thirty feet long and twenty feet wide room, fighting, these with the fury of despair, the others with the fire of liquor in them. Some of the boyars, unaware of danger, treacherously attacked from behind and having no weapons, fell without offering any resistance. The aged were dying crossing themselves; but many of the younger kept defending themselves fiercely.

Chairs, plates, the knives, spoons and forks of the table cover became weapons in their hands; some, although wounded, would furiously clench

---

[9] Odobeşti and Cotnar - famous Moldavian vineyards and, respectively, wines.

the murderers' throats and, heedless of the wounds inflicted on them, they'd squeeze until they strangled them. If one of them got hold of a sword, he sold his life dearly.

Many of the mercenaries died, but in the end there was no boyar left alive. Forty seven corpses were lying on the floor. During all this fighting and wrestling, the table had been knocked over; the jugs had broken and the wine mixed with blood had built a pool on the slabs of the hall.

Along with the slaughter upstairs, the killing had begun in the courtyard as well. The servants of the boyars, suddenly finding themselves hit by the soldiers, tried to flee. The few who managed to escape jumping over the walls, gave the alarm all around the boyars' homes. Inciting more footmen and attendants, they also roused the town folk and all of them ran up to the palace gate, which they began breaking down with axes. The soldiers, dizzy with drinking as they were, offered but a poor resistance. The mob was getting more and more worked up.

The voivode, who had been given notice of the people's riot, sent the provost to ask them what they wanted and what they were demanding. The provost went out.

„ Well, High Justice Moțoc" he then said, turning to the latter, „ tell me, haven't I done well to rid myself of these villains and to rid the country of such scum?"

„ My Lord, You have proceeded with great wisdom" the mean courtier answered. „ I've had it in mind for a long time to advise You to do this, but now I can see that Your wisdom went ahead of my advice, and You have done well to have them slain, because...as...it was about to..."

" I see the provost is staying away too long" Alexander said, interrupting Moțoc, who was getting entangled in his own words. " I do feel like giving orders to have that mob shot at with my cannons. How dost thou reckon, shall I do it?"

" Of course, sure, have them be shot at by the cannons. There is no harm if a few hundred knaves die when so many boyars have perished as well. Yes, by all means, let them all die."

" I was expecting to hear such an answer", the prince said peevishly, " but let us see first what they want."

Meanwhile, the provost had climbed on top of the wall above the gate and, waving for silence, he shouted:

" Kind people, His Highness the Voivode is asking what you want, what you are asking for and why you have come rioting like this!"

The mob stood gaping; it wasn't expecting such a question. The people had come without knowing what for and what they actually wanted. They began gathering in groups and asking each other what they should ask for. Finally they started shouting:

" He should reduce the taxes!"..." He should stop skinning us!"..." He should stop drawing impost upon us!"..." He should stop robbing us!" ... " We've been left destitute!"... " We have no penny left!" ..." Moțoc has taken it all!"..." Moțoc! Moțoc! '..." It's he who's fleecing and plundering us!"..." It's he who advises the voivode!"..." He must die!"..." Moțoc must die! "...It's Moțoc's head we want!"...

This last cry finding an echo in all hearts, it worked like an electric spark. All voices joined in and became one, and this one voice was shouting: „ It's Moțoc's head we're asking for!"

" What is it they want?" asked the Voivode when he saw the provost coming in.

" The head of High Justice Moțoc! " the latter answered.

" How? What?" Moțoc yelled, jumping like someone who'd stepped on a snake. " Thou didst not hear well, brother! Thou wantest to make jokes, but this is no time for joking! What kind of words are these? What should they be doing with my head?! I'm telling thee, thou art deaf, thou didst not hear well!"

„Oh, yes, he heard very well " said Alexander, " listen thyself, their shouting can be heard from here."

Indeed, as the soldiers had given up any opposition, the people had begun climbing the walls, from where they went on shouting at the top of their voices:

" He should deliver Moțoc to us! It's Moțoc's head we want!"

„ Oh, poor me!" the rascal cried. „Holy Virgin Mother, do not let me down to my ruin!...What have I done to these people?! Begetter of God, rescue me from this peril, and I swear to build a church, to fast as long as I live, to frame in silver Your miracle-working icon at the Neamțu monastery! But, Gracious Lord, do not listen to these fools, to these knaves! Let the cannons fire into this mob! I am a great boyar, they are but a bunch of fools!"

" Fools indeed, but many" the prince retorted coolly. " Wouldn't it be a pity to have a lot of people killed for just one man? Consider it thyself. Go and die for the good of this country, as thou thyself said when thou told me that the country neither wanted nor loved me. I am glad that the people is rewarding thee for the good turn thou didst me by betraying my army to Anton Sechele and later by letting me down and siding with Tomşa."

" Oh, miserable me!" the boyar cried, tearing at his beard, as the tyrant's words had made him understand beyond any doubt that there was no escape for him. " At least let me go and settle things at my home! Take pity on my wife and on my little children! Let me confess myself!", and he went on crying, and yelling, and sobbing.

" Enough!" the Voivode shouted, " stop lamenting like a wench! Be a man! What should thou confess to? What wilt thou tell the confessor? That thou art a robber and a traitor? All Moldavia knows it. Come on, take him away and deliver him to the people. And tell them that it is this way Voivode Alexander punishes those who plunder the country."

Instantly, the provost and the captain of the mercenaries began dragging him out. The miserable boyar kept shrieking at the top of his voice, trying to resist, but what could his old hands do against the four sturdy arms that were dragging him? He was desperately trying to keep ground by stiffening his legs, but he was stumbling against the corpses of his mates and slipping on their blood which had clogged on the slabs. In the end, his powers gave in and the tyrant's henchmen, bringing him to the gate more dead than alive, pushed him into the mob.

The wretched boyar fell into the arms of this many-headed hydra, which in a nick of time tore him to pieces.

" Behold how Voivode Alexander punishes those who plunder the country!" the tyrant's messengers shouted.

" Long live His Majesty the Voivode! " the crowd answered, and, satisfied with this victim, they scattered.

While unfortunate Moţoc was perishing in this way, prince Alexander gave orders for the table to be put up again and for the dishes to be cleared away; then he had the heads of all the murdered cut off and their bodies thrown out though the windows. After that, taking the heads one by one, he set them in the middle of the table, carefully and in good order, placing those of the lesser boyars beneath and of the greater ones above, according

to kin and rank, until he built up a pyramid of forty seven heads, the top of which was the head of a High Chancellor. Then, after washing his hands, he went to a side-door, drew the bolt and the wooden bar that kept it locked and entered the apartments of the princess.

From the beginning of this tragedy, knowing nothing of what was going on, Lady Ruxanda was deeply worried. She couldn't find out about the causes of the uproar she'd heard as, according to the customs in those times, women were supposed not to leave their rooms of their own will, while the maid servants couldn't risk themselves among those soldiers who knew nothing about discipline. Nevertheless, one of the maids, a more daring one, had got out, had heard that there was a riot against the Voivode, and had brought the news to her mistress.

The good lady, fearing the people's fury, was scared and, when Alexander came in, he found her praying in front of the icons, with all the children around her.

" Ah!" she cried, " thank the Holy Virgin for seeing you. I was very scared!"

" Therefore, as I promised thee, I've prepared a physic for thee, against fear. Come along, lady."

" But what was all that yelling and shouting I heard?"

" Nothing. The servants had started a row, but they have quietened down now".

Saying this, he took Ruxanda by the hand and brought her to the dining hall.

At the horrible sight, she gave a mighty shriek and fainted.

" Women will be women", the prince said smiling; " instead of rejoicing, she's frightened". And raising her in his arms, he carried her back to her apartments. Then, returning to the dining hall, he found the captain and the provost waiting for him.

" We shall have the carcasses of these dogs thrown over the walls and their heads lined up on the battlements" he said to the captain.

" And you" he said addressing the provost, " must catch me Spancioc and Stroici."

But Spancioc and Stroici were already close to the Dniester by that time. The pursuers overtook them right when they were crossing the boundary.

" Tell the one that sent you" Spancioc shouted to them, " that we shall meet again before dying."

IV

" If I ever recover,
I, too, will have many of you frocked..."

Four years had passed since this scene, years during which prince Alexander, faithful to the promise he had made to Lady Ruxanda, hadn't beheaded any boyar. However, in order to keep up his tyrannical bias for watching human suffering, he invented all sorts of tortures.

He would have people's eyes punched out, their hands cut off, or have those he was suspicious of maimed or crippled; but his suspicions were mostly unfounded as nobody really dared to cavil at him any more.

However, he did feel uneasy because he hadn't managed to lay hands on either Spancioc or Stroici who were living in Kamenetz, waiting and watching out for their opportunity. Although he had two sons-in-law, both very influential earls at the court of Poland, he kept being worried because of those two boyars, for fear they should incite the Poles, who were only looking for pretexts, to invade Moldavia. But these two Romanian boyars proved far too good patriots not to consider that war and invasion by foreign hosts would have meant the ruin of the country.

The Voivode had written to them several times to return home, binding himself with the greatest oaths not to do them any harm, but they very well knew how far they could trust such oaths. In order to keep a closer eye on them, the Voivode moved to the fortress of Hotin, which he had significantly fortified/strengthened for this purpose; but here he was taken ill with typhoid. The disease made quick progress and, before long, the tyrant found himself in front of his grave.

While raving with fever, it seemed to him he could see all the victims of his cruelty turning up in front of his eyes, fierce and terrifying, threatening him and calling him to account in front of the God of Justice. In vain did he struggle on the bed of his agony for he could find no rest.

He asked to see the metropolitan bishop, Teofan, all the other bishops and the boyars and, telling them he felt he had come close to the end of his

life, he humbly asked them for forgiveness. Then he entreated them to take pity on his son Bogdan, whom he was leaving heir to the throne, and assist him, because being very young and surrounded by mighty foes, he wouldn't be able to defend either the country or himself if there was no harmony among the boyars and they wouldn't show love and submission to the young prince.

" As for me" he pursued, " even if I were to recover from this disease, I have made up my mind to take orders as a monk at the monastery of Slatina, where I will be doing penance all the days God might still grant me. So that, Holy fathers, if you see me close to my death, let me take the tonsure as a monk."

He could say no more words. Mighty spasms took hold of him and his entire body froze in a swoon as terrible as death, so that the metropolitan and the other bishops, thinking he was dying, ordained him, baptizing him Paisie, after the name of Petru, which he had borne before ascending to the throne.

Then, bowing to Ruxanda as the regent until her son came of age, they proclaimed Bogdan Voivode, after which, couriers immediately set out to the boyars at home and abroad, and to the captains of the army.

Twilight had hardly set in when Spancioc and Stroici arrived. Dismounting and leaving behind their horses at some hosts, they hurried to the fortress, which stood silent and deserted like a huge tomb. One could hear only the murmur of the waves of the Dniester hitting its naked and grey rocky banks, along with the monotonous shouting of the sentries, who could be seen in the dusk leaning on their long spears.

Climbing towards the palace, the two were quite surprised at meeting no one; finally a servant showed them the room of the sick man. When they were about to enter, they heard a loud noise and they stopped to listen.

The Voivode had woken of his lethargy.

On opening his eyes, he saw two monks standing by his bed, one at his head and one at his feet, motionless like two bronze statues. He looked at himself and saw he was covered with a surplice. By his pillow, there was a kamelavkion. He tried to raise his hand, but he couldn't, because of some woollen rosary strings.

He thought he was dreaming and he closed his eyes, but on opening them again after a while, he saw the same things, the rosary, the kamelavkion, the monks.

" How do you feel now, brother Paisie?" one of the monks asked him, seeing he had come to.

This name reminded him of everything that had happened. His blood started boiling and, half rising, he shouted:

" What frights are these? Ha, you're mocking me! Get out, screws! Get out, or I'll kill you all!", and he looked around for a weapon, but as he found only the kamelavkion, he madly threw it at one of the monks.

Hearing the screams, the princess, her son, the metropolitan, the boyars, the servants, - had all hurried into the room.

All this had happened right before the two boyars arrived. They were now listening at the door.

" Ha, you've had me frocked! " Alexander roared , with a hoarse and fearful voice. " You think you can get rid of me? You'd better take that out of your minds! Either God, or the devil will heal me and..."

" Stop this blasphemy, wretch that thou art! " the metropolitan cut in. " Do not forget that thou art in thy dying hour! Mind, sinner, that thou art a monk now; thou art not a ruler any longer! Mind that by thy roaring and blasphemies thou art frightening this innocent woman and this child on whom the hopes of Moldavia rely..."

" Dissembling jade " the sick man cried, struggling to rise from his bed. " Shut up, for I myself, the one who established thee as metropolitan, will disestablish thee! You've frocked me, but if I ever recover, I, too, will have many of you frocked! And I will have this bitch quartered along with her brat, so that she cannot listen to the advice of screws and enemies of mine any more. He who says I am a monk is lying! I am no monk, I am the Voivode! I am Voivode Alexander! Help, lads! Where are my valiant ones?! ...Strike, strike to death! It's I who's ordering it! Kill them all...None of them should escape! Ah! I'm choking! Water! Water! Water! " - and he fell back, rattling in his throat with wrath and madness.

The princess and the metropolitan left the room.

" Lady," said Spancioc, taking Ruxanda by the hand, " this man must die at once. Here is some powder; pour it in his drink..."

" Poison!" she shouted, shuddering.

" Poison, yes, " Spancioc confirmed. " If this man doesn't die at once, the lives of Thy Highness and of this child are in danger. The father has lived enough and has perpetrated enough harm. Let the father die so that the son may live!"

A servant came out of the room.

" What is it?" the princess asked.

" The patient hath come to, and is asking for water and for his son; He told me not to return without him."

" Oh! He wants to kill him! " the loving mother cried, desperately clutching the child to her breast.

" There is no time left to ponder, Lady" Spancioc added. " Remember Voivode Stephen's wife, and choose between son and husband."

" What sayest thou, father?" the poor woman asked, turning her tearful eyes to the metropolitan.

" This is a cruel and terrible man, indeed, my daughter; may the Almighty advise thee well. And I will go and get things ready for us to set out on our way with our new prince. And may God forgive the late one and thee."

With these words, pious Teofan left.

Ruxanda took a silver cup full of water which a servant was just bringing. Then, mechanically and rather pressed by the boyars, she let the poison drip into the cup. The boyars pushed her into the room.

" What is he doing?" Spancioc asked Stroici, who had half-opened the door and was watching.

" He's asking about his son – says he wants to see him – asks for the drink – the Lady is trembling – gives him the cup – he doesn't want to take it!"

Spancioc gave a start and drew the dagger from his belt.

" Oh, yes, he takes it, he's drinking...may it do a lot of good to you, Your Highness!"

Ruxanda came out pale and trembling. She leaned against the wall.

" It is you who shall be called to account for this in front of the Lord, for it was you who made me perpetrate this crime " she said sobbing.

The metropolitan returned.

" Let us go " he said to the princess.

" But who will be looking after this poor wretch?"

" We will" the boyars answered.

" Oh, father, what didst thou make me do!" the princess said to the metropolitan, and she went with him in tears.

The two boyars now entered the room.

The poison hadn't started working yet. Alexander was lying face up quiet, but very weak.

When the boyars came in, he looked at them for a long time and, not recognizing them, he asked them who they were and what they wanted.

" I am Stroici."

" And I am Spancioc" the other added. " And what we want is to see thee before death, the way we once promised thee."

" Oh, it's mine enemies!" Alexander sighed.

" I am Spancioc" the latter went on, " Spancioc, whom thou tried to murder when thou had those forty seven boyars killed, Spancioc, who's escaped thy claws! Spancioc, whose property thou hast robbed, leaving his wife and children to beg at any Christian's gate!"

" Oh! What sort of fire do I feel burning inside me?" the sick man cried, gripping his belly.

" Say thy death prayer, for thou art going to die. The poison is at work."

" Oh! You've poisoned me, villains! Lord! Take pity on my soul! Oh! How it burns! Where is the Princess? Where is my son?"

" They went away and left thee with us."

" They went away and left me! They left me with you! Oh, kill me, to stop my pain! Oh, stab me please, thou art younger, take pity on me! Rid me of the pains that tear me! " he said turning to Stroici.

" I won't besmear my gallant dagger in the polluted blood of a tyrant like thee!"

The pains were increasing. The poisoned man was struggling in convulsions.

" Oh!" he cried, " my very soul is aflame! Oh, please, give me water...let me have something to drink!"

" Here, "said Spancioc, taking the silver cup from the table, " the dregs of the poison are left. Drink and cool thyself!"

" Oh, no, no, I don't want it!" the victim screamed, tightening his teeth.

Stroici grabbed him and held him tightly, while Spancioc drew his dagger, unclenched the prince's teeth with its point and poured down his throat what was left of the poison at the bottom of the cup.

Roaring like a bull that sees the block and the axe that will hit it, Alexander tried to turn his face to the wall.

" Oh, thou doest not want to see us?" the boyars said. " Nay, to thy punishment, thou must look at us. Learn how to die, thou who only knew how to kill!"

The wretched prince was now struggling in the spasms of agony; he was foaming at the mouth, grinding his teeth, his blood-shot eyes had goggled wide open. A frozen sweat sadly heralding death came out like buttons on his cheek.

After half an hour of excruciating agony, he finally expired in the hands of his executioners.

This was the end of Alexander of Lapusna, who left a large stain of blood on the history of Moldavia.

Down to these days, one can see his and his family's portraits at the Slatina monastery built by him, where he is buried.

GALA GALACTION (1879 – 1961), by his real name Grigore Pişculescu, an Orthodox priest and PhD in theology, had his literary debut in 1902 with the short story *Califar's Water Mill*, in the literary magazine "Romanian Art and Literature". His first volume of stories, *The Little Church between the Baulks* (1914), gained the Romanian Academy Award for literature. It was followed by *The Bells at the Neamțu Monastery* and *At the Seaside*, two other volumes of novellas, in 1916. Until 1947, when he became a member of the Romanian Academy, he wrote numerous articles, started the translation of the Bible into Romanian (published in 1938), and travelled to Jerusalem as a priest and professor at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest. He also published several volumes of short stories, letters, novels and even a three-act dramatic fantasy (*Rita, the Princess,* 1942). Among the titles of his prose writings: *A Tally on the Green Fir, Autumns of Lore, Tertius the Caligrapher, Letters to Symphorosa,* the novels *Roxana, Mahmud's Slippers, Doctor Typhoon* and *Crossroads Among Centuries*. The three volumes of his diary appeared posthumously, in 1973, 1977 and 1980.

CALIFAR'S WATER MILL

In the vicinity of an ancient forest, Califar's water mill stood contemplating itself in its pond. It had been there watching itself ever since the oldest people of the village on the other side of the forest could remember, and Califar had been "old man Califar" since times immemorial. The old men in Alăuteşti could still recollect his greyish look, his ever –searching sharp eyes under those bushy eyebrows and his mill with its protruding six-foot roof. The lads that had dared to face to its other end the forest crammed between the village and the mill had seen with the eyes of people who'd been young eighty years before.

Beyond the mill there lay the Goatery, a stretch of stony, ravine-cut, thorn-covered land, in which only the evil one would cut furrows with his horns.

While kindling the fire on bad weather nights back in Alăuteşti, weaving wenches used to say that old man Califar had sold his soul to Satan for who knows how many centuries of life, that the wicked one had placed in the mill pond a magic noose for Christian souls, and that the miller was willing to endow anyone who'd covet ask for them with the riches the devil had tempted Our Lord Christ with. But that in this way the devilish noose would tighten round the soul that had coveted the unclean gain so that he'd go off his chump: the riches the evil one granted him were so many and the joy he tickled him by was so sharp that the unfortunate headstrong man, fretting like a dog fighting a swarm of wasps and laughing madly, would roll headlong into the pond. Califar's pond and mill were nothing but concoctions of the dark. This pond in which the mill had been mirroring itself for ages was not a usual one, as no wave would ever crease its surface. Its smooth face stayed ever limpid and frozen, like a rock of transparent salt, in its frame of reeds and willows. The dam that rose on one side of the mill was – the Christians
used to tell with a shudder – strengthened underneath with the bones of all those who had been tempted by the treasures of Satan and had come to Califar so that he make them rich. The mill stood there with its roof boasting a six-foot projection, like some head concealing evil thoughts beneath a hat pulled down deep over the eyes. Nobody had ever seen the mill working. The miller used to grind only for his master, Old Nick, and

no one knew at what hours of the day or night. Yet, they said that whenever Califar lifted the sluice and let the bagpipe of water loose down the mill race, the water would hiss like a snake cornered by flames, and that from beneath the wheel there flowed a sort of bloody spume. And what wasn't being said! How many foolhardy men from the village and from other parts as well, driven out of their minds and fooled by the devil, weren't being mentioned at the bees in Alăuteşti! And the fear of the needy kept them crowded by the glittering fireplaces, while the courage of the brave stood straight, hands in their vests, gloomy and ready to give it a try.

Among the brave, you could count in Stoicea: an oak tree in his bearing, steel in his arms, and shrewd as no one else; but a love child

Poor Stoicea was, with neither father nor mother, nor any inherited parental wealth. The late pope Radu had found him on the porch of the church, one month after the death of his wife, and had taken him up in his deserted house. But Stoicea had hardly reached the age of six when priest Radu followed his wife into the grave. Since then, poor Stoicea had grown up about the thresholds of everyone – a stray live child. And now he'd come to be sturdy lad Stoicea. Yet, who would want you for a son-in-law when you've grown on the charity of the village and you keep herding the cattle of those who have marriageable girls? This was why Stoicea understood there was no chance for him to find a position in his village, and for quite a while now his thoughts would wander away through the fog of the forest towards Califar's water mill.

' After all, what if I give it a try?...What do I have to lose? I've got no parents, no relatives, I'm dear to no one on earth...I'm on my own in the wide world...On the other hand I know myself for anything but a weakling, I've never seen ghosts or spooks as long as I kept grazing the village herd on the Saele Hill, about the old graveyard, or the Sheriff's Field, and so many other places...Come on! That you should go crazy when you see hordes of treasures and jewels in front of you! Let me lay hands on them and I will know how to handle Califar and his master...I've made up my mind: tomorrow I'm gonna let the herd loose in the everglades and take my chance through the forest to Califar's mill'.

And indeed this was the very thing Stoicea did. The next day, while the fiery wheel of the sun was rolling up the hill of Alăuteşti, he drove the herd to the meadows, threw his topcoat over his shoulder, his bludgeon across the topcoat, and got lost whistling among the oak trees.

In the forest there were no footpaths. Stoicea was breaking his way right across the thicket. Wherever the ivy was too tightly knit and hindered his advance, he produced his big knife. He kept heading north, as he'd been told if he did so, he would reach the mill about noon. After a long and hard walk, Stoicea came to a clearing in the middle of which an oak tree let its knotty old branches hang above a host of pasque flowers.

Tired and tenderly comforted by the gentle waving of the flowers, Stoicea bent his waist, laid down his topcoat and lay down, the sun lighting the tips of his opincas[10].

" When it reaches my eyes, it's gonna wake me".

Stoicea took a nap for the time it takes the shade to cover a man's height, and when the sun rays stung his eyelids, he woke up. He sprung to his feet, refreshed, and sank anew into the dark of the forest between which the beams of light seemed to be pouring flames turned upside down. When noon was well past, Stoicea caught sight like the shine of a blade through the trees down the slope.

It was the pond of Califar's mill. He walked on for a while and there the mill stood, right in front of him. It looked like any other mill; but the pond seemed to lie beneath it too shiny and somewhat too ice-like. On the bridge, the miller was busy binding the stone; his beard looked hoary, his eyebrows were like dry moss, his nose – the beak of an owl.

" God speed, uncle Califar!"

" Thank you, nephew! What sort of wind has blown you rolling to my mill through all the fogs of the forest?"

" Uncle Califar, I've been told you are a matchless wizard, one who would enrich anyone that asks you. This is why I've come as well."

" All right, son, let me make you rich. Bear with me till I finish binding this stone, I just have to give a few more hammer strokes. What's your name, though? And you must also be hungry...I invite you to eat with me, as I myself haven't eaten anything yet, either. I have a pike sour borsch and an almost whole tortilla cake. Here, I'm ready now. For the moment, be so kind and wash yourself, for you've shaken upon yourself all the cobwebs in the forest...See, down those stairs.

---

1 – opincas – peasant's footwear in the Balkans

Leaning on his club, Stoicea made for the pond; he went down on the rotten stairs, trying them carefully with the tip of his club and with his opinca.

" Old man Califar's nothing but the wreck of an old bird! I could make him shake off the days he's still got by a mere slap!...The pond with no waves, but what are these here? Old hags' chatter! Let me wash and drop all nonsense!"

After washing his hands, he made cups of his fists, dipped them into the cool pond and producing them full of water and murmur, he splashed his cheeks with it...

Oh, what a belated dream! Stoicea jumped up from his topcoat and suddenly understood it was the cold drops of a stormy rain unexpectedly rising from the deceptive serenity of that day.

" I was wrong with my scheming; instead of waking me, on reaching my eyes, the sun dropped upon me this thick soaking blanket. What shall you be doing now? I won't stay under this oak tree for fear of a thunderbolt. Which way shall I go?: ahead towards Califar's water mill, or back to the village? What could the time be? Man, what a tempest! You can hear the ancient oak trees breaking down. Let me turn to the village and mark this day as lost on my score."

But Stoicea couldn't find his track in the forest any more and he lost his way. The harder he was trying to find the right direction, the more badly he was getting entangled in all kinds of intricate tendrils and vines, through ravines full of rotting thunderstruck trees, deep holes whitening overturned roots protruded like as many ribs of carrions. To make things worse, the storm wouldn't break into healthy rainfall, it kept roaring in the crowns of the oak trees, crunching, grinding and screaming. Only big, rare, drops were whistling through the foliage like bullets. Stoicea kept hurrying ahead, a little worried about the direction in which the storm was driving him. At a certain time, he noticed that hordes of four-legged beasts sneaking from behind the undergrowth, stags, deer, foxes, even wolves, were running along with him down the slope. All those beasts ran crumpled and whimpering as if driven by a fiery whip. The hawks were fleeing as well; driven by the storm, they'd swing on their wings for a few moments, then fall - like some arrows. Then all those beasts started yelping and howling fiercely. The wolves were now rushing madly downhill, treading foxes to the ground. The stags were jumping sideways, breaking

their way through the bushes. The storm began blowing more bitterly now, wheeling, fluttering and crowing like a she-fiend above the forest that started thinning down unawares.

But at that moment the slope from which the storm was blowing Stoicea into that riot of beasts suddenly broke against the chest of a whitish hill as vertical as a wall. The gush of beasts was split into two or three and vanished along the windings of a valley, while Stoicea dashed and took shelter in a small cave beneath the hill.

" Where the hell may I be here? I've never been in these parts all my life! In my frenzy, I must have run westward and come close to the edge of the mountains. Yet, good that I found shelter here."

He had hardly concluded this piece of thought, when the storm brought to his ears the neighing of a horse, the rattle of hoofs and the scream of a woman. As he jumped out of the cave, a sorrel stumbled in front of him, throwing a frightened maiden on to his chest.

" Help me, swain, for a wounded she-bear is chasing me!"

Indeed, in no time the jumbo was there, dashing forth fiercely, infuriated both by the wound and by the swelling sound of a horn and a pack of hounds.

The horse rose to its feet and disappeared in the bushes, while Stoicea flung the young girl into that chalk hole and waited for the beast to come conveniently close; then he hit so that its brains got scattered all over the place.

" God bless you brother sir! Learn that I am boyar Rovin's daughter, so your brave deed won't stay unrewarded. My name is Tecla. I came out with father, my brothers and our stewards for a ride, rather than a hunting party. This storm scattered us right when we'd come across the she-bear and I happened to stray this way, with the bear on my tracks. But here come our people, too!"

Riders could be seen hurrying through the bushwork and closing in along the valley, while the dogs, which had arrived first, were yelping and barking around the dead beast, fawning around the young lady, then returning with plenty of joyful messages. Boyar Rovin, the young gentlemen his sons and their men jumped off the saddles, surrounding the maiden and Stoicea, shaking the lad's hands and wondering a lot at the crushed skull of the monster.

" Who are you and where are you from, brave young man? You've saved my daughter from death, and I'm going to give you a lordly reward. Wouldn't you like to join us? My court and estate could certainly do with such a sturdy lad."

And Stoicea accepted the offer on the spot! He just had to thrust his opincas in the stirrup of a lordly stallion, putting one end of his club on his shoulder, the other on the foam-covered mane of the horse, then together with the troop of hunters, he got lost through the clearings of the Rovin estate. By dusk they reached the boyar's manor...

And in a few years' time, he, the former cowherd in Alautesti, came to be the most trustworthy man and the foreman above all the other stewards on boyar Rovin's estate. But his luck proved to be more lavish than he'd dared to dream, for young lady Tecla fell in deadly love with him, so boyar Rovin couldn't help it and permitted her to marry Stoicea, making him his son-in-law and master for good over the largest of his estates.

So here was Stoicea, raised to the rank of a boyar by the prince and honoured by everyone, loved by his wife, lucky in all his children and his crops, lucky in everything, like in fairy tales! For Stoicea's boys were growing into proud manliness, and his herds were grazing over pastures so vast that you couldn't ride around them in three days, and his sheep were whitening the grassland up to the horizon, like snow.

And Stoicea's days were passing joyfully, full and limpid, but quick like mountain streams, or like dreams.

At times, rather seldom though, he'd remember his former position: " "Is it me, Stoicea, the abandoned child who grew up at alien doors? Is it me the one who one day made up his mind to turn to miller Califar to make me rich?...My luck met me half way, and instead of Califar's mill, I came into lady Tecla's arms, on an estate twice the size I wanted."

Yet, Stoicea had but little time to ponder upon his past, as his days were passing by fast and serene.

But one day, a bailiff of his father-in-law arrived at Stoicea's on a foam-covered horse.

" Boyar Stoicea, sir, kiss your hand, boyar Rovin, your father-in-law, is urging you to hurry and take your wife and children, along with whatever

is dearest to you from your belongings, and flee to the mountains, as two days ago the Tartars entered the country and are drawing near like the mother of all blizzards!"

The man had hardly finished speaking when the field guards and the shepherds on the estate rushed in from all sides, roaring: " The Tartars! The Tartars!" Boyar Stoicea at once ran out bare-headed to the courtyard, and his voice thundered:

" Break the dam of the pond down upon the ditches! Raise the bridge at once! Get into the house and bar the servants' door, pile upon it wood, chests, cupboards, or whatever you can find! The rest of you, produce from the cellar the powder barrels, the bullets, the firelocks, the pistols and the yataghans. Get ready to pour ceaseless fire upon the Tartars that dare to approach the door!"

Then boyar Stoicea entered the house as well, through the large six inch thick front door; he closed and locked it, crossing upon it iron bars as well. Then he shouted from the stairs to his boys:

" Father's darlings, Niculae, Andrei, Zamfir, bring me my handjar, my mace and my belt with the pistols. I'll stay here to keep guard, you shall take the windows!"

Boyar Stoicea felt his heart throbbing when, in the distance, at the back of the bower, he saw lady Tecla embracing her younger children amidst the flurry of peril.

But there was no time to waste. His orders had hardly been carried out and Stoicea cast an eagle's eye all over the house, from the garret down to the cellar; he gave more orders and, back on the stairs, he saw ,through the little window above the door, the Tartars emerging from the horizon in dark swarms, approaching the house like the shadows of a cloud. Their horses jumped like bloodhounds over the flooded ditches, and now the hideous dark enemies were swarming all around the house.

Boyar Stoicea made sure that the servants' door was well fortified and savagely defended from the inside, so it could not be penetrated by the foes; but the lordly front door protected by the roof of the porch worried Stoicea. Indeed, sheltered against the bullets, the Tartars were able to attack it. Their axe blows were falling upon the door like hail.

" The dirty beasts will break down the door however thick it is. Boys, we must take the stairs and fix them in the doorway!"

Boyar Stoicea dashed down the stairs; but when he reached the last step, from the oak wood door, on which the Tartars' axes went on pattering, there came a gust of wind so strong that it threw him back and made him duck…And an owl-like voice full of mockery made his liver freeze:

" Man, what a strong lad we've got here!...He's hardly splashed a handful of water onto his eyes, and he collapsed like some gosling…"

Stoicea got up and stood, his two legs wide apart; he goggled a funny pair of eyes, looking all around him, like a man kicked awake from his sleep and out of his mind…

" Where are they? What's become of the Tartars?"

" What Tartars, son?"

" Where am I right now?...Where is my house? My servants?"

" What house, what servants, son?"

" Where is my wife Tecla, boyar Rovin's daughter, my children, my estate, my wealth ?"

' Come to your senses, recover your wits, nephew Stoicea. You are at Califar's mill, you came from Alăuteşti for me to make you rich."

Stoicea was listening with a gaping mouth, his eyes staring stupidly; then he began tearing at his hair, shaking his head like some bottle gourd from which he was trying to get rid of a bumble bee.

„ Have you come to? I am old man Califar, and you are Stoicea from Alăuteşti. You came here so that I should make you rich. Well, what do you say…have I made you rich?"

" My Tecla! My children! My house! My wealth! Woe to me! Poor me!"

" Sure, all this is the fortune you asked me for! I did my best to please you!"

Stoicea was standing there, his eyes staring at the ground. In the end, he recognized his club propped against the stairs. He felt his cheeks wet with tears and tried to collect his brains thrown by the devil's horse. In a few moments, after he had splashed his face with that handful of magic water, the devil had taken him in his saddle along a man's lifetime: he'd swept him around in a storm, had him meet Tecla and boyar Rovin, got him married and made him rich, had him raised to a boyar's rank…Then he'd blown his dream away like a bubble, destroying it for good!

Stoicea bent and took hold of his club.

The miller was mockingly standing stiff by the rails of the bridge, like some huge, grey owl.

" You satanic beast, I want to enter hell yoked together with you!"

" How much you would oblige me! It's three hundred years since I've been bearing this accursed life in my bones, as I've been cursed not to die until I am killed!"

" If so, take this!"

The brains of the wizard spread all over the bridge. Stoicea went to the dam and head- first, he split the transparent depth.

GLORIA CONSTANTINI

by Gala Galaction

Badea and Constantin Fierascu were brothers by two mothers. Their father, Tudor Fierascu, had lost Vasilikia, Badea's mother, when the latter was only one year old. Six years later he married a second time; she was a baptized Turkish girl, from the other bank of the Danube, from Samovit.

During the war in 1877-78, Tudor Fierascu was just a small merchant in Celei [11]; being a clever and industrious man and a speaker of both Bulgarian and Turkish, he carried out very profitable business as a dealer in army supplies. From Celei down to Giurgiu[12], now by himself, now together with partners, he would search, bargain and pay for the hay, barley and flour ordered by the Russian imperial intendancy. Tudor Firascu's gain was large enough, because from a rather poor innkeeper, after the war he found himself a big landowner with over a hundred acres and a fine pair of houses in Corabia[13].

Yet, luck has moods and surprising whims, for it often gives you sun and rain on one hand, on the other just hail and gale. Soon after the war, Tudor Fierascu lost Vasilikia, whom he loved dearly, and thus was left a widower, with little Badea on his hands. His own mother was still alive, and the old woman brought up the little boy until he came to be seven. Then the old woman died as well, and Tudor Fierascu, after such a prolonged widowhood, came across anew love and decided to marry once more.

As a well-to-do man, a true gold bug in his village, he also had business and interests across the Danube as well. Passing once through Samovit one evening in May, he saw by chance a charmingly beautiful young girl through a curtain. She was the daughter of a poor Turk, whose back was sagging under the burden of his three odalisques and a host of children. Fierascu's heart gave a start beneath the layer of the dead leaves of his widowhood, like earth in spring when snowdrops sprout.

---

[11] - Celei – a small town on the Danube bank.
[12] - Giurgiu – town and port on the Danube bank.
[13] - Corabia – town and port on the Danube bank.

The man who was already past forty and who had been mourning his beloved Vasilikia for such a long time and in such chastity, suddenly felt young, and in spite of the difficulties he could foresee and later actually bumped into, made a chapter of life out of a mere evening vision – an evening transparently on the rose-covered summits of Somovit. The Turk gave his consent in exchange for a purse of gold. Sultaneh was baptized Filofteia in the Bulgarian church of Somovit and crossed the Danube to Celei on the left, the Romanian, bank.

But it seems to be a sad fact that here on earth, destinies built up from too much poetry be as fragile as Sevres china, or if not, again like Sevres china, they should be useless, have no practical purpose. In Tudor Fierascu's house, Filofteia remained the former Sultaneh with uncovered face, but just a lazy, dreamy woman, incapable of learning the language of those around her.

Besides this, all her thoughts had remained across the Danube, at Somovit. Tudor Fierascu went on loving her steadily and passionately, perhaps even more than in the beginning, with a sort of amorous obstination, expecting to perceive in her splendid and indolent body the rise of a genuine wife's soul. But on our bank, Sultaneh kept staying just an odalisque called Filofteia, torn away from the place of her first heartbeats, the first kisses and oaths.

Back in Somovit, there was a Turkish heart mutilated forever, thirsting for revenge, one that had sworn upon the head of the prophet to kill the giaour in Celei and the defiled houri. And one moonlit night, when Tudor Fierascu was returning from Izlaz[14] in his dogcart together with Filofteia, on passing by the well in Moldoveni[15], two bullets which remained a mystery for god avenged the Koran, sending the two travellers sprawling onto the road.

At that time, Badea was eight years old and a pupil at the school in Corabia, while Dinuț, Fierascu's and Filofteia's baby, was at home, in the arms of his nurse.

Of course, a guardianship was set up; Vasile Fierascu, Tudor's younger brother, was a member in it, and both Badea and Constantin were brought

[14] Izlaz – a village in the area, having a certain historical importance.
[15] Moldoveni – village in the area.

up in the house of their uncle; they were treated kindly a
enough as compared to the pains and humiliations so comm
childhood of orphans. Yet, their parental fortune got entangl
dwindled, not because of the uncle's malice, but because of his inabil
administer it.

Badea finished primary school in Corabia and then tried to enter the seminary; but he was a mediocre child both in learning and intelligence, and failed. So he stayed about the house, helping his uncle with the work in the field; later he returned to Corabia to get a job. He did work indeed first for a Greek grain dealer and owner of barges, then in a grocer's shop and finally for a timber dealer. He proved to be an obedient and hardworking boy, even though he wasn't very bright. His masters were all satisfied with him and never retained a penny from his wages.

When he came of age, he returned to Celei and tried to disentangle the thread ball of his father's legacy. Yet, there still was another underage boy, Constantin, who right then finishing his primary school classes, and the tenants holding Tudor Fierascu's little estate told him he could claim and obtain his due part only through a long and ruining law suit. A kind and simple soul, Badea contented himself with laying hands on a little stretch of land of what was his; the inheritance was left as entangled as before and he went on waiting for Constantin to come of age as well.

That child was growing up and proving himself a completely different nature as related to that of gentle Badea's. Up to the age of seven, he grew together with his cousins and the other children in the village on the heaps of earth and brickwork that marked the place where the citadel of Malva, or Sicibida had stood once upon a time.

When he reached school age, he went to the village school together with his playmates. Constantin was a beautiful child, as he resembled Filofteia, his mother. He was also smart and imaginative. But he was awfully lazy, indifferent to scolding as well as to praising; he knew no other rules for acting than his own fantasy and liking, which, nevertheless, very seldom happened to urge him to do some useful work. During the five-year period in which he attended classes at the local school, he was, by his natural intelligence, much above his schoolmates, yet, his lack of diligence placed him among the slackers. He was interested in the history classes and in extraordinary events. By the end of the fifth class, he had come to know as

much history as the schoolmaster. But in all other subject matters he was weak because of his complete lack of interest.

The house of his uncle and that of his father lay close to one another, and both were close to the Roman ruins. As the house of Tudor Fierascu was larger and better, his brother moved into it until his two nephews came of age. On Tudor Fierascu's plot, beside the house and its various dependencies, there also was a pithouse, the old people's hut in which Tudor and his brothers were born. It was on top of this pithouse Constantin used to spend most of his time after school, impaling hundreds of lady cows. Yet, still more exciting than these victims were to him the ancient Roman ruins. From his schoolmaster he had somehow learned what that badly ransacked hill had been, all those girdles of ruined walls showing here and there from their century-old blanket of clay, and a keen interest, which later was to reach genuine archaeological moments, kept little Constantin's attention focused for hours upon them.

It's true that this bias for archaeology had an explanation of its own and an immediate profit. Once the debris and the broken bricks were removed, there often emerged the splinter of some red pot, or a piece of marble, or, at times, even a few rusty coins, or beautifully carved little rocks. Constantin would gather everything he found in an old bag which he kept hidden on the roof of the pit house, by the chimney. But this favourite occupation of Constantin could not last long as, according to his uncle's judgment, it was useless. So time came when his tutors began wondering and held council over what was to be done with him, a mediocre graduate of five elementary classes. The local vicar was of the opinion that the boy was good for the seminary, as he had a beautiful voice and sang very sweetly. But another tutor, one who thought himself a much better observer, believed that the boy was fit for a vocational school where, after all, it was easier to enter. Consequently, after some debate, it was decided that his uncle would take him to the vocational school in Bucharest. And the poor man took him there indeed.

For almost two years, Constantin unwillingly trained to become a blacksmith, but feeling no attraction to the trade. Those hammers, bellows, ovens, the machines…disgusted him as brutal, noisy and dirty.

What he did like though were the plaster casts and busts they brought to the school to be replicated in bronze. Yet, he kept wondering who were the craftsmen who could imitate the human forms in lime, in wax, or in clay,

and where was the school in which this incomparable handicraft could be learned. He began making inquiries and learning. Statues were now the only objects his eyes and thoughts were dwelling upon. One day he learned from a senior schoolmate that an exhibition of painting and sculpture was opened at the Athene[16]. The next Sunday he went to see it as well. It was the best, but also the last of his soul's daydreaming; his soul was born for the arts, but doomed to remain grounded and never to bloom. He stayed there until evening, skipping dinner, stuck to the 10 or
20 pieces of sculpture placed in a semicircle beneath the stairs of the Athene. Especially a naked, white woman, hiding in a wheat field - ,emerging from the sugar-like block of marble was to stay forever in his heart.

Yet, what was the use of all the plans he'd begun to hatch! A few days later, Constantin engaged in a bloody fight with one of the pedagogues, and this serious infringement of the regulations occurring after many previous ones brought about his expulsion from all the schools in the country.

Kicked out from the teaching system, a lazy and undertrained craftsman, a real bag of claims and disillusions, Constantin returned home, to the ruins of Sicibida. He was now sixteen, with too little parental wealth to live on, and with no trace of appetite for farming.

So he tried to get a job on an Austrian ship. But with the little he had learned and knew about boilers, he was accepted only as assistant
stoker. To be a stoker on a ship was as much as being an usher in the anteroom of the inferno. Although he was a sturdy, resilient lad, Constantin, who also was sluggish and devoid of steady appetite for work, could not stand it by the machines and finally passed to the galley. But there was heat and dirt everywhere. So he went out to deck as a sailor, to enjoy fresh air and the sight of the Danube's banks. Yet, what a silly illusion that a sailor's life was spent gently, sweetly, between the canopy of heaven and the water, and within these illusions, what a lot of ignorance concerning the drudgery on a ship, the loading of the huge bales and the sleepless nights spent hanging on to the rope ladders! Constantin soon got

[16] Athene – a sort of a palace of the Arts, built by public subscription.

fed up with this sailor's life and said good bye to his ship, the Hildegarte, in the port of Galați[17].

Here he strolled all day long about the streets of the town, then in the evening he happened to be in a garden where a troupe of provincial actors were showing the play *The Daughter of the Air*..

To Constantin it was a revelation!...Here was a profession to his liking. He made friends with the actors and told them he was awfully keen on entering the troupe.

In the beginning, his future colleagues made great fuss of him, but they soon noticed they were dealing with a fellow loiterer that could be useful to them. They had him read to see whether he was fit for a prompter. He wasn't very good at it, but they discovered he possessed a nice voice, and they taught him a few arias to be sung in a choir; He could be useful there, with his really melodious voice. For a long time and in many plays he played the servant, the porter, the royal messenger – characters that appear and disappear after uttering a few ridiculously awkward words. But even if he had stayed in the theatre, Constantin wouldn't have made it because he lacked "the flame of the stage", as an itinerant celebrity tried to explain. His histrionic career came to a sudden end with a violent scuffle right at the end of an Act IV, when one of the main actors of the troupe found his wife – the queen in the play – behind some casks at the back of the stage in the arms of Constantin, her majesty's page.

So he lost two more years with actorship as well. He returned to Corabia and, thanks to some insistence, he became a copyist at the town hall. It was in this position that the time came for him to draw lots for the army, and he also met Frusina, the daughter of an innkeeper in Caracal[18]and his future sister-in-law.

Step by step, patient Badea had managed to shake free their father's small estate from the occupation and the claims of those using it, and was now waiting for his brother to be twenty one so that either should take over his share. But he was painfully aware that his brother didn't resemble him, and he had good reasons to worry about what would happen with his father's land once it came under the mere control of wayward Constantin. To tell the truth, the latter didn't know very well what to do with that

[17] Galați – large port close to the Danube Delta.
[18] Caracal – a small town in the area.

stretch of land, neither was building up any plans for his coming of age. He only felt that since he'd come closer to Celei, that is, he was now a clerk at the mayoralty in Corabia, his attraction to the ruins of Sicibida had taken hold of him with renewed force.

The village of Celei lies very close to Corabia, so that Constantin could come home any time he wanted. The village is interesting, not so much in itself, but for the underground it stands on. Part of the houses in Celei rest on stone pavement. Every owner hits upon this pavement if he digs several palms deep in his garden. So that whoever needs stone, can dig up his yard or garden and he'll find plenty. Almost every house in Celei must have, or have had, a gully, or a trough, a threshold made from some Roman sarcophagus, or from its remains. Each villager must have sold to the amateurs in Corabia, or from other parts, some antiquities
(that is, some finely carved little stones probably detached from missing rings or bracelets, or a few Roman coins, or small red mugs, or other queer objects found right under the foundations of the houses. About thirty or forty years ago,, it was common event that the plough share of a villager should hit in the field some Roman sarcophagus, or a stone fragment carved with glorious Latin letters. And also thirty or forty years ago, a few scholars came to Celei to dig with pickaxes into the mass of Malvensian ruins. One of them, Cezar Boliac, stopped in that place several times, to carry out some serious research work. Among other things, Cezar Boliac found under the porch of a villager a hermetically closed sarcophagus, which he opened up with the permission of its latest owner. The operation wasn't exactly easy to carry out, as the lid was fastened onto the sarcophagus with iron cramps wrapped up in lead, and closing line of the two grooves had been cemented. But in the end the sarcophagus was opened and they found an almost whole skeleton lying on a bed of laurel branches and leaves. The scent of the laurel, now grown as yellow as Havana tobacco, spread, strong and sweet in the air, after seventeen centuries of reclusion. Golden earrings, an ivory hair pin, two splendid and complete half-moons of teeth were telling the people that on those laurel branches and leaves, a young, beautiful and dearly loved woman had gone to eternal sleep. There was no inscription or name, so that the mystery of the heartbroken lover or husband, a contemporary of Caracalla, should stay unknown forever.

Where nowadays Celei blooms, and sheep and oxen drink from Roman sarcophagi, there once upon a time stood a city they used to call Malva, or Sicibida. Across the Danube, where the Bulgarian Ghighia stands now facing Celei, there was the Roman city of Oescus, from which the nearby river seems to have taken its name, Iscra. It was in Oescus that Constantine the Great established the headquarters of the Goths. Here, between Oescus and Sicibida, emperor Constantine built a bridge, which is actually mentioned among his imperial achievements. Boliac notes that the ruined pillars of that bridge can still be seen nowadays when the waters of the Danube are low; he even believed that he had discovered the two terminal pillars near our bank, close to the foot of the Roman ruins.

Constantin Fierăscu had come to know this and much more. He also knew that on the other bank at Ghighi you could find still more numerous and more exciting antiquities than on our bank in Celei. During his idle wanderings among the ruins on both banks Constantin, an uncultivated man, but one having in the germ of the possibilities stifled within him a genuine fibre of an archaeologist and of an artist – kept wondering how was it possible that the love and curiosity for such ancient things, lying for so many centuries under those mounds shouldn't have attracted an educated man with financial means as well?

Once Constantin crossed the river to Ghighi. A demon in his soul had started rousing fresh thoughts in him. If he had neither the knowledge, nor the money to open up the grave of this mysterious past, what if he could come at least across some gold coins like the ones they had found in Celei as well, and which used to be sold for 400, or even 500 franks apiece? For some time now, he'd got acquainted with Frusina, the daughter of the innkeeper in Caracal. What a vixen of a girl! What a sort of trouble-stirring green eyes she had! How lithe and cunning a lass! Oh, if only Constantin could find one gold coin at least! He'd sell it for 500 franks and would buy Frusina a present to his heart's desire!...

So Constantin crossed the Danube to Ghighi preoccupied by more precise and less unselfish intentions.

Yet, here too others had come first! At the town hall, four statues stood leaning against the walls, representing three full-size women and a man. They had just been dug up from under the rabble on that day, and were very well preserved. They were white, with a bluish hue; the folds of the

women's clothes were so exquisitely carved by chisel that they to be waving in the wind. Constantin felt envious enough, but envy soon turned into hope. The mayor, a young man, was a friend of Constatin's. He took the mayor to a glass of wine and finally persuaded him that it would be no great loss for the museum in Sofia if one of the three women crossed the Danube to Romania that night.

„You could report to the prefect that they dropped one on the stones by mistake and it all went to smithereens!"

And the mayor accepted; but in the Bulgarian villages, carts were rare, and the statue the mayor had given up could only be taken to the river in a cart. Yet, the only cart available closer by was at a distance of five kilometres, and before Constantin reached the place, someone else had hired it!

Henceforth, Constantin's passion for the ruins in Ghighi and Celei turned into feverish yearning and foolish expectations for the gold hidden beneath them.

One evening, on his way back from the office (where, together with the archivist and the bailiff, he was hardly busy with anything but archaeology), he learned from his brother that a relative of theirs had found and sold to some gold bug in Corabia precisely one of the much coveted gold coins, but had said no word to anyone...Constantin went to this relative, scolded him for not showing him the coin he'd found and got him to describe it to him minutely. Briefly, the coin was made of pure gold, on one side it had the inscription GLORIA, on the other, the name of CONSTANTINE. There was a tall man represented on it, holding a lance under his armpit; at his side, there were two children. One of them was looking upwards at the lance bearer, his hands behind the nape, while the man seemed to be gently holding one hand on the head of the other child.

All these details got engraved in Constantin's mind as deeply as on the imperial coin.

At this time and under these circumstances, Badea Fierăscu decided to get married and, by mere chance, he set his eyes on Frusina, whom he'd met, together with his brother, at a wedding party in Corabia. A man with a convenient position, hardworking and thrifty, Badea had already been looked up by many match makers, but in spite of their cunning, none of them had succeeded in trapping him in her snare. He had fallen for

Frusina; he liked her very much, unaware of the danger a beautiful and clever wife might be to a man who was neither handsome, nor smart. Once Badea made up his mind, he wouldn't change it easily. How could he have suspected that Frusina had fallen in love with his brother, who kept sending her long letters, written in a faultless hand. Yet, this was how things stood in reality. Constantin was writing on his clerk's desk for an hour or two every day fiery declarations of love to Frusina in Caracal, and in the evening, he used to furtively slip them into the mail box at the station, addressing them to a lenient aunt. Frusina's answers were much shorter, as she had some trouble with her writing. She'd send him picture postcards, or letters containing more flowers and curls than words of love. Yet, in this way, both Frusina and Constantin had managed to penetrate deep into each other's heart.

Ignorant Badea met the innkeeper from Caracal in Corabia and asked the latter's daughter in marriage. The innkeeper knew Badea and held about both the man and his wealth the most respectful convictions; on the other hand, he had at home four more girls, among whom two were already marriageable. So the poor man accepted Badea's proposal, and was even grateful for it in his mind. Badea let nobody know about his intentions; only when he had bought his present and was to leave for Caracal the next day on his wooing trip did he finally let his uncle Vasile and his brother Constantin know about his plans with Frusina. Constantin was flabbergasted.

, All right, brother, do whatever seems right to you...', and he went out to the well to drink some water.

Badea wasted no time and went to Caracal, wearing a new waistcoat, high boots with palm-broad creases, and with a hair-cut done by an artist of a barber. His future parents-in-law received him heartily and treated him as if he were the sub-prefect. When Frusina understood what it was all about, she turned red, then yellow, and under some pretext, she sneaked out of the house and ran to that aunt of hers who knew her secret. The aunt was a practical woman (as well as a philosopher in her own way); after letting her cry to cool down, she advised her, lectured on her and, concluding, she said:

' Don't be a fool, Frusina! Marry the one that asks you, and make love with the one you are fond of!'

She returned home and showed Badea a pair of eyes red with weeping, as was becoming for a young girl when they told her she was to leave the parental home forever. Badea's heart gave a twist of love when he saw so much sentiment in his future wife, Frusina.

On the same day – an autumn Sunday it happened to be - , back from Corabia since the previous evening as he was a bit ill, came out of the house and climbed on to the tomb of Sicibida, like Marius had done in the past on the ruins of Carthage. He was ad, tire and sincerely disgusted of his entire life. He'd come to be neither a mechanic, nor a sculptor, nor a ship captain, or an actor, a baritone – but a copyist at the town hall in Corabia!...And when finally in this squalid life like a sun-scorched pasture field Frusina turns up, blonde, slim, lithe, like a willow ruffled by the breeze, when finally her love, her cunning green eyes emerge – that long-coveted spring in which you'd love to quench your thirst-ridden heart – here comes an idiot of a brother (but your senior and quite thrifty), who gets ahead of you with all those cows and oxen of his!

After losing everything he had lost, now he had to give up Frusina as well!... If he had told her, or written to her on the previous day, perhaps Frusina would have turned Badea down, but her parents and relatives would have kept hammering her until she had finally given her consent.

So, why should he interfere? Let things happen the way they would! To cut Badea's way and go to ask her in marriage himself would be mere nonsense; he had no social position to speak of. For his share of the land to become as profitable as Badea's he ought to labour it himself instead of letting it on lease, but he felt no inner drive for farming. How could he propose to Frusina with the 90 franks a month he earned at the town hall? With what he got from the rented land, he could barely pay his debts. He felt he'd been born in a barren unfortunate hour! And there also might be in his blood and nature something inherited from his poor mother, that christened odalisque, about whom he'd been told, God bless her, that she'd keep watching the coffee pot all say long.

Anyway, Constantin had drawn lots for the army in spring and was taken up by the 21st infantry regiment in Ilfov[19]. He was now waiting for the call-up orders, which was due to arrive immediately after New Year at the latest. Under such circumstances, bad as they were from all points of

[19] Ilfov – county including the capital city, Bucharest.

view, he had to suffer and keep silent. Oh, if only he'd been wise enough when he was on the ship, he'd have gone down the river ever further until he'd got lost with it into the sea! And from there, he'd have got on another ship, wandered through the wide world, learned foreign languages, saved lots of money and, finally, returned as a wealthy man...

In fact, there still was enough time to do that; at twenty nine, you can still start everything anew: learning, profession, trade. Yet, his life had started so badly and had such an incoherent continuation...For the time being, the army wouldn't let go, so he had to enlist and do his duty like anyone else...As a soldier, he might have some prospects...yet, he rejected any illusions that some time in the future he had chances to get beyond the position of a sergeant major. Formerly, that path hadn't been impossible, but now the laws had changed. To take up learning German
Seriously – he'd started picking up some of the language on board the ship - , to learn book-keeping well and eventually get a job with a trading company, this seemed a better and more realistic idea. However, who could tell! The supreme solution that could change everything within one hour, which could shorten all ways and put the wonder-working hood upon destiny, might be lying in gold coins somewhere close by, just a few inches beneath the earth!

This is what kept crossing Constantin's mind on a grey autumn day, when the Danube was gleaming between its banks and the copper-like sun seemed to stay motionless in the immensity of the rolling masses of mist.

It was with a shrinking heart that Constantin found out, right after Christmas, the day set by Badea for his wedding with Frusina, so it was with genuine joy he received the note summoning him to the regiment on the very next Monday after the Sunday of the wedding. He stoically attended the preparations for the event as he knew he had to leave that very evening, consequently his suffering had a fixed term.

Frusina, with her green eyes, was as beautiful as a fairy. The wedding party took place in the countryside (that is, in Celei) and like in the countryside. When they returned from church, and Frusina, in keeping with tradition, with a wife's hair dress now, began distributing the gifts, Constantin sat down, as he was unable to stand any longer. Her hair combed in long plaits and a loop, with a silk crepe veil reaching down to

the ground, soaked all over in embroideries and spangles, Frusina was pinching the hearts of all men, whether married or single lads. Constantin went to the cellar, put his mouth to the spigot of the wine cask and drank desperately. Then he returned among the lads and had the fiddlers play for him again and again that fiery tune of broken hearts:

Green the leaf and joy is dead,
My dear Leana's getting wed'
...

Some of the lads there, among whom quite a few had also received the call-up notes from their regiments, found the tune much to their liking and joined in noisily, fraternizing with Constantin. A poet both by nature and by the drive of the huge amount of wine he'd drunk, Constantin felt a hero and a captain among these brave heart-broken comrades. And the barracks,, the bugle, the flag...the entire military destiny beginning the very next day, everything kept crossing his wine- and love-singed brains like some stormy call to run assault up the ridges of Grivița, or Plevna[20]!
While savagely dancing the reel in the yard, he swore to himself that within a year he would put on a sergeant's stripes, and that when he was released as a sergeant major, he would kneel in front of all his superiors and all the men of consequence in Romanați[21] so that they should open for him the way to the superior military training school. And within two years, facing whatever hardships there might be, he would become a sub-lieutenant! And when he returned here, to his brother's house, with those golden braids on the sleeve of his tunic, a sword dangling at his hip, treacherous Frusina's heart would feel the sting of a thousand needles, like his own heart on this day.

When the evening came and the train was due, the ones with call-up orders had one more reel dance, one more jug of wine and, headed by Constantin, bravely started for the station.

The next day in Bucharest, at the gate of the regiment, all the fumes of the wine and the grand plans of overnight scattered away in no time,

[20] Grivița, and Plevna – locations in Bulgaria where the Romanians had recently fought glorious battles against the Turks.
[21] Romanați - southernmost county in Romania, on the Danube banks.

leaving clear and wide the sky of reality – a grim January sky and the rough reality of the barracks.

For Constantin, a schooled and clever boy, with a wonderful handwriting, life in the army couldn't start badly, and it actually started very well indeed. He soon knew everything that was expected from him, regulations and exercise, and consequently he was soon made a front ranker, with military honours. On that day, he thought of Frusina back there in Celei, of his previous life – and he felt he was becoming a different man.

But one fair morning he found out that the sub-lieutenant of his company had been replaced and that another, with such and such a name had come in his stead. This name seemed very familiar to him. And indeed, when the new officer came to take over the company, front ranker Fierascu recognized in this superior a former pal from the theatre! He was one of the unforgettable companions he had been with during their campaign to Galați and on other tours, but then this comrade of his had given up the theatre and probably resumed his studies to become a sub-lieutenant. At that time, he used to have a poet's long plaits, he was a really golden heart and kept reading poetry and novels all day long. The two had become close friends, at times they would share the little money they got from home (as they only earned debts from the theatre), and once they spent a whole month in the same room. Yet, there had always remained a certain distance between them, induced by the respect Constantin couldn't help feeling for his friend's culture…

Constantin was certainly very glad and felt flattered to discover a friend and a former companion in the uniform of his company's commander. He recalled those few months of strange comradeship. This sub-lieutenant had fled from school and from his parental home because of an ill-timed love affair, but even though he did possess a reckless heart, he was very intelligent. In school, he had learned a lot of things, and even for the stage he did have a remarkable taste and talent. But one could predict that soon the young fugitive would get fed up with this provincial actor's adventure and go back to school and to his parents, which he eventually did indeed. However, - as Constantin had estimated – but for some miraculous transformation, the former first lover-acting youngster in Galati was not at all fit for the military.

Front ranker Fierăscu lay in wait for the officer and, observing all the rules of military respect, he addressed him:

" Hail, sir! I had the privilege of meeting you before. I am Constantin Fierăscu!"

" Is it you, indeed, tragedian?"

That ominous day put an end to Constantin's seriousness and diligence. Mușat had remained the same day-dreamer, the nice pal Constantin had known in those memorable moon-lit nights on the piers of Galați, just that now he was a sub-lieutenant in command of a whole company, to which front ranker Fierăscu belonged as well. Furthermore, and unfortunately for Constantin, Mușat opened up his heart with no reticence; he told his former friend a lot of things concerning the military career and life in the army – everything seen through his own eyes of a pseudo-soldier, which could only harm and sterilize the determination of shaky Constantin.

Soon, the latter found again in the barracks, namely in the regimental office where his friend had promoted him, the same mean, bureaucratic atmosphere he had left behind at the mayoralty in Corabia. This unfortunate encounter with Mușat, exactly when he was on the way to collecting his forces and making good decisions, was equivalent to a release of steam from the cylinder of a running railroad engine. Mușat was single. He often took Constantin home with him, exempted him from hard tasks and, out of friendship, was doing him the worst possible service. The officer told him about his love affairs and disillusions. Fierăscu too told him about his melancholy idyll from which he'd fallen straight into the barracks. On intimate friendly terms with his superior, Constantin naturally came to thinking about leaves (especially as Mușat was closely related to the colonel as well), and he got them exactly as he asked; a few days for Easter, almost three weeks at harvest time, and then a whole month as medical leave.

Consequently, at Easter he came home to Celei. He found Badea unchanged and Frusina still more beautiful. From the slim blonde Frusina he had known, a plump, golden Frusina had by now emerged. Small townships and the suburbs of larger towns, on the uncertain boundary between urban and rural, offer at times – brought up in the garbage of the slums, but fed on the sap of the nearby fields – flowers of an amazing

beauty and vigour. Frusina was such a flower, but she was blonde like yellow water lilies.

As he'd grown more and more prosperous, Badea had now started a beer house, like his father; he had several hired hands in the yard and, out of respect for the place from which he'd brought Frusina, he would let her stay in the shade, walk about bare-headed and dress her hair like town wenches. Consequently, Frusina combed her hair upwards, wore camisoles and starched shirts, but kept sighing while rereading the letters from Constantin, whom she imagined far away in Bucharest, the military tunic tight on him, standing still in the ranks, or performing rhythmical and sparkling movements. Poor Constantin, how bitter his heart might be, and what a tiresome life he was living! Since he'd left, he'd barely written four postcards; in the last, he let them know they had made him a front ranker and asked them for some pocket money. Bucharest was a large city, teaming with hordes of pretty girls and women, like the Danube with waves! And Constantin must be quite a handsome front-ranker too! Yet, while examining herself in the mirror her arms knit behind her nape, she found it hard to believe that, deep in his heart, Constantin had allowed the beauties reflected by that mirror to fade away entirely. Her green eyes answered her slyly from the mirror she was questioning. A cheekily turned up little nose palpitating with its pink little nostrils under the breeze of memories and the fretting of expectations. Her rosy complexion, her tender lips, the shades round her eyes and the fiery hair were revealing so much daring and aggressive beauty that she couldn't believe Constantin had managed to shake off the magic of that charming memory and sleep like a log on his rough barracks pillow. And her arms that seemed taken from the statue of Venus, her piercing breasts, the hot and impatient blood drowning and making all those assets glow...kept also whispering that Badea, the clumsy and dull-witted merchant, hadn't brought leisure and proper merchandise into the house, but trouble and robbers.

Combing her hair, watching herself in the mirror and rereading Constantin's letters, that is sowing the seeds of evil weeds, Frusina reached the Easter holidays, and Constantin came home on leave for a few days. The two stayed at a distance, watching each other like two beasts observing one another thoroughly before letting the violence of war, or of love blow upon them. But Constantin soon dropped his eyes to the ground and remained shy and wavering during the three days of his stay. On

seeing this, Frusina pretended to be indifferent terribly taken up with the housework and her husband's business, and for three full days she kept whirling her skirts from the house to the yard, from the yard to the shop, from the shop to the cellar. She joined the dancing reel too a few times, but only to spite Constantin, as she never stepped in at his side, but at the others'. Badea kept standing at the counter and counting his pennies, the fiddlers went on rummaging in the depths of hearts, Frusina and Constantin kept dancing, never seeming to take any notice of one another. But when he was about to leave for Bucharest, taking advantage of a minute when Badea had passed to the next room, Frusina said to Constantin:

" You were saying, brother, that you've learned and could remember all those regulations by heart?"

" It's true, sis..."

" I'm surprised? I for one thought you'd lost your memory altogether!"

With this arrow piercing his heart, Constantin returned to the barracks. He found it gloomy and fetid. The service was hard, discipline was strangling him, the knapsack had grown as a mountain. Without Muşat's friendship and protection, Constantin might have met with ignominy in the army. The same numbness in the arms in the midst of work, the same fainting of power that had regularly come upon him midway and made him miss one trade after another, always under the pretentious disguise of some drive to the arts and some call to more lofty preoccupations, were now relapsing in the circumstances of growing and thwarted love. Through all the commanding sounds of the bugle, the tiresome drilling and the marches, the rationed and short sleep periods, the insolent and ardent memory of Frusina kept breaking through.

„ Mister sub-lieutenant, sir, I miss her so that I'm melting off! It seems I'm about to perpetrate a sin, like father and mother..."

„ That the deuce decide upon you, Fierăscu! Five years ago when I watched you on the stage, standing stiff and barrack-like as if you'd swallowed a bayonet, it always crossed my mind: This guy is no good for the theatre, he'd be fine for the military! Now when you are about to become a corporal, I find you infatuated like some primadonna and
I'd gladly send you to a thousand theatres or devils, but I don't know where from I could get a passport for you!"

" From the colonel, sir!"

" I do know what you are after, damn you! You want me to give you a leave and thus indirectly become an accomplice of your evil deeds! What I can and want to do for you is to give you an eighteen-day leave now at harvest time. But you'll have to give your word of honour that you'll reap in the scorching sub like the most hardworking farmer in Celei. Then you'll come back here and I'm going to let you have some other medicine as well. Fierăscu, do not forget that you promised me and to yourself, you've even sworn to do your best so that we become again equals and comrades as we used to be!"

When it was harvest time, Constantin turned up in Celei. He told his brother they had orders from the regiment that all the soldiers from the countryside should return home and help their parents or relatives with the reaping.

" And will you reap for me?"

" You'll see!"

And Constantin, an indefinite and suggestible soul, kept the promise he'd made to Muşat. Treading with a sort of artist's irony on the official reports, the inkpots in the archives at the Corabia mayoralty and on the necktie he'd worn for years, he took off his tunic and started reaping fiercely.

As long as harvest lasted, Constantin slept a dreamless sleep. Surprised and disappointed by such behaviour, Frusina kept giving him a verbal sting from time to time.

On the evening when his brother's harvesting came to an end and the reapers gathered at his home to be granted a drink, Constantin sneaked from among them and went down to the Danube to have a bath. And by the bank full of willows by which the vast, grey immensity of waters was flowing past, he had a marvellous bathing after a day's work in the scorching sun. At a few steps distance under the willows there stood a fisher's hut with a bed of dry mugwort and tressel leaves, the best imaginable cabin to have a rest after bathing. After drying in the warm red light of the setting sun, half dressed, Constantin lay down for a rest in the hut...

He was about to fall asleep. The new moon rose above the golden, rose-white and blue immensities. But he was startled from his drowsing, as the osiers and the weeds were set moving by a white shape crossing the purple

of dusk. It was Frusina, who'd come bathing. Constantin lay there paralysed, as all his strength had suddenly shrunk to his heart, which began struggling to tear free from its bridles.

Frusina dropped the sheet she had on her shoulders, then, letting the sack-shaped dress she was wearing slip to the ground, she emerged shining like some Toledo blade from its sheath. And with the movements of a searching, attentive Diana raising her bow, she raised her arms to the height of her breasts, while the crown of her head, heavy with her hair piled up like a helmet, touched the silver horn of the moon, barring Constantin's eyesight...

The young man felt he was on the brink of an abyss, incapable as he was to understand and value the noble and pure beauty of eternal assets. Therefore, all that depth of dark osiers, of the phosphorescent Danube, of bats and irises, among the fields of tulips – which seemed to be fuming in long capricious coils from the earth up to the crescent of the moon, enclosing Frusina's marmoreal beauty – was for Constantin just another interred treasure. Overwhelmed by the rebellion of his senses, fascinated by the precipice of sin, Constantin's hands let go of the dry weeds he was grabbing as if to stay above the abyss; he gave way and fell:

„ Frusina, my treasure, Frusina, come, come!..."

From that evening on, the lives of both Constantin and Frusina came under the spell of that exclusive and all-destructive passion. As if fatally nailed to each other by the dice of voluptuousness and crime, they felt and yearned to be henceforth one soul and one single body. The beginning consumed under an ominous new moon flourished into reckless, passionate lust, and on the coal-black sky of the crime this passion kept growing like a torch coming ever closer, while up in the sky the moon was growing to a full moon. And under the spell of this travelling moon in its growth, the two lovers went on eagerly looking for each other, in search of any convenient nest. But neither the riverside coppice, nor the threshing floor laid with a carpet of heavy wheat sheaves, nor the rooms in the house guaranteed enough safety. Like birds that choose a hollow for their nest to be, love will choose his nest with much consideration and speculation. At the back of the yard there still stood the pit house in which Tudor Fierăscu and his brothers had been born and on top of which Constantin had played as a child. Constantin now secretly cleaned it up and built in it a bedstead

laid with all the fine-scented weeds he could find in the fields and in the garden. This pit house had an entrance, a fireplace and a dark room at the back.
The chimney and the niche of the fireplace formed a sort of upside down funnel through which the night air, the tune of crickets could freely penetrate along with the curiosity of the stars. It was here, on an entire field of picked flowers, during the two weeks left, that Frusina and Constantin claimed the full cup of vain and dearly paid for caresses.

Because the day that follows the crime's night always is the day of judgment, in the rose nest of voluptuousness there lies Cleopatra's serpent, and under the bedstead made up of camomile on which Frusina and Constantin would lay down their heads in ecstasy, just three palms beneath the floor, three skulls of dead men stood grinning, like as many spies of destiny.

Now the days and nights were passing by like a dream and it was with a broken heart that Constantin saw the hour of departure drawing near. All sorts of plans – many inconsiderate and impossible – kept crossing his mind, enticing him in turns. That he should write to Muşat that he was heavily sick and ask him to prolong his leave, that he should go to Bucharest and ask the officer to grant him another leave, to ask him to arrange that he be moved to another regiment in Romanaţi, to ask for a leave in order to prepare for his corporal's exam, to urge Frusina to come to Bucharest, pretending she wanted to see some relatives (she really had some in the Capital)...or cross the Danube one night with Frusina to Bulgaria and get lost there...He was well acquainted with a Bulgarian priest in Vraţa, one he'd made friends with one day on board the ship; he had exchanged a few postcards with the man out of mere sympathy. He was a young, kind-hearted and enthusiastic person, and Constantin was entitled to believe that in a difficult situation pope Karabaşef could be of great help to him. That he should flee to Bulgaria along with Frusina...Desert and disgrace military honour! What a hard word! A terrible project! But confronted with the madness of his love and Frusina's fiery charms, any considerations in the world and any power on earth were nothing but fragile hovels made of wooden planks under the assault of a hurricane.

During all this fretting and wavering of his conscience, Constantin never felt any uneasiness at the idea that Frusina was his brother's wife; Badea's interests and pain meant less than nothing to him.

Separated from one another by nine years of age and by the lack of any common childhood memories, the two brothers were just strangers to each other. For Badea, Constantin was just a conceited and unreliable step brother, whose rights and due share he had always honestly tried to defend and spare, but who hadn't deserved it and entirely ignored Badea's righteousness. For Constantin, Badea was nothing but a senior brother, completely indifferent to him who had taken advantage of his position with particular insistence of the stupid, and to whom he owed neither love nor gratitude, and hardly a little bit of respect, which, nevertheless, confronted with Frusina's love, was as much as a handful of straw in a burning furnace.

Consequently, it wasn't Badea's honour and suffering Constantin really minded, but his friendship with Muşat, his grand plans to become an officer, some ambition as a soldier and a Romanian, and above all this, the danger implied in choosing a way that crossed all fields and laws.

Tortured by these thoughts, yet unable to make a decision up to the very hour of departure, Constantin left for Bucharest as sad as a tomb. Frusina was coquettish and non-sentimental, but of a sensual nature which was only now opening up to the sun of passion; she hid in her room and bit the pillow so that no one could hear her crying.

On reaching the regiment, Constantin didn't find Muşat any more. The cultivated and polyglot officer had unexpectedly been sent on a military mission.

Constantin cursed the day on which he'd been born! During July, August and September he kept roasting in the barracks and bearing the brunt of the service, as another guy had replaced him in the office. Whenever he had the chance to get an hour or two of leisure, he hid in the stables to read „Elena" , or „Fulga". He felt unable to write letters any more. Anyway, Frusina wrote badly, and his letters could have fallen into Badea's hands.

At the beginning of October, Muşat finally returned to the country. Constantin welcomed him with tearful eyes, but not with his former frankness. Without taking the trouble to analyze the situation and the real interests of his poor friend, and thinking he was indeed ill, Muşat promised

and obtained for him a medical leave. Gnawed at both in his heart and his looks by his fatal passion, Constantin had not only the aspect, but somehow even the right of a soldier entitled to a medical leave.

This time Badea received him knitting his brows and with some suspicion in his soul. People's eyes can see evil even where there is only good to be seen, and their mouths can start rumours both justly and wrongly. In Celei, gossip had flown with wings of dragon fly from ear to ear letting everybody know that someone, one night, had seen Frusina leaving the pit house where Constantin used to sleep. And compassionate loose-tongued gossip had also reported the news to Badea as well.

Constantin's return was entirely inconsiderate, and so was the latest plan he had conceived of. In keeping with the destructive law of his soul, all the former projects had turned to dust, and a new one, shiny and illusive, had replaced them. Now his only dream was to elope with Frusina to the Bulgarian bank. He'd planned to obtain a passport on the names of Badea and Frusina and cross the river at a remoter point where nobody knew him. But he also needed some money so as to be able to reach Vrața to pope Karabaşef, so he thought of secretly selling a few acres from his share of the land to a willing neighbour. Besides this, and before it, he also had two more points to solve: tell Frusina she must needs accompany him and lull to sleep Badea, whom the gossip had made suspicious and morose.

Frusina seemed wavering; yet, more and more enslaved by passion, she gave way and started dreaming about the valleys of the Balkans. Constantin had pictured them to her according to Karabaşef's enthusiastic description. They would settle down in a garden at the foot of the Balkans, cultivate a few acres of roses, and live to the end of their lives just on love and the profit they'd obtain from the rose oil...

But with Badea things went the wrong way; hot quarrelling came up between the two brothers. Badea would blame Constantin for all his former life of an indolent man and an adventurer, and asked him to relieve him of his loving presence and go back to the barracks. If he was sick, he should go to the military hospital, for it was meant for soldiers. Constantin insolently retorted that he had come to his own fortune dishonestly speculated by Badea for such a long time, and that out of Fierăscu's entire heritage he ought to be permitted at least the pit house at the back of the yard, where in fact he had settled. On hearing him mention the pit house,

Badea got still more gloomy: gammer Anca's revelations suddenly seemed to strangle him, and he dropped the argument.

Deep in his heart, Badea was a gentle and wise man. The quarrels with his brother were hurting him and he didn't pay too much attention to the village gossip. Yet, he did have some apprehension, a vague, old, almost superstitious fear...Constantin was the son of that Turkish woman, Sultaneh! And that step mother, beautiful, cold, sad, carrying her Dinuț[22] at her breast, used to often appear in his childhood on the iconostasis of his memory as a madonna of ill omen; she still seemed the same to him. However, Badea, a wise man, kept seeing to his business and just took care not to leave too much money in the drawer of the shop counter.

It was vintage time, and Badea was expecting several casks of both new and old wine to arrive from Drăgăşani[23]. He had just got the news that a cask of wine had just arrived in Corabia at the station, so he decided to go and take it over on that very day. Frusina told him she'd like to join him on the trip as she wanted to buy herself a dress. Constantin was left behind in the pit house, lying on a shepherd's sheep skin greatcoat, his arms crossed under his nape, watching the bluish coils of smoke rising from the chimney. Outside, it was a typical October day, wet and foggy. He felt sorry Frusina hadn't stayed behind, but he knew the dress she wanted to order was the one in which she would elope to Bulgaria. They had only met here in the pit house in haste and hurry. Autumn and bad weather would gather people around their fireplaces. Yet, in the evening some of them would drop in at the pub as well. This was the most appropriate time when Frusina could sneak out of the house and run to the pit house. The difficulty and peril of these meetings, the corrosive waiting and tiresome plotting for the profit of an hour, half an hour or even just a few minutes of love-making kept fiercely whipping up the flesh and impatience of the two lovers. Frusina had saved a little money, and Constantin was expecting one thousand franks for three acres of land. He hoped to sell more of it later, through an intermediary. In Bulgaria, money was expensive and the people lived very cheaply. For the time being, he could get a job as a mechanic at some mill or factory. The main thing was that finally he should reach the

---

[22] Dinuț – diminutive from Constantin.

[23] Drăgăşani – famous vineyards in the north of Oltenia, southern province of Romania.

other bank with his beloved Frusina in his arms! Deserters weren't pursued there and – you couldn't help it! – desertions did occur every day. He would make it up with Muşat some time, on the soil of Bulgaria. The problem of the passport was a little harder, for the conditions to get one were now more difficult than before, yet, Constantin had firm promises from a clerk he was befriended with, that he'd get the precious document in two or three days. Oh, if only he had 10,000 lei right now…

If only about fifty gold coins bearing the image of emperor Constantine would emerge right now from this soil full of hidden treasures! But who could foretell the whims of luck, and who could tell what uncle John would hear when the gold-holding jug broke under his pickaxe!...

Today Badea was to bring home that cask of wine. There would be much crowding and ado/fussing about. Frusina would sneak out like a pussy cat and come running this way. But there still was a lot of time until then! And time passed hard when you were in love and the creature you loved wasn't within your reach.

With such thoughts, Constantin fell asleep on his sheep skin coat and woke up at dusk. Badea and Frusina had returned. The cask was in the kitchen of the pub. The people who had nothing to do at home had come to admire it and to attend the ceremony of descent to the cellar. Frusina ran up for a kiss and a hug, and to let him know she would be back later, as soon as she found an opportunity. Constantin kindled up the fire and warmed up the food Frusina had brought him secretly, for since he was on bad terms with Badea, he hadn't gone to table for two days. After eating, he sat there, head in his palms, by the coals that gave bursts of light before going to sleep in the ashes. The pit house was growing dark and a vaguely blood-stained twilight seemed to freeze on the fireplace.

To belie the waiting, Constantin lit a cigarette. But as he threw the butt, he saw two coals come alive at one end of the room.

" How come the cigarette butt got so far, and what is it that caught fire?"

Surprised, he got up to look at what was burning and to put it out with the poker. It lay on the same line with the fireplace, but in the opposite direction as related to the door, right in the place where in June the camomile-covered head of their bed had stood. But when he bent and was about to hit with the poker, he saw other two coals come to life, then another two.

" It must be some rotten wood" Constantin thought.

The light spread by the six coals turned into the light of six live, mysterious, glimmering stars, the light of six innocent violet-blue eyes, like the eyes of children. Then from each eye there sparkled bluish flames which flowed into one another, building up on the floor what seemed to be a pool of burning spirits, beneath which the six eyes gave a painful blink and struggled until they got consumed in the flame.

" A treasure!" flashed through Constantin's mind, " it's a treasure, flickering like this!"

And with feverish fingers he groped for the knife in order to plant it in the middle of the flame for a mark. But the flame suddenly burst and glittered in scores of bluish little peaks, as if above an entire bowl of spirits. Constantin froze stiff, his hand on the hilt of the knife.

There was a dance conveying a certain rhythm and meaning in all that lace-like violet-blue swarming. Each flame would undulate as if alive, each bluish gash would produce a woman-like shape with raised arms, waving hair and naked virginal breasts. And all those maiden-like flames were spurting, dancing and kept mingling in curves converging in the same point, where their arms got knit in a short reel of two or three rounds. Then all fell in a foaming, formless velvet; then they separated again, as they went on resuming and undoing this sort of choreographic tiara full of sapphires. But how much suavity, how many revelations in that dancing!

Yet, after composing seven or eight tiaras, instead of dancing maidens, there emerged from the bluish lava several long straight flames resembling gladii. Instead of a tiara, these gladii rushed together and suddenly built up a pyramid of military blades which shone for a moment, then collapsed in the lava. The next moment, the gladius-like flames rebuilt the pyramid, then again and again as if responding to a command.

This dance of the gladii also had a certain rhythm and meaning. When the seventh pyramid came up, disaster struck. Finally recovering his wits, Constantin thrust his knife in the middle of it, and the pyramid-shaping gladii broke and went out – except for three of them. So now the pyramid had only three violet-blue edges, on a basis of crushed and vaguely swarming yellow serpents. For a few moments, the three gladii rested tip to tip, then breaking up the rhythm and harmony ruling so far, they got mixed in a chaotic vehement fight. They fell, rose, fell again and rose again for the last time – impetuous, stormy and spinning in their tumult, like a whirligig with three fire horns. Then suddenly they broke up into splinters

on a bed of golden and burning embers...and the whole vision faded in the dark.

Mad with joy, Constantin threw an armful of dry faggots onto the fire, illuminating the pit house. Then from the back of the room he produced a pickaxe, barred the door with wooden bolt and began digging around the knife. When he had only dug three palms deep, the pickaxe seemed to hit a pot. Shaking in all his body and his chest hammered at by his heart beats, Constantin dropped the pickaxe and started digging with the knife.
Terrible disappointment! Instead of a pot, he produced from the hole a skull of incalculable age. He rolled it over on to the fireplace and took up the pickaxe again. Immediately there was another pot-like sound and a second skull appeared in the glow of the fire. Constantin set it beside the first and took up a spade, as he couldn't go on digging with the pickaxe any longer. Finally he dug up one more skull, but when he further tried the bottom of the hole, he found no earth, but a hard layer.

" It's bones again, I must have hit across some well filled with skeletons, and I will stay a pauper!"

But this time it was not another skull, it was a pot. Constantin dug around it almost epileptically and pulled it out. It was heavy, round-bellied and its mouth was covered with gravel. But because of the violence of his feelings, when he was about to set the pot onto the fireplace, he dropped it right on the blade of the pickaxe. The pot broke like an egg and scattered all around its shiny, smoking yolk! For it was full of gold! Over a hundred, over two hundred piercing eyes, first size stars of imperial "glories" of Constantine!

Constantin dashed upon it like a vulture upon its prey. It was the gold he had been dreaming about for such a long time! It was the treasure he had called upon with all his thoughts and impatience for years from under the ruins of ancient Sicibida! Those were the gold coins of emperor Constantine, as he had known them from the description of others, just like he'd imagined, flying as numerous as butterflies over the realm of his imagination and the daydreaming of an adventurer and a pseudo-artistic idler.

So, the dream had come true! The impossible had turned possible, sonorous and glowing! Luck appeared to him that evening like a solar, liberating archangel, through the door broken to splinters of his long imprisoned destiny!

There were mainly gold coins with the well-known face of Constantine, with some addition of silver and gold coins showing some alien figures. There were over four hundred gold pieces (Constantin kept collecting, counting, then got it all wrong and started counting anew), heavy, untouched and making up altogether a considerable fortune.

" Who's there?"

" Open, Constantin, it's me; who else could it be!"

" Frusina, ...we are rich! We are our own masters! Look, Frusina! Count, my dearest!...Tomorrow we'll cross the river to Bulgaria. The day after tomorrow we shall be in Sophia!"

But while Frusina, almost in a swoon, was falling into Constantin's arms, back in the pot house, gammer Anca – who'd stayed behind all the others – was just telling Badea, thrusting two needles of persuasion into his eyes:

" You may believe or not, and do whatever you want! But why not give it a try? Run over to Constantin's pit house, pretending you want to fetch something from there, and you will find Frusina behind the door...Or do it in a different, in an easier way: go and look for her all about the house, and see where you can find her!"

Sure of what she had told him, as she had been spying on Frusina, Anca left at once to let Badea make his choices. Badea put up the window shutter and rather unwillingly began to call Frusina. There was no answer.

" So it is true! Her ladyship is in the pit house with Constantin! I'm going to teach you a lesson! He pretends to be sick anyway, so let him lie for a month because of a good hiding! And you Frusina, sweetheart!...Wait a bit, sis, wait a bit!"

"Open the door, you cur! Come on, open it! Are you mocking my kindness and my home? Open the door, or I will break it into splinters!"

The bolt was weak and the door burst open. But Badea had hardly stepped in with his straw-like wrath and the stick he was grabbing in his hand when mad Constantin hit him straight on the forehead with the pickaxe.

" Cub of an odalisque!..." Badea stammered, falling face down in the splinters of the pot.

Within the narrow walls of Constantin's mind, there was a flash illuminating for an instant the depth and horror of the abyss gaping in a moment in front of him.

" What have you done, Constantin?...You've killed your brother!"

" So I did...But now it is over...Run and put on your fur coat, then we'll be off!"

He too put on his sheep skin coat, poured the accursed gold (from the pan he'd collected in) into a kerchief and hid it into his bosom. Then he took Frusina almost under his armpit and set off with her in the damp, compact night. They sneaked by the fences meeting nobody, then they descended the slope making for the Danube.

Constantin, who'd expected to leave any night, had kept a boat ready for them, hidden among the osiers.

Exhausted with emotion and slipping at every step on the muddy ground, Constantin and Frusina crept blindly ahead, snapping by the osiers, stumbling on weeds. Yet, Constantin knew the direction perfectly and they came out from the thicket right by the boat he'd prepared. He shouldered it and carefully set it on the water, then, with Frusina by his side, he began rowing as gently as he could. His idea was that he should rather let the boat drift with the stream close to the middle of the river so that they shouldn't come close to the piquet of the Bulgarian border guards.

But fate and the currents of the river drove them exactly in that direction!

The Bulgarian border guards, lying on the bank of the river, felt them approach and were piercing the dark with lynx-like eyes...

" Coje tam?"...Who's there, man?...Coje tam?"

What brought Constantin to his doom was exactly the fact that he was a soldier with no military honour and without conviction; when he'd learned the paragraph about guard, he'd refused to believe that a sentry had to obey regulations entirely and, after three unanswered questions, to open fire.

The night shook with the report. A bullet hit Frusina, who gave a shriek like a night bird and fell off the boat. And when Constantin tried to shout, another salvo passed through him and turned the boat over.

Back in the pit house, in the bleeding glow of dying embers, the three skulls on the fireplace were grinning satisfied. The accursed treasure had

brought three more skulls as an interest. One was right here, the other two – at the bottom of the Danube.

The next day, the authorities took up Badea's corpse from among the splinters of the Roman amphora. On his sallow and shattered forehead, half covered in clotted blood, a *Gloria Constantini* was shining brightly.

TO VULTURES

The ridges of the Pulley[24] could finally be made out in the distance on that sunny day now after so many rainy days. They looked clear and rugged like some crown made up of axes. The Pulley seemed to be crowding all around to build in its midst the hollow of the Iablonicioara[25], a remote, sheltered place inhabited by a handful of people.

On one side, the forest-covered wall of it was jagged so as to allow the steel-like waves of the Iablonicioara to pass through the crushed stone slabs and the beech trees. The spring of the stream lay far up in the mountains, beneath a rock, and the shepherds collected and directed it in gullies over the whole breadth of the clearing, then they let it flow over the tops of the fir trees below. Further down the slope, a few more brooks spouted from under the rocks to treble the size of the stream. Along its bank, the only gentler path wounded down to the few houses built up in this eagle's nest.

On that day, there was no cloud above and the huge mountains, which for so many days running had been fretting and releasing, from all their ridges ruffled to the sky, rains, thunderbolts and torrents, were now gentle, tenderly resting under the generous sun. Only up there in the sky, higher up than the tallest fir trees, eagles kept whirling ceaselessly, bathing their wings in the light and giving chills of deadly threat to the poultry around the fifteen or twenty houses at the bottom of the village.

Among these houses, the largest and the most thrifty one belonged to Danila, the head of the shepherds in that village, a newcomer on the high plain, yet, a great sheepfold chieftain now in his old age.

But right now, there was only one old, limping shepherd at home, busy mending the cedillas. The master was at the sheepfold up in the mountain, with all the other shepherds. It was the same in al the other hoses; only old men, women and children had remained around the fireplaces. The men in their prime and the youngsters, happy that the sunny weather was back, had all gone out with the sheep to the ridges, or down to the stream, to the

---

[24] Pulley – proper name of a mountain range.

[25] Iablanicioara – a mountain river in the Southern Carpathians.

villages strung along the valley. They were all shepherds and they usually left with cheese and sheep skin-loaded horses in order to return with loads of maize.

Another larger and richer-looking house was that of Păun Ozun, one of Dănilă's sons-in-law; the man was a stately Romanian lad, with the soul and body of a hero. He was not at home either, only his wife and the children were, as he had left the previous winter carrying a secret letter to Tudor Vladimirescu[26]. The letter was written on lamb skin was not so important, but the one who was bringing it was Păun Ozun, together with ten more highlanders, all of them skilled in using guns.

Old man Dănilă, the head of the shepherds in the Windlass, had been through much suffering and had crossed many fords of bitterness in his lifetime. He came from the eastern bank of the Olt[27]; three times had he made a fortune in his young age, and three times had it been swept away by the torrents of foreign invasions. Twice it had been the Turks to plunder it, and once the Russians. Lordly houses, rich households and sound establishments those had been indeed! But as the plough share cuts through the very heart of an ant hill, splitting up in an instant the citadel of those industrious workers, so did the blade of misfortune tear up three times in turn the very purpose and life Danila, the Romanian.
The third time when disaster struck him, he could save nothing of what he had. His folks had set off up the Jiu[28] the night before. There was only one watch-time to the dawn. When the roaring and the pistol reports drew near, he had to take refuge in a nearby coppice on the hill. And before sunrise, his own household, along with the entire village were struggling in flames.

Dănilă cried, then he climbed to the top of the mountains, never to descend again to see the plain and the oppression on it.

Up in the mountains, he became a shepherd after being three times through those Job-like afflictions, he found once more, beneath the ashes, the name of the Lord and the key to heavenly grace.

[26] Tudor Vladimirescu - the leader of the great uprising of the Romanian peasantry in Wallachia, in 1821..
[27] The Olt – large river separating Wallachia from Oltenia.
[28] The Jiu – river crossing Oltenia from the north to the south.

Year after year, Dănilă's flocks and his hired hands increased, he sponsored young couples and spread his kin and supremacy over several mountains. But now he had grown old, had lost his wife and was staying mostly by the springs of the Iablanicioara, above the houses he had built first, directing the shepherds and comforting his old age with an ecclesiastical breviary.

It was here, by the Iablanicioara, that tidings reached him about the death of Alexandru Şuţu[29], about Tudor Vladimirescu's shaking awake Oltenia and about the uprising that spread all over the country a call voicing the various and only too well-known evils and wrongs compelled upon her, about the wicked bishops and boyars, about the cruelty of the Greeks and the relief of from the oppressive imposts. Tudor was summoning the pandours, the mountain guards on the frontier and all who still had a spark of manliness left in their chests to life and arms!

Dănilă had come to be eighty years old now. He sighed and opened his heart to his son-in-law, Păun:

" Go in my stead and serve Tudor to your death. Your wife Agripina is my daughter, your kids are my grandchildren and my heirs. Go with a light heart and let the Lord take pity on your youth!"

Păun Ozun was his most beloved son-in-law. He had married Agripina, the old man's youngest daughter, and they had three children, Mariuca, Vlad and little Păunaş. But his father hadn't even seen Păunaş yet as he was only two months old, born after Easter that year.

Păun Ozun and his ten comrades, ten sturdy lads paid and equipped by old man Dănilă, had left at the end of January, whistling merrily, jumping from rock to rock on their way from the mountains to the plain.
Everywhere they kept meeting with group upon group of stalwart fellows, all determined and rugged men, ignorant of homesickness and regrets, who had set out with guns, scythes or forks on their backs to join the banner raised by lord Tudor.

A lot of time had passed since Ozun had left. Being a woman, Agripina didn't have a heart like his. When she finished her housework and especially whenever she set Păunaş to her breast, the thoughts to her husband, the concern and even fear for his fate would surround and sadden

[29] Alexandru Şuţu – prince of Wallachia in the first half of the 19th century.

her. At such times, she'd put a sheepskin coat on her shoulders and, holding the baby tight and her breast, she'd run to her father. Old man Dănilă was usually sitting on the porch , or in the house, watching how the goats were being milked, or how the snow was melting on the peaks, talking to the shepherds or the breviary. As soon as he saw Agripina, with the sheepskin coat bulging over the burden in her arms, his face would brighten up.

" What kind of present are you bringing me?"

" Well, father, only these evil thoughts of mine that never cease crowing in my heart!"

" Dear girl, you don't even realize what you've brought me! It's the dearest little ram in our flock! You're bringing me the one that shall rule in forty or fifty years all over the plains liberated by Tudor!"

One day, he told Agripina with flaming eyes:

" Stop being a wench, Agripina! Tudor, along with Păun, are in control in Bucharest. The native boyars have all sided with Tudor. Whatever might happen from now on will come from the Lord!"

This piece of news was rather old and Dănilă was telling it to Agripina once more at the beginning of May; within his heart, he was sad and downcast, because the grand news he was expecting wouldn't come at all.

For an entire month, the mountain wrapped itself in mists and rotten rains. The paths turned into torrents, and no tidings came from the villages down the valley. And see, after so many weeks, the rains stopped. The sky healed and shook off its white and grey wrappings. The mountain went on fuming for a while. The Iablanicioara cleared up and finally retired to its tortuous, deep riverbed.

On that day, old man Dănilă had climbed to the sheepfold early in the morning. It was rather far up there and the old man could only climb to the place on horseback. Agripina had started the day neither merrier nor sadder than usual. The sheep were away in the mountains along with Dănilă's. Mariuca and Vlad were playing at the back of the garden, that is close to the stream of Iablanicioara and just beneath the last beeches thrust into the slope of the mountain, for Ozun's house and garden stood on the edge of the hamlet. The slope was terribly steep and the stream, after whirling and struggling above among the sharp crags, was coming down straight, breaking from rock to rock and noisily crushing against each bolder its

waves which looked rather like snow balls than water. Mariuca and Vlad kept teasing and pushing each other until they got into the globe of humid powder rising from the fall of the torrent; when they felt splashed in the eyes, they ran back again with great fun. Agripina had just started making the hominy in the cast iron kettle. It was almost noon and she kept stirring hastily, casting frequent looks at Păunaş, who was asleep in the cradle.

The baby was sleeping on the threshold, his head in the shade and his little body tight in his napkins bathed in the sunrays. He was pink-white in the cheeks, like roses which are neither white nor red, and he was sucking in his dream. Beyond her sleeping little gem, through the open door, Agripina could see a few wooden log houses, a stretch of old Dănilă's yard, the road crossing the village and the hollow of the Iablanicioara; beyond the black wings of the fir tree forest casting deep shade upon the blooming hay fields, she could see the axe edges of the Windlass biting into the blue sky. There was no other noise but the bubbling of the kettle on its trivet, the dull roar of the stream behind the house and, by the backwater, the laughter of the two children, or the mooing of some calf separated from its mother.

In the middle of this peace, this fountain between mountains caressed by the sun, a desperate shriek rang suddenly:

" Run! Run! The Turks are coming!"

Agripina gave a start and turned her head to the open door. The terror of the news suddenly turned into the terror of facts seen through her own eyes! From the bottom of the valley of the Iablanicioara, horse manes emerged in an instant and behind each mane there was a Turk's head. White little clouds soon rose in the air and ravines rang with the patter of pistol reports. Agripina dashed to Păunaş, lifted him from the cradle, put him in her lap and burst into the garden through the back door. She sneaked by the stables, reached Mariuca and Vlad and dragged them with her; then she started climbing the slope from one beech to another.

Surprised, the children began questioning her:

" Where are we going, mother?"

" Why don't we eat, mother?"

Agripina found no time to answer. From down there in the village, shrieks, neighing and more shots rose, piercing the heights above.

" What is it, mother? Who's screaming? Who's firing those pistols?"

Gasping, Agripina answered:

" It's the Turks, my dear ones! The heathen Turks gran'dad used to tell you about! Let us run as hard as we can up to the sheepfold!"

The path Agripina had chosen was indeed the shortest, but the hardest as well. It took a powerful man to conquer the chest of the mountain, not a woman carrying a baby in her lap and dragging another two after her. Păun Ozun himself seldom climbed the slope this way, as it was a terrible path that drove a man out of breath step by step; it was following the leaps of the Iablanicioara, and it resembled more a ladder of boulders and roots than a path.

Agripina was climbing hard, her breast struggling as hard as the torrent flowing close by; she was helping both Mariuca and Vlad, while also protecting Păunaş in her lap lest she hit him against stones or branches. It would have been wise for her to turn to the right or to the left and hide in the forest ruling all around her, equally dark everywhere. But the baby had woken up and started crying, and it seemed to Agripina that only the roar of the stream granted enough cover for his screaming. Crammed in the lap, the little one, jolted about and hungry as he was, kept screaming at the top of his voice, kicking with both his little feet and hands against the shirt Agripina had rolled up and tied at the belt. Besides all this, Agripina's ears were ringing with the shrieks and shots back in the valley, while the roar of the wild stream wouldn't allow her to make sure whether she was or not.

Furthermore. Agripina was aware that there must have been other women in the village who'd fled to the forest and that the currish Turks must have started in pursuit. Where should she hide, wasting time right now when the fire was burning at her heels? She'd rather go on struggling until her heart burst within her chest! When she reached the sheepfold, she could as well collapse and die; her kids would have been safe. They were Paun's flesh and blood, the fruit of their love, the apples of Dănilă's eyes! If the Turks caught her, they would rape her and perhaps let her live, but they would certainly smash her kids against the rocks! How could she face her father's question: " What have you done with the children? Where is my hope and only comfort?"...Better go on climbing, climbing! She mustn't give up before seeing at least the little clearing beneath the sheepfold and then, even if she dropped dead, Mariuca, Vlad and Păunaş would have escaped alive. Their crying would be heard from the sheepfold,

the shepherds would certainly come and find them...Oh, but there still was such a long way to the clearing!...

Mariuca was seven, Vlad was only five years old. They soon became exhausted and began crying.

„ Mother, we are hungry!"

Vlad, who was rather plump, with a flushed face soaked in sweat, fell to the ground like a poppy mown down by rain. Agripina had to stop on the spot. Păunaş had kept on struggling in her lap until he'd got numb and fallen asleep again, with his fingers in his mouth. Agripina strained her ears so as to hear through the noise and cracks of the stream, but she could make out no sound. She dipped her hands in the foam of the stream, splashed her eyes with several handfuls of water, which as much as throwing a drop onto burning embers; then she took Vlad up on her back. Agripina was a sturdy woman indeed, she was young and robust, yet, the burden she was struggling with was beyond the powers of a woman. She was carrying Vlad on her back, Păunaş in her lap, while Mariuca, dizzy with exhaustion, was clinging to the end of her mother's belt. Agripina began to stagger like a cow hit between the horns. The trees around her seemed to be throbbing and turning red. An awful thirst was scorching her throat and entrails. Her thoughts seemed to be melting in her head. She felt like flinging herself into the snow-like foams produced at the whirls of the Iablanicioara to drain the torrent at one gulp, but she still had enough sense left to realize that one drink would have made her collapse as if stricken by thunderbolt, the children would be lost and all her pains so far would be in vain. A curtain of blood and madness was slowly drowning her brains. The whole forest seemed to be burning within her chest and the beats of her heart felt like as many red-hot boulders jumping and hammering at her ribs. She stopped from time to time, her hands grabbing some root or hanging branch, and her chest was rattling like bellows. She'd put Vlad down, knot the lap of her shirt anew and press her eyes back into their sockets with her fists. And she was thirsty! She was very thirsty! She'd wet her tongue and resume her climbing. But the sinews of her legs were trembling, her breasts were swollen and gave her terrible stings. Knocked about all the time, Păunaş began crying again, but now he could hardly whimper. The permanent bumping had made him dizzy, while hunger almost made him swoon. And there still was some stretch to that clearing! Mariuca let the end of the belt slip from her hands and fell crumpled onto

the wet leaves shed the previous autumn. Agripina took Mariuca on her back and as Vlad had now recovered a little, she tied him to the end of her belt. At that moment, through the moving leaves, Agripina caught sight of the Bracinelu, the mass of rocks skirted by fir trees where old man Dănilă's sheepfold was located.

" Blessed be You, Holy Mother!"

Right beneath those rocks there was a clearing where Dănilă had gathered the hay they'd mown from the ridge; a few haystacks from the previous year were always left there. With blind frenzy, Agripina strained her remaining powers and stepped out of the forest at the end of the slope, in that clearing where the haystacks stood. The clearing was deserted, yet, if the Turks had taken the path of the sheep, they were supposed to turn up at about the same time.

The rumbling of the Iablanicioara had almost fainted now. The place lay in deep silence. High up in the endless blue of the sky, eagles went on wheeling with tireless majesty.

Agripina fell down in the shade of a stack and listened as attentively as the riot of her blood and the hammering of her heart would allow it. She could hear nothing. Then it crossed her mind:

" Father is unaware of the danger! The shepherds must be scattered all around the place, so the Turks are going to fall upon them unawares!
I have to go on up to the sheepfold!"

Păunaş was asleep again, sighing in his slumber every now and then.

" Sleep on, mummy's darling, for at this time my milk is nothing but burning poison. I will set you at a goat's udder."

Agripina tried to rise. A thousand daggers stabbed her entire body, but especially her breasts. She had run out of strength! She would have to creep! What should she do with the children...By now, Mariuca and Vlad had recovered to a certain extent.

" We are hungry, mother! Let us hurry to gran'dad, to the sheepfold!"

From here on, the slope was gentle as the path went round coiling by the Bracinelu.

" Mother cannot take you further. I have no strength left..."

" We can go by ourselves, mum!"

Agripina was feeling very bad now. The mountains and the woods were turning with her and the whole weight of her body tipped over to her head,

like the water in a bottle when you turn it upside down. Nevertheless, she could still think clearly:

" The milk is rising to my head...!"

She grabbed the sleeping baby, wrapped him up in his napkins and in her apron, then she dug a shelter for him into the haystack. She put in the baby and crammed back some of the hay to cover him up. Then she set out with Vlad and Mariuca, walking as if crazy, without saying one word and unaware of them.

In the meantime, old man Dănilă was waiting at the sheepfold for his shepherds to descend to water the sheep. He had taken the pistol reports he'd heard for some shepherd's joke and had forgotten about them altogether. His eyes erring over the ridges to the east, the old man was thinking far away of Tudor, of Păun and Bucharest, where the brave leader seemed to have vanished like in a tomb.

„ Where might Tudor and his men be? Are they still in Bucharest, or somewhere else? What have they been doing for such a long time?"

The anxiety of the old man was increasing as he kept staring at the cloudless sky and the ever lower and hazier vaults of the highland spreading in the distance, and so much the more as his old age wouldn't allow him to jump on horseback and confront the world.

Taken up with such thoughts, he heard the weeping of a child behind the fold. He stood up and looked over the pens, his hands raised to his eyes. What could this mean? It was Mariuca. A bit further behind her came Vlad, and still further there came a woman who could only be Agripina, but with the gait of an insane creature.

Mariuca fell to the bosom of the old man and told him, crying bitterly:

" The Turks came to the village, gran'pa! Mother took us by the hand and brought us up to the clearing...There she hid Păunaş in the hay and turned mad on us...She doesn't want to see or hear us any more!"

Bluish-red in the face, her shirt torn on her breasts as swollen as a bagpipe, Agripina was coming, waving her hands and head as she came.

Dănilă grasped everything in an instant. The shepherds were closing in from all directions at the head of their flocks. Dănilă picked up his horn and blew the signal of distress: " Come running, boys!"

Among the first to arrive was Dragomir Ozun, Păun's senior brother; he also was a sort of doctor in his way and knew how to bleed somebody.

Agripina had collapsed in the fold, as soft as a goat torn by wolves. Dănilă left her in Dragomir's care, while he immediately set off with the young shepherds armed with guns down the slope towards the clearing; he also took Mariuca in the saddle with him.

A majestic silence was ruling over the world. One could only hear the more and more remote sound of the sheep bells above. Thought after thought – clouds and ravens – were crossing Dănilă's mind. What were the Turks looking for up here? When did they come, borne by what gale?...If ultimately they want our skins, we'll sell them as dearly as we can! But the road was deserted down the slope and no noise came from down there...

When they reached the clearing, Mariuca pointed with her finger:

„ That's the stack in which mother hid Păunaş."

"... She must have hidden him somewhere else, gran'pa's little girl!"

The hay with which Agripina had covered up the hole she'd dug under the stack was scattered all about the place and Păunaş was nowhere. The eyes of the shepherds fell upon some rags spread all over the clearing. They ran to them. It was Agripina's apron and the napkins of the baby, now full of blood, while all over the place, in the grass, there was a vast scattering of grey feathers and down, suggesting a scuffle between vultures.

Those prey birds of the sky had descended in the clearing and had snatched Păunaş from the labour of weeping, the pains of hunger and all the laments and torture of a human life among an unfortunate people enslaved for such a long time.

Dănilă cried for the second time in his life. The chill of terrible forebodings stabbed him to the heart. Looking eastward (and Târgovişte[30]lay in that direction), looking southward (and Drăgăşani[31] was located in that direction), his fur cap in his hand, the old man cried in front of heaven:

" Put an end, oh Lord, to our misery! So much oblation ought to have satisfied Your Holiness! So much waste, so much plunder by vultures from

[30] Târgovişte – former capital city of Wallachia, where Tudor Vladimirescu was assassinated.

[31] Drăgăşani – the name of a famous vineyard and a locality where a battle was fought by the Greek rebels and the Turks.

the sap of this poor country and from our own flesh should do! Let it suffice!"

LIVIU REBREANU (1885 – 1944) was the first among the 14 children of a village schoolmaster in Transylvania. He was an officer of the Hungarian army until 1908, when his first short story was published in Sibiu (*Codrea – The Voice of the Heart).* It was then that he started planning the vast prose epic of the Romanian village he later achieved in his novels *Ion* (1920) and *The Uprising* (1932). He excelled in both short stories and novels; his first volume, *Torments*, appeared in 1912 and was followed by *The Rakes* and *A Confession* (1916 – 1917). He translated, in 1917 a volume of Tchechkov's novellas, *The Wench's Mouth*, then, in 1918 - 1919 he published Romanian variants of short stories by Tolstoy and Gorki. His three-act comedy *The Quadrille* was acted at the National Theatre in Bucharest, then, in the same year, 1919, he published the autobiographical writing *The Ordeal.* Some other plays he wrote were *The Envelope* and *The Apostles.* He was also an active and fervent theatrical chronicler and, in a later period in his life, he led the National Theatre in Bucharest. But Rebreanu only became a great name in Romanian literature after his novel *Ion*, a best-seller amply debated upon by critics, followed by *The Forest of the Hanged* (1922). He was elected president of the Romanian Writers' Society, in 1925, when his novel *Adam and Eve* also appeared. His next great novel, *Ciuleandra*, appeared in 1927, followed in 1929 by *The Lord of the Mountains*, a romantic memento of the peasants' uprising led by Horia. In the same year, he was awarded the National Prize for Prose. *The Uprising*, (1932), consecrates him as a classic of Romanian literature and is followed by *Embers*, (1934), *The Gorilla,* (1938), and *Both* (1940). The year of this last novel is the year of his reception to the Academy.

"Let's go, Yitzhak!"

"Let's, corporal, sir!"

They set off, the corporal in front, Yitzhak after him, through the deserted defence trench, in which in which the snow had built drifts, covering the shell-ravaged earth clods.

They were walking carefully, stepping only in the deep and frozen footprints of some patrol of the previous day; they'd duck both heads and backs lest the enemy's eyes, watching from the left, discover them, or they be hit by the bullets which cracked every now and then and whizzed by, like shrieks, making the high sorrows floating benumbed in the gloomy air shiver. They kept walking on, breathing more and more heavily, then sweating...

First they turned right, then again ahead, and then they suddenly found themselves on the edge of the fir tree forest, which, thick and tangled, climbed up a steep slope. At that moment, the corporal stopped so abruptly that Yitzhak Strul, who was following him closely, like some faithful shadow, was on the point of bumping into him.

"Let us take a little rest!" the corporal whispered without looking at Yitzhak.

"Let's rest, corporal, sir!" the soldier murmured too; he at once let go of his gun slip in the snow and began to wipe the sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his great coat, while he prankishly/playfully pushed his uniform cap, too tight on his head, to his nape. White steam rose from his hair and mouth, wrapping up his head in a sort of fog, which kept scattering in the petrified frost.

Silent and thoughtful, the corporal too was breathing out waterspouts of fatigue. He too wanted to dry the streams of perspiration, raised his hand, yet he changed his mind halfway, and he only stuffed his cap down to his eyes, while casting a hesitating glance at his mate. But when Yitzhak, on feeling his look, turned to him interrogatingly, the corporal shunned his eyes as if frightened, pretending he was assessing the way they had covered.

" He's so morose today," Yitzhak thought, while lazily shouldering his rifle; he had cooled down a little.

Their footprints showed behind them like some ever-smaller dark stains on the ridge of that hill covered up in snow like in an endless white bed sheet. The parapet of the trench was winding like some grey wrinkle, here and there broken, and finally getting lost in the distance. The brittle snow mastered the whole landscape, so white that, if one looked at it for some time, it would make one's eyes smart. But the sky looked indifferent and gloomy; it descended very low, as if intending to crush the earth. An oppressive sadness seemed to be wandering in the air and would penetrate deeper in the souls than the all-inclusive frost.

A few scattered black trees, their branches naked, like some sick people begging for forgiveness, kept watch as if petrified under the burden of solitude.

" We haven't seen the sun for ages" Yitzhak said suddenly, bored with so much silence which had begun oppressing him.

Although he'd spoken almost in a whisper, his voice rang harsh and imperative, breaking the silence of the forest like the beat of a heavy wing. An old fir tree gave a frightened start and shook off the snow on its branches; the snow sifted down noiselessly on to the white layer...The corporal turned to Yitzhak as if the latter's voice had awakened him from some raving.

" What did you say?"

" The sun, I said, hasn't shown up for a long time ..." the soldier resumed, looking at him with merry eyes. " Is it late, I wonder, corporal sir? Lest night catch us out here in these deserted places..."

" Night?" the corporal murmured, his head bent to the ground, so that he seemed to be talking from a cavern. " Only God knows what might happen until dark..."

The joy gently got extinct in Yitzhak's eyes. The voice of the corporal, strange and trembling a little, leaked down to his heart like a sort of vague threat. He would have liked to go on talking for a while, but his courage faded in his throat. Then, in the grip of confusion, he began wiping off his perspiration, but this time with his naked palm. First his forehead, then his nape and finally his neck. He caressed at length his neck especially, as if it had been the part of his body he liked best. He had a long skinny neck with swollen veins, the skin on it very red and a little wrinkled, stained with

brown freckles as big as smallpox traces. Thin, dirty, brick-collared hair began showing beneath his chin; it also covered his jaws, mixing with the moustache and climbing up his cheeks to his lively eyes, which looked permanently, frightened. His thin, hooked, domineering nose abruptly rose in the middle of the hairy, russet face, lending it a merry aspect' even when his mouth and eyes were full of sadness. Yet, his head seemed too big for his weak, stunted body, and you'd wonder how the gross military uniform, the sack on his back and the heavy gun didn't break it down...

The corporal looked around trying to decide which way they were to go. The footprints they had been following so far were getting round the forest on the right. He scratched his head, spat and cast a reproachful glance at Yitzhak... Finally, he made up his mind and turned left, keeping close to the skirt of the forest. He was walking with rare steps, as if wanting to arrive later at a spot they, however, had to reach in the end.

Yitzhak Strul was following him quickly, changing from time to time the burden of the gun from one shoulder to the other. The silence darkened his state of mind more and more, compelling him to think. He was talkative by nature and especially now he felt a painful need to talk, maybe just because the corporal was so sullen and had such a queer look about him.

"Why does this man keep so silent?" The question would keep piercing his mind like a twinge.

In the beginning, Yitzhak had been proud he'd been the one chosen to accompany corporal Ion Ghioaga on this scouting mission. They had been on such missions many times before and had done quite well. With Ghioaga he'd have gone even into the depth of hell with no fear at all. But this time the corporal acted as if he were a stranger. He'd never been so sour before. Obviously this mission was more dangerous than any before, since even the corporal seemed confused and gloomy. Why didn't they build up a strong patrol, as it ought to be done? How rash to send out only the two of them if they had to face who knows what sorts of hardships! This would mean going of your own will and uselessly into the very jaws of death... Yitzhak Strul gave a shudder, and looked more carefully to the right, then to the left, to realize where the corporal was taking him. He soon understood that they were heading for the lines of the enemy; yet, at the same time they also seemed to be returning. What was this? They wouldn't possibly return through the firing lines, would they, so that they

might be shot by their own people?... He got scared. His beard started trembling so that he tried in vain to keep his jaws tight.

However, it was the obstinate silence of the corporal that anguished him more. He was growing surer and surer that this silence must have some reason. Ghioaga was known to be quite a jester, famous in the whole battalion for never losing his nerve and high spirits, not even in the most dreadful moments, that he'd go out to storm with his cap aslant and yelling like at wedding parties, making the soldiers laugh and forget about danger... And Yitzhak knew him well from back home in Falticeni, where he himself had a small inn with a yard wide enough to shelter on Thursdays, the fair days in those parts, the peasants who'd come to sell and buy. For ten years now, Ghioaga used to put up at Yitzhak's, so that they'd come to be quite friendly, and used to help one another in trouble, as people will do. Two years before, right by this time of the year, in the dead of winter , when Ghioaga had bought his oxen and didn't have enough cash, Yitzhak had come to his rescue like a brother, and out of all his poverty, had lent him four gold coins, for him not to miss the bargain. True, he couldn't return the debt down to this day, but it didn't matter, for Ghioaga, too, was a poor man with five children and no land... Now Ghioaga had been made a corporal, while Yitzhak had stayed a mere soldier, as he was too scrawny and the army didn't enlist him, but late, when the war made them ignore how hale a man was, but sent everybody to the fire lines. But even at the front they got along like two friends, yet, Yitzhak would show the corporal the due respect...

"See, Yitzhak, we've come a long way down here and I still haven't paid you that debt!... My God, how come that I didn't pay it back to you?"

The corporal had spoken up so suddenly and with so much pain in his voice that Yitzhak got frightened as if he had heard a curse. He only answered after a pause, in a very low voice, trying to conceal his anguish:

"Let it be, Ion, there is enough time ahead for you to pay it back, if only we get away alive!"

"Yes, right you are, if we get away alive..." – Ghioaga murmured with a hoarse angry voice, which closed the discussion like a hot seal.

Yitzhak's thoughts started racing wildly, a strange kind of fear gradually taking hold of his soul. He wondered why the corporal was torturing himself, just like him. At the moment when the four gold coins

had come to his mind, the corporal too had flung at him those words about the debt. Why, after all, should he feel sorry right now?

There was something fishy at work here... He didn't even dare imagine what it could be. But he felt so lonely as he'd never felt before. In vain did he try to calm down and comfort himself with the thought that he was getting scared of mere flashes in the pan. Deep in his heart, fear was writhing ever more painfully. He felt as though he'd woken up in the middle of the night, by himself, with no defence, among robbers determined to kill him...

Yitzhak Strul wasn't born a brave man/wasn't a brave man by nature, he was fearful and suspicious. Even if a child addressed him harshly, his beard would start trembling and his heart pounding. Back in Falticeni, they had nicknamed him "the rabbit". At the moment when the doctor on the recruiting commission/board had said "rather weak, but still able", Yitzhak had fainted. The very thought that he'd have to go to war frightened him to death. He was convinced he would die on hearing the first cannon thunder. A day before he had left the garrison, he had taken leave from his wife, from his children, from all his neighbours and acquaintances, crying like a helpless old crone... His luck was that, as soon as they arrived at the front, they were sent straight into the fire. As he didn't dare to fire his gun, he stood pressed against the wall of the trench, ducking and looking now to the right, now to the left, to see how others were dying. Then, on seeing the others, his fear began to subside. "He who has life ahead will get away," he said to himself. Even at war, people wouldn't die so easily and not all the bullets would hit their target. Then he put out his head to see whom he was to fight. Seeing nobody in front of him, he was surprised and calmed down a bit more: " What sort of war is this when you can't even see whom you're killing?" However, he kept hearing the enemy's bullets whizzing by above his head, and at times he could see some clod of earth go to pieces right in front of him with a rattling noise of knives. Then close by his side he heard a kind of thud, as if a heavy sack had fallen to the ground. He turned his eyes. A young lad had collapsed to the bottom of the trench, his head all covered in blood... Yitzhak suddenly grew mad as if hit on the forehead with a mace, he raised his rifle and began firing wildly to avenge his comrade about whom he only knew he came from a village near Falticeni and that his mother was a widow. As he grew hotter and hotter, he felt his chest swell and his arms grow stronger. His heart was throbbing

with a confidence and a pride he'd never experienced before...Yet, a bit later when he heard the order to advance, fear overwhelmed him again and seemed even worse than before. All of a sudden, hesitation and all kinds of thoughts started haunting him anew. In a trench you are somehow sheltered, while in the open field you have to grab death by the throat and go ahead. Fear from the court martial rather than his own drive was urging him to climb out from the trench, and yet he couldn't as his legs felt wooden and he was unable to move them. At that moment he caught sight of corporal Ghioaga as he jumped out of the trench and started ahead like an arrow, his nose proudly up in the wind...On seeing Ghioaga acting like this, Yitzhak felt a warm thrill pierce his heart and his legs became as light as feathers. He jumped over the parapet at once as if wanting to compete with the corporal. And while he was racing ahead, his heart was gradually filling with anger and a strange lust to crush everybody who'd stand up in front of him...

Little by little he got used to the war too, the way people will grow used to anything in the world. He did keep thinking of death, but now it seemed less frightening than before. He used to live now fear-ridden, now driven by a savage recklessness. The closer he felt the danger, the more courage he could summon, while remote danger would make his heart shrink. In battle he'd work himself up to madness, close his eyes and hit wildly to the right and the left as if out of his mind... He gradually gained a sort of confidence, which gave him a manly appearance. Once after a bayonet charge, the major himself praised him in front of the whole battalion. Another time, when a bullet had made a hole in his left calf and he'd stayed behind to bandage his wound by himself, the commander of the brigade, a general in front of whom the regiments used to tremble, on passing by him, shook his hand, asked what his name was and said to him: " Bravo, Yitzhak!" He wrote to his wife, too, about all this, so that the woman got scared and sent him a postcard, entreating him to slow down his exploits, lest his children remain destitute on the roads. But Yitzhak just smiled at his wife's worry. He could see she still imagined him the way he'd been on departure. She couldn't even imagine that her Yitzhak was now yearning for a full acknowledgement of his valour in front of the enemy. How could the woman suspect it, when he himself would cherish this desire only secretly, lest some more waggish comrade of his might poke fun at him? Nevertheless, he kept ceaselessly dreaming of a

decoration, as if his entire future depended on it. That was why he always crowded whenever some dangerous task was at hand. His heart trembled, fear used to make him shake and yet he couldn't give up. He often imagined how the whole suburb would marvel to see him with a medal on his chest... It seemed to him he could hear everybody whisper: "Look at the rabbit... what a brave man that one!"

Yet, Yitzhak's hopes went to the dogs when the commander of the company was replaced. The new lieutenant said no gentle word to him in two weeks. He'd swear at Yitzhak with no reason, kept rebuking him, and two days before he even hit him on the head with his horsewhip. He couldn't please the officer no matter how hard he strove. The lieutenant's harshness broke Yitzhak's confidence. Fear nestled again in his soul and took more and more control of it. The looks of his commander frightened and stung him like poisoned arrows. Finally, the suspicion that the lieutenant wanted him killed came up in his mind. And the more he struggled to shake it off, the deeper this feeling dug itself into his soul...

"Maybe right now we are heading for our death," Yitzhak thought suddenly, his eyes blinking as if he had been woken from a dream.

They were walking on... with rare steps, at times sinking waist-deep into the crystal-pure snow, or causing the heavy snow burden fall from the branches of the quiet fir trees among which they kept walking on, exhausted and dejected.

"How silent the corporal keeps!" Yitzhak thought, carefully stepping in his tracks. "Perhaps he knows something and won't tell me..."

He began watching the corporal's movements. He could only see the man's back: the cap pulled deep down on his head, the worn-out knapsack hanging loosely on his shoulders, the gun, hanging with its muzzle directed right his way by chance, the bread sack, from which he could hear the dull rattle of the cartridge magazines... Then he suddenly felt a great loneliness take hold of him. He felt an invisible hand was pressing upon his shoulders, as if trying to stop him... He quickened his pace until he came abreast with the corporal. He calmed down a little and turned his eyes to Ghioaga, expecting at least one word that might put an end to his anxiety. But the corporal kept on walking ahead with the same heavy, exhausted gait, as if he hadn't noticed Yitzhak had come by his side. His dried-up face with its swarthy skin stretching over the bones looked tortured and dark with thoughts. At times his moustaches gave a twitch, making the

frown on his face look still fiercer for an instant. Yitzhak was striving to guess what was going on in the corporal's mind. And because what he could read terrified him, he'd cheat on himself, pretending he understood nothing and wondering at his obstinate dumbness.

"Why, after all, doesn't he open his mouth?" Yitzhak murmured, clearly feeling that this question was spreading like hot water, trying to penetrate the tiniest recesses of his mind, yet incapable of digging out the comforting answer.

Suddenly, the corporal stopped again, without uttering a word, panting with fatigue.

The gloomy thoughts in Yitzhak's mind scattered at once, like a flight of shy birds, at which some child had shot a stone with his sling. He confidently looked into the corporal's thought-ridden face and he kept up his confidence even when Ghioaga turned his head away, as if afraid to meet his eyes.

"Where are we going, after all, corporal sir?" Yitzhak asked, sticking his question on to the lips of the corporal so insistently that it seemed he wanted to squeeze out at any price an answer that might quench his anxiety.

Ghioaga cast a long look at him... Pity was dripping out of his eyes, so much the more obvious as he was striving to hide it. After a while he said quietly:

"Let it be, you'll see... Let it be, don't hurry, for..."

He stopped, his mouth gaping as though he had wanted to add something so weighty that he was afraid it might choke his voice and fray his lips.

At that moment, Yitzhak felt how sweat was flowing down his cheeks, through his greasy beard, down his chest, all over his body; it was hot sweat which, nevertheless, could not protect him against the terrible cold, which suddenly seemed to sneak in through all his pores and rushed to freeze his heart.

And this cold seemed to come from the corporal's eyes and his gaping mouth, where one could see no tongue or teeth, just a round, black hole, like the muzzle of a loaded gun from which death was lurking.

"All right, corporal sir... All right, sir..." Yitzhak stuttered with an ever-fainter voice, as if it had been filtered through ever-thicker sieves.

Yet, his eyes remained hanging on to the cheeks of the corporal, wandering, tired, like some shy prayer. He had stopped yearning to find out anything. The lieutenant came to his mind and, at the same time, a sort of childish kindness flooded his soul. He felt his mind was empty of all thoughts, his heart tense with impatience. His life was hanging on a yarn so thin that any stir could have put an end to it.

"Come on, Yitzhak, let's go!" the corporal said, shaking off the soldier's look, with a voice sweetened by pity.

Yitzhak gave a start, as if stabbed with a knife in the chest. This gentle voice terrified him like a sentence of conviction. He began to pant heavily and, stepping back more and more horrified, he suddenly roared as if crying out for help:

"I'm not going any further, corporal sir!... I can't, corporal, sir!... Not even if I know you'll kill me, corporal, sir!"

"Be careful, Yitzhak! Be very careful!" Ghioaga shouted at once, his eyes burning with a strange glimmer.

The soldier clearly saw the flash in the corporal's eyes and understood its meaning. But fury had set his blood astir, as it always did in the whirl of great danger. The only thing he could now feel was a blind drive to defend himself with all his might and thus to fight off the threat before it touched him. So he kept roaring, covering the corporal's voice and withdrawing, his eyes permanently in those of the corporal, facing him... But as he was stepping backwards, he stumbled on a dead root and rolled suddenly into a hole in the snow. The unexpected fall put out his anger in an instant, an overwhelming fear replacing it. Now he realized there was no escape for him and that he had to accept, with no useless opposition, whatever his fate might bring him. From the bottom of the hole he shouted terrified, while trying hard to rise:

"Wait, corporal, sir! I'm coming! Stay calm, for I'm coming!"

A certain thought had crossed the corporal's mind at the moment when Yitzhak had fallen. He had even given a jerk to the sling of his gun, meaning to carry out this decisive thought. But on seeing Yitzhak's snow-covered boots waving in the air, the shadow of a laughter lit up his face, melting the frown on it and chasing away the temptation.

"Come, come on! Follow me!" he said and set out without waiting for the soldier.

Yitzhak climbed out of the hole, shook off the snow and ran after Ghioaga, more reassured, as if the jolt had scattered his worries…

Now they were walking more quickly and freshly, both feeling they had escaped a danger. The corporal's tongue came to life and he kept talking, so that Yitzhak could hardly provide answers to his questions. Yet, they were only speaking about merry happenings that had occurred years before, small events, which would string up in people's lives like shiny, cheap beads on a tow thread. They were avoiding on purpose any approach to the gates of war, as if here their lives had got stuck in sticky mud from which they were unable to free themselves. They were talking loudly, so as to cover up the thought that kept seething in their souls, as if trying to spoil their pleasure. From time to time, the corporal would give a laugh, but it sounded so false that Yitzhak would turn to him and start laughing as falsely as his interlocutor…

Now the forest was growing thinner, it scattered into solitary trees, thrust at random into the ground, as if by some supernatural hand. Dusk was descending unawares, gradually darkening the air and laying a grey fog over the white of the frozen snow.

Oppressive silence wrapped up again the two soldiers, little by little. Again they stopped, looking at one another, and their faces were getting gloomy. They'd still utter a word now and then, but they were watching one another like two secret enemies. Twilight oppressed their souls and encouraged their ever-darker thoughts.

Yitzhak would often look all around, as if expecting the blow to come down upon him any moment. The very prattle of the corporal pierced his heart with a foreboding of death so sure that, when they stopped at the edge of the forest, he suddenly asked:

"Do you have orders to kill me, corporal sir?"

Ghioaga stopped his speech, as if he'd cut it with a thin thread, and answered with no surprise in his voice:

"Me?"

"Why do you want to kill me, Ionica?" Yitzhak went on, like a child in front of an angry judge.

A heavy shadow darkened the corporal's forehead. He turned away his head, set his gun straight on his shoulder and murmured with a very deep voice, as if coming from a cave:

"You shut up!"

Then, after a few moments, again:

"You shut up!"

And then, almost at each step, as if he himself had been terrified by his own voice:

"You shut up!"

Yitzhak fell silent and looked at the ground, following the corporal, his back bent under the burden of dismay. His head, cap pushed back to his nape, was balancing in the rhythm of his steps. His brains were smarting with the zigzag of thoughts he could not control. The desire to resume the talk with the corporal was writhing in his mind and now he was sorry he had interrupted it. But Ghioaga was now walking on, even more dejected than Yitzhak himself, sighing from time to time…

They were descending along a row of spruce firs, which seemed to be cutting across, like a dotted line, the gentle slope that lay asleep under its white blanket. Both were ducking from the menace that was lurking from the ridge of the other hill, the enemy's. They'd hurry from one tree to the other. The frozen snow was gritting under their boots so loudly that, in the silence that ruled all around them, they kept turning their eyes towards the enemy lines, frightened at the thought they might be overheard. A dry valley, here and there marked by rare fir trees, was winding right under the slope of the enemy; it was getting even more narrow as it went further until it reached the line of spruces.

Exhausted by so much thinking, Yitzhak Strul was listening to and counting his own steps, as he kept looking ever more curiously around him, in an attempt to recognize the place. Thus he found himself, little by little, experiencing a feeling of confidence. He saw they kept coming ever closer to the enemy lines and this brought him a bit of hope. If you approach the enemy, it means you really go on patrol – he remembered the short briefing in war theory he had received in the barracks at Falticeni. Perhaps it was only stupid fear that had roused his imagination?… The very thought that this might be the case distorted his face in a smile of happiness, such as he'd never felt before.

He was calmer now, and yet, in the depth of his soul he was aware that the quiet he felt was just trying to soothe his forebodings and deceive him. While cherishing hopes of good fortune, he clearly felt the painful fretting ceaselessly burning in his brains and that it had stopped torturing him because he had developed a thin layer of indifference on which his

illusion of contentment could move freely. That great terror had coiled up in a hidden recess of his soul, like a beast lying in waiting on the lurk. He felt it hatching inside him, ready to charge... And yet, a giddy kind of serenity was luring him. He remembered things from home and he thought that after this here exploit the lieutenant would grant him the leave he had been yearning for. He ought to get at least two weeks, if one wanted to heed justice, but he'd make do with eight days. For him to see at least his wife and the children... What a joy when he came to knock on the door of the entrance hall one evening: "Who's there?"... "Come on, open, it's me, Yitzhak!"... He began planning the days and even the hours so that no minute should be wasted... The first day... the second... the fourth... What if he had the medal too?... After all, the lieutenant too might soften down a bit now...If you thought it over, the new lieutenant wasn't so wicked either, you just had to know how to handle him...

They were reaching the valley... The enemy slope was slanting like a ravine and so close that it shut off the horizon like a wall. The rows of trees were converging in a remainder of forest with old, thick-branched firs, on which the huddled-up snow seemed to sleep.

They reached the grove. The corporal stopped by the stem of a very thick fir, its bark all notched and besmeared with resin. A root coiled in the shape of a bench was rising above the snow. Ghioaga removed the snow with the butt of his rifle and sat down slowly, exhausted. Yitzhak stopped in front of him, questioningly, with a merry confidence in his eyes, breathing heavily. Then, as Ghioaga was stubbornly keeping silent, he asked him smiling:

"Have we arrived, corporal sir?"

But the corporal made no answer. Through the trunks of the trees, he was watching the enemy's position, as if measuring with his eyes the distance to it...

After a while, Yitzhak asked again, still smiling:

"Am I wrong, or we are right in front of our company?"

Now the corporal suddenly turned his eyes to him and said:

"Right you are... Look, over there..."

And he lazily pointed with his hand in the distance. Yitzhak could see nothing. The gentle, smooth slope was stretching like a sheet of paper, but it got molten away in the fog of dusk. He stood there, his eyes staring, eagerly thinking it would be fine if, on their way back, they didn't take the

roundabout way, but take a shortcut across the field, to reach the company sooner...

Silence again came down between them, like a hedge.

Then, after some time, the corporal said softly:

"Well, brother Yitzhak, I've brought you so far... From here on, you might as well go on by yourself..."

The soldier gave a start, as if stung with a needle. He looked at the corporal in confusion, and it was only after a few moments that he stammered:

"But where should I go, Ion?"

"Over there..."

The corporal made a sign with his head towards the enemy line, then cast a warm look at him, which encouraged Yitzhak to ask again, still more confused:

"But why should I go, Ion?"

This question, however, infuriated Ghioaga, as if it had roused in his soul an anxiety that had hardly subsided. His eyes became cold and his voice threatening:

"Why do you keep prattling in vain? Be happy and set off, otherwise..."

Yitzhak instinctively clang to this last word, as if to some redeeming rope, and resumed it painfully:

"Otherwise..."

Now Yitzhak Strul clearly felt that the fear had burst free from its corner and flooded all the secret recesses of his soul like an incurable poison. He knew it would knock him down in a few moments, yet he couldn't help trying another little delay... He propped his rifle against the trunk of the tree, sat down by the corporal, caught his right hand with both his hands and his mouth began rattling very fast, scared of missing the opportunity of telling him everything before it be too late:

"Don't let me down, corporal sir!... How should I go there?... I can't, Ionica! Won't you take pity on me? Or, at least on my wife and the children? They'll kill me... kill me!..."

"No, they won't, don't be scared of that" – Ghioaga grumbled, turning his head away, so as to avoid seeing those eyes in which terror was dancing madly – "this is why I've brought you down here, close by...

Can't you see? You just raise your hands and start climbing the slope slowly. Nobody will touch you if you don't go with any evil thought..."

The soldier jumped to his feet, as if bitten by a snake. His eyes were burning with sudden anger, as though only now had he grasped what the corporal had meant.

"Good that you let me know, for I won't budge hence, not even if you kill me! Let it be, for now I've grasped the temptation, I'm not such a fool... you want to make me a deserter, don't you? I'm amazed that you're not ashamed, Ionica! If at least we didn't know each other from home!... It becomes you badly, Ionica, I swear it does! What harm have I done you that you want to turn me into a deserter? Don't you feel any pity to let my family destitute on the highroad and make me unable to ever return home?... Well, see, I don't want to become a deserter! I don't want to, I simply don't!"

The corporal listened to him calmly, then he told him, still speaking gently and softly:

"You may not want it, yet you can't get around it!"

"You're lying!" Yitzhak shouted, driven mad by the soft voice of the corporal.

"It is in vain that you don't want it, you are already a deserter," Ghioaga said again.

"Why should I be, if I refuse to go? Am I not doing my duty? Don't I fight like anyone else?"

"It's true, Yitzhak, but I can't help it... Believe me, brother! This is an order! Hear me? Order of the lieutenant... Look, you are not in our company any longer. The report was sent this morning: Yitzhak Strul, a deserter..."

Yitzhak raised his eyes in despair. The question "Why?" was tearing his brains, since he found no satisfactory answer. He was searching his mind for words to express his revolt or at least words of defence but he only found a silly, stupid stammer:

"I don't want to... I don't want to..."

"You ought to want it, brother Yitzhak," – the corporal said to him, almost in a whisper. "You have to accept, for there is no other way... I thought it over, I fretted enough all the way down here, and you can see there is no other way..."

"What have I done, Ionica, for God's sake?" Yitzhak managed to whimper again, still more befuddled.

"How could I know? I am not the one to blame, Yitzhak, you can see I'm not... Mister lieutenant ordered me to..."

Ghioaga cut his speech short, frightened by the eyes of the soldier, goggled as if on the point of springing from their sockets.

"To kill me?" Yitzhak insisted.

"To kill you!" the corporal said faintly. "And bury you so that no trace of you can be found... Now you can see, Yitzhak, you can see you can't return any more... Woe to our souls!"

There followed a long spell of silence. Petrified, Yitzhak was watching the corporal's lips, on which he could read his sentence, while Ghioaga was standing, neck stretched out, eyes nailed on Yitzhak, as if expecting an answer that might relieve his heart...

The cold had softened. Light snowflakes ware falling from the sky, floating lazily like some scraps of paper...

Then, suddenly, a loud report shook the silence, followed by a sharp whiz. The noise seemed to awaken the whole nature. A cutting wind started soon, making the snowflakes whirl in the air and setting astir the branches of the fir under which the two soldiers had stopped. A huge branch which stretched above them like some heavy wing moved a little, without shaking off the snow frozen on it.

Ghioaga rose heavily, lifted his rifle on to his shoulder and whispered:

"I'll be off now... Those over there seem to have noticed us and are shooting at us... God bless you, Yitzhak!"

He took Yitzhak's sweating hand and pressed it lightly.

Yitzhak gave a start, as if woken from a nightmare and clung on to the corporal's hand, murmuring:

"I don't want to... I don't want to..."

His voice was dipped in such great grief that Ghioaga, in order to conceal his pity, suddenly snubbed him:

"Don't you make me grieve, man, or it will turn worse!... I've been teaching you how to escape, and you are keeping me here so that night should catch me on the way... Beware!"

He tore his hand away and took a few steps.

"Don't you let the evil hour make you come back, Yitzhak, for you'll get me into trouble, while you won't escape anyway... Good night!"

He set off alone on the way they had covered together, his head bent, his heart as heavy as lead. He blessed himself several times before he felt his soul a bit relieved. Then he said to himself, heaving a deep sigh:

"Thank you, Lord, for helping me stay away from sin!... I would have had him upon my conscience for a lifetime... Poor Yitzhak..."

He looked back without stopping. Yitzhak was standing in the same place, motionless, with one arm stretched out as if in a silent call...

The corporal got smaller and smaller until the thickening darkness swallowed him entirely.

Another report burst out. Yitzhak gave a shudder and turned towards the enemy slope. He took a step, then he stopped terrified, murmuring:

"I don't want to..."

In his mind there was a terrible turmoil. He didn't even dare any longer to pick out one thought from among the thousand fragments that were ceaselessly struggling within him. Yet his soul was full of an unflinching obstinacy from which the murmur "I don't want to..." kept coming forth. He raised his head to the sky, as if expecting rescue from up there. Above him stood, black and motionless, the huge branch that could easily bear any burden. And suddenly all his thoughts clung onto that enticing branch...

The darkness kept growing, dressing up the whole earth in mourning attire. In the pitch dark, Yitzhak strove hard before he could pass his straps over that motionless branch and then arrange the sling round his long, red-skinned neck sprinkled with freckles. The branch cracked a little, covering up his writhing, while the ever more furious wind kept tossing and turning him all night...

Morning arrived late, accompanied by ever more frequent shots. The snowfall had ceased. The sun peeped out through a break in the clouds, lighting thousands of rainbows on the snow-covered fields.

Yitzhak was hanging under the motionless branch, like some gallant soldier standing still according to regulations. Only that instead of his military cap there was a thick layer of fresh snow on his tousled hair and his boots were a few inches clear from the ground. His swollen eyes, bulging out from their sockets were still staring terrified in the distance, at the trenches of his company. Yet, the white light was kissing his bluish

face, wiping away the traces of grief and smoothing out the wrinkles of reproach...

In the air above Yitzhak Strul's head, the war was raging, more furious and more hungry than ever, like some huge bird of prey...

THE CATASTROPHE

David Pop was fond of quiet life. He had never liked fretting of any kind. He aspired to much quiet and little work, or even none. And he had managed to get them both due to the diligence of his father, a grim, industrious and tight-fisted peasant, who had made a fortune.

It was only his cool temper that David had inherited from his parent. Otherwise, no ambition bothered him. Old man Pop had been stubborn and tenacious. He'd put it in his mind to turn David into a "gentleman", especially as the school was close at hand, in Năsăud[32], and cost him almost nothing. In the beginning, the boy, too, seemed to like learning and it looked as if he wouldn't stop before becoming a lawyer or, at least, an archpriest. But later as he grew a little older, he softened down. He would have enjoyed it more to herd cows than to torture his brains with Latin syntax... Yet, with moil and toil, he was graduated from high school and went to Cluj[33] to read law, as the old man stuck tooth and nail on seeing him a lawyer. But everything was in vain. It didn't work. For seven years David went on studying, but always right before the exams he found himself down with some disease, or who knows what trouble so serious that there was no way for him to confront the professors. The peasant, unflinching as he was, kept on hoping. Yet, in the end, he had to tell David straight in the face that was fed up. David was thirty one at that time, a full-grown man. The old man couldn't help it; he gave up, ashamed of his son's shame...

While idling away his seven years in Cluj, in order to show the people in Năsăud that he wasn't wasting his time there, David decided to serve his time in the army, one year in two instalments. Even more, in a terrible impetus, he rashly sat in for the army officer exam and, much to his own surprise, passed it all right. Thus, besides the fortune he was to inherit from his parents, he also had a title: reserve sub-lieutenant. He felt flattered and somehow honoured with this title. On the emperor's birthday, he would put

---

[32] Năsăud – a small town in northern Transylvania.
[33] Cluj – capital city of Transylvania at the time.

on his full-dress uniform and go to church, stirring up a sensation in that quiet little town. The children used to cling to his heels, admiring his magnificence, and the gendarmes would salute him, frozen with respect. David walked gravely and proudly, twisting his moustache, rattling his sword and telling himself contentedly that it was no trifle to be a reserve sub-lieutenant.

As soon as he'd turned his back upon school, David married the daughter of an archpriest from the Tîrnave county, a sweet, gentle and obedient girl with a beautiful dowry. Old man Pop, however, died before he had a chance to see his grandson, born on the first anniversary of the wedding. Thus David was left the head and master of the family. No care was worrying him. His wife was seeing to the whole household better than any man could have. The 'head' didn't have anything to do but eat, take walks and put on weight, which he did with no delay, but, of course, with moderation.

So David was very pleased with life. He didn't often go out, only sometimes, to the beer saloon, and on Thursdays, as they were the fair days, to see the market. This was everything Nasaud[34] could offer; but even that much used to bother him. At the beer saloon, the gentlemen would permanently annoy him with politics. What did he care? He just wanted quiet. Why should he fret? The Romanians were all right, but it was all right with the Hungarians as well. Why should he interfere in such quarrels? He had subscribed to a Romanian newspaper mainly because an agent had had mistaken him. Then, as the Hungarians had started talking on his account, he subscribed to a Hungarian paper as well. And in order to stay completely untroubled, he would read neither.

Not even in the elections for parliament did he participate. It was in vain that the Romanians insisted, or that the Hungarians begged him. Why should he get involved? If he voted for someone, the opponent would be irritated. That was why the Romanians began calling him a renegade, while the Hungarians called him an agitator.

But he didn't mind at all what people said. He did his duty as a Romanian intellectual by going together with his wife to all the Romanian balls and festivities, always paying a fivefold price for his tickets. He subscribed for poor pupils, for all the philanthropic actions, so he was

[34] Nasaud – small township in northern Transylvania.

always mentioned in the local newspaper among the 'lavishly generous donors'. He didn't join the Hungarians' parties because his wife could speak no Hungarian at all; but he used to pay his tickets there too very regularly so that the scales be kept straight.

Consequently, David Pop was feeling happy, and he'd walk along the main street in Nasaud, his fingers in his waistcoat pockets, his paunch protruding a little, looking calmly around, a permanent kind smile on his lips. He ate well, drank a little, smoked a lot and played for hours running with Titi, his son, who was now almost three.

Yet, one day he was upset by a question of Traian Hogea, the headmaster of the local high school, a man madly involved in politics and reputed for reading all the newspapers at the beer saloon. The headmaster asked him:

" Well, Mister Pop, what do you think, will there be war for us or not?"

" What war?"

" War, sir, war! Haven't you read the papers?"

And he set out explaining a lot of things which David refused to understand, as he didn't like them.

He returned home depressed and even somewhat frightened.

" Elvira, I'm afraid the Lord is punishing us...Hogea says there will be a war!..."

" People seem to have had enough of good life" the woman replied indignantly. " This war would be the last straw...Instead of praying to heaven on our knees and elbows for a little rain, as the corn is getting scorched in the fields..."

But David looked so dejected that on seeing him in such a state of mind she hastily added:

" Now, don't you take everything Hogea is saying too seriously, for you know what a newsmonger he is."

But it was in vain. Her husband couldn't be appeased so easily. That word had penetrated his soul like a spear. He sat down at once and began skimming through the so far unopened papers and, as he kept on perusing them, he became still more downcast and grumbled:

" It's the war! The war!"

And suddenly he was overcome with bitter regrets. Who had driven him to become a reserve officer? Why hadn't he thought of it at that time? His

father could have rid him from any military obligations by bribery, or pretending he suffered from some disease, or by some other way...So many had escaped...Now he wouldn't care a button...He had already felt the burden of that title before, when he'd had to waste a month each summer participating in manoeuvres, knocking himself up and roughing it. But now the regrets were overwhelming him and his soul was deeply troubled.

" What an idiot I was, what an idiot! Be it as it may! I will do what all the others will...As if it's only me who'll have to go!...It's fate and that's all!"

Next afternoon he took out his uniform and hung it on a rope to have it aired. Walking through the town, he bought various things he thought he needed. If something was to happen, he should be prepared, and there was nothing, so much the better.

Then one Friday, late in the afternoon, while he was just reading an article in which they said there was good hope that the war be avoided, David got a telegram.

His heart started throbbing like a frightened bird, his fingers were trembling when he tore it open. He read it, he grew pale and murmured hoarsely:

" Very well, I will leave at once!"

The whole yard began reeling, while the limpid air seemed to grow darker. Alarmed, Elvira ran up to see the telegram, and hardly capable of mastering himself, David told her:

" I am to leave this very evening. Within twenty four hours I am to report at the regiment..."

It took Elvira a lot of insistence to persuade him to wait till next morning. She had to explain to him scores of times that he could reach Bistrița by coach in three hours, so if he left next morning, he would still arrive there sooner than required. David gave in, without being entirely convinced. In fact, at the moment he was incapable of understanding anything. He felt his heart oppressed and was eager to leave as soon as possible to make an end...Then, come what may...

His wife cried all evening and did the packing. She was trying to look tough; she smiled and kept saying:

" Never mind, David, perhaps nothing will happen. People can't have grown so mad to come to grips for nothing. No, no, calm down! What do you think, shall I put in two sweaters as well?"

Indeed, David seemed to have calmed down. He arranged his uniform on a chair beside the bed, in order to have it at hand next morning, he put several banknotes into his wallet and kissed Titi very many times. The boy was charmed with the gorgeous military uniform and wouldn't go to bed for the whole world.

In the morning David used to sleep till nine, since Elvira was there to wake up at dawn and look after the household. But now, he woke up before sunrise and before Elvira, put on his uniform, went out in the courtyard and woke the coachman...He had no patience at all. He seemed to yearn to see himself on his way sooner, maybe just to feel his soul relieved.

On leaving, he kissed Elvira three times and said to her with a trembling voice:

" Should I die, take good care of Titi!"

The woman's face was wet with tears, even though she was trying hard to go on smiling so as not to make departure still harder for him.

When he crossed the Vicar's Bridge, David looked back. His house, the one inherited from his father, an old stone house with a yard as large as a garden in front of it, seemed to be watching him pathetically, while at the gate, Elvira was waving a small handkerchief like a shy pigeon, holding Titi by the hand. The boy was rubbing his eyes with his fist. Only now did David remember he hadn't kissed his son. He was sorry and opened his mouth to tell the driver to turn back. But at the same moment it crossed his mind that returning would be of bad omen. Who knows, it might even have been better that he didn't say good bye to his son, as this could mean he would soon come back home...He felt at once that this thought was immediately bringing him some relief...

Leaving the little town behind, the road passed by a large wooden cross on which a tin Christ hung crucified. David, who had rather enjoyed playing the unbeliever and stirring up his wife's indignation by saying there was no God, now piously crossed himself, stammering:

" God help me!"

" What's the news, sir?" the driver asked, spitting between the horses, which were running sprightly on the quiet road. " They say there will be a war! Can that be true?"

" Only God knows what will be" David replied.

II

During the first night, David had only beautiful dreams. He dreamt he was still at home, pottering about the yard and the coppice, talking to Elvira and kissing Titi. But the second night he dreamt about a fierce attack with bayonet fight, during which he was wounded in the belly by a grim-looking officer's sword.

The officers were talking only politics, setting straight the destinies of countries and peoples, and they were clamorously asking for the war, grinding their teeth. David wasn't feeling at ease among them. Such garrulous bravery made him sick. But he enjoyed spending the whole day with his platoon, al of them lads from the Someş[35] valley most of whom knew and liked him, lads who'd cross themselves the way he did whenever war was mentioned. Among them he was losing his grief and finding again his confidence, along with the vague hope conveyed by the phrase:

„ God is great and kind".

On the second day already, he sent Elvira a long letter in which he advised her not to be depressed, as perhaps nothing was going to happen, even though otherwise when he was by himself, he felt that in a few days there was to be something that had never happened before.

In fact, now he was feeling ready and calm. He would do his duty. Beyond that, he didn't care. Since this was his lot?!

A day before leaving Bistriţa, he wrote his will, sealed it with red wax and sewed it in the inner pocket of his waistcoat. Neither his hand nor his heart trembled at all. He only thought that if he should die, they ought to find out who he'd been and what his last wishes were. Yet, while writing, it crossed his mind that if he got away unhurt from the first battle, he would be safe for the rest of the war. Such glimmers made him feel happy.

[35] The Someş – large river in northern Transylvania.

He trusted forebodings, especially good ones, the way people will do in front of perils and of the unknown...

III

David's battalion was the first to set out on the first day. The yard of the barracks was full of sad peasants, of tearful women, of bustle, shouting, weeping, swearing and turmoil. In the streets, there was heavy cramming. Crowds of strangers were roaring with enthusiasm and pelting with flowers the men who were going to die, God knows where and for what.

David had no idea where they were going. Only the next day, in a railway station on the Hungarian plain, did they find out that they were going to fight against the Serbians. In fact, David didn't mind against whom he was going to fight. It was the same to him. He had to do his duty, and God should see to the rest.

He was so calm as if for ages he had been doing nothing but waging war. When he casually remembered his quiet way of life back in Năsăud, It seemed a dream to him, such life seemed never to have existed in reality, although not more than ten days had passed since the arrival of that terrifying telegram. At present he seemed to have become a different man. The one back in Năsăud seemed to have got benumbed, being now replaced by a sleepwalker who kept saying to himself in way of encouragement and comfort:

„ I will do my duty!"

He didn't dare, perhaps he was unable, to account for what had happened in his soul. It never crossed his mind to ask himself what ‚duty' really meant. He'd cling to this word and was content he'd found a strong enough support in it. Maybe by trying to clear things up for himself, he would have lost his quiet and self-control. Perhaps if he'd tried to find out, a gulf might have opened up for him and he would have been so frightened that confusion and terror would have overwhelmed him. He might have experienced all this and was on purpose smothering any torturing thought in its very root.

The other officers, those who'd been talking politics and bravery at home, now as they were coming closer to the fields of death, were

becoming more and more uneasy, pale in the faces and hoarse. On the contrary, David had a permanent smile of contentedness on his lips, as if he'd been going to some beautiful feast, determined to pay a tenfold price for his ticket. When the battalion swore again faith to the emperor in front of the enemy, David did it full heartedly. The oath strengthened his faith in the redeeming duty...

The first cannon roars made his heart quiver a little, and the bullets hissing by his ears did frighten him too. And especially when he saw the first lad from his platoon fall face down like a sack full of earth, his cap rolling away and his face full of blood, it shot through his brains like lightning:

„ Duty is death...", and he was dismayed.

Up to that moment he had somehow forgotten to imagine that war meant death. So far it had seemed to him something confused and terrible, but without directly reminding him of death, or perhaps he'd thought about something worse than death. But he soon understood. He understood, and he gathered more strength. As soon as it turned up, the thought of death ceased scaring him. Death was for men. So he waited for it serenely, indifferently, as something compulsory, or accidental. When he saw the first dead man, and then as he saw more and more blood, he also understood that death would choose its man, and that wherever a man might hide, it found him. In the evening after the first battle, he smilingly counted seven bullet holes in his cap, in the sleeves of his tunic, in the legs of his trousers. For seven hours, the bullets had kept hissing around him, but they'd been looking for others, not for him. The major, who had remained at the edge of the village about two kilometres behind the death line, hidden in some brambles, was found cold, hit in the heart by a stray bullet, while he had got away unscathed from the deadly rain of steel adders...

That day gave him self-assurance. Henceforth he was going to walk casually in the most terrible gun fire as if taking a walk in the square in Năsăud, on a summer morning, among the vicar's pigeons. On seeing him act like this, the soldiers too gathered confidence and courage. It was a sort of flirting with death, unaffected, natural, which the others called courage, or heroism, but which for himself meant only fulfilling his duty. He soon became famous. His comrades looked at him with a certain amount of envy, his commanders with respect, Medals and crosses came to reward

him. But they weren't making him happy, and he didn't wear them. He'd just smile and say:

" Reward for duty...Ridiculous..."

IV

But days, weeks and months kept passing and there was no end to the war. A great victory proved less useful than a drop of iodine on the wound of a soldier. And victories called for defeats, and defeats called for victories, and the war was going on...

David Pop, a valiant and skilful soldier, was given – besides one more star on his lapel – a more important task: a machine gun section. The long-lasting war had made first rate soldiers out of former ignorant civilians. From Serbia, David was transferred to Galiția, then from Galiția again to Serbia, and then to Poland...He fought in the marshes of the Pripet and on the banks of the Dvina, and finally he came to the Isonzo valley in Italy, where he remained.

Two years had passed since David Pop had known almost no day without the sound of cannon roaring and machine gun barking. Others were yearning for peace, for home and family, he wanted nothing. He was obstinate in his duty like a lunatic in his fixed idea. Others found respite to take a run home; he didn't, and didn't even look for it. He seemed to be afraid that if he left the track for one moment, he would return to his former self, the former idle David Pop. And in that case, who could tell what might come out of his present striving...

He used to write to Elvira regularly each week, he'd send both her and Titi lots of kisses and hopes that soon there would be an end to it, that he would come home and they would resume their happy and quiet life. Less regularly, he got letters from his wife; they were full of tears, desires, prayers to God, and trembling of anxiety. But not even such letters could change his frame of mind. He did miss his wife and the child, but it was a strange kind of missing that wouldn't take his mind away from his duty. Duty first, he used to tell himself, and only then quiet, peace and love.

Not even in his dreams did he use to call at his home. He kept dreaming about bitter onslaughts, stormy battles, shells bursting beside him leaving

him uninjured, desperate commands, heartrending groans. He went on dreaming at night about the war he was waging in daytime. Others would dream about being at home, and when they woke, they wept because it had been only a dream.

V

Now he was living in a deep ravine in the rocks of the Cars, just a few steps behind the front line. He had a bed made up of green boards and a soft mattress taken from a deserted village, and electric light brought in and set up as if on purpose in order to mock their squalor. He was living here together with a Croatian captain, a Hungarian lieutenant and two Hungarian sub-lieutenants who kept swearing all day long and sighed for peace. Since he had taken over the machine guns, David had been transferred to a Hungarian regiment, where he felt lonely because his Hungarian was rather poor and he couldn't easily communicate with the soldiers either, as they were older, had children at home and kept complaining and lamenting about exhaustion and homesickness. And life would hardly stir here, like some large stream whose flow was hard to notice.

One day in this lair, he unexpectedly found himself in front of Alexe Candale, an old friend from the University, a skinny little man with very lively and piercing black eyes and a warm, cutting voice. David embraced and kissed him. He listened to his friend's voice as if it had been a gospel. Months had passed since he had last heard a Romanian word. He couldn't have enough of listening to him and looking at him. It seemed to him that the toil of the war and the permanent threat of death had hardened his looks, but that his soul had stayed even warmer than before.

They were by themselves.

" You haven't changed much, Alexe" with a smiling reproach. " You are exactly the same as you used to be ten years ago..."

" But times have changed terribly" Candale answered quickly, looking straight into his eyes, somehow questioningly.

In the eyes of his friend, David perceived a great concern, a very heavy burden oppressing his heart, an animated anxiety; but he understood

nothing. After a short silence, Alexe went on suddenly, with a questioning, piercing voice:

" I have been wounded three times, but I don't know for what..."

" I haven't got one scratch, and it's almost two years since I've been fighting with no respite...The Serbians, the Russians, the Cossacks, the Italians, I fought against all of them" David said with a certain amount of pride, which wasn't very much in his habits.

" We keep shedding our blood in foreign countries and we don't know for what!" Candale said in the same voice. Then as he saw the same stubborn perplexity in David's eyes, he went on passionately, more and more hotly:

" What have we got to share with the Serbians? What do we have against the Russians or the Italians? What? You tell me, for I cannot answer it. What have they done to us, or what have we done to them? And yet, we've kept butchering one another for so many months...You have no idea how many of our lads have died, how much Romanian blood has been shed!...The villages are deserted. And all for nothing! Do you understand? For nothing!...What will rise from this sea of Romanian blood, from the fields fattened with our corpses? Do you believe that we shall have some reward? Do you?...It's horrible what's going on with us. Others know at least that they are struggling for something, other nations do...But we? What for? Why?"

David Pop was listening to him, his eyes wide open and almost entirely flabbergasted. An abyss seemed to open in front of him, one in which he would have to tumble as soon as he took a glance into it. He clearly felt that a strange kind of fear was taking hold of him, and he quickly murmured, as if seizing a saving rope:

" It's duty, Alexe!"

Candale burst out roughly, firmly:

" Duty?...All duty has its limits!"

An old sub-lieutenant stepped in merrily, triumphantly. He was proudly bringing in the news of some victory somewhere, and after imparting it to the two friends, he himself added in melancholy way:

" Yet, all this isn't bringing us closer to peace..."

They couldn't go on talking and Candale left soon. David remained confused, upset as he had never been before. He kept feeling the threatening abyss in front of him, ever wider, ever more enticing. Only late

at night at the front, behind the awfully quacking machine guns, in the midst of the steel rain, only then did he come to somehow, and he suddenly told himself with a sort of relief:

" Alexe is badly off...He has always been like this...Duty!..."

And watching how a soldier was changing the cartridge belts, how the shooter went on correcting the range of that deadly machine, trying to penetrate through the darkness in front of him from where the shells came steadily to burst in the sky with yellow flashes and sowing splinters, seeing the bright rockets rise in the air and looking down for minutes running like some pitiless, death-bringing eyes David was thinking only of Candale; and the more he thought, the more he calmed down...Alexe had been looking for trouble even back in Cluj in the past. He used to always have quarrels, either with the Hungarian students, or with the professors, or because of the demonstrations. He was obsessed by the triumph of justice and who knows what else. But David didn't understand the reasons for rioting at that time either...That is, why all that quarrelling and harassing one another? What was the use of it all?

Wouldn't the Romanians stay Romanians however badly the others might strive to oppress them? May anybody come and try to make Vasile Precup, or Toader Hirlău give up wearing opincas[36] or singing doinas[37]! ...So all that jangling over this matter was nothing but idle talk. And, after all, what had the use of all that agitation been? It may have just added some more poison to the situation, maybe...

At that moment a huge shell came whizzing through the air like a storm and entered the ground just a few steps beside him, covering him with earth, along with the soldiers manning the machinegun. The machine suddenly ceased its clacking. Still shaking, the men cleaned themselves of earth, covered in icy sweat. David shook off the sand from his hair and clothes, telling himself with a sigh that contained both gratitude and regret:

" This is reality, indeed...The rest is just dreaming and illusion...".

VI

[36] Opinca – peasant's footwear in the Balkans.

[37] Doina – sad folksong, mostly characteristic of pastoral life.

Next day already his mind was completely cleared of the confusion induced by Candale's words. He was living again like before: the machineguns, the sleep and food. He wouldn't take interest in anything else. He hadn't been reading newspapers ever since the beginning of the war. Why should he read? Was it from the papers he'd find out what the war was like, he who couldn't help watching its atrocity every day and every minute, who felt death lurking for him all around? His comrades kept discussing, making plans for the future, they often quarrelled, sharing Europe, or settling the destinies of nations after the war. Meanwhile, David was lying in bed, looking at the electric bulb, with no thought in his mind, just feeling that his skull was completely empty, as if the war had little by little squeezed out all his brains.

The days went on passing, monotonous, indifferent and uncounted. David at least was keeping no record of them. What for should he? What was yesterday would be again tomorrow. Nothing better, nothing more...He enjoyed lying awake like this, his eyes open, but without seeing, his ears cocked, but without hearing...In this way he could at least rest his bones and spare his nerves for the hours of duty.

One evening as he was lying absent-mindedly like this, he involuntarily noticed that his comrades' arguments were hotter than usual, that they were speaking angrily, and that from time to time they were suspicious sidelong glances at him. Especially a Szeckler lieutenant, with a big moustache and a bluish nose, was desperately sawing the air, chattering away in German, then stopping suddenly to swear at length in Hungarian. David did now what he had never done before: he asked the Croatian captain what had happened. Two sub-lieutenants jumped as if bitten by snakes:

" What's happened?" they screamed. " Don't you know what? You go on sleeping, you..."

Less upset, the captain explained:

" What has happened, my friend, is that your Romanians have jumped upon our back..."

" Like bandits, like brigands! They've invaded Transylvania, at this very moment they might be in my own village, the ruffians may be plundering my parents' house right now!" the Szeckler lieutenant yelled, with a wild look.

It was Tuesday. All the evils had plagued him only on Tuesdays!...Tuesday!

David Pop had half risen from his bed and was now sitting there and staring with large, puzzled, wide open eyes. Deep silence had set in and was ruling in the den, interrupted only by the heavy breathing of the Szeckler. All of them were watching David with questioning eyes, in oppressive expectation, as if the course of the whole world and the issue of the war had depended on one word of his. He looked at each of them in turn, protruded his lips as if wanting to say something, then shook his head as a sign of perplexity, and then lay back again, his hands crossed under his nape.

A sub-lieutenant couldn't master himself and said to the others in Hungarian, in a low voice, but so that David too could hear:

"I bet he's glad of it...It's all in vain, he's got a traitor's blood!..."

David did hear the words indeed, he understood, and still he said nothing. He knew that he had always done his duty and he didn't mind anybody's words. In forty nine bitter battles, he'd never lost his calm, he had often saved the situation, and for this he had so many times been praised, decorated, embraced...Should he lose his temper now?

However, pretending not to have heard the sub-lieutenant's words, the captain asked him directly:

" What do you say to it, comrade?"

His voice sounded like an accusation. David gave a start. A heavy knot seemed to come up his throat, almost choking him.

He answered quickly:

" What do I care?...I know that I have always done my duty. For the rest, I don't give a damn..."

And, with a sigh, he slowly turned his face to the rocky wall, where, on a few nails, all his clothes and weapons – his entire fortune at present – were hanging.

He was trying to stay calm, but he couldn't. He felt that something was swarming within his heart, that strange thoughts were piling up in his mind. He forced himself not to listen to his comrades' talk, the way he'd always done before, but he didn't manage. He kept hearing the words like some molten lead drops dripping on his brain:

" The rascals!...The traitors!...The Wallachians...Transylvania..."

The hatred and fury of the officers were hitting his eardrums, penetrating his blood, invading his soul and raking it awfully. He felt answers and insults crowding on his lips, he felt that abuse hurled at him was tormenting him.

" I have to stay calm! What do I care? Why should I interfere?", he kept telling himself and, like so many times before, he made up his mind not even to think of what was going on around him.

But tranquillity and peace of the mind would shun him now. The words of the officers had entered deep into his ears and kept ringing there all the night. And that night seemed terrible and endless although no cannon roar or gun fire was shaking it. All the others were sleeping like logs; they were snoring awfully, and, every now and then, they gave a start or shouted loudly, frightened in their sleep. But he himself was unable to close his eyes for a minute, even though he had been under fire for almost twenty four hours and was feeling crushed with fatigue. Now his brains were booming with thoughts, as if all the thoughts smothered within himself during those two years were now suddenly rushing upon him to crush him under their burden.

He remembered Elvira and Titi, and wild yearning took hold of him. There was a big void in his heart, consuming and painful, and his eyes turned wet.

" Two years! It's two years!" he murmured, deeply moved.

Then again the venomous words, the insults, the threats of the officers invaded his mind. And then suddenly Candale's question flashed up in him, like a bright torch:

" Why are we shedding our blood?"

And as an answer, the captain's words came up several times, obsessively:

" The Romanians have attacked us from behind..."

Never before had the word " Romanians" sounded so enticing in his ears. He went on repeating it in his mind, his lips, too, were unconsciously articulating it voicelessly, sometimes lovingly, sometimes roughly, or sweetly, and he was experiencing something like a motherly caress when he uttered it:

" The Romanians...The Romanians...The Romanians..."

And unawares he found himself imagining what it would be like if the sheriff in Năsăud were a Romanian, along with the foresters, the judge, and

the gendarmes, and if in Bistrița, too, there were only Romanians in the law court, at the town hall, in the schools, and if the prefect himself were a Romanian…And all over Transylvania, only Romanians. What would it be like, he wondered.

He enjoyed the idea like a child and added to himself with a smile:

" Even the honveds[38] should be under Romanian command!"

He stopped short as if scared that such wild thoughts could cross his mind.

" It cannot be!...Hear what childishness!...Childish raving!...It would be much too…"

Several times he murmured to himself: "Childishness" , but soon he found himself saying:

" The Romanians have entered Transylvania…They may have reached our parts by now…Perhaps by now the sheriff is a Romanian in Năsăud already…"

In his mind, he saw the whole map of Transylvania, surrounded by the wild Carpathians, crowded with lots of troops, endlessly long columns rushing in stormily through the narrow, winding gorges, entering the villages, with women and children watching in amazement from the gates, advancing with no delay through Alba Iulia, Cluj, Sibiu[39]towards the Tisa[40], irresistible, who knows how far?

Suddenly, however, the insults uttered by the Szekler hissed in his ears, the vision vanished, and instead of it, he began thinking of hard battles that must be going on there against the enemy that had invaded the country. A shudder of shame ran through his entire body, realizing that for a moment he had been glad that the enemy had invaded the territory of the country. But again, he instinctively murmured, sad and worried:

" Enemy…The enemy…"

He felt the word was grieving him deep down in his heart…

He mumbled, shuddering:

" It's awful that brothers should be killing one another!"

And at the same moment, the question crowded itself into his mind:

---

[38] Honved – Hungarian infantry man.

39 Alba-Iulia, Cluj, Sibiu – important cities in Transylvania.

[40] The Tisa – large river on the Hungarian Plain.

" What would I do if I should be there in front of them with my machine guns?"

His heart shrank as if pressed in red-hot tongs. But instead of an answer, he told himself again:

" It's awful…Brother against brother…How good I'm not there!..."

He crossed himself and, slightly relieved, he murmured:

" It's good I am not there…It would be horrible …Here I know I'm doing my duty, and the rest I don't mind…"

He fell in a slumber towards morning and dreamt he was in Transylvania, somewhere in Năsăud , with Titi in his arms, kissing Elvira…and then suddenly in front of a Romanian company, with his machine guns, grieved and wavering as he was thinking, horrified:

" What am I to do? What shall I do?"

VII

He woke up covered in sweat, tired, confused. He set out doing his job as usual, calmly, but although they didn't speak any more about the new conflict, his comrades seemed to keep on watching him with suspicious eyes. He himself felt somewhat guilty, and ha hardly dared to look them in the eyes; He was afraid his thoughts that had tortured him overnight could be read on his face. Those thoughts infuriated him now , as they went on clinging to him, upsetting the quiet which for two years had given him the strength to do his duty everywhere, protecting him against all cares and desires.

" I will do my duty to the end!...My duty!...My Duty!..." he kept repeating to himself angrily and obstinately, trying to regain his equilibrium. But with surprise and fear he discovered that this magic word was now unable to quieten either his mind or his soul any longer, that now the question " Which duty?"would arise at once, more poisonous than ever before, and that he couldn't provide a satisfactory answer to it any more.

He was glad when, in the afternoon, he was given a more dangerous task. He might have the luck to be hit by a bullet too, so that all brooding and fears should come to an end. The best remedy to any suffering remained death! Never before had he started fighting with the desire, or at

least the thought of dying. However, on that afternoon death seemed a boon to him. Why should he go on torturing himself, why should he keep trembling that they might send him "there" as well?

But death didn't want him. Almost all his men at the machine guns died, he was finally obliged to take over the charge of aiming and shooting, but nevertheless, no steel splinter came close to him. The bullets were shunning him as if on purpose; wherever he went, they stopped whizzing so furiously...

Yet, all that jolting of the battle soothed down his thoughts a little. He slept like a log and when he woke up, he said to himself triumphantly:

" If you do your duty, not even the devil can hurt you!"

And he quietened down indeed. Just that now he impatiently waited for the war reports, and found himself unconsciously looking first and foremost for "the Romanian front", and always reading those lines with a pang in his heart...

VIII

Then after ten days an urgent order arrived: the regiment was to get on the train at once to be transported to the Transylvanian front.

David hadn't even had the time to fully realize what was going on. He found himself in a coach together with a lot of other officers, among whom Alexe Candale as well; the man kept staring at him with questioning, burning eyes. But they didn't stand a chance to exchange
one word at least until the next day, in a small station, where the train stopped for about two hours.

Candale asked him quickly, in a muffled voice:

" Well, what are you going to do?"

David had been expecting this question which now, however, confused him terribly. He answered by another question:

" What about you?"

" I am going to pass over to our people as soon as I can. And anyway, I will fire no shot at them...I prefer being killed than hurting a Romanian soldier...don't you?"

David didn't answer. No answer occurred to him on the spot. Only later did he say shyly, almost visibly trembling with emotion:

" What about our duty?...And our oath?"...

Candale didn't have the time to say anything in reply. But an expression of strong contempt showed on his face at David's words...They felt the other officers were watching them with suspicion in their eyes, so they had to part.

The rattle of the iron wheels, the monotonous noises of the rolling train were making David close his eyes. He was sitting motionless, almost shrivelling in a corner on the bench, and his mind was boiling. The officers in the compartment were paying no attention to him any longer, they were talking, laughing, smoking and cheering for the defeat of the " Wallachians". From all that gossip, David only heard " the crushing of the Wallachians", and these words were making him sick to such an extent that it was taking him huge effort to control himself so as not to burst out.

" Why do I keep worrying in vain?" he kept repeating to himself, trying to calm down. " Why?...Duty is duty..."

He didn't succeed and kept biting his lips, resuming again and again those soothing words:

" Why do I keep worrying myself to distraction? Why am I torturing myself like this? Am I guilty for having to go there? I didn't want it...I still don't...It makes me shudder...Yet, I've got to do my duty!...Do I have to?..."

He was clinging to these words and went on muttering for who knows how many hours, ceaselessly, like a tortured, confused song of woe:

" I have to! I have to! I have to!"

IX

In Arad[41], the troops disembarked and were sent to a camp out of town, where another regiment was already camping, one that had been brought from some part of Russia.

[41] Arad – a relatively large town in western Romania.

David was still unable to find his peace. The closer he came to the front, the more wildly his heart throbbed, the more burning thoughts and words were crowding in his brains. Now he was walking, his head bent, between the hastily pitched tents, among the tired soldiers who were eating, singing, swearing...As if in all the world he was the only one to be tortured with the fear of the front, of tomorrow, of having to face "them".
Something seemed to be driving him somewhere, anywhere, so that he shouldn't burst into bitter weeping and make himself the laughing stock of people, he who had always been keeping his forehead high in the midst of the most terrible rains of fire.

Roaming like that through the camp, he found himself in front a clean-shaven officer, with small eyes, a thin nose and a sharp pointed chin. David stopped involuntarily, as the face seemed familiar to him. The officer must have felt the same for after a moment's hesitation, he dashed to David with stretched out hands, shouting with genuine delight:

" David Pop!"

" Exactly" David answered, shaking both hands of the man. " I was on the point of not recognizing you without your beard and moustaches."

" I have sacrificed them on the altar of the homeland for fear of lice" said the officer, taking him by the arm, and then continuing in surprise:

" Well, my dear, you, precisely you, an officer? What's hit you?...I thought you were idling your time away back in Năsăud and that by now you might be on the commission who welcome the Romanian soldiers with icons and procession banners...Well, what do you say? These events have thrown us in quite a messy position, haven't they, even us who are doing our duty..."

He was a good friend of David's, a lawyer in Bistrița, Emil Oprișor; David knew him as a „mad chauvinist", as once upon a time he used to call all those who wouldn't keep quiet. Oprisor had even been imprisoned for a month at Seghedin[42] for having incited the peasants in Vararea[43], who were having a law suit against the Saxons in Pinteneasa, not to give up and because as a consequence of his urging, the peasants from Vararea had shot some oxen of the Saxons in the fields under litigation....

[42] Szeged/Seghedin – a relatively large town on the Tisa, in Hungary.
[43] Vararea, Pinteneasa – villages in northern Transylvania.

The high spirits his friend seemed to be in upset David...How could he be so merry when he was being sent out „there"?...Or perhaps Oprisor had already made up his mind, perhaps he already knew what he was going to do?...He could not refrain from asking him at once, curtly, meaningfully, his voice turning slightly hoarse:

„ What do *you* say?"

He was waiting for the answer with a shrunken heart.

But Emil Oprisor answered without hesitation, quickly, with amazing carelessness:

„ What I say, my dear?...I say that we have to do our duty. That's it!!...Is there any other possibility? I cannot see one. If not to bolt over to the enemy...(David gave a start on hearing how coolly he had uttered the word „enemy"). But this cannot be done. First because you've taken an oath which you are obliged to keep. I don't admit of treason, not even under the pretext of doing it for your country and kin. A traitor is a rascal, whatever reasons might urge him to treason. Especially as the reasons always, do you understand me, always rely on interest one way or another and emerge from cowardly selfishness...Then even supposing you wanted to cross the lines to the enemy, the question is, can you? I think you cannot. Be sure that a thousand eyes are watching us. One doubtful move and you get a bullet in your back, or, which is worse, you hang. And after all an enemy is an enemy. Shouldn't you fire if he fires at you?"

David couldn't control himself. He interrupted Oprisor with such amazement in his voice that the latter was confused for an instant:

„ You?...You?..."

„ My dear" Oprisor resumed after a slight hesitation, „ First of all, let's get it clear that war is war, that is, something extremely tragic, the most tragic event known to people. What can be more terrible than to kill somebody who has never done you any harm, some poor unknown fellow from some remote country who may be the nicest person on earth? But since war exists, can you, a mere candidate to heroic death, as they say, go against the trend and oppose the general madness?...Thanks God, I think not many have been more Romanian than I. You very well know that I suffered for my disinterested feelings. I would like it, perhaps my soul even wishes the victory of the enemy, deep down it might be yearning for Transylvania to become a Romanian province as it ought to, even though,

to tell you the truth, I do not very much believe it possible...Yet, given the situation we are in, we can't but do our duty unto death..."

„ How easily arguments can be found" David murmured, feeling deeply grieved.

Both kept silent for a few moments, without looking at each other. Both felt there now was a wall between them and that they could not come to understand each other. They started speaking about other things, they exchanged impressions about the two years of fighting, simple details about the flutter of the wings of death. While speaking, both kept trying to smile, to look merry, but neither managed. David felt his heart wrapped up in such cold that he was surprised his teeth didn't start chattering.

Then they parted like two strangers. They shook hands, wished each other luck, and David said good bye to him in German, as if he'd been talking to one of his other comrades to whom he didn't feel attached by any fibre. He stayed behind and for a long time he watched Oprisor walking away, his head up, slightly swinging his body and cutting the air with a soft horsewhip, very calm and casual. While watching him go, David suddenly felt he envied him.

" Here's a happy man who knows what he's going to do!" he thought, while all the anxiety and torment that had rendered him unable to make a choice crossed his brains in a violent rush.

When Oprisor disappeared behind the tents, David returned to his own place; he felt downcast. He ate, went to bed, and kept tossing all night. Recalling Oprisor's cool words, he remembered Candale's, and especially the latter's burning, determined eyes. His brains were smarting while he hesitated between the two. Had they spoken to him in the same way, he, too, might have taken a decision. But as things were, David felt that the sharp reasoning of Oprisor was as imperious as the glow in Candale's eyes, while his own conscience could only revolt, suffer and moan...

Finally he couldn't stand it any more. A great tiredness overwhelmed him and he fell asleep, murmuring: " Tomorrow!..."

The delay calmed him down to some extent during the following days as well. He realized that all his plans and decisions would be useless. Let us see what the next day will bring!...When he saw "them", then...Who could tell? Circumstances might make the hardest decisions crumble. So much

the more his wavering and hesitation. Why should he imagine he would act this way, or that, if might have to act otherwise?

X

He began to pray every night, shrunken in the bed he happened to have, his face always turned to the wall, while his comrades were playing cards, drinking, smoking and howling sophisticated oaths. He was experiencing a great need to prostrate himself, to humiliate himself by asking for superhuman help. Only the Lord could still have granted him real comfort, a soothing remedy.

Every evening he desperately, passionately repeated, like a child beaten by a step-mother: Our Father that Thou art in heaven...

And now he always fell asleep with the name of God on his lips...

XI

After a few days of anxious waiting, they set off. Rumours ran that they were going towards Făgăraş[44]. Sometimes by train, sometimes on foot, in hard, hurried, exhausting marches.

One day by dusk, they crossed the Olt[45] and camped in an almost deserted village, with small, murky houses. Only a few women and old men were hiding behind the wattle gates, those who couldn't or didn't have the heart to run away. The name of the village was Porumbacu. A strong Romanian column was said to approach the village in great hurry...The collision was expected to happen next day at dawn...Tomorrow!...The troops were given a few hours rest so that, a bit refreshed, they should be able to start digging their defensive entrenchment...

---

[44] Făgăraş – both a little town and the highest mountain range in the southern Carpathians.

[45] The Olt – large river crossing the mountain range and flowing south into the Danube.

David was done up with fatigue as never before. He flung himself down on the floor in a deserted house and slept like a log. He needed neither food, nor drink. Only sleep could still grant him the leisure he needed so that he shouldn't have to think of anything…

When his orderly woke him, it was still pitch dark. He rubbed his eyes, stretched himself making his bones crack. It was midnight. Sleep wouldn't leave him. He didn't even hear when the soldier told him he'd received a letter, but he was as happy as a bride when he saw it. He brightened up at once. Casting a glance at it in the poor light of a rush candle, he saw it came from Elvira. He read it smiling permanently, his eyes drowned in tears of tenderness. His wife was writing only trifles, but those trifles seemed to him more precious than all the treasures in the world. She was telling him that Titi kept talking about his father all the time, that he'd grown tall and was obedient, that he would play only war. She was also telling him she was rather annoyed because she couldn't find hands, as all the men were at the front; that everything had become so expensive that one could hardly stay alive. She also wrote that all the town officials had fled to Cluj, some even to Budapest, so that only the Romanians were left, but they were living in fear too, because who could tell what was going to happen if fighting and shelling began there as well, if whatever was left to the poor people should be destroyed…

" Aha, so she wrote this after…" David said to himself as he started reading the letter for a second time, stopping now at each word, looking between the lines for what wasn't there.

He folded the letter carefully and put it in his pocket above his heart; and the sheet of paper seemed to warm his very soul.

" If she, poor soul, knew what I am passing through right now' he then thought , getting ready. " If she knew!..."

He left the house in a better state of mind. Coming out, he hit his head on the upper threshold. He started swearing, but he quickly broke off.

" This is sure to be of bad omen…God take pity on me!..."

A rough autumn wind was blowing under the grey, starless sky. In all the houses one could feel a sort of swarming, like in an anthill kicked by a wag; there were commands, whispering, short shouts, heavy rattling…the army was getting on the move….The tiny houses looked like heaps of terror in the dark of the night, while the completely leafless trees were rustling, weeping, waving in the wind.

The trenches were dug on a bald hill ridge, a few hundred yards from the village. Now they were to fit them, deepen and consolidate them. Work started at once. Weak lanterns began glimmering like some fantastic signals in the winding ditches, while the mattocks and the spades were whizzing and hitting with dull thumps the sleeping earth which indifferently allowed to be notched and drilled.

The silent, hard, sweat-producing work lasted until dawn…

Against his habits, David didn't mind what his men were doing. He was sitting heavily on a bed, his elbows on his knees, his eyes piercing the darkness mournfully enveloping the surroundings. Imperceptibly, homesickness crept into his heart. He began recalling details from his former peaceful life; and with each recollection his soul was warming up. At present that life seemed so sweet to him, he yearned for it so desperately that his entire self was filled with pain. His thoughts were strolling through Năsăud, he was embracing all the people that passed the Vicar's Bridge, smiling to them with brotherly love…Even the Jews he had never been fond of seemed nice to him now because they belonged that life at home…Not to mention Elvira with her sweet obedient smile, her warm, tolerant eyes, always so kind, so diligent!...What about Titi, with his delightful way of speaking, his charming tenderness!...

Some Hungarian oath would now and then interrupt his reverie, reminding him how far he was from all those objects of the yearning that was torturing him now. Or he couldn't help hearing some sinister thump of a pick-axe suggesting they were digging graves…

He was wondering how come he hadn't realized in what bleak turmoil he'd been living for such a long time. Blood, death, shell splinters, bullet hissing, crashes, explosions, dirt, sweat…what a life! And he had lived it for two full years without thinking for one moment of the other life, the real one, without even wanting it back!

And then again in the next moment he was sorry fate wouldn't let him stay to the end the way he had begun. That indifference, that coolness, that insensibility were so satisfactory! How and where from had he got them? And especially how and why had he lost them. Not even now did he fully realize, or he didn't want to. A word like any other, without his taking pains to penetrate its sense to the core at least, had been able to make him forget everything for two years. And now a hazy feeling, uncalled for, even ill-treated, and against which he had struggled with might and main, was

upsetting his soul, was torturing and at the same time sweetening his life…It was no use any more trying to make a choice, to take a decision. It would be in vain for him to repeat the word "duty". He was aware it had become an empty word, powerless to make him submit blindly, yet, still strong enough to make him unable to oppose it. His burning soul tortured by endless love couldn't find in his brains a support strong enough to untie his hands, to reconcile his fears…

Dawn was delicately descending from the sky, redeeming the world from the oppression of the dark. Little by little, the surroundings emerged and took shape in the light. A narrow stripe of sun appeared from behind a hill, faintly polishing the hoar-frosted ground.

Now David couldn't get enough of contemplating these places as if in his lifetime he hadn't seen a more beautiful landscape. Maybe only the neighbourhood of Năsăud, with its maize fields, orchards, and its grove could have given him so much joy. Everything was like in a fairy tale and so dear to him that he felt like hugging the whole scenery. The yellowish slope descending gently almost down to that pathetic little village hidden along the banks of a small stream, the road sticking to the bank and the gloomy forest climbing steeply on the opposite bank as far as you could see...

„ Why am I enjoying this like an idiot?" he wondered. „ As if I hadn't seen enough ravines and villages and..."

But then he immediately changed his mind:

„ Here I am again back in Transylvania", and while thinking, he felt his heart swell, and the landscape itself seemed to grow still more beautiful...

At the moment when the hardly risen sun hid again behind the gloomy tissue of clouds that was bordering the horizon, heavy muffled roaring suddenly started from behind the lines; it was followed by a whizz moving away at great speed. David gave a frightened start.

„ See how my heart is throbbing!" he said to himself with a smile. „ As if it were that first cannon roar two years ago...It's ours!" he then added, trying to guess the direction of the shell.

But he couldn't make it out and this irritated him a little.

The thundering then grew in frequency, finally melting into one deep and threatening roar. The cannon roar which he knew well by sound was soon answered by others, dull, short, hoarse ones.

„ They started it there too..."

On the right and on the left, far away, he then heard rapid gun fire and the barking of machine guns. His eyes ached as he strained them in the hope that he might discover something. But the noise went on for hours, sometimes more intense, sometimes weaker; yet he could see nothing.

„ Where are they? Where are they?" David kept murmuring, his heart tight, his forehead covered in hot beads of sweat.

It was only about noontime that he saw a huge greenish snake crawling along the road in the valley beyond the village; a rain of white shrapnel shell clouds immediately crowded above it. But this didn't last more than two or three minutes, as the snake quickly disappeared in the forest.

„ It's them!" David whispered, petrified. „ Now it's starting..."

Then he saw numerous shells bursting among the trees, where the column had entered the thicket...Then the cannons fell silent for a short while...Finally, when men and carts appeared in the forest, the shelling was resumed and went on till late in the evening...Yet, nothing showed up in front of his trenches, or in the vicinity. His own machine guns fired no shot all day long. The soldiers were sitting hidden in the ditches, telling gross jokes, counting the shell and the lice, or thoughtfully writing postcards for home on their knees...Then as it grew darker, the noises of the battle quietened down and only isolated, as if frightened, gun reports could be heard, resembling the last spasms of a dying man.

Burning curiosity was now gnawing David's mind. What had actually happened? Where precisely had they fought? Was it over? And...who had won?

His heart was trembling in his chest.

XII

An officers' mess had been improvised in a cottage behind the front line; the officers were coming here in turns, ate quickly and went back to the trenches.

David had sat down at a table, beside a captain he didn't know. They were both eating without exchanging a word. But in the end David couldn't help asking, his eyes wide open and burning:

„ Where did they fight?"

„ On the flanks, comrade...We repelled them with bloody noses..."

David started. He went on asking:

„ Were you in the fight?"

„ Of course...My battalion sustained the strongest pressure...It was a hard fight, my dear. We came to bayonets...We had serious losses as well, but the enemy were completely crushed. I am only sorry for poor Oprisor..."

David dashed at the captain:

„ Is Emil Oprisor in your battalion?...What's the matter with him?...What did he do?"

„ He was taken prisoner by the enemy, together with two platoons; he was flank guard. They suddenly surrounded him and he couldn't help it, he had to surrender...A great loss, honest! I'd rather have lost a whole company than him. An excellent officer, always merry, daring, intelligent...It's a pity we lost him..."

The captain soon left, his cap pushed back, a cigar between his teeth, grumbling satisfied and full.

David sat there bewildered. What had happened to Oprisor set him thinking. See, the lucky one! Here he is regretted, over there he must have been congratulated...What is it fate cannot achieve if it chooses to!...He was envying Oprisor as if the man had won on the pools.

Just as he was rising to leave, a lieutenant came in; he recognized David and asked him:

„ Have you heard? Candale is dead."

„ It can't be true!"

„ He's dead. A bullet bore his forehead. Instantaneous death. But he fought admirably. He kept encouraging the soldiers, making jokes, bustling, why, he was superb...the whole regiment regret him, and especially the officers, who are reproaching themselves for having suspected him of not fighting against the Romanians. But one can't help it. You probably are being suspected in the same way. Your situation is very delicate, of course, we all understand it...That's why suspicions are somehow justified, aren't they?..."

David quickly left the room with no answer. He was furious and indignant, and while walking on the road towards his tactical position, he was waving his hands and grumbling like a madman.

The injustice of fate was driving him mad.

„ So, Oprisor is willing and determined to fight, but gets away safe and sound, and is appreciated here and will be welcome there...While Candale, who would have rather cut off his hand than fire a single shot, dies by a brother's bullet...Oh, but this iniquity is horrible!...It's terrible!...What about me then?...What's in store form me?"

XIII

The soldiers went on digging more trenches, repairing them, improving on them. The barbed wire entanglement sometimes looked like an ice flower ribbon in the faint glimmer of the few stars one could see in the sky. Here and there a report, like the bark of a hoarse dog, could be heard. From time to time, blinding flares came up in the air and burst above the village in the valley, illuminating it for two minutes, then going out and leaving behind crape-thick darkness.

David flung himself to the ground, wrapped in a tarpaulin, put a knapsack under his head and went to sleep. Why should he keep tormenting his brains with thinking, when fate was so wicked? He was sorry he had been fretting in vain so many nights and days. From now on, he would stop worrying altogether, Come what may!...

He woke up in cannon roar. The darkness hadn't cleared up yet. He looked at his watch; just three after midnight.

„ You did start it early, damn you!" he muttered lazily, stretching his body.

For a while, he listened to the whizzing of the shells. He knew the speech of cannons only too well, and he soon understood that whatever was going on did not concern him. The two artilleries were trying their strength...

Slowly, slowly, sleep overcame him again...

When he woke up again, rifles were cracking as well. The fire was sparse, uncertain, as if the rifles too had just woken up. It was already daylight, but you couldn't see the sun because of some black, angry-looking clouds which kept changing shape threateningly. Yet, at the very top of the blue sky, a few bright sunbeams were announcing a beautiful autumn day.

„ Why so much sleep with me?' David wondered, getting rid of his bedding and standing up to see what was going on around him.

He was feeling relieved and eager for work. How long was it now since he had last felt this cool determined, triumphant calm? He himself was surprised at it and felt happy. As is sleep had literally taken away all his anxieties and hesitations.

„ One should go on doing one's duty, that's it" he told himself with a bitter smile. „Only duty will give you the quiet and moral strength you need in life..."

The question „ Which duty?" flashed up in his mind, but he found the strength to dismiss it. „ Any duty is holy" he muttered. A painful grip was struggling within him, he was moved and had tears in his eyes. He stifled his feelings, grinding his teeth.

„ Fate is accursed. Fate is dreadful...But what can you do against fate?"

He was standing behind a machine gun, in a hole, so that half of his body was above the ground; he was looking at the village, down the naked slope. At the edge of the village, in the valley, he suddenly discovered a long line of moving spots.

„ The Romanians!" he muttered, and his heart was beating as if about to break his chest.

The gunners at the machine gun in front of him were watching him impatiently, worriedly, waiting for his order. But he kept standing motionless, his eyes fixed on that line which soon drew near, waving, narrowing, widening like an accordion. At the same time, a frightened pattering of rifles began. The rifles were cracking hastily and their reports finally combined in one deafening yelping.

The line was coming ever closer, prudently, with halts and jumps...Now it was only about seven hundred meters in front of them...

Fascinated, David kept watching them; he saw them quite well through the binoculars. They had greenish uniforms, like his own, and on their lapels there were some dark green signs. They were short, agile, thin in the face, bony, quick, and their eyes were shining so brightly that the shine seemed to reach and burn him like a needle sting. He also marked out an officer with a big, bushy dark brown beard which was shaking and turning towards the soldiers when he ran. Thin, sharp bullet whizzing was all around him more and more often, as if all the bullets had been looking precisely for him.

„ It would be better this way" David thought, unable to take his eyes from the row of soldiers on the slope.

Suddenly, he saw a slight movement, like of runners getting ready for start, and clearly heard a shrill voice screaming:

„ Forward, boys!"

He also saw how they all jumped to their feet as if burnt and made for them...He could even make out the rattle of the weapons and the canteens...But the next moment his eyes turned to his own gunners. The desperate eyes of his men frightened him. He felt as if they had caught him with his hand in somebody else's pocket. He opened his mouth as if to defend himself, but his lips mechanically uttered like so many other times in moments of peril:

„ Langsam!"

And the machine gun started barking at once like a dog set free from its chain. The wave which had risen sprawled to the ground again. Some rolled back writhing or dead...David thought he could hear groans and curses. The machine gun went on firing, tireless, bloodthirsty, only slightly hoarse. It seemed never to have produced such a dreadful noise before. To David at least, the noise he used to almost ignore in the past seemed to rip his heart now. The bullets were whizzing, furiously whipping the ground, hissing fiercely among those down in the valley...

„ Langsam!" David repeated with a beseeching gesture, his heart broken.

He felt the need to stop this storm and yet, he had no power to utter any command...

After a while the machine gun slowed down of itself as if it had got tired...

More time passed, and those down the slope tried again to stand up and start forward.

But now the gunners didn't even wait for David's order and started a sustained fire which compelled those who'd started to take cover again...

The sun had come out from behind the clouds, had risen high and was hotly watching this scuffle of men. The air was seething with the reports of rifles and cannons.

Then unawares it was past noon. The machine guns went on barking alone like venomous bitches, and the line of soldiers in the valley was

unable to come closer. The slightest movement broke under the storm of bullets that was sweeping the whole slope.

David was still standing there petrified, his eyes looking ahead, his brains completely empty. He had neither thought nor desire left. Only that he was unable to turn his eyes away from that greenish row of people who kept impatiently, painfully writhing on the slope. He didn't know any more what was going on on the left or on the right; he was unable even to think of such things. The bullets that kept coming from the valley and whizzing by his ears, but which wouldn't hit him and seemed to be talking to him, crying to him, scolding him, - were dear to him.

„ They seem to be looking for me, they seem to know that I too am..." David told himself several times without finishing his thought.

A mighty yearning to be hit by one of those bullets from the valley took hold of him. He imagined that the blow would be a tender caress to his chilled soul. Yet, the bullets kept hissing by, sometimes furiously, sometimes gaily, but never touching him...

His mouth was dry, a terrible thirst was torturing him; he wanted to know what time it was, he was aware he had an excellent watch, and yet, it seemed to him he didn't, or he felt such dread of the watch as if it had pointed at his dying hour.

„ It must be about four hours since they stopped...since this stopped them" he thought, adding at once with a sort of exhausting despair:

„ What time can it be, my God, what time?"

He felt hot as if he'd been in an oven. His clothes were burning him...Then suddenly, unaware of what he was doing, he took out Elvira's letter and began to reread it calmly, careless about whatever might have been going on around him. He was reading and smiling, and he heard neither the barking of the machine gun, nor the patter of the rifles or the roar of the cannons. Now he was feeling well, contented and happy...

Who knows how much time might have passed? David seemed to belong to another world. He didn't even understand anything when he suddenly felt a rough hand grabbing him by the nape and heard a savage voice roaring close by:

„ Get hold of him, sergeant!"

He jumped to his feet, tried to struggle, it crossed his mind to use his revolver, then he saw in front of him that bearded officer, with bloodshot eyes, his cap missing, with large beads of sweat on his shiny bald head,

screaming hoarsely as he was making for him. The machine gun was silent. A couple of ginners lay dead, with their brains scattered, the shooter was standing with his hands up and a terrified face, while a short, swarthy soldier was disarming him.

„ It's over...How good it is over 1" David thought, excitedly gripping Elvira's letter in his left hand. „ They seem to have outflanked us...What do I care? All right, it's coming to an end..."

He looked at the bearded officer intently, woefully. He would have liked to say a word, but felt he had no voice. He was puzzled when he heard himself saying:

„ Duty ..."

But at that moment, the bearded officer pointed his revolver at David and shot him in the chest, yelling:

„ Get hold of him, sergeant!"

David felt a blow in his ribs, immediately followed by a sharp burn. He reeled on his feet. The grip on his nape was released and he fell over the hot barrel of the machine gun, embracing it like a lover. But he felt no pain. His head was hanging heavily on one side. The tired smile which had welcomed the bearded officer was still hovering on his lips. His eyelids were heavy like lead, but he was unable to close them....He was aware he was dying and was happy. Now all duty was over, everything was over. He felt great relief and he only wished he had had the strength to shout loudly that duty was over. He tried hard to stand up, but he couldn't. Yet, a sort of muffled moan burst from his throat:

" Brother...Romanian..."

The sergeant heard him and wildly turned round:

" You kept killing us for five hours and now you are saying you are our brother?...God damn you, cur!"

Raising his gun with both hands, he hit David on the head with the butt. The bones cracked, the skull was flattened and the brains mixed with blood streamed down onto the barrel of the machine gun...

In the trenches around, the fight was at its height. Men were rending one another, blood was welling forth from savagely inflicted wounds, and terrible deadly blows kept falling.

Soon, the last machine gun was silenced. The infantry rushed up like storm from the valley, passed through the barbed wire, and dashed into the trenches shouting wildly so that the valleys were ringing:

" Hurrah!"

Several soldiers dashed sat the machine gun, unclenched David's arms and threw his body aside as if it had been but some useless rag. The machine gun was carried away as it was, its barrel besmeared with the bloody brains, and the eyes of those who were carrying it away were shining with happiness, they were joking and yelling lustily in middle of the turmoil that wouldn't recede.

The corpse had rolled aside and remained face up, its arms spread out as if crucified. The crushed face seemed to preserve a bitter smile, and the bulging eyes kept staring at the sky wonderingly, questioning and yet, contented. In the left hand, the crumpled letter was soaked in blood.

The fighting passed ahead; David Pop was left alone. The shell-ransacked earth seemed to adjust itself so as to make up a cosy couch for him, and the compassionate sun was kissing his large wonderful eyes, his blood-besmeared cheeks, his distorted mouth, the whole sunken face. And the smile of the dead man seemed to keep on saying, ever more humbly, more dolefully:

" Brother...Romanian..."

MIHAIL SADOVEANU (1880 – 1961) was born in a small Moldavian town, son to a lawyer and a peasant woman, whose exquisite rural heritage and sensitivity will pervade most of his writings. Since childhood he was fascinated by history, especially by the figure of the voivode Stephen the Great, around whose age and reign he will weave one of the most vivid and luminous cycles of historical novels in world literature. His literary debut took place in 1897, as a pupil, with short stories which were gathered in a volume, *Stories*, in 1904. In the same year he published his first novel, *The Falcons*, the volumes of stories *Stifled Pains* and *Uncle Precu's Pub*, which all enjoyed a great success. After *Tales from the War* (1905), he was awarded the Romanian Academy Award for prose (1906). The same year brought about *The Memories of Corporal Gheorghita, Withered Flower* and *A Child's Grave*, all three volumes of short stories. Three other volumes followed in 1907, *Times of Refuge, At Us, in Viisoara,* and the novel *The Scrapbook of Neculai Manea.* He translated from Maupassant, then, in 1908, published the dramatic narrative *Haia Sanis.* The first of his series of historical novels, *The Kin of the Soimarus,* appeared first in instalments in the famous literary magazine "The Romanian Life", then as a volume, in 1914. In 1916 he was elected a corresponding member of the Academy, then a full member in 1923. Out of the numerous titles of novels and short stories in this period: *Lapusneanu Street* and *The Blue Heron* (1921), *Neagra Sarului* (1922), *A Milll Came Floating down the Siret* (1925), *The Enchanted Grove* and *The Land Beyond the Fog* (1926), *The Demon of Youth and Tales from Ancuta's Inn* (1928). His next historical novel was *The Sign of Cancer or the Time of Duca-Voivode* (1929), followed by one of his masterpieces, *The Hatchet* (1930). Other titles came in the following years, such as *His Majesty the Forest's Prince* (1931), *The Golden Bough* (1933), *Midsummernights* and *The Sun in the Pool or the Shah's Adventures (1934).* The personality of Stephen the Great was evoked in his novel *The Life of Stephen the Great* (1934), then the first part of his historical trilogy *The Jder Brothers, The*

Apprenticeship of Ionut, appeared in 1935. The next two parts followed in 1936 (*The White Spring*) and 1942 (*His Majesty's Men*). In 1938 he was awarded the title of Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Jassy. Several other titles from his vast work: *The Oldest Memories* (1935), *The Case of Eugenita Costea* (1936), *The Valley of the Frumoasa* and *Bear's Eye* (1938), *Wolves' Island* (1941), *The Tales from Bradu-Stramb* (1943), *Nada Florilor* (1951), *Nicoara Potcoava* (1952); this last novel was awarded the State Prize of Romania. Sadoveanu is perhaps one of the most celebrated Romanian writers: many outstanding Romanian and foreign critics paid him homage in volumes of studies and in articles about his works, he was translated into countless languages and his *Complete Works* are continuously re-edited.

THE ENCHANTED GROVE

I

It becomes obvious that Miss Lizuca is an evil sort

Mrs. Mia Vasilian was informing her new acquaintances about her person, with an air of naïve youthfulness:

"...*Twenty-three years ago*, when the stork brought her into her parents' home, she had been baptized Maria, imagine that!"

The two women, wives to clerks freshly transferred to our little town by the Conservative government, were listening to her intently, still preserving their mute reservation about the number of years. The name seemed acceptable to them.

A fairly nice name, isn't it?

Still, as soon as she'd started cooing her first words, her ladyship changed it herself. In a musical pitch, pouting her little lips, she would always answer: *My name is Mia!* And Mia it remained.

At that time, somebody had made the observation that this proved "the sense of music" in the little girl.

Indeed, Mrs. Mia Vasilian could confess with no false modesty that she was a perfect musician! Everybody admitted that she had a charming voice!

Anyway, she had even studied at the Conservatory for four years. The famous Teodorini[46] loved her and foresaw a bright future for her. The family were even discussing to send her to Milan.

Her parents had been rich; they owned a great estate in Buzau[47], near Leontesti[48]. Trains, liveried servants, governesses... Such were the circumstances Mia Vasilian had been born and brought up in.

---

[46] Elena Teodorini, a famous Romanian soprano.
[47] County in the South of Romania.
[48] Village in Buzau county.

Her father, Boyar Anastase, would often take her on his knees and show her the forefathers' portraits in oval, gilded frames.

Out of the past glamour, she was left with this much, at least: a noble breeding!

Under those circumstances, her marriage to Vasilian would have appeared as a mismatch, for her ladyship was born a Papazoglu[49].

And yet, with so many things, unhappy financial speculations, political enmities, she had to stoop to fate. Still, nobody could say, could they, now? that Vasilian didn't come from a good family. On the contrary, he was from a very good family indeed, of Moldavian boyars, but anybody would admit that Papazoglu was something different: it was a famous name, it was top-notch.

Anyway, the main thing was that she was feeling well and happy. And Jorj would meet all her whims... It couldn't be conceived of otherwise. He was her senior by fifteen years and had been married before.

He was left behind with a child, a little girl who – how should I phrase it? – was a sort of a thorn between them... a child, woe! Quite ill-bred she was.

This brought a little shade into their life, didn't it? For Vasilian had married her out of love. Seeing her resistance, at first, poor Jorj had fallen sick.

She had to give in; and, at the wedding, she had worn such a beautiful, such an elegant outfit, that all her lady friends were green with envy.

"I am somewhat difficult", Mrs. Vasilian concluded with a sweet smile, "and my taste is choice. I especially like elegance and finesse... I can't understand why coffee isn't served yet!" she continued, jumping from her armchair with a sprightly movement.

"Never you mind, madam Vasilian", the older lady calmed her," don't bother. It will be on its way. Until then, I'll roll myself a cigarette."

Mia Vasilian pattered to the bell and pressed its button lengthily, a frown in her black-contoured eyebrows. Meanwhile, Mrs. Emilia, throwing a fugitive glance full of many meanings, to her daughter, Madam Neicu, opened her purse and started rummaging in it for a little silver tobacco box, where she kept second-quality tobacco.

[49] Name of an old Fanariot (Greek-Turkish) noble family, boyars in medieval Romania.

Mrs. Mia Vasilian, wife to the well-known lawyer in our town, had noticed Mrs. Emilia's glance and smiled: it seemed odd to her how such a tall and stout mother could have such a thin and wiry daughter – like a thread... Never mind, they were both ugly and tastelessly dressed. As to their hats... How could women of some condition wear such hats?

The maidservant, a lively lass with a tiny squirrel-like face, stepped in, folding the lap of her white apron.

"Have you rung for me, madam?"

"*Ma chere,*" Mrs. Vasilian softly answered, "we are waiting for coffee and it isn't arriving..."

"In a minute, madam..." and the maidservant disappeared backwards.

Mrs. Mia Vasilian took two steps towards the open window.

"Nice day," she spoke up, "still, it seems too hot. Orange sherbet will be brought, presently, too. This lass is very intelligent and knows all my tastes. And one ought to know, dear Mrs. Emilia, how to handle servants."

"Not even servants are what they used to be these days," Mrs. Emilia observed.

Mrs. Vasilian answered, smiling:

"I am very happy with mine. With me, servants are afraid of only one thing: that I might fire them..."

Madam Neicu puckered her thin lips; she would have liked to answer something back. But she mastered herself and remained silent.

"And for all that, I change them pretty often, what shall I do?" Mrs. Vasilian innocently complained. "With some of them I am forced to part. I especially cannot abide by ill-mannered ones... With me, dear madam Neicu and Mrs. Emilia, troubles are of a completely different kind. I cannot complain too much, still you ought to know that there are a couple of ridiculous old people living on the outskirts of this wretched little town, the parents of my "predecessor". Not a day passes without their asking Jorj to send the child to them, for they want by all means to see their Lizuca, that they cannot live without their Lizuca! If the poor child hasn't had a careful breeding, it's only their fault. She has popped up from there, cutting such faces and behaving so much like a peasant's girl, my dear ones, that, to tell you the truth, I'm even horrified. Can you imagine that I can't make her wear an embroidery or a ribbon? Is it conceivable that at her age – and she's almost six! – she shouldn't be able to make a curtsey in

front of older people? I was raised otherwise. These things simply mortify me."

The maidservant with her little squirrel-like face showed in the shadow of the door, carrying the tray with jam and coffee.

"Ma'am," she delicately spoke up, "Lieutenant Micus Lazar is asking if you are willing to receive him."

"I certainly am! Show him in; I keep open house today; he is always welcome!" Mrs. Vasilian answered in a somewhat higher pitch.

And, hopping in her rustling dress, she took two steps towards the door. When she saw the greenish uniform, the blond, straight-haired head and the freshly-shaven, slightly powdered face of the officer, she put out both her hands at him and smiled sweetly.

"Mr. Micus, I haven't seen you for ages," she trilled. And the young man stopped in amazement after two steps, slightly turning his head and savouring the music in her voice.

"Madam," he ceremoniously answered, "I am very happy that you haven't forgotten me..."

Heels in line, bending low, he lightly caught the little hand Mrs. Vasilian was putting out to him and kissed the tips of her fingers. The little maidservant had set the tray on the coffee table between the two ladies and had turned around, watching in transfixion. Mrs. Emilia and madam Neicu were sitting, teaspoons raised, and did not know if it was meet to slurp up the sherbet at that moment. Eventually they gulped it up, and, while they were sipping in the due water, the officer presented himself to them as well, elegant and solemn.

The exchange of compliments that followed, the rounded movements, the smiles and invitations spread out in the wine-coloured little parlour a mist of noble self-oblivion and merriment. Nobody noticed when Lizuca, Mrs. Vasilian's affliction, had crept in, among the chairs, towards the sherbet tray.

She was a rather short little girl, sturdy and plump. The blue canvas dress was twisting in a totally unacceptable way on her little body. Her little boots were full of dust and their laces were undone. Her socks had fallen down, showing a pair of sunburnt shins, with questionably clean knees. Her hair was cropped very short, like a little boy's, and her head's roundness was showing all sorts of irregular bumps. Her tiny nose was in great need of a handkerchief, a fact her sleeves were doubtlessly proving.

Her mouth was a tad too big and her cheeks a shade too red. She wasn't pretty and dainty at all, Miss Lizuca wasn't. Only in each of her hazel eyes, shaded by black lashes, there glimmered a tiny flower of light.

Without the slightest hesitation or care for the noble assembly, Lizuca stepped lightly but firmly towards the sherbet table and, sticking two fingers into the jar, withdrew them adorned with a flimsy piece of sherbet. Just as she was busy to steady it with her mouth and tongue, careful not to waste any of the titbit, the little servant maid saw her and gave a shriek.

"What is it, *ma chere*?" Mrs. Vasilian turned around in amazement.

But when she saw what it was, when she understood what contrast and sacrilege had been produced in her wine-coloured little parlour, blood suddenly rose to her cheeks and flared up in her eyes.

"What's the meaning of this, Helen?" she spoke up firmly and dramatically in a low voice. "How many times have I drawn your attention upon these things? Don't just stand there like a piece of wood. Take her out of here!... Don't you understand that if I set eyes on her one more time, you'll have to call the doctor? Oh! This is terrible!" she desperately sighed, turning to her guests. "Everything is in vain, everything! I don't know what to do about this child any more. See for yourselves what habits she's acquired since she came home from her grandparents'. I've told Jorj a thousand times that this child is a shame and a scandal. That's exactly why Jorj has not sent her to the old ones any more... It's a decision that I can only approve of!"

The ladies were nodding, deeply sympathetic; then they sighed. Mr. Micus seemed confused. He would have sooner laughed. And he was sorry that the light had vanished from Mrs. Vasilian's face.

But the lady of the house was a refined and understanding creature. As soon as she saw that Helen had rushed upon the child and grabbed her in her claws like a vulture, pulling her in violent and irregular jerks towards the darkness of the hall – she turned to Mr. Micus with that dainty smile which, however hard she might strive, no other woman in our town could possibly produce.

"Mr. Micus," she said after the intermezzo, "wait a little please, till I bring you some raspberry jam which I made yesterday with my own hands."

"With this little hand..." the officer replied, bending again and kissing the rosy nails.

As if this piece of gallantry had been a signal, Mrs. Emilia and madam Neicu exchanged a glance and rose to their feet at the same time. Opposition, protestation, explanations and smiles didn't last too long and, after the two ladies had made their exit, there was silence for a while in the little parlour, then a light, crystalline laughter resounded, as a sign that any annoyance was fairly easy to forget in this world…

II

Miss Lizuca is planning a valiant expedition

"You just come over here, you little devil's bug, you!" the maidservant was grumbling with repugnance, pulling and dragging Lizuca by one wing. "That I should stand grudge and abuse because of you!"

The little girl started squeaking in a shrill voice, stiffening her legs and struggling sideways:

"Leave me alone! Let me be! You're but a servant maid… I'll tell on you to daddy."

"Indeed? You'll tell on me?" And the maidservant jostled her forward, helping herself a bit with her foot as well. "*The master* ain't gonna be home soon, and till he is, we'll make bloody sure to settle your hide atop a nice pole!"

Lizuca puckered her lips and flashed back at her in hatred, under her crossed eyebrows.

"So?" the maidservant shouted, "you're giving me the sneaky eye? The mistress is right, she is. You beast and devil's breed, you!"

Grabbing the child again by the lap of her dress, she gave her what is called *a knob*, twisting her thumbnail and knuckles in the crown of the girl's head. Seeing that Lizuca was still mastering herself, she gave her another , an even stronger and tighter one, until she felt under the other hand's fingers the flesh tremble and heard the tears seeping in the tiny, insignificant nose.

"Have some more, as interest, too," she said laughing, and slapped her palm on the girl's short-cropped head. "Go and don't return before hell freezes over!"

Lizuca stumbled and hit her head against the wall. Then, sniffling, she swallowed and mastered her tears and turned again that slanting, thievish look upon the maid.

But Ileana had entered the kitchen and was talking to the cook in a shrill and impetuous voice. Miss Lizuca could dry her tears in peace, using that part of her sleeves which she also used to wipe her nose. Then she noticed close-by her pal Patrocles and smiled at him.

Patrocles was a russet mutt, with short, bowed legs and a big head. He had deep, perpendicular wrinkles between his human eyes rimmed with black eyebrows; years and life experience had whitened the hairs on his muzzle.

As soon as he saw Miss Lizuca's smile, he drew near and started licking her hand, still besmeared with orange sherbet.

"They spanked me yesterday", Lizuca sighed, "they spanked me again today, they spank me every day…"

As usual, Patrocles understood. After he licked her hand clean, he turned on his hind paws, rose and leaned lightly against the little girl's breast, comforting her and wiping the trace of the salty tears from her cheeks.

"Patrocles," Lizuca told him, "daddy isn't returning from Bucharest any more and I haven't seen my grandparents for a very long time. They won't even allow us to go there any longer. Since mommy died, we fare very badly."

Patrocles whined lightly and looked at her with his beautiful, gold-circled eyes.

"Indeed," he answered, "we do fare very badly."

"Shhh! Just listen!" Lizuca spoke again, putting up a finger. "Mommy is laughing. Mommy is always laughing. Our mommy never laughed like this…"

The little girl listened intently, then she stood a while deep in thoughts. She slowly whispered – to a vague shadow that had suddenly appeared:

"Daddy, I've heard mommy laugh in the parlour with mister Micus…"

Mrs. Emilia and Madam Neicu were just coming out after their visit and were making for the little gate opening to the street. In passing, the old woman laid her hand on the child's head.

"What's the matter, little girl?" she asked. "Have you been crying?"

Lizuca pushed back the hand that was caressing her and gave a slanting, unfriendly look to the two ladies. She didn't answer and pulled aside, followed by her friend.

"Wicked child!" Mrs. Emilia declared, while Madam Neicu was listening, ears cocked, to the crystalline laughter in the little parlour. In total agreement and winking to each-other, they both passed without any rush into the deserted street, in the scorching heat of the summer.

In front of the house with its shutters down, Lizuca remained pensive after their departure, her eyes staring in the distance and her eyebrows lightly frowning. There were some dried-up flower-beds around her, the flowers on them scarce and faded. Coloured glass balls, on top of sticks, reflected the deformed images of the child and the dog.

Miss Lizuca didn't falter much.

"Patrocles," she spoke, raising her left index to the height of her nose, "I will no longer stay here. I'm going to my grandparents'."

The dog stared at her.

The little girl sneaked up to the back porch, through which the little maidservant had dragged her out, and pulled out from one of her recesses a little coat and a cap knitted of red wool. She bent and pulled up her fallen socks. Then she stood again thinking for a while.

Dutifully sitting on his tail, Patrocles was following each of her movements. Animated by his mistress' foresight, he trickled furtively, ears down, into the kitchen and shortly returned, delicately carrying in his mouth, only by an edge, a huge slice of white bread. A hoarse voice resounded behind him:

"Scram! Rabid beast! Botheration on you and all the likes of you till the end of your days!" A piece of wood resounded loudly on the porch and bounced on its ends a few times, trying to reach the pooch. Patrocles turned his head, understood that the pursuit was about to end and carried the bread to his pal.

"Patrocles, why are you carrying that bread in your mouth?" Lizuca asked laughing.

"For I've got no pocket!" the doggy answered with his eyes, in great merriment.

"Then let me put it away, for times of need," Miss Lizuca decided; and, receiving the bread from Patrocles, she carefully placed it in a pocket of the little red coat. "There's just one more thing we need," the little girl went on, "and then we'll run away. We're going into the wide world, to our grandparents'!..."

Lizuca knew every nook and cranny of the house. She quickly found the ashes that she was in great need of, filled the other pocket of her little coat to the brink, then turned to the little gate opening in the street.

"Hops or flour are no good," she explained. "There is a story granny used to tell me, one with two children that lost their way – and it is said there that rabbits and foxes licked up the trace of flour and hops and the children couldn't make out the way back. You have to strew out ashes, for the marks to be preserved. Let's go, Patrocles!"

"Let's!" the puppy answered. And both went out through the gate, starting on a long journey, full of adventures.

III

A council with the Sunflower

It was eveningtide, but the heat was still high and danced in ripples, like reflections of a secret water above the sleeping houses. The street was rising, empty and lonely, towards the glamour of sunset. Bells started their sweet and sad toll from the churches of the town. The little girl stopped for a while, listening.

"They were tolling the same way *then*..." she whispered, staring in the void.

The two pals slowly passed, following the footpath at the edge of the road, up the hill, to Mihalcea's poplars. Once there, Lizuca stopped and realized that she had run out of ashes.

"What shall we do now, Patrocles?" she asked the little dog. Patrocles gave his huge ears a shake and looked her straight in the eyes:

"I don't know, mistress!"

A long rustle passed through the trembling poplars. Miss Lizuca said:

"Hence, we have to take the little footpath on the left. Even the poplars' leaves are turning in that direction. Then, we'll pass through the orchard and through the grove at Buciumeni – and right after that, we're at my grandparents' cottage. Since we've run out of ashes, we'll go there and we'll never ever return. Nobody will beat us there and granny will weep and rejoice that we've come. Are your feet sore, Patrocles?'

"No."

"Nor are mine. Let's go. Look, Patrocles, hereabouts the path is tiny and narrow, but it's more beautiful than in the town. And maize stalks have gathered both on the left and on the right. And they are moving and hissing like some sword blades. But I'm not scared. They are urging us onwards and they can protect us from many a wicked beast. You know, the maize stalks have their own empress, Patrocles. A huge and beautiful flower: granny says that her name is Sun's Sister[50]. Let's stop here, by her. How do you fare, Sun's Sister?"

The gold-crowned flower bent softly to the child, in the wind's breath.

"I'm glad to find you tall and beautiful," Lizuca went on. "We are going to granny and grandpa's."

"Very good," the sunflower approved.

"For we cannot remain at home. Daddy stamped his foot at my grandparents and won't let me be with them any longer. And when daddy arrived home, mommy had a quarrel with him; she was screaming shrilly, asking him to sell the orchards and the woods. Daddy didn't want to and said they were mine, inherited from my mother. And mommy was pattering her feet quickly and then she goggled her eyes and fell on the chair in a swoon; and daddy jumped up and sprinkled her with water. Then daddy went away; and mommy kept on spanking me, but I didn't cry. I would sneak out to Patrocles, in his doghouse, and sit there hidden and think of my mother, who went away and never came back. My mother has died, Sun's Sister!"

The flower dropped down upon the child two petals like some butterflies of light and shook her head with sadness.

[50] Popular name for sunflower.

"Isn't it true that this is the path to my grandparents'? Then let's go, Patrocles, or else we'll be late."

Two steps away from Miss Lizuca, the little dog was gently digging at an anthill with his paw, then he put his nose into in, whiffing. Presently he started shaking his head and sniffing, jumping to and fro.

Lizuca burst out laughing:

"See, Patrocles, what happens if you don't leave them alone, they'll sting you. Stay put, that I may take them off your muzzle and let them go in the grass. Don't you know that the ants' queen abides here? And if we rid her of dangers, she'll give us a straw; and when we need her, she'll come immediately to our rescue, with all her kin of ants. There. Here's the straw. Let's go now. Fare thee well, Sun's Sister.

IV

Where Holy Wednesday turns[51] up.

They descended among the orchards full of a warm breeze of savoury and beeswax. Very tall fences, with rods as pickets and thorns as eaves, rose to the right and to the left. Old, strange-shaped willows were softly moving their silvery hair. Lizuca knew that those willows were actually people and beasts, frozen down for ages by a spell. She was shyly watching them and listened to them as they sighed and whispered.

The two pals' path halted for another while near a quiet assembly of tiny red bugs, dotted with black.

"These are ladybugs, Patrocles," the little girl said.

"I know, but let's hurry on, for the sun will go down in no time," the doggy answered.

[51] Weekdays are personified in Romanian popular mythology, either as old, holy women or as mischievous witches who either help or, respectively, put to test fairy-tale characters and people. Holy Wednesday is said to possess an iron-toothed little bitch that protects her from wrongdoers and punishes foes.

"All right, all right, Patrocles, don't get upset. Look, on the hillside across, the grove can already be seen. We'll be there by and by."

There was silence and loneliness around them; and a sweet light was filtering through the willow branches. No dog's barking, or bird's call could be heard. As if they had entered a fairyland... Far, overhead, the blue sky was vaulting down upon the grove, flowing like water; and a queen eagle was floating on that wave, with motionless wings.

Suddenly, from behind a bend, a tiny dismal hag popped up, her eyes small and her nose crooked. She was slowly coming towards the two pals, bending on a little white staff. Patrocles cocked his ears for a second, gave a little growl, then remained quiet at Lizuca's side.

The little old woman stopped two steps away from the child and opened a toothless mouth, with pursed and dried-up lips. She asked, nodding her head:

"You're going to your granny's, aren't you?"

Lizuca looked at her in amazement. How did the old woman know that she and Patrocles were going to her granny's? Then she understood and smiled:

"You must be Holy Wednesday!" she said happily. "I have never seen you before, but now I recognize you. Where is your little bitch with fangs of iron and teeth of steel?"

Holy Wednesday answered, smiling:

"I left her home, to watch over my household."

"Have you now?" Lizuca answered. "We're not afraid of her, for we are good people. Godspeed, Holy Wednesday, the sun is about to set and Patrocles is worried lest we should be late."

"Godspeed, auntie's little one," the old woman answered, patting her on the head. "You are a poor and orphaned little girl."

The two pals straddled on. Holy Wednesday stood awhile, looking after them, as if she had been faltering in indecision. Then she started uphill, and, with enough difficulty, passed the stile of a garden. Lizuca and Patrocles hurried their pace. The orchards remained behind and the two pals reached the bottom of the valley, where a wooden footbridge crossed over a brook that was shimmering and gurgling among weeds and between tall clay banks.

The frogs standing guard at the footbridge jumped in the water one after the other. Lizuca stopped, her heart pounding; then, seeing that Patrocles was standing unimpressed, she realized that there was no danger.

"With Patrocles by my side, I don't fear a thing!" Lizuca murmured and passed the footbridge.

For a brief moment, she caught a glimpse of a fantastic little girl and a weird dog in the water. And, without wondering too much, she stepped into the grass of the grove.

Birches, poplars and elms rose uphill, on the coast, their branches tangled and immobile in the eddy of the dusk. From high above there, it was as if a cobweb of rosy waters had been flowing under the arches of the twigs. And in the silence of the little glades, on the hump of a crab apple tree, a woodpecker heralded the travellers' arrival.

As if the twosome had been expected, tiny little birds appeared, swinging on lissom cornel twig tips. They were all watching Lizuca with their tiny, needletip eyes, and asked her, all at the same time, what she was doing in their kingdom.

But Patrocles was there. Rising on his hind legs, he gave them two barks and threatened them with his paw.

With tiny laughs, the little birds flew out of sight. But on the fork of a birch, another master of the place appeared: a startled he-blackbird, who was staring at the little girl now with his right eye, then with his left. He was black and his beak was yellow. And, with great insolence, he called out at Lizuca, in his shrill, flute-like voice:

"Fie, cross, you! Fie cross!"

"He's pretty cheeky, he is..." Lizuca thought. And gently asked him:

"What wrong have I done, for you to call me ugly and cross-eyed? I am but a sorrowful little girl going to her grandparents'."

The he-blackbird hopped on a twig closer-by, gave the little girl a gentle look and softly chirped from his crop:

"Lizuca... Lizuca..."

The little girl started laughing. Patrocles threw himself at the birch and the blackbird darted through the golden cobweb towards the recesses of the grove.

V

Miss Lizuca finds a good host in the Grove.

As soon as the sun went down behind the hilltop, the moon, chased away from the other world, came shining through at the edge of the grove.

Never before had Lizuca seen the moon so close-by and so huge. A disquiet came to her soul. To the West, in the depth of the forest, threads of embers were still shimmering in the dark; it was that way that the last little birds were furtively stealing, greeting her goodnight. And although the moon reddened to the east and light was growing over the mist of the fields, a mysterious, thick shadow was spreading out in the forest, oozing from unknown nooks and valleys.

Lizuca felt a little frightened.

"What shall we do now, Patrocles?" she asked the little dog. "The path cannot be seen any more."

In the light, purplish darkness, the dog touched her hands with his muzzle and gave her a friendly glimpse. With Patrocles by her side, she had nothing to fear. This was obvious to Miss Lizuca.

"Patrocles," she told him, "I know that you're a brave and dauntless little dog; but what shall we do if we get lost in the woods? Now, I deem we'd better carve up a little plank of lime wood, like the ones calling people to church, and hang it on a treetop. When the wind blows, the plank will resound and my grandparents will look for us and find us. But we can't carve that plank, for we haven't taken a knife with us."

"It's clear," Patrocles answered, "we can do nothing without a knife."

"Then what could be done? Look, the Lord has lit up the candles in the sky, but you still can't see the trail. We can't stay here overnight. I say we should find a place to sleep."

"That's a piece of cake." Patrocles answered.

"All right, then, let's go. But whom should we ask for shelter, on a night like this and in the middle of nowhere?"

The little dog started out, sniffing in the grass. The little girl noticed that on the sides of the trail the flowers had bent their heads and were asleep. In a shady corner, she saw a tiny light.

"There must be a little house for us out there," Miss Lizuca murmured.

Coming close to the glow worm's light, she found herself standing near the hollow of an old osier willow. The long plaits of the branches were falling towards her, drowsily swaying.

"This is a very good lodging." Patrocles grumbled.

Then Lizuca asked the willow's permission:

"Auntie willow," she shyly whispered, "will you let us come into your home?"

The osier willow softly caressed her and allowed her into the hollow.

"It's very nice in here, Patrocles," the little girl said, nestling. "I can see there's a mattress and a little pillow of moss. I'll cover myself up with the little coat and put my cap on, and I can sleep like a queen. Look, there is room for you too."

The little dog entered the hollow too, through the window, and coiled up near the child.

Lizuca started talking again in a whisper:

"Patrocles, I don't think we should be afraid of the Woods' Wicked Witch. These are unsoiled, clean places... Holy Wednesday lives nearby. You know what I'm scared of?"

"What?"

"The badger. I've heard that the badger is very bad."

"Let him just dare to come," Patrocles growled with defiance; "I'll teach him who's the boss."

Right that moment, Lizuca gave a shriek. A shadow had risen in a streak of light, hopping towards the hollow. From time to time it would stop, feeling about with two long, straight horns.

Lizuca could hardly mumble in terror:

"The badger, Patrocles!"

With a short bark, Patrocles had already dashed out. The little horns of the apparition fell down. Lizuca only saw it for one split second, frantically tumbling down towards the undergrowth.

"I know it very well that Patrocles isn't afraid of anything!" she smiled.

The dog's voice was heard, sonorously yapping in the forest.

"Patrocles!" the little girl called out, "don't leave me by myself!" And putting her head out of the hollow, miss Lizuca awaited, in the silence of the places, for her pal to return. She heard him, at length, coming: tippery-

tip. He entered, panting, and coiled up by her side. Then he grumbled in dissatisfaction:

"It was only a hare!"

"Boy, was he scared of you!" Lizuca told him in admiration, caressing him.

There was complete silence in the grove and mysterious darkness had fallen, of a kind through which eyes could still easily see. In this silence, a little cricket started chirping in a melancholy voice, close by. Lizuca listened attentively.

"It has a pretty chirp," she whispered.

"Yeah, but it won't let me sleep," Patrocles snarled.

"I don't know why, but I'm not sleepy at all. It's so beautiful and cosy here... I've never known this grove. Now I can see it's a forest like in the fairy-tales mother used to tell me... The cricket isn't chirping any more. It has stopped."

"And very well he did," Patrocles mumbled sleepily. The cricket was quiet. Then, a nightingale swelled up her voice a few times, on top of a twig, in a moon ray.

"What's this?" the little girl asked in amazement. Patrocles didn't answer her.

The grove was silent again in its haze of light, like in a dream. And Lizuca understood that, in that magic, something extraordinary was going to happen. And she was waiting, her heart throbbing and her eyes wide open .

And, suddenly, green glow worms' candles started flickering in two rows and she saw the flowered meadow opening towards a stone wall, between two old birches. Without a sound, a flint door moved aside in the greenish light, and from the pitch darkness of a cave a wonderful sight came to view. There were some tiny little men, rising only two spans above the ground. Their faces and eyes were glowing with smiles.

The little girl wanted to count them.

"It's not meet that you count us!" a tiny little voice was heard. "But, for your knowledge, we are seven!"

And Miss Lizuca didn't count them any more; and she knew there were seven little men. And they were slowly coming towards her, through the enchanted grove, among the candles of the glow worms; and it was as if they were glowing with light themselves.

A little old man and a little old woman were stepping up front, their hair white and their cheeks red, dressed in garments of moss. Following them, four little dwarfs with grey beards were carrying a little bed of osier, trimmed with chicory and melilot flowers. And on that little bed, on a puny stone throne, sat a little princess, tinier than all of them and blonde like the ears of wheat. She wore a crown of wild poppies on her head and was clad in a long dress of a ruby-stone hue.

Miss Lizuca's heart was pounding faster and faster.

"I know you," she whispered in rapture, "I saw you at my grandparents' home, in an old book that my mother used to read when she was my age."

VI

Here it is shown who the little men were.

The old people stopped and the bearded little men set the little osier bed softly onto the ground. Then, without the slightest noise, they all sat down on the grass in front of the hollow. The tiny princess was seated between the two old people; the four bearded little men, behind them. They all put up their heads at the same time and gazed at the little girl, their eyes shining like precious stones.

First the Princess spoke up, in a tiny bird's voice:

"Miss Lizuca, isn't it true that you like fables and fairy-tales?"

"Oh, yes," the child answered, a delightful warmth enveloping her gently. "Mommy used to say that without any stories man's life would be sad and dull..."

"We knew you would come to us," the Princess resumed. "We had the Earth's Urchin[52] stand guard at the edge of the forest and, when the willow received you in her little house, he came down into our caves and let us

[52] One of the many cerberian avatars, The Earth's Urchin is, in Romanian folklore, a white, dog-like animal which is blind and has a ghastly, strident bark. It forecasts death and, immediately after someone's burial he will bite the nose and ears of those whose ritual has been in some way mistaken.

know. We often come out at night and while it away with the creatures that flee humans. I'm very glad that you've come on this very night. I sent out a hare to herald everywhere that we are coming forth in the moonlight. At night, this grove is an enchanted kingdom, which ordinary humans will never be able to know."

Taking with her slender fingers a white wand, as thin as a pin, the little men's Princess made a threatening sign towards the brook. And suddenly Lizuca saw a tiny bridge of silver with a filigree railing arch over the black brinks, instead of the wooden footbridge. And the waters' whisper started being heard, like a soft song under the osier.

The Princess made another sign and the moonlight began flowing down in the clearings, like a soft rain. And on the paths, among grass and flowers, the creatures of the grove started arriving. There were huge hares twitching their ears and whiskers, and red rats with shrewd looks in their eyes, and big gophers, beckoning to one another with their paws. And the badger plumply passed over the silver bridge. Gently crossing the path up to the assembly, he rose to his hind legs, bowed, then started hopping and bouncing like a little bear. Miss Lizuca was wondering how such a gloomy, ill-tempered creature as the badger could dance and be merry. Above the shrubs, unknown birds started flapping their downy wings. And black bugs, stag beetles and night butterflies kept crossing the path of light. And out of sight, the nightingale started singing again,

"Thus do we come here and make merry," the Princess spoke again. "The humans are sleeping and know nothing."

The little men started laughing.

"We," the little old man spoke, "have long severed our lives from the mortals'. A long, a very long time erewhile, we, too, used to live out in the broad daylight; and when humans became more numerous and managed to spread into our places, there lived one old man of our kin who wanted to live in peace with them. His name was Hop-o'my-Thumb and he was a miller. He owned a tiny little mill by the water of the Moldova River, and he would grind the people's grain very neatly and well. But the mortals being stupid and wicked, couldn't abide by such a peerless master. When they sat by the mill, near the fire, and drank a yellow sort of liquor out of shiny bottles, they would pester old man Hop o'my Thumb, pulling his beard and making fun of his tiny little figure.

Then, one day, the little miller got very angry. He crushed the millstones with the hammer and lifted the weirs at the mill races for good. And, leaving the mill dead and deserted, he mounted his old hare and ran far away from people, to deserted places. That's why, since that day, that old man has never liked people again. He would often come out of his wilderness, to the high road, at river fords or old inns and, at eveningtide, approaching the humans' fires and councils, he would play the most dumfounding pranks on them. Humans have many weird stories about his feats. It was then, after he quit being a miller, that the old man urged some of us to join him and move here, in the grove at Buciumeni."

The old man was silent for a moment. Miss Lizuca noticed that all beasts, bugs and birds stood stone-frozen in the light, listening.

"And what has become of him?" she shyly asked.

"Who? Hop o'my Thumb? He has long departed to the other world and doesn't like coming into this world any more. He's old and weak now. And he gets together, out there, from time to time, with Gog-Crook-up-Trunks and Magog- Grind-up-Stones and other giants of old, for a chat. He won't spend much time with them either, for giants are somewhat slow-witted, ugly enough, ill-mannered and greedy. Still, he has to spend his lonely hours with them. They are close to the end of their rope, anyway. The giants, after they once helped Prince Charming to kill the dragons and the ogres, have nothing left to do but to pass on, into the eternal gloom. Hop-o'my-Thumb is also awaiting his end, from one century to another. Sometimes he is sad thinking about death. Although our life is long, and we count our years by the thousand and could be immortal, I can see our time is coming, too. So, one of these days, the old man will die. And, as people are less and less fond of fairy tales and are more and more prone to easily forget their friends, erelong we will close our eyes for ever, too. And then the caves will stay forever locked."

Miss Lizuca felt tears flooding her eyes.

"This cannot be!" she whispered. "If you, too, depart, what will become of me?"

The old woman suddenly started weeping and sobbing.

"Just as granny would", Lizuca thought.

The other little men smiled. The old man bent and set his hand on the child's forehead.

"Cheer up, Lizuca, for we won't let you down. Only this spring was there great danger upon the grove. Thank God, we managed to stay out of it."

"What happened this spring?" the child asked.

"Don't you remember? Your father came to your grandfather's and asked him to sell the grove, for he needed money."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Lizuca remembered. "For a long time mommy has been pestering and urging him to sell the grove. But neither I, nor Patrocles wants that. And neither does grandfather."

"That's right; the old man wouldn't let go at any cost, and he had gone into a great fury and was yelling that this couldn't be. That this was the little girl's forest…"

"And ours!" the Princess added in a thin voice.

"And if the yeoman had been weak," the little man went on, "and he had allowed them to kill the forest, then the springs would have dried out, the grass would have withered, the cliffs would have crumbled down and we would have been forced to wander to God knows what wilderness!"

"Isn't this a better place than any other?"

"It certainly is. We have grown accustomed to this grove, since Hop-o'my Thumb brought us here. We have our own secret caves, under the hill, and there we can live a quiet life. In summertime, we often come out, like today, and make merry. And when leaves start falling and the forest grows bare, we lock ourselves up in our recesses and wait for the winter to be through. Now and then, the roar of blizzards reaches down to us, remote and dim like a moan. We will doze on beds of fir needles and moss, or sit upright, awake, whispering fairy tales; then we remember last summer's happenings. The pearly light of stalactites descends upon us from the ceiling of the cave and, far beyond, the immortal springs keep glimmering. Once a day, we eat hazelnuts and tiny hip berry apples. And we drink clear water from thimbles of acorn. We are no gluttons, we are happy with very little. And thus we merrily wait for the time when the ice cracks on the brook and torrents start sounding the music of spring. Then, on the first night with a full moon, we open up the cave and set out to see the violets, the sweet violets and primroses in the clearings.

VII

The tale about the fairy of fancy

The old man stopped and Miss Lizuca looked around herself. She saw that all the beasts and birds had turned, eyes glittering, to the Princess, and she understood that they were all waiting for a fairy tale from her. And she rejoiced deeply. She then noticed that the badger had sat down, muzzle on his paws, nice and gentle, only blinking his eyes of embers from time to time. Patrocles had also put his head out of the hollow, watching intently; but since he was a charmed dog, he wasn't amazed at anything.

"I, too, know a tale," the little blonde Princess sang, "but it's as old as the hills, from the time when the grove of Buciumeni was one with many other groves, up to the huge mountains. In those times villages were sparse, and boroughs were scattered here and there, at great distances. And the woods were full of aurochs, and great birds, which now have gone to the frozen seas, were living on the waters. And the villages were inhabited by kind people, who believed in our kingdom of miracles. And men of great knowledge lived in the cities, as they do nowadays, and they did not believe in it.

And it so happened that there came a rumour to this beautiful and ancient grove, that there lived somewhere a fairy as no one had seen before, lithe and white, with blue eyes and golden hair touching the ground; and such was her beauty that even old bears from the mountains' wilderness and wild boars would come to kneel down in front of her. And when she came out in the darkness of clearings, the sun would shine up around her and the springs would murmur sweeter.

And when village girls and boys sat down in the evenings to chatter and do handicraft, they would speak about her as of the marvel of marvels. Tidings had come to them brought by the woods, by the wind and the waters, for nobody had as yet set eyes on her.

And the fame of that gold-haired fairy had spread out over lands and seas. Even at courts, in castles, word was heard about her. And many a prince took up their arms, mounted their steeds and raised their armies to spread throughout the forests to find the fairy. On their arrival, the deer

scattered, the birds fled up to the skies; but in vain did they search and rake the thick and tangled woods, for they found neither the fairy, nor her castle.

But rumours and tales still kept oozing out, all around the world, about her. And it happened that a Prince Charming from a far-away borough, hearing about the fairy and her beauty, stood up in arms and came as well with all his men.

And he, of all people, believed in that fairy. And as he entered the clearings by himself, at eveningtide, and started playing sweetly a little flute of osier, the fairy showed herself at once, by the springs, smiled at him and spoke thus:

"Prince Charming, you believed in me and kept me in your soul, therefore, when you called me, I came to you. And henceforth my love shall warm your life and all your sorrows shall find redemption and I shall bring you the blooms of comfort in your death hour."

Prince Charming was listening enthralled. Her voice was touching and sounded like a string of gold.

When he took a step towards her, she raised a finger and stopped him.

"Come again tomorrow evening," she told him, smiling.

And he returned time and again, when dusk filled the glades with mystery. And he was happy as no other human being had ever been on this earth.

And his courtiers and magi, close on his steps and willing to set eyes on the golden-haired fairy themselves, could only see Prince Charming alone, by the spring. And they didn't believe in the kingdom of miracles and started saying that there was no fairy in the grove. And Prince Charming heard them and was astonished at their words.

"Prince Charming," a learned magus then spoke to him, "we, too, wish to know the truth. Ask the fairy for her ring and bring it back to us as proof of her being."

And in the evening, at the spring, Prince Charming asked the fairy for her ring.

"That is an earthly thing," she answered him smiling, "I do not wear vain adornments; my love is far more precious than mortals' trinkets."

When Prince Charming returned with this answer, the magi gave him a pair of scissors and advised him to furtively cut off a strand of her golden hair.

And another evening, finding the right moment, Prince Charming cut off a golden strand and hid it in his bosom. Then, when he returned and the learned ones had gathered, when he wanted to produce the piece of evidence, he could no longer find anything beside his heart.

A great assembly of scholars and magi then gathered around Prince Charming, they opened books, unscrolled parchments, made lengthy speeches and proved beyond any doubt that there was no fairy in our grove and that everything was but the figment of sick imagination.

Then, believing them, Prince Charming mounted his horse and returned in all pomp to his kingdom. But he was gloomy and sick at heart, and for a long time thereafter he would sit and muse, as if bemoaning something lost for ever; but the charmed image of lore would no longer light up the gloom of his hours. And he died, his soul shrivelled up and battered, like all humans'. And no one brought him the bloom of comfort in his death hour.

Still, the poor, silly people who remained in our parts, went on believing in the golden-haired fairy. From time to time, they would catch a glimpse of her, at dusk, by the springs."

VIII

On the frontier of the kingdom of wonders

The old woman started weeping again, and softly sighed up:

"Our Princess has told us a very beautiful tale, which I had long forgotten."

Miss Lizuca turned her gaze to the grey, bearded little men, and saw them sitting as still as stones.

She asked the old man, pointing at them with her finger:

"How about them, won't they tell us a story too?"

The eyes of the bearded little men glimmered at her at the same time, like some silvery poplar leaves. Their ruby lips smiled in their beards.

"No," the old man answered, "they don't have much time to think of fairy tales, for they are master goldsmiths. They will very seldom come out in the groves. Usually, day in, day out, they will hammer on their anvils, in

their recesses, by the unextinguished fires. There they pound and hammer gold and silver and make jewellery. And they extract precious stones from nooks and crannies they alone know. And they collect the treasures buried in the ground by people of old. And, once a year, on Midsummer Night, they bring the gold dust out of the caves and scatter it in the wind. And then the sweet-woodruff flowers open, receive the gold dust and bloom so beautifully. And on that same night the flames on treasures can be seen burning and our little men dig up the ground for them, with their tiny spades. But they work so secretly and quickly that people never see them."

The old woman started weeping again.

"Why are you weeping again, granny?" the Princess asked.

"I, too, have remembered and wish to tell a tale," said the tiny old woman in a soft little voice. "Here, not far down, in the valley, there is a yeoman's small cottage. And people have lived in it for a very, very long time. At first, they are young, then they grow old and start out on a path with no return. Then other young ones grow and they, too, become old. And they are dear to me and I often go in the evenings to their place to peep in through the window. But at one time, I saw, under the icons and their light, a young, pale woman with huge eyes and there was a little girl by her side and the woman was caressing her and telling her:

"Mommy's darling, your father has forgotten me and deserted me and I won't be in this world for much longer. When I'm gone, don't weep too much and don't forget your games. When you wish to see me, you should be alone. Then you should think of me and I will come. I'll be nothing but a shadow; still, I will comfort you and embrace you."

Lizuca's heart leapt up hurriedly in her breast.

"Mommy spoke to me like that, one evening!" she thought, closing her eyes. "This old woman was at the window, then, watching us..."

It was as if tears were dripping in her heart.

The little men thought she had fallen asleep.

"The child is falling asleep;" the old man said, "what shall we do now? We cannot leave her here, for at daybreak the cold wind will blow up the hollow bed of the creek and pinch her cheeks and make her little eyes wan. We cannot take her into our caves, either. When she wakes up, she might be frightened; and in daytime, our land of miracles has no opening to this world."

"Then," the old woman shyly said, "let us take her to the earthlings on the hillside, to the little house I've spoken about."

"Your thought is wise and meet, granny..." the Princess concluded with a smile.

Miss Lizuca opened her eyes. Now she could see the assembly near the hollow at a greater distance, as if through smoked glass. The Princess waved her thin little wand. One of the grey-haired little men stood up and pulled out a little silver hammer from under his belt. Then he hurriedly picked out a bluebell flower with a tall stalk and, setting a glow worm in the flower's cup, started out quickly, carrying that tiny beacon towards the steep of the creek. The little light shone in the darkness of the hollow, then climbed up the opposite slope. It kept appearing and disappearing among the shrubs. The grove seemed frozen in silence, as if inside a crystal.

From the other side of the creek, the tiny silver hammer suddenly resounded, giving three knocks at the earthlings' window.

Then the little beacon showed again in the darkness of the waterbed. And the remaining little men, breaking the assembly under the osier willow, gave Miss Lizuca friendly smiles, while slowly withdrawing to their enchanted cave again. The secret door opened on their approaching, then closed imperceptibly behind them. The light of the glow worms went out. The beasts drew back to the darkness of the woods. The birds flapped their wings towards the stars. And Lizuca, her eyes closed, heard near her Patrocles angrily giving three barks. His voice made the night and the grove resound.

Another dog's voice, more faint and remote, answered him. And Patrocles barked again, thrice.

As if awakened from a sleep, Miss Lizuca could see from her hollow a trembling light, moving in the darkness of the waterbed. She heard voices. Leaping up from her side, the doggy dashed out noisily towards the alien light.

Frightened, yet trusting her friend, Miss Lizuca was waiting, shivering in the chill of the night.

Violet shadows drew near, in the sound of the two dogs' voices. In the reddish glow of a lantern, the little girl caught a clear glimpse of two little old people resembling the ones in the cave. And she was bewildered, for they also resembled her dear grandparents.

She felt she was being carried in somebody's arms. The echoes of the barks broke down, whirling in the hollows. And midnight sleep overcame her tired little body with its numbness.

IX

The grandparents had an orchard and bees

When Miss Lizuca opened her eyes, she found herself in a white little room, lying in a clean little bed under the covers. The sun was rushing in through the open window. The light silk-thread curtains were waving softly in the morning breeze, which brought in to the child the murmur of the bee garden and scents of balm mint and hyssop.

The icons and their candles were gleaming up high, in the eastern corner. Lizuca recognized them. She was in her grandparents' little cottage. She was resting in the small cot where, once, her mother, who was no longer in this world, had grown and slept.

Suddenly she called the departed one, in her thought. And, closing her eyes, she saw her as always, talking to her mildly, her cheeks pale and her eyes huge. Lizuca received her caress to the depth of her heart. And she sighed lightly. Opening once again her eyes, she rejoiced to have reached her good, old, beloved ones.

On a striped woollen carpet, coiled up on the floor, Patrocles was sleeping. The little girl wanted to call at him, cheerfully. Then she changed her mind and remained silent.

And, at once, as she was staying there, she heard voices in the orchard. They were quarrelsome voices. Her attentive ear immediately singled out the crystal-sharp edge of mommy's voice. And, just as edgy, the magpie's crowing of the little maid. Then, quiet and calm, the grandfather's answer.

"If you please," mommy was saying, "would you be as kind as to enlighten me? Last night, when I sent Helen to see whether the child hadn't by chance come here, you told me you had no idea about such a thing and even had the air of getting worried…"

Helen, too, was raising her voice in vexation:

"And he was even calling us to account, that Lizuca might have lost her way and disappeared!"

"And now," the mistress rejoined, "I gather from what you're telling me that the child is here."

"Yes," the grandfather calmly answered. "It dawned on me, after a while, where to look for her. And I found her, late, lost in the forest."

"This is outrageous indeed," mommy ironically retorted. "What do you think, that I can be moved by such children's tales?"

The little maid rushed in again, cheekily:

"I, for one, gathered it all, as early as last night!"

There was a moment of silence. Then grandfather's voice rose with a slight irritation, in a poised, heavy pitch:

"What exactly do you mean, if I may ask? What children's tales? What did you gather last night? What is it that you cannot grasp now? And, after all, what is it exactly that you want with me?"

"We have come to take the child! To leave her here is out of the question!"

Lizuca shrunk under the covers.

The old man was laughing with embitterment:

"Don't you say, sister! That's utterly curious! You have come to take her away – but I will not give her away. I have had enough patience so far. I know you're running short of time and you have to go at once, but I could tell you a long story about a young lady who would give anything for this girl to come to an end, like her mother has. And she'd like all this to happen in smoothness, so that she might enjoy the yeoman's work with no further commotion. But this, my dear one, cannot be; for the yeoman has long known where the courthouse lies and the ways to justice. And now we find we even have more things to tell the judges than before, and so we shall, with no fear or shame, for we are silly, simple people, aren't we? So, be as kind as to go home and leave the little girl and the dog at peace, here."

Lizuca put out her head and whispered in a trembling voice:

"Do you hear, Patrocles?"

"I hear," the dog grumbled indifferently. It looked like he didn't bother about a thing any more.

But mommy's voice rose again, unflinching. And, after a while, grandfather interrupted her worriedly:

"Madam, you'd better calm down now. Don't wave your hands so quickly, or you might get into some trouble!"

But mommy wouldn't listen and modulated even more shrilly her high, crystalline voice. When, suddenly, she gave such a heart-rending shriek, that Lizuca started in her bed and her legs gave a jerk. And after the mistress' scream, Helen's growl of death broke out too.

Almost at the same time, the low door opened and, from the next room, grandmother slipped in towards the little girl's cot. She was tiny and slim and her eyes were like two washed-out chicories.

She seemed frightened. She was putting out her dry hands towards the child.

"Granny's little darling! They woke you, didn't they?" she whispered. "It happened just like himself had said (himself was grandfather)! They got too close to the beehives and the bees got to them! Now they're running for their lives, out of the gate. They're waving their hands in all directions and still can't escape! This afternoon her ladyship will be watching her guests with only one eye."

"What?" Lizuca shouted. "You mean the bees have stung her?"

"Yes, my sweet, just imagine!"

"And the maid, too?"

"Ay."

"My, am I glad of it!" Lizuca answered nastily. "And so is Patrocles, too. And when I see daddy, I'll voice out loudly to him my resolve that I'd rather die than go away from here. And I'll also tell him that I heard mommy laughing in the parlour with Mr. Micus."

"Apple of granny's eye," the old woman sighed, hugging at her breast the little girl's short-cropped head. And she started weeping softly, her tears seeping in her nose. And Miss Lizuca, gently rocked like this, closed her eyes. And in that smell of sweet basil, at the old woman's breast, she started remembering with new bewilderment the happenings of that night, on the frontier of the kingdom of wonders.

Our estate lies out in the Bărăgan[53], quite far from the Borcea Lake, rich in both game and fish, at about two hours' ride on horseback.

In the summer of 1896, I was living alone out there, only with the bailiff, the workers, the vast fields and the merciless heat of the summer. *Our people* had acceded to power, and father was staying in Bucharest, a *politician* overwhelmed by lots of difficult business. Mother and my two sisters were there with him. I didn't much know what to do by myself in that big, white house of ours, deserted as it was now. My young age too needed something, this I was painfully aware of. I was restive and apparently looking for that *something*. In the end, I began to go out shooting in the Iezer[54] whenever I had some spare time.

It was there at the Iezer that I had my first love story. And I also came to the brink of dying out there.

I was indeed fond of the steppe. I had spent all my childhood and youth there, in the Bărăgan. Scorched by the sun in summer, blown by winds in winter, deserted and dismal, with no skyline, no rivers, no cool spreading from flowers or forests, just straight endlessness – it was, nevertheless, the stretch of land most dear to my soul.

There you cannot see mountains with bluish ridges rising almost to the sky with their peaks, nor ancient forests boasting their savage eternal tunes; neither do cuckoos sing of luck when torrents come rolling foam-covered down the steps of steep slopes, when the everglades fill with flowers and singing guest birds. Out there you can only hear the blizzards whizzing over the endless desert of snow-covered fields, sprinkled here and there with rare and sad villages; then in summer you either stare at the empty plain, or at vast fields in which the sun seems to be pouring molten gold, in which the people work hard apparently bent under painful burdens. Yet, it was in these places so poorly endowed with common assets of beauty that I experienced the thrill of endless horizons, when my horse was

[53] Bărăgan – the lower Danube plain, in southern Romania.
[54] Iezer – as a common noun, it means "pond".

taking me in eagle-like flight over roadless distances, while the melancholy of sunsets was penetrating me with the profound mystery of an unknown endless sea. And gradually, as I grew in age and yearnings, I began discovering incomparable beauties.

In the morning, I used to wake up when the red blood-like sun set the window panes on fire. After dressing, I'd hurry out of the house. The horse was usually waiting for me at the stairs, by the grove of acacia trees that surrounded the house, our *palace*, as father, God bless him, would call it. The horizons were covered in steam; sky larks were singing above our fields. I set out with the bailiff, a short man with piercing tiny eyes and long moustaches. I spoke very little to him, as I didn't like him at all. The horses were moving at a dull trot on the mud road, accompanied by the dizzying songs of the skylarks which kept spreading melodious cascades of music from the height of the sky. The endless plain full of bounty was waving gently in the morning breeze, at times, when bent by the wind, then shining like gold when it rose again in waves. I would pass over dew-covered balks among the armies of silent reapers – while my thoughts kept wandering away...

During the day, the heat was overwhelming. I usually sat down somewhere in the shade; I was thirsty and there was no water. I kept watching the wheeling stains of heat, my eyes lost somewhere far in the unknown – and at that time I was feeling so bored and lonely that I wondered why I was staying alive.

Towards evening, in order to while my time away, I used to ride to one of the tiny red railway stations hidden in bunches of acacias along the railway stretching straight ahead endlessly. I'd come across some lonely pothouse in which at rare intervals you could hear noise of voices, soon to be drowned in the silence of the desert. When I reached the station, I waited for some train coming from far away and getting lost in the hazy distance of the sunset. At some window, showing up in the creepers that covered the walls, there would emerge the head of some woman in holiday garments; the clerks moved slowly, exchanging greetings with acquaintances; then the engine would puff and get moving; the station remained small and lonely in the peace of dusk. I would set off at a slow trot, lost in thoughts. The silence of the desert enveloped me from everywhere, the shadows were conquering the fields rushing in like waves

from the east, while from time to time some lineman's cabin would ring sadly, as if weeping, in that immensity: lang-ling.

Long sunken in the bluish sunset, the sun was still sending rosy light gleams upon the motionless clouds above. In the growing darkness, remote villages could be perceived first just by slight coils of smoke, then by lights glimmering in the night, like glow worms on the endless spaces, mingling after some time with the stars on the canopy of the sky.

And I'd go to bed in that sad deserted house as I didn't know what to do with myself: I couldn't read, was unable to write, and I felt a terrible spleen oppressing me.

Dragomir the bailiff was piercing me with his tiny eyes, he seemed to be reading in the depth of my heart; and several times he dropped hints at me, while smilingly twisting his moustaches, that for a young boyar like me there were plenty of remedies for boredom.

" Well, it could be done...don't be angry with me...Here, in our parts, we could find a sprightly young woman, or a pretty girl...Hm!" – and he would just stare at me.

But I didn't like the man and I would have hated him to know about my secrets and weaknesses. I used to dismiss his allusions curtly, and I went on waiting. But whatever I was waiting for kept lingering, and boredom was progressively darkening my soul.

Yet, one day I caught a word casually dropped by Dragomir.

" Nowhere in the world can you find game like in the Iezer!"

I happily turned to him. There was at least some pastime ahead of me.

" What are you saying, Dragomir?"

" I was speaking about the Iezer...Dear God, what game you can find there! Your hair will surely stand on end..."

" I'll certainly go out there shooting!"

Dragomir's eyes sparkled. He was ever so happy that he might be left alone and see about his own tricks. He started telling me all sorts of wonderful things about the Iezer, and his chattering seemed never to come to an end. And I spent all night thinking of the delight of a shooting party in the swamps of the Danube; the next day, I decided to take a quick ride out there on horseback and with my rifle.

This was the start of my trips to the Iezer.

The first trip met with no success. I left my horse at the pothouse on the edge of the village and descended towards the river, by the railroad. The white network of the iron bridge was stretching out far in the distance, beyond the swamps on the other bank. In pools full of pewter, horses up to their chest in water were lazily chewing the bundles of grass afloat on the surface. Then beyond these sallow pools, there suddenly opened the large everglades of old willow trees, enclosing vast portions of deep water. I was walking, rifle in my hand and eyes directed to these humid forests, full of darkness and of wild animals, my ear strained to the noises of the water and the rustle of the willows. I could see quick flights of wild ducks, herons fluttering heavily above the tufts of reeds, I could hear the shrieking of hazel grouses and moor hens, but I was too far from them. I understood that I needed a guide, a local hunter and a boat which should take me to the hidden places and the windfalls – so I allowed the game to float in peace on the surfaces, or rise in long angles on the red of the sunset; my soul was full of the beauty of those places, of the thousands of strange voices resounding in the swamps at dusk, of the wonderful hues of the water shining in the last sunbeams, and I wandered long at random, aimlessly.

When I came back, the innkeeper squinted his eyes at my empty bag.

" I can see you've caught nothing..."

" No, I had no boat..."

" Neither boat, nor man who knows the places, sir...If you would come this way again, let me teach you what to do...Know what? Tell me just one word! Nothing more, and I'll send for Marin...You do want to hunt, don't you?"

" Of course I do!"

" So this is it! Tell me one word, and I will send for Marin at once...This one, sir, is some hunter...and not only a hunter, but a fisherman too, I can tell you...It's with him you should go hunting, and we'll talk afterwards!"

The man was talking excitedly, proud of the Iezer and of Marin.

" All right then, when I come again, let's call Marin."

" Look, sir!" the innkeeper said quickly, his eyes up and his finger pointed forward, as if he wanted to remember something; "look! I'll send for him and you can settle things with him in no time...You'll buy him a

tzuica[55], sir...One, two or three glasses, as much as pleases you...and the bargain is concluded! It's I who says it! Upon my honour! I, sir, was a corporal in the army, in the artillery! My name is Sandu Popescu!"

And he suddenly fell silent, looking at me, his chin on his chest, as if to take a better look at my surprise. Then he smiled and petted with one finger, the right index, his short-cropped black moustaches which seemed drawn with coal on his full-rounded reddish face.

He looked at me with his merry little eyes.

" This is as good as settled already!...So, when are you coming this way again?"

" I'm coming tomorrow...But see to it that you cook a good meal for me..."

" What? My God! Sir, I'll have my wife kill a hen...And I have a cow, too, sir! Upon my honour! I, sir, was a corporal in the artillery! I'm going to get ready for you the best of meals!...So, the bargain is as good as concluded!...What kind of food would you like, sir?"

And he looked at me again, his chin on his chest. Then he suddenly gave a start, raising his finger:

" Wait! A nice roast, and everything will be all right! And a sour soup! A sour soup and a roast! That's it! And I'll call Marin and things are settled! Upon my word!"

I left him there in front of the pub, his hands propped on his hips in his slack trousers as if blown up by the wind, merrily looking after me while I was sinking in the shadows of the Bărăgan on the back of my Raven heading for the pale, almost effaced sunset.

The next day about five p.m. as soon as I dismounted, Sandu dashed out through the door of the pub as if thrown out by someone and shouted to a tiny little brat who was lying in the sun:

" Daddy's little one! Run to uncle Marin, boy!"

He had hardly taken my horse under the shed and roared at his wife: " Ana, woman, cut the throat of that motley hen of ours!" when he stepped into the low, smoked room with a brotherly smile on his face: by then, Marin, the big hunter arrived as well, the little brat by his side like a colt.

" Here he is, this is the man!" Sandu said proudly, putting his hand out to the man.

---

[55] Tzuica – plum brandy.

The marksman was short, had very broad shoulders, a hollow face blackened by a rare, tousled beard; he was looking at me with two round, green eyes, without blinking, with no smile on his face. With his right hand he was holding the butt of the gun strapped on his shoulder; his large, black hand, with long, bony, knotty fingers seemed dreadful to me.

I smiled.

" Are you Marin?..." Then I didn't know what to tell him. " What would you like?"

" One glass of tzuica, one glass will do " he answered with a gentle, low voice.

" One tzuica, two, as many as your kindness would grant him " Sandu added, smiling and rubbing his hands.

The hunter stood silent for a moment, his eyes staring at the floor, then he looked at me with his round eyes:

" Are you the boyar[56]at Sărățeni[57]?"

„ Yes!" the publican shouted quickly. " It's boyar Niculiță!" and he carefully placed three small glasses on the table.

The hunter slowly sipped up his drink, his eyes half closed. He replaced his glass on the table and wiped his tousled moustache.

Then he said again with his tired- sounding voice:

" I was told that in Sărățeni the people are better off..."

Sandu didn't allow me to speak up. Thrusting his index ahead in the air, he replied:

„ What? Those are very well off! They live like in Abraham's bosom, indeed! Take my word for it, uncle Marin, upon my honour!"

The man nodded. The publican put another glass of tzuica in his hand.

He drank it up slowly as well. Then he began rummaging in his girdle. He spat bitterly and muttered:

„ There is none!"

„ What should there be?"

„ He means tobacco! Tobacco!" Sandu shouted. „ Calm down, boyar Niculiță will buy you a whole packet!...This is the sort of boyar I like! He is some man! And did you see his horse, uncle Marin? A true dragon, uncle!"

[56] Boyar – Romanian gentleman, or aristocrat, usually a landowner.

[57] Sărățeni - name of a village.

The hunter opened the tobacco packet and then produced a black pipe from the top of his boot. He gave it several strong blows and hit it against the table to get it clean.

Then he suddenly spoke up loudly, stretching out towards me his big black left hand:

"No! Here, on our estate, there is no way for a peasant to live decently! The former boyar, the one that is dead now, beggared me, while this one, the newcomer, pushed me still further down the slope!...I've been left only with my house and my gun, nothing else!"

In his voice, there was a rough, painful rattle. In his green eyes staring at me there was a strange sparkle.

The publican winked at me and coughed. Then he took Marin's gun and presented it to me.

" Yours, sir, has *central* firing! I do know something about it, as I was a corporal in the artillery...Uncle Marin's is the other, the older kind...But it's a good gun, you ought to see how well it works."

" If it weren't good, it wouldn't have lasted to this day!" the hunter said, his voice soft again and suddenly calm, filling his pipe with tobacco.

" It's true, he's right!" shouted Sandu. " What about another tzuica, uncle Marin?"

Marin shook his head and put the gun on his shoulder.

" No, I've had enough! Let us set off now...the sun is about to set..."

We made for the Iezer, while Sandu followed us with his eyes, his hands on his hips and a smile on his lips.

On the way to the pond, Marin said no word. He kept puffing from the pipe, his round eyes pointed ahead, releasing bluish coils of smoke that rose up to his hat turned greenish because of rain and weather; then they'd melt away at once in the luminous air. He was walking slowly; his large boots with tops up to the knee were treading heavily on the hard ground, each boot resounding twice: first the heel, and then the thick sole. His slack trousers made of reddish wool and his black twilled cloth coat showed large stains of blood and fat; fish scales sticking in the creases were shining green in the slanting sun beams.

We descended straight to the pond. The scattered little houses of the village and their whitish smokes were left behind, as if painted against the serene sky. In a still pool and mud, hidden among crushed club rush stems,

there stood a boat; it was black with tar and tied with a thick rope to a pole thrust into the muddy bank.

" This is my boat!" the hunter said suddenly. " Over there is the hiding place of the paddles...And there up the bank, among those willows, above the reed of the swamp, stands my little house...It's everything I was left with!"

And he cast a dark look at me, the rough rattle present again in his voice.

I liked the man, although he spoke so little and looked at me so queerly. You could tell from his embittered complexion, his deep voice, that he'd been through painful storms. Troubles had dug deep wrinkles on his face and had drained the very spring of his speech. While watching him, I was thinking of his previous words about " the old boyar", the new one, and about the storm that might be kept at the bottom of his soul; it was this that generated the bitter words:

" I was left with only that much: my little house and the gun!"

And I wanted to tell him a comforting word. But he turned to me his round eyes and said to me loudly, his voice bright again:

" Come, sir, get in! I'll take the paddles and we'll be off..."

We started the boat and slowly penetrated into the reed thicket. From the village one could hear the lowing of cattle, soft sounds of cow bells and human voices, so clear that they seemed to come from near by in the pond. Then gradually the noises faded away – and we were now floating along narrow canals, between the reeds that were rustling gently and trembling along with the golden light of the sun. From time to time, the water would give a hasty ripple: close by, a dark shadow would cross a beam of light, and, turning to me, the hunter would say:

" A moor hen..."

And we went on floating silently for a while. Then suddenly a rough quack would shake me awake from the quiet that had taken hold of me, wings fluttered and a duck soared like an arrow above the russet tufts, beyond the range of the gun.

Then suddenly we were floating smoothly and we entered beneath the vaults of the big willows in the glade.

The sun was setting, a golden powder was filtering through the green plaits of the willows and trembling in flowers of light on the dark, motionless surface of the water. As they united above, the branches were

creating dark archways beneath which we were passing in a boundless silence, leaving a path of steel-like scales behind the boat.

We stopped between two hollow willows, sheltered by thick branches drooping from high up down to the shining face of the water. In front of us there lay a huge mirror in which the sun seemed to be whirling in a nest of fire, between two walls of reeds that were shaking slightly in the hardly perceptible breeze.

Marin lit his pipe, then he pushed his hoary hair behind the ears with his dispersed fingers.

I got my rifle ready; I slowly pulled back the cocks, making them click twice each.

The sun was shedding blood-red beams now while sinking on the horizon. A moor hen appeared from the reeds, on the other side of the free stretch of water, followed by her chicks.

" We still have some time to wait!" Marin said, turning his motionless face to me, " The sun is setting now..."

And he kept calmly puffing at his pipe.

" Uncle Marin" I whispered, driven by the wish to say a kind word to the man.

" Yes?"

" Did you have much trouble with the old landowner, the one who has died?"

He turned to me his round, green eyes, taking out the pipe from his mouth.

" I suffered", he said softly, " I kept suffering...But will I be able to go on suffering now, with the new one?..." And his eyes were questioning me. " Because of the old one, all the little wealth I'd earned went to the dogs, and it was because of him too that my wife is in the grave!..."

And he looked at me frowning, as if grinding his teeth. A sort of watery rays seemed to be dancing in his green eyes. His knotty black left hand had risen towards me.

He wanted to say something more, but his eyes sparkled suddenly; he looked up and his hands grabbed the gun. A wind-like whizzing was passing above us. It was a large flight of wild duck wheeling in the sky.

The two guns thundered, their deep reports filling the old willow forest. Shrill bewildered shrieks of hazel grouse responded from among the reeds, a few ducks fell heavily in the water raising red drops, while the flight, as

if hit by a gale, made a sudden turn, rose and finally got lost in the distance above the glades.

II

I wasn't able to make out much from the broken, sparse speech of the hunter. In his turn, Sandu the publican spoke too much, and he either couldn't tell me what I wanted to find out, or he pretended he didn't understand. And he used to confuse me with his hasty chattering, smiling at me in a friendly way, raising his finger, propping his chin in his chest, swearing upon his honour and shouting he'd been a corporal in the artillery. Mister Sandu Popescu was quite a sly fox. He'd furtively pass the glasses of tzuica to the hunter; it was the boyar that was to pay! And whether there was some or not, a packet of tobacco wouldn't do any harm; it was the boyar who paid! And he'd smile so happily with that face like a full moon of his that I couldn't help it, I kept silent and paid merrily.

Anyway, I had good reason to do so. All our watches and hunting parties were very lucky. Marin knew all the most hidden recesses of the game and he'd stealthily take me to them, smoothly, silently, with a craft I never ceased to admire. On the other hand, the pond was crammed with wild duck, hazel grouse, - all sorts of fearful flying game, with round eyes and long, shiny trembling necks. And my partner too seemed to possess some of that slight flexibility of the neck, showing prudence and shyness, along with something of the penetrating, round, sharp, green look reminiscent of the Iezer's standing water, the kind of look that always made me feel uneasy.

Within a week, the passion for watches, for the game in the swamp had penetrated my soul, my blood, my senses. I would come at a gallop as soon as the sun was going down, quickly pass through the pub where Marin and glib-tongued Sandu were waiting for me, fill a small flask of tzuica for the hunter and pay for two packets of tobacco; then we'd walk down to the thicket of the reeds. In the quiet of the vast swamp, the lonely shriek of a single bird would awaken those solitudes like a rumble and make me start. My eyes wide open, I searched the air above the line of the russet tufts, towards the fiery sunset, or along the canals between the reeds, or the dark

vaults of the willows pierced by stars here and there, or the flowers-like patches of light, - and my heart started throbbing whenever a blade of club rush or osier shook. Now I was able to tell the difference between the gentle shaking produced by the wind from the slight shy thrill caused by the passing of a water bird.

My ear could now tell the difference between the wind-like flights of wild ducks, the soft, hardly audible fluttering of the heron, or the wing sputter of club rush crakes; I could also tell very well the scream of the vultures wheeling in the sky, out for pray, from the trumpet-like roar of the mire drums, or the short, rough gaggling of the blue geese. And all the time I spent in the boat holding my rifle, my eyes stayed watching wide open, my heart about to start beating heatedly, with no other feeling, or thought.

Marin kept giving me explanations about these passionate shooting trips with his soft voice and broken speech as usual. In the long silent spells, he went on puffing from his permanently full pipe. When it was over, he'd fill it up anew, but before lighting it, he'd clear his throat with a gulp or two of tzuica.

Little by little we managed to make friends to a certain degree, and I found out part of the past that had so embittered his soul.

The old boyar, the one that had died, boyar Leonida as Marin used to call him, had behaved like a villain all his lifetime. He used to roar at people and whip them regularly. And he'd managed to get everybody meek and tame, he'd drive them like slaves. And it was because of that old man too that Marin was pushed to this restless trade of a fisherman and a hunter, a trade he'd never been happy with, but which in the end had penetrated his blood, along with the stenches, the fever and the ghosts of the swamp. And it was the same old man who had caused the terrible suffering of his young age – about which, nevertheless, the hunter was not willing to speak clearly; yet, I thought I could guess what it had been, as this pain of his involved his wife as well; the woman had died at that time, she went off only " because of sorrow and bitter grief."

And now, with this new and young master, the hunter didn't have any clear conflict. At least he wouldn't tell me anything. And neither could I infer what he could have against the man, since "his boyar" wasn't even living on the estate, he'd come only in autumn to stay for a month or two.

" What do you have against him, uncle Marin?"

" I? Against him? Nothing. Whenever he comes, I bring him game and fish – that's all. And for that much, he allows me to feed from the ponds for a year, as I only have the gun and my little house left..."

And he'd cast a tired look at me, with his face dark and his round, green eyes, nodding.

Once he said to me curtly:

" You too would be afraid like me..."

" Why should I? You told me you had no quarrel with him..."

" Nor did I have one with the other. It was him who did!...I had nothing..."

" Oh, come on!"

" What do you mean ? Nothing! That's all!"

From that much I couldn't make out anything. The man's soul was too dark, his heart too petrified by an ancient secret hatred he was unable to appease. And even though I treated him well, some of that hatred spread over me as well; at times he was looking at me the way he looked at his game, with sparkling eyes, at times he wouldn't answer my questions. His entire scorched being, with that tousled beard of his, with his deep eyes as dull as the water of the pond, was full of mistrust, of resentment against that fleecer who'd left him only with his gun and house and who had done him great wrong once upon a time, in his youth perhaps.

And whatever I might have done, I too was a fleecer. However well he controlled himself, something sharp, a sort of discontent seemed to filter through his speech, and I kept looking at his huge black hands with those knotty fingers with a queer anxiety.

Yet, slowly, slowly we got over this as well. He gradually seemed to forget about the boyar. I came to be rather a partner to him, after I had first been his apprentice, and his feelings to me seemed to improve when, at the end of the week I slipped two five lei[58]pieces into the hands that had frightened me.

His eyes sparkled in a greenish lightning. Then he looked at me contentedly, with a smile:

" May you live long and God bless you, sir...This is not for me.."

" For whom is it then?"...

[58] Lei – Romanian currency.

He raised his eyes suddenly and looked at me. Then he slowly lowered his eyelashes looking at the bowl of his pipe and there was no answer. Still, he was trying to show me that I had reached his heart, that he was grateful to me. He began muttering, and he coughed several times.

" Know what, boyar Niculiță? You've never come to the pond in the morning...

„ No."

„ Well, if so, you know nothing. It's in the morning that things work really well...It's in the morning that I do both my hunting and my fishing...There is something in the evening as well, true – but never mind! Can you spare some time in the morning?"

„I can, uncle Marin, why not?..."

" Well, then come in the morning once. Tomorrow if you choose. And I'm going to take you around the water...Lord, you should see the pond in the morning, with all its beauties!"

And he scratched his head , the pipe in the corner of his mouth and his eyes warming up for an instant.

I was thrilled by a sort of anxiety, impatience, and the promise of a hunting party such as I had never seen before, and my eyes must have been shining with joy.

" So I will come tomorrow by all means."

" You just do that, and you won't be sorry!..."

And he began rowing more heartily, taking me through the thickets of reed and club rush towards the bank.

The summer evening was spreading its hazy mystery over the swamp. The big iron bridge in the distance looked like a long, white ribbon stretched beneath the blue sky. From behind us, light, lazy steam was rising from the still waters. A hardly perceptible breeze was bringing the sharp, warm miasmas of the silt and the rotting spinney.

The man was rowing, his neck tense; from time to time he spat in his palms, then pulled at the oar handles, while the water behind us was lapping lightly, trembling in small circles as we passed.

I gave a start.

" Sir, don't get angry...I'm just a simpleton...What schooling did I ever have?"

" Why should I be angry, uncle Marin?"

" See, I'm unable to chat away like that, telling a lot of nonsense...I'd rather keep silent, I'm a man of little talk...Woe to me!...Only God knows how much I had to stand!"

" Well, uncle Marin, I won't get angry for that much...Why should I?"

" No, but you shouldn't imagine...See...This Sandu is quite a chatter box..."

Then he suddenly stopped, spat in his palms and fell silent. His rowing grew more tense. He seemed to be sorry even for the little he had said, while I was imagining a terrible storm of passion back in the past, unleashed by the old boyar, " the one that's dead now".

III

I got up very early in the next morning; it was hardly past midnight. Dragomir, who since my shooting trips had started, kept treating me very carefully, had given orders the previous night and the horse was waiting ready for me at the stairs. As soon as he felt I was there in the dark, he gave a sweet, light neighing and touched my stretched out hand with his humid muzzle.

The stable man tightened the saddle girth. I felt for my game bag, tried the triggers of my gun and jumped onto the saddle.

It was a warm night. Large patches of clouds covered the stars. The Bărăgan was silent, stretching out like some petrified sea in the unknown distance. There was neither human voice, nor rooster's crow, nothing. The dark in front of me was like a wall in rapid withdrawal as the horse kept advancing at a quick trotting pace.

I was impatient and I was giving the spurs to the horse. The clouds in the sky grew thicker, consuming the blue of the sky. When the gentle breeze coming from the pond began to caress my face, I also felt a drop of rain on my cheek.

" It's going to rain!" I thought. " Nothing will come out of it!" And a strong regret darkened my soul, as if I'd undergone a great loss.

I hastened the pace of the horse through the deepening dark. The village with its tiny land plots suddenly popped up in front of me. On the edge of it by the waterside, Sandu's pot house showed no trace of light.

Lots of thoughts crossed my mind.

What shall I be doing with the horse? Where shall I put him up? Last night before leaving for Sărățeni I had arranged with Marin that I should come next day before dawn so that we have enough time to reach the glades, but I had forgotten to tell Sandu to wait for me and shelter my horse. What shall I do now? Until I wake him up with my roaring, until he dresses and finally comes out, a lot of time will pass. On seeing the rain, the hunter might think I was not coming and go somewhere else. But what if the drizzling stopped before dawn? Let me ride to the pond on horseback. I must find Marin. Let us find out.

And I set out at a quick pace to the place where I knew the boat was tied. The Danube-ward horizon was as if closed by a wall of darkness. The rain kept falling hard in small, warm drops.

I found the spot of the boat, but the boat was missing. A few pieces of tree bark piled up on the moist bank were still burning slowly, lit probably by Marin in the previous evening in order to point out the place for me to see from a distance. But why was the boat missing? Had the man come? Had he left for the pond? That couldn't be, he was supposed to wait for me! Maybe he hadn't come yet!

For a young passionate hunter like me, such small things concerning the shooting had become very important. An unpleasant event, even if a trifle, causes you a lot of trouble. I was standing there, weighing things over and over again, while the heavy rain was pouring down, soaking my hands and my face.

I turned my gun upside down and waited. Those pieces of tree bark went on glowing, with no flame; from time to time, they'd give a puff and release coils of whitish smoke. I made myself a cigarette, lit it with a coal from the fire, wrapped my light summer tunic tighter around my body and, dismounting, I leant against the saddle and went on waiting and pondering. But the night was lasting, the village lay behind, the vast swamp ahead of me in a dead silence. The slight ripple of the rain in the reeds was hardly reaching my ears – and I didn't know what to do with all those childish questions and suppositions.

Suddenly, I turned and I caught sight of a light shining on the bank. It was trembling like a red star. Marin's house stood there, I should have thought earlier about that. Now with this rain, what could I do but go up there and ask what we should be doing!

I passed the bridle rein of the horse around my left hand and slowly set off, slipping on the muddy bank as I made for the hunter's little house. All around me, the thick darkness of the night was growing paler.

I reached the house.

It didn't seem far from the fire, but I walked for quite a while. It was a low house, with a reed roof, and you could hardly make it out in the dark. The light was coming out through a tiny window. The yard was empty and clean. At the back of it, you could suspect rather than see a fence, a garden and a flower garden.

I shouted:

" Uncle Marin!"...and I waited for a while. No one came out.

I came closer, dragging the horse after me.

" Uncle Marin!"

Somebody drew the bolt on the door. I was preparing to say something about the rain, the shooting party – but I froze there, gaping. In front of me in the doorway, holding a kerosene lamp, there stood a girl, a girl about twenty years of age. She raised the lamp above her head so as to make out the one who had shouted.

" Who's there? Father is not at home..."

Then she stopped. She had seen me quite well. She wanted to retreat, as if scared by something. I quickly took a step forward.

" Is uncle Marin not at home?"

" No. Are you the boyar from Sărățeni?"

I nodded, trying to imagine what I could tell her. She had lowered her lamp and the flame revealed a swarthy, clean face, with thick eyebrows and two wonderful eyes. Now those eyes were smiling at me, and I suddenly felt penetrated by a strange thrill, there on the bank of the Iezer, in the dark still surrounding me, and the hardly audible pouring of the rain, in that great solitude, in front of a girl who had suddenly turned up in front of me with a lamp in her hand and such beautiful eyebrow-rimmed pair of eyes. Something warm flooded my chest, then that warmth rose to my cheeks and eyes. A lot of daring words rushed to my lips. My entire fiery youth with an unexpected love risen from the dark was pushing me like a big wave towards this girl standing in front of me and smiling.

Then she spoke, suddenly lowering her eyelashes.

„ Father went out on the Iezer. He saw it was raining and thought you wouldn't come any more...Now he went out to check some bow nets he's put in some good places last night..."

I started wondering at her sweet voice. It's over! I was making up my mind ever more every minute – and my eyes were burning in their sockets.

„ I waited for him by the fire quite a long time, wondering why he wasn't coming..."

„ Well, he went out by himself..."

I took another step forward. She withdrew with the lamp. I said quickly:

„ Look, I'm going to leave my horse outside, but I for the time being will enter to dry my clothes...I'm soaked to the bone!"

She let me in and I entered. Behind me, the light too invaded the low room, revealing the fire place on which the flames of a few faggots were dying away, the clean walls, the chest at the back of the room with the dowry rising up to the beam. And the hot thrill of the love my youth had been yearning for so long enveloped me like the flames of a pyre. It was the fault of the rain, of the night and the frightening mystery of the place, and the light which had revealed such large black eyes...

The girl, in her printed blue calico, her white blouse sewn with a stream of ornaments, tightly girded with a narrow belt, her plaited hair combed tight on the head, was watching me with her eyes of darkness, and didn't know what to say. She had put the lamp by the fireplace and seemed to look at me somehow scared.

I said again quickly:

„ Well, I didn't know uncle Marin had a marriageable girl...And what a girl!...He told me no word about it..."

She kept silent, her hand at her chin, her eyes turned to the fire.

„ What's your name?"

„ Chiva!"

I was wondering what else to tell her.

„ I'm going to tell uncle Marin not to keep you hidden like this..."

„ No, No!" she retorted hastily. „ Don't tell him anything!"

And there seemed to be a trace of fright in her voice.

„ Why shouldn't I?"

„ Father will kill me if he finds out I let you into the house..."

„ Why did you let me in then?"

She seemed to hesitate.

„ Since you told me you were soaked to the bone..."

And she turned her large eyes towards me for an instant; they were shining with kindness.

„ All right, Chiva, because you took pity on me, I'm going to buy you a pair of earrings."

She kept silent, then she smiled.

There followed a spell of silence. A rooster gave a dull cock-a- doodle-do outside. The dark in the window was growing paler. A strange sort of warmth enveloped me; my blood rushed to my cheeks. I was unable to say one more word. In fact I had nothing to say. I took a step forward; the girl gave a start. I put out my right arm, taking hold of her tightly girded waist. I felt her withdrawing, her neck tense. I caught her with my left as well. She was striving to pull back her head, suddenly as white as chalk in the face, her lips tight, saying no word. Then the right arm she'd propped against my chest suddenly weakened and fell. I hugged her savagely in my arms, kissing her eyelashes. She was still trying to keep her face clear. Then all at once I felt her lips burning me like fire for one instant, while her eyes lit up like black fire.

And in her voice there suddenly was pain trembling:

„ Father is due to come...Daylight is here...Stop it! You can hear his voice too..."

She opened the door quickly. The Iezer was steaming far away, the warm steam rising in the damp, gloomy flood of the day. A voice was shouting somewhere over the vast glades – it was a long, frightening roar, trembling as it grew and then fell along the reed-fringed channels and beneath the vaults of the willows.

The girl said softly:

„ He'll be arriving soon..."

I was arranging the reins on the horse. I asked:

„ What is he shouting?...What's he saying?"

„ He isn't saying anything. He's just shouting like this. I have to go and fetch the fish for our meal..."

Her black eyes would send just short flashes at me, then she'd quickly look at the ground again. Her formerly white cheekbones were now flushed like apple blossom.

I tried to say something more. I put out my arm, but she took a short step back.

„ I'm coming back tomorrow morning!" I said with a trembling voice. She didn't answer at once. Then she whispered, without looking at me:

„ Not tomorrow, it's a Sunday; father is staying at home..."

„ Then it's going to be Monday...About the same time..."

She kept silent. She turned and entered the house quickly, shut the door and noisily replaced the bolt. The light went out. And in the east, through the piles of ragged clouds, the fiery springs of rosy dawn began flowing over the mountains of fog and the waters of the pond. The rain went on falling, yet ever more scarce, the rough voice in the glades fell silent – and in the silence that enveloped the solitude and the foggy light of daybreak, I got on my horse and set off as if chased by something towards Sărățeni.

IV

Fiery love, my first love, was burning me! I was trembling as if shaken by fever alone in my room, while outside the rain went on falling. And I kept recalling each minute from the time I had spent face to face with Chiva, every instant, each glance, and the fire-like kiss that still kept burning my lips, which, hot and savage, had penetrated all my blood.

At that moment, far from the girl as I was, it crossed my mind that I could have been more daring than I had been; I was missing her, those eyes that had flashed at me and the kiss that was still keeping me under its spell. I thought I could still feel under my finger tips the warmth of her well-rounded, hard flesh, I could still feel her entire lithe body leaning against my chest – and a single mastering thought, one sole passionate desire was in control of me.

The first love! I knew what love was only from books and words. I too was dreaming, the customary way, about a lithe maiden, a stretch of woods, a flower-carpeted meadow, and a creek murmuring in the mystery of dusk, about whispers and promises – but how different those images were from this sudden, sweet and scorching illness which had taken me stormily towards the daughter of a hunter on the banks of a pond by just a couple of words and a look! And how quickly everything had passed! I was unable to collect my thoughts, couldn't think of anything else. My

thoughts would scatter, then gather in a single point – and the girl stood in front of me, before my half-closed eyes.

I kept making plans, passionate words sprang from my mind. And time was passing slowly, slowly, like the drops of the rain dripping from the eaves. I felt like mounting my horse; then I changed my mind; it would have been madness. And I cannot tell any more how I spent the night to Sunday, how sick I felt the next day and the following night which seemed incapable of ever reaching midnight, which was torturing me every minute. If you are humans, you must know this kind of love that will rake your senses and disturb your mind!

Monday before dawn I was galloping hard on the back of my Raven through the darkness of the endless plain, beneath a clear, moonless sky full of golden little candles. I was riding very fast, so that the wind was whizzing by my ears.

As soon as the Iezer shone in the distance, I slowed down my gallop.

I rode far around the village, and when I reached the bank, I made for the little house at soft gallop, directed by the light that was shining now exactly like it had the first time.

My heart shrank when it crossed my mind that perhaps Marin hadn't gone out on the pond – what shall I do if so? I also remembered that the girl hadn't answered my last words when I'd left, and if so, what shall happen to my poor heart? And a lot of other thoughts would come and leave like stormy flights of frightened birds.

At a gun's range, I dismounted and took my horse by the bridle rein. I approached the place slowly, breathing heavily, my heart throbbing in my chest.

I left the horse behind. I came close and stopped by the door. I wanted to call out. But whom shall I call? The hunter might be at home. And there wasn't any voice in my throat.

I suddenly gave a start. I could hear Chiva's voice close by, behind the door:

„ Is it you, father?"

I could hardly whisper:

„ No, Chiva, it's me, open up please!"

There was no answer; perhaps she was hesitating, maybe she was thinking of not letting me in. I said again entreatingly:

„ Don't you know me, Chiva?"

Then the bolt gave a short scrape; and the girl stood in front of me, her dark eyes shining in the beam of light that had flooded the threshold along with her appearance. She was pale, her teeth tight like at the time when I'd kissed her. She stood there motionless, still undecided.

I was shivering with excitement. I put out my arms. She withdrew suddenly as if hit by something. She moaned:

„ Father will find you here!" , but in such a light whisper that I could hardly hear.

And when I entered the hall, she put her hands against my chest and began struggling in my arms. Then suddenly she quietened down, leaned against my chest, put her arms around my neck and I felt her warm, her hot breath making me dizzy.

V

A deep peace was now ruling over my soul. Back home, I went out in the fields to supervise how the corn stacks were being built. I merrily chattered with Dragomir like never before; and he was quite surprised to get so much attention from me. I promised tzuica to the workers and stayed long watching them move joyfully among the golden sheaves, with their forks, loud voices and merry jokes.

By vesper bell, I set out for the Iezer at a light trot. Mister Sandu, the innkeeper, was waiting for me on the threshold, his hands on his hips, with the usual friendly smile on his lips.

„ Good weather is back again, sir! How are you? ...Uncle Marin is waiting for you!"...

And the hunter came out soon, treading heavily in his big boots, looking at me searchingly with his round, green eyes. He said with his usual tired, low voice:

„ I didn't wait for you that day...It was bad weather...I knew you wouldn't come..."

And suddenly as he was looking at me, a strange anxiety enveloped me like a fog. I turned my eyes away, to the horse Sandu was just taking to the stable. Yet, the bitter, rough image of the hunter kept haunting me. I turned

my eyes his way and examined him. Is he suspecting anything? Hasn't he come to feel something?

He suspected nothing; neither was there any chance for him to. He was calmly filling his pipe with tobacco, then he put it in his mouth and looked at me for a while.

„ What's wrong with you, boyar Niculiță? Aren't you feeling all right? You look quite sallow in the face...Are you tired perchance?"

„ Yes, I spent a lot of time in the fields..."

But I wasn't tired and I didn't understand what could be wrong with me – although that oppression, the fog that seemed to have enveloped me, was still pressing upon me.

In spite of myself I was staring at the huge knotty hands of the hunter. And suddenly I felt the terror of those big hands that could crush me in a moment; it was fear of them and that long controlled anger which could have burst out in an instant and fallen upon me.

But I only felt this confusedly in those moments at the bottom of my being, like some light breeze, a slight shudder.

Then Sandu returned, he gave the man the due glasses of tzuica and the packet of tobacco, then put his hands on his hips again.

„ Sir, I've put a chicken in the oven and I will also prepare for you a bortsch of carp brought by uncle Marin from the Iezer...Something as nice as at a restaurant, I can tell you upon my honour..." and he put forth his index as if he wanted to give it to me.

We roamed over the Iezer that evening, and in many others. I pretended I didn't have time in the morning. Marin kept asking me:

„ Why aren't you coming one morning, as we talked?...That's the right time for shooting!"

„ Well, uncle Marin, I will, some time...But I'm rather busy tomorrow morning..."

I looked aside, with a heavy heart, then I added at once with determination:

„ No. Tomorrow I've got a lot of work to do, I can't come..."

When the cool dawns were near, my Raven would bring me at a stormy gallop to the Iezer. If the light was out in the little house on the bank, I would return slowly, pensive, my heart heavy; if the light was on, I felt a sort of thrill of happiness. I'd stealthily approach the house leading my

horse, its bridle wrapped round my left arm, and that soft, thrilled voice would ask as almost usual from behind the fir tree door:

„ Is it you, father?"

And my heart would hammer in my chest like a wounded bird.

Then our young age couldn't stand any longer the mornings when the lamp had to be kept out.

It was in a hollow, in a ravine of the bank, among the weeds grown in the thicket of club rush and reeds, that Chiva would come trembling, her large eyes on the watch, her ears strained, listening to the smallest noise in the neighbourhood. She was shivering, moaning lightly when I caught her in my arms and clinging to me tightly. Yet, many times her cheeks were as white as chalk and chilled.

I'd ask her gently:

" What's the mater with you, Chiva?"

And she could hardly answer:

" Oh, if father should find out...If he found out...He would let me have hell! I'm very scared of his anger..."

I was also experiencing her fear, a bit more remote, weaker, like an anxiety in front of the unknown.

But I loved that girl with all the fire of my twenty two years of age. I didn't care about the estate's affairs any longer either, nor father's other affairs, I didn't even read the letters that came from Bucharest; I seemed to be living in a beautiful dream which I didn't want to awake from any more.

Dragomir used to merrily twitch his long moustaches, he'd leave me to my yearnings, receive me joyfully, follow me with his sly eyes whenever I left – and he'd see to his own business. But I didn't care a damn about what he probably was doing while I was away. I wanted everybody to leave me alone, I needed nothing else.

The girl too seemed to care for nothing in her life but those hours of sweet love whispering. It was with much fear she used to come to meet me, with fear again would she part with me. She was now pale in the face, her eyes were shining as if because of some hidden disease; it was with shame and humiliation that she often looked at me, and fear, the fear of the hunter's anger often emerged at the bottom of her strong being in words whispered with large, goggling eyes; at such times a chill seemed to blow over our love.

She was a simple girl, unable to say beautiful words, but all her sharp senses gave her a strange understanding of things. She was perfectly aware she had made a mistake, that the young boyar who loved her had to stay a mere passenger through her life – but what could she do? Something stronger than fear and the awareness of her sin, the fire of youth had rushed upon her entire being, and with closed eyes she was sinking in the abyss. Even I was amazed at her broken, dark, timid words by which she was telling me all this, and she made me understand she expected nothing from me.

Once in the morning, in that hiding place among reeds and weeds, she told me excitedly:

" Father may as well find out about it all – it seems to me I'm beyond any fear...When time comes, I'm going to let him know, as the truth must be told..."

„ When is that time?"

„ When he finds out...I'm very scared, but at that time perhaps I won't be...He has crushed mother too with the heel of his boot...I, too, was screaming as if he wanted to kill me as well, so furious was he...Yet, he didn't kill mother – she died later of a broken heart...I was very small, but I can still remember..."

„ But why, Chiva? What happened?"

„ I understood everything" the girl answered, looking at me with a shy smile on her face. „ Mother was having an affair with the old boyar...And father kept roaring that he'd kill me as well, that I wasn't his child, that I'm just filth and he'd give me to the dogs...I did understand everything. And then mother died!..."

I was watching her anxiously. Now I did understand the gloom in the hunter's soul and perhaps Chiva's more special feelings as well. Yet, I could grasp the sinful deed of my own youth only in a blurred way; I wasn't able to understand it in fact. The terrible, but hazy, events of the past, however, were transmitting to me a breeze of pain from the tomb of the past.

In the meantime, Chiva, with her large black eyes, was lost in thought by my side. She suddenly said with a soft voice:

„ Mother too sinned with the old master of the estate...What's going on now, seems a kind of curse!..."

Then she began to laugh, turning her head to me:

„ Let it be, Niculiță, it doesn't matter; perhaps no one else is going to find out!"

And she closed her eyes and bent towards me, asking for a kiss.

Thrilled, dizzy with love, I set off for Sărățeni on my horse through the hazy light of dawn. And in my mind, as if in a dream, emerged the shadow of Chiva's mother and the phantom of the old boyar. At that time in the past they might have lived a love story that resembled mine, and the old boyar had crushed two lives with no remorse whatsoever, perhaps not even realizing it. And at present I, too, might be crushing another life, that of Marin's daughter, maybe the daughter's of the other two who had disappeared...What could this mean? What could happen?

For the time being, I wasn't able to imagine an end to my love yet; all those days of love in the past kept staying there within me like a great light; each moment was being recalled with all its load of endless splendour, along with the promise of endless bliss – just as endless as I was imagining the flame of my youth. But I suddenly gave a start from my dream: in front of my eyes there suddenly rose the bitter, stern image of the hunter...

In front of me to measureless distances, the tree-less, plane, the Bărăgan lay smooth, with no hill whatsoever. I was riding on alone under that endless sky, with my love and my anxieties; a light breeze was caressing and cooling my cheeks.

From a lineman's hut there came two sad, long sounds and spread over that immensity. And the first rays of the sunrise shone over the fogs of the horizon.

VI

My love lasted almost until the beginning of autumn. I used to come before dawn, furtively like a thief, ride at some distance around the village, tie the horse on the edge of the reed thicket and, my heart throbbing as usual, make for the said hiding place. Peace was ruling over the vast ponds, only from time to time was there a rustle of wings, or a lonely bird's shriek passing above. Chiva was always there waiting for me in her calico dress, her shoes with high heels, her hair combed tight and her plaits forming a crown on her head, her eyes shining. As soon as I arrived, a

smile would illuminate her entire face, and she'd put out both her hands towards me as if for protection.

No one was suspecting anything. The places I was crossing on horseback held no villages, no people – so nobody could notice my coming or going.

In the evenings I used to come on my usual way and carelessly put up at Sandu's pub. The former corporal came forth immediately with uncle Marin's glasses of tzuica and tobacco, talking to me about the most varied topics and smiling at me like an old friend. The hunter never stayed away; he was more relaxed now in relation to me; up to the pond or the willow glades, he would tell me this and that and ask me, too, about what was going on in the wide world. Then as soon as we reached the stalking place, we both fell silent, our eyes and ears strained, concentrated on the slightest noises, our fingers on the trigger. At such moments I almost forgot he was Chiva's father. I had never seen them side by side, nor heard their voices mingle.

But one day, when I dismounted and entered the pub, Sandu smiled at me meaningfully, as if he wanted to tell me something mysterious, or ask me something special, and he was wavering about doing it or not. In his usual place, Marin was cleaning his pipe. He greeted me with his usual low voice and went about his activity. There was nothing that could upset me. Yet, mister Popescu wanted to tell me something, and he couldn't. However, when we were leaving for the pond, he winked at me pointing at the hunter.

Various thoughts started crossing my mind. Sandu, or somebody else might have felt something, and he was trying to let me know to take care, or maybe the hunter himself was suspecting something. A slight anxiety began taking control of me, and I was following attentively every movement Marin was making.

There was nothing special. He untied the rope as usual, he rowed quietly, taking me smoothly through the same paths of the reed thickets and stealthily slipping the boat beneath the vaults of the willow trees. Just that he was talking to me less than usual, but this had happened before.

When we returned to the pub, Sandu looked again upset, as if not daring to address me. Finally, after Marin had left, when I was about to mount Raven, he came close to me and slightly touched my shoulder.

" Boyar Niculiță..."

" What is it, Sandu?"

He looked at me, smiling:

" Look, sir, didn't you pass at dawn towards the Iezer on your horse...?

" Why?"

" It's nothing...I was just asking...There was a guy here in the pub, saying he'd seen you...But I know this morning you haven't been with uncle Marin at the pond..."

" No, I haven't."

" But did you pass on horseback?"

" If I had no business around here, why should I pass by on horseback?"

" Of course, this is what I was telling uncle Marin too, for he asked the peasant if he'd recognized you for sure..."

" He asked whether the guy recognized me? No, in the mornings I've got other things to do; I have no time to come shooting..."

" This is exactly what I told him too...Yet, uncle Marin went on questioning the peasant...The man was saying now he couldn't tell for sure, perhaps he'd been wrong..."

" Well, why did he go on bothering the man? Didn't he know I hadn't been here?"

I felt my questions and answers were coming too smoothly. I had rather put an end to this sort of silly argument. Still smiling, Sandu was looking straight into my eyes. Now I was keeping silent.

„ Well, this is it, young sir...I only wanted to know...Only that much." And his wicked eyes seemed to be waiting for a confession.

I quickly got on the back of my horse and gave him the spurs. On the way, I anxiously began recollecting all the movements and looks of the hunter. Then I thought of Chiva again, and of the daybreak love-making I was already impatiently looking forward to; and again uncle Marin's icon came to my mind...There were a lot of various thoughts crossing my mind, but none could make me decide one way or another, nor could they thwart my ride to the Iezer next morning.

I went again next morning as usual, with a little anxiety, and making a wider detour. Chiva, too, was waiting for me, her eyes shining, warm, thrilled, moaning as if in pain when I hugged her in my arms...All anxiety was dissipated like mere smoke.

But on the third day, when Raven took the usual path by the reed thicket, he began cocking his ears. I halted him and dismounted, gun in my

hand. And in the darkness that enveloped the place, through the milky steam of the swamp, I suddenly felt Chiva by my side. She held me tightly in her arms, she pressed her lips on my mouth – and I gave a start under her hot kiss; a burn seemed to penetrate me, like in the first moment of my love story.

Putting her hands on my shoulders, she said in a low voice:

„ Stop, don't go further; go back...I only came to warn you..."

I stood there petrified. She was staring at me through the dark with shining eyes; she seemed to be smiling, her hot breathing was glowing on my cheeks.

„ What's happened, Chiva?"

„ I don't know...Yesterday father was silent all day, searching me with his eyes...Then in the evening while I was laying the table, he suddenly asked:

„ Why have you lost weight like this? Why are you so pale in the face? What's wrong with you?"

„ It's nothing, father, what should it be?" and blood flooded my cheeks...Then he yelled at me:

„ You call this food, or what?", and he slapped me across the cheek, hit me with the fist in the breast...I lay flat on the ground...And I understood that he might have found out something..."

„ No, Chiva, don't be scared...What could he have found out?..."

I was speaking with determination, but from deep down a tremor rose in my voice. The girl began crying as she leant against my chest.

„ Oh, if he finds out ...- he's going to crush me with his boots, like mother..." And she was looking at me from beneath her lowered eyebrows. „ If he finds out, he'll kill me and throw me into the pond, Niculiță...Oh, you don't know father, but I do, I saw!..."

Her tears were burning my hands.

She wanted to add something; suddenly, I felt her give a start and stretching out. She hugged me tightly, kissed me quickly twice on the eyes with that light moan of pain and love, tore herself free and got lost in the fog that was rising in whitish waves from the edge of the pond.

I felt my heart heavy, full of unrest, and a question that seemed written in blood appeared in front of my eyes: „ Is it true? Does he suspect us? Has he found out?" And the breeze of dawn brought me a light noise of steps and voices. But it could be just an impression. Something from within hit

my heart, then it pressed it hotly. Feeling dizzy, I put my foot into the stirrup and jumped onto the saddle.

VII

A sickly need *to know* tortured me all day long and, in spite of a heavy heart, finally brought me in a hurry to Sandu's pothouse, then to the boat waiting as usual.

I had searched the innkeeper with my eyes, now I was searching the hunter; no, there seemed to be nothing. I was considering not to come in the morning for a while, and things could calm down if there was some suspicion. As for knowing, *the hunter had no chance to know.* He could find out from nowhere. Neither did he look worried.

Here he was: pipe in the corner of his mouth, he's untying the rope, setting the oars and carefully arranging his gun at the front of the boat. He casually looked at me to see if I was well seated, then he thrust one oar into the muddy water. We moved. We slowly entered the club rush thicket, then took the path between the reeds.

We were rather late this morning. The sun was setting among a pile of murky-bluish clouds. Red sheens were glimmering on the stripes of water among the reeds. A quick flight of wild duck suddenly cut the air with a whizz above our heads.

„ Won't we be late today, uncle Marin?"

„ Why? We certainly won't!"

And we slowly-slowly penetrated ever deeper into the Iezer. A long rustle, made up from thousands of awakened voices belonging to the inhabitants of the swamp, passed through the reed thickets, foreboding bad weather. And on the sunset horizon on the rim of the mountains of clouds covering half of the sky, there suddenly appeared a broken, irregular golden stitch bordering the entire dark mass. It looked as if a broken lightning had got petrified on the sky, like some terrible threat.

„ It's going to be bad weather, uncle Marin!"

The hunter didn't turn his head; he kept rowing tensely, while light gossamer of smoke was rising from his pipe.

In the west, the clouds broke up suddenly and through that breach, there was an outburst of blood-like streams of the sunset. The still surface of the pond looked like blood up to the remote black shadow of the willows.

The boat drew a wide circle in those flame-like waters. Then slowly-slowly the light dwindled, while the oars were raising a gentle splash of waves. The westward clouds closed up again; shadows suddenly spread, while the rustle of the reeds fell silent. A lonely heron passed in the distance, heavily fluttering its wings. From time to time, it gave a long shriek, like the sound of some trumpet.

And the boat floated gently, skirting the edge of the glades, then entered again the reed thicket, which seemed to whisper as if alive, the plants bowing to each other, touching one another. The light haze of the Iezer was enveloping us gently like the warm breath of a living creature, while the light kept dwindling; it was as if I'd been looking at things through my eyelashes.

„ Uncle Marin, where shall we stop? Here on the right, among the willows, would be the right place..."

The hunter seemed to give a start, but he didn't turn. His pipe had ceased smoking. The oars were now striking the water more strongly.

„ Are we going somewhere else?"

He kept silent. And I suddenly felt the old anxiety taking hold of me from the depth of my being to my suddenly warm, shrinking heart. And like at a flash of lightning I remembered Chiva's appearance in the morning and the impression I had of hearing a rumour of voices. And I wanted to rise, to ask questions, my heart started beating wildly – when all of a sudden the boat entered a reed thicket and stopped by a tree hollow. Marin rose to his feet, and, first pushed back, I rose as well and stepped on the floating ground among water plants I knew, close to a shelter I knew...The place of our dating! And suddenly a light blinded me, made me close my eyes in a swoon. I had understood!

„ Have you understood?" Marin asked heavily, turning up at my side. His round eyes were staring at me, burning. I could feel his noisy breathing.

„ Why have you cheated on my daughter?..."

Gun in my right hand, my left hand hanging by my body, I was looking at him, flabbergasted. And I was feeling something cold enveloping me like a serpent. My throat was dry, my tongue heavy. I could utter no word.

And I understood what was to happen! I also imagined what had happened. It seemed to me that my strained ear could catch in the breeze whispering among the reeds a lost voice from who knows where coming from a human being on the point of getting extinct far in the swamp, or perhaps who was already extinct:

„ Niculiță! Niculiță!"

I gave a start. And in spite of me, the question sprang to my lips:

" Where is Chiva? What have you done to her?..."

The hunter grinned; his round eyes were glistening like the Iezer. And all of a sudden a voice – it seemed a stranger's voice, low, tired, frightening – Marin's voice nevertheless, uttered:

" Where she is? What I've done to her? What about you, what have you done to her?..."

And again he grinned, unmoved, by my side.

„ You boyar!...Fleecer!...You, too, acted like the other, the one that died!...He put my wife to shame, persecuted and reduced me to poverty – and here he is again, the fleecer turns up again! He's here again! What did you do, cur? Tell me, cur, why did you put my girl to shame? Why did you kill her? Why did you poison me?"

I had no power to budge. In his terrible voice, there trembled a long-lasting hatred, a hatred he had kept control of scores of years, a nameless devouring hatred, the hatred of an entire wronged and oppressed nation perhaps, and I could see, I could understand that he was going to crush me pitilessly, for there was no place to flee, nor any time of forgiveness.

His hands, those huge knotty hands, crammed with veins like ropes, suddenly appeared in front of my eyes, with spread fingers rising towards me, to my neck! They were moving, moving slowly like some dark animals which were about to crush my neck, and I understood within a flash of light that if I didn't pull the cocks at once, if I didn't quickly lower the barrel of my gun and if I didn't fire at once – everything would be over. Those fingers were going to grab my throat and crush me!

And I don't know how long a spell passed, how long it took the mad fright that had paralysed me to set free my breath and release my hands! But it seemed to be an eternity – during which I had the time to look at the wide Iezer covered in steam, full of mystery and deepening darkness, penetrated however by long blood-like stripes; I had the time to think of

Chiva, who might be alive, or who might be lying with stretched out arms on the bottom of that black water, in the mud, among water weeds...

Then I felt those heavy hands, I saw the shining evil eyes that seemed to be burning me; the barrel was lowered and my curved right hand finger pressed the trigger!

A long thundering report resounded, shaking the deep old glades; and I too collapsed like in an endless dark.

When I opened my eyelashes and looked at the stars, beside the dead body with his immobile white eyes, I was still feeling round my neck a lariat-like iron grip.

MIRCEA ELIADE (1907 – 1986), the world-famous writer and historian of the religions, was born in Bucharest, studied there and published for the first time in "The Journal of Popular Sciences and Travels". Here he published his first piece of fantastic fiction, *How I Found the Philosophers' Stone,* which won the publisher's first prize, in 1921. His first novel, *The Novel of the Short-Sighted Teenager,* was started in these years, but was published only posthumously. In these early years, Eliade fervently studied Italian, English, Hebrew and Persian, laying the foundations of what was to become an encyclopaedical culture; he published articles of orientalistics, history of religions and alchemy in various reviews and magazines. The autumn of 1925 found him a first-year student in Letters and Philosophy. He started a "University Review" the next year, then became an editor of the magazine "The Word". He visited Italy, then returned the next year there, to write his diploma dissertation on Campanella and to document a vast history of the Italian Renaissance. In 1928 his first visit to India took place, followed by visits to Egypt and Ceylon. He returned to India and embarked on hard studies of Sanskrit grammar and Hindu philosophy in Calcutta. In 1930, while living in one of his professors' house, Eliade met the latter's daughter, Maitreyi, who was to be the subject of the homonymous novel. He decided on the subject of his PhD, *A Comparative History of Yoga Techniques,* which he would write between 1930 – 1932 and publish in 1936. For two years he lived at Tibetan monasteries, studying the language, meditating and practising yoga. He returned to Romania in 1932, for the military service, and published a book of essays, *Soliloquies.* In 1933 the novel *Maitreyi* made him famous at 23. He won an important literary award and defended his PhD in philosophy. He started teaching at the Bucharest University and writing the novel *Return from Paradise* which appeared in 1934, along with another novel, *Dwindling Light* and the volumes *Oceanography, India* and *Asian Alchemy.* In 1935 he published *Construction Site* and *The Hooligans.* His doctoral dissertation, *Yoga. Essai sur les origins de la mystique indienne,* appeared in Paris and was praised by tens of orientalists. In the same year, 1936, the novel *Miss Christina* appeared in Romania, then, in the following year, he published *Babilonian Cosmology and Alchemy* and the novel *The Serpent.* Another novel,

Wedding in Heaven appeared in 1938. He was appointed cultural attaché at the Romanian embassy in London in 1940, while his ample fantastic tales *Doctor Honigberger's Secret* and *Nights in Serampore* were published in the country. Between 1941 and 1944, while in Lisbon, he started work at the treatise of *History of Religions* and *The Myth of the Eternal Return.* A play by him, *Iphigenia,* was staged in Bucharest. In 1942 he published *The Myth of Reintegration. Comments to the Legend of Master Mason Manole* and *The Island of Euthanasius* appeared in the following year. Between 1946 – 1949, as a visiting professor at the Sorbonne, he vastly collaborated to various reviews and magazines. In 1948 he published in Paris *Technique du yoga.* The following year was to be the year of his monumental *History of Religions*; Eliade also started work on the novel *Midsummernight* and published his *Mythe de l'eternel retour.* After a long series of international conferences and congresses, Payot published his *Chamanisme et les Techniques Archaiques de l'Extase.* The book was followed, in 1956 by *Forgerons et Alchimistes.* In 1957 he moved to Chicago, as a professor in the history of religions. He published *Mythes, Reves et Mysteres,* then, in 1959, *Naissances mystiques. Essai sur quelques types d'initiation.* Some other titles of his vast scientific work: *Patanjali et le Yoga* (1962), *Aspects du Mythe* (1963), *From Primitives to Zen. A Thematic Sourcebook on the History of Religions* (1967), *De Zalmoxis a Gengis-Khan* (1970), *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Passions. Essays in Comparative Religions.* (1976), etc. He was awarded numerous titles of Doctor Honoris Causa, by the most famous universities all over the world. His short stories were first published in Paris (*In the Courtyard at Dionis* – 1977), while the first volume of his memories appeared in Madrid, in 1966, both in Romanian. In 1978 he was awarded the Legion d'Honneur; in the same year his first book appeared in communist Romania. His last anthumous volume of essays appeared in 1986: *Briser le toit de la maison. La creativite et les symboles.* Only in 1990 was he elected a post-mortem member of the Romanian Academy.

DOCTOR HONIGBERGER'S SECRET

Motto: Einem gelang es – er hob den Schleier der Gottin zu Said...

Novalis

One morning in the autumn of 1934, a messenger brought me a rather strange letter, adding that he was to wait for an answer on the spot. The letter had been sent by a lady whose name, Zerlendi, I had never heard of and who was inviting me to pay her a visit that very afternoon. It was a very correct and excessively polite letter, the kind that a lady was expected to address to a stranger.

„ I found out that you have recently returned from the East, and I think you might be interested in taking a look at the collections gathered by my husband", she was writing among other things.

I confess that I was taking little interest at that time in the acquaintances I was invited to make because I had spent a number of years in the East. More than once, I was compelled to reject a friendship that promised it would be entirely agreeable to me just because I refused to tell banal stories about the „ mysteries of Asia", about fakirs, about miracles or adventures in the jungle, sensational details my she- or he-partner was expecting me to comment upon. However, Mrs. Zerlendi's letter was mentioning some oriental collections, without entering details about their nature and origin, and this was enough to arouse my curiosity.

I was indeed interested in the lives of the Romanians who had let themselves enslaved by a passion for the East. To be frank, I have to confess that, many years before this event, I had discovered in the shop of an antiquarian on the bank of the Dâmbovița[59]a whole case of books concerning China; those books had been thoroughly studied, annotated and sometimes even corrected in pencil by the one who had bought them, and whose signature I found on the front page: Radu C. This Radu C. had been no dilettante. His books, now in my possession, proved that he had done a serious and well-disciplined study of the Chinese language. Indeed, he had

[59] Dâmbovița – a small river that crosses the capital city, Bucharest.

annotated the six volumes of Se-Ma Ts'ien's *Memoires Historiques*, translated by Edouard Chavannes, correcting all the printing mistakes in the Chinese texts, he was familiar with the Chinese classics edited by Couvreur, was a subscriber to the Toung Pao review and bought all the volumes of the *Varietes Sinologiques* that had appeared in Shanghai up to the beginning of the war. This man had interested me ever since I reconstituted part of his personal library, even though for a long time I was unable to find out his complete name. That antiquarian had bought several hundred volumes back in 1920, but except for a few illustrated books he had sold immediately, had found no amateur for this collection of texts and studies in sinology. At that time I kept wondering who'd been the Romanian that started such a thorough study of Chinese, and had left nothing behind, not even his complete name. What obscure passion might have driven him towards that remote realm, which, however, he didn't want to approach as a dilettante, but whose language he wanted to learn, and whose history he had taken pains to understand? Did he manage to ever visit China, or did he die before his time in some ravine at the front?...

I was to get an answer much later to some of the questions I kept asking myself, bewildered and melancholy, while perusing his books there, in the shop of that antiquarian on the bank of the river. Anyway, it was an answer unexpectedly knitted into other mysteries. But this is another story bearing no connection to the happenings I've started to relate here. However, remembering Radu C. and several other orientalists or amateurs of oriental things that had lived in Romania completely ignored by everybody, I decided to accept the invitation of that unknown lady.

In the same afternoon, I was in front of the house on S. Street. As I stopped in front of number 17, I recognized one of those houses by which I couldn't pass without slowing down to spy on it, eager to guess what was going on behind those ageing walls, who was living there, struggling with what sort of destiny. S. Street is in the very middle of Bucharest, very close to Victory Road. By what miracle had that aristocratic house at number 17 managed to stay untouched, with its iron trellis work fence, with the pebble in the yard, the acacias and chestnut trees grown freely, crushing with their shade a part of the façade? The gate was opening with difficulty and, among beds with rich autumn flowers, there lay a pool from which the water had long dried out, along with two dwarfs with washed- out colours. It was a world that had slowly got extinct in the other beautiful quarters of

the capital, but which here had been kept alive decently, without the agony of decrepitude and misery. This was an aristocratic house of the old times, but well preserved. Only the façade had withered too soon because of the humidity of the trees. The main entrance was sheltered by an awning of bromated glass, in the style practiced forty years before. A few stone steps, green with moss and adorned with large flower pots on the sides, led to a marquee with collared upper glass panes. There was no visit card by the bell button.

I had been waited for. A limping old woman servant opened the door for me immediately and invited me into a vast drawing room. I hardly had the time to cast a glance at the furniture and the paintings surrounding me when Mrs. Zerlendi stepped in. She was a woman past fifty, but one you could have hardly forgotten if you'd seen her once at least. This lady hadn't aged like other people. Or perhaps she was getting old the way women used to in past centuries: understanding in some mysterious way that by death she would come closer to the great illumination of all meanings, and not to the end of an earthly life, to the gradual withering of flesh and its melting away for good into clay. I have always divided people into two categories: those who conceive of their death as an *end* of life and the body, and those who picture it as a *beginning* of a new spiritual existence. And I never try to pass judgment on a man I meet but after finding out his sincere belief on death. Otherwise I run the risk of being misled even by the greatest intelligence and the most upsetting charm.

Mrs. Zerlendi sat down in an armchair – and, with a gesture in which I didn't recognize the usual familiarity of women of a certain age, she pointed at a high-backed wooden chair.

„ I thank you for coming" she said. „ My husband would have been delighted to meet you. He, too, was fond of India, maybe more than was in agreement with his profession as a physician..."

I was preparing to listen to a long story, being glad that in the meantime I could examine with a discreet attention the strange complexion of Mrs. Zerlendi. But my hostess stopped for a few moments, then she asked me, slightly inclining her forehead towards me:

„ Do you know the life and works of doctor Johann Honigberger? My husband fell in love with India through the books of this Saxon physician

from Brasov[60]. He too had probably inherited an interest in history, for history was the great passion of the whole family, but he started being concerned with India when he discovered doctor Honigberger's writings. In fact, he kept collecting data and he even started writing a monograph on this Saxon physician. He was a physician himself and thought he could write such a paper."

I confess that at that time I knew very little about doctor Johann Honigberger. I remembered that, many years before, I had read his main book, *Thirty Five Years in the East*, in an English translation, the only one within my reach in Calcutta. At that time, I was studying Yoga philosophy and techniques and I consulted Honigberger's book especially for the details it held about these occult practices which the doctor seemed to have been closely acquainted with. But his book had appeared about the middle of the last century, so I suspected the author of a certain lack of critical spirit. Yet, I ignored that this doctor, who had enjoyed great fame as an orientalist, came from an old family of Brasovians. At the moment, this was exactly the detail I was interested in.

„ My husband had an extensive correspondence with various physicians and scholars who had known Honigberger, for even though the man had died in 1869 in Brasov, recently back from his last trip to India, there still lived a lot of people who had met him. One of his children had become a magistrate in Iasi[61]; he was born from the doctor's first marriage, but my husband never came to meet him, although he often travelled to Iasi in search for certain documents..."

I couldn't help smiling. I was amazed at the precision of the details concerning Honigberger's biography known by Mrs. Zerlendi. She probably guessed what was in my mind, for she added:

„ He was so interested in these things that they got imprinted in my memory for ever. These and many others..."

She suddenly fell silent, pondering. Later, I had many opportunities to find out how many and precise memories Mrs. Zerlendi had about doctor Honigberger. She spent a whole evening telling me about the doctor's first visit to India, after he'd spent about four years in Asia Minor, a year in Egypt and seven years in Syria. It was easy to understand that Mrs.

[60] Brasov – a large city in the centre of Romania.
[61] Iasi – large city in Moldavia, looked upon as the capital of this province.

Zerlendi had searched several times the books and manuscripts of her husband as if she had some time in the past cherished the desire to carry out herself the work he'd begun.

The truth was that one could hardly resist the mysterious charm of this Saxon doctor, a doctor only by his own decision, as officially he only had a chemist's diploma. Honigberger had spent more than half of his long life in the East. At one time he had come to be the court physician, the chemist, the director of the arsenal and admiral of maharajah Ranjit-Singh in Lahore. He had several times gathered considerable fortunes and then lost them. A high-class adventurer, Honigberger had, however, never been a charlatan. He was a well educated man in very many secular and occult sciences, and his ethnographic, botanical, numismatic and artistic collections enriched many illustrious museums. It was easy to understand why doctor Zerlendi, highly interested as he was in the past of our Saxons and in the history of medicine, had dedicated so many years of his life to the reconstitution and deciphering of Honigberger's real biography.

„ Because he had soon reached the conclusion" Mrs. Zerlendi told me once, „ that Honigberger's life concealed many mysteries in spite of all the books written about it". For instance, he was unable to explain his last trip to India in 1858, when he was hardly able to bear the burden of life, as he'd come back seriously ill after a trip to tropical Africa." Why did Honigberger return to India in spite of his ruined health, and why did he die as soon as he'd set foot in Brasov?" my husband kept wondering. The so-called researches he'd carried out long before in Kashmir also seemed suspect to him. He had reasons to believe that in reality Honigberger hadn't been only to Kashmir, he'd crossed the boundary into Tibet too, or at least he'd studied the occult sciences of pharmacology in one of those monasteries in Himalaya, and that the botanical inquiries had been only a pretext. Anyway, it's for you to cast more light on all this" Mrs. Zerlendi added.

I have to confess that after setting my eyes on the books and documents referring to Honigberger, books and documents collected with so much care by Mrs. Zerlendi's husband, I, too, became convinced that the life of that Saxon doctor was indeed enveloped in mysteries. But everything that followed after my first visit in that house on S. Street went far beyond the secret of doctor Honigberger.

„ I thought at that time" Mrs. Zerlendi resumed after a long pause, „ that it would be a pity to let all this work go wasted. I heard about you and I read some of your books, especially those referring to India and Indian philosophy. I cannot say that I understood them entirely, but I did understand that much: that I could address you with full trust..."

I tried to say I was flattered and all that, but Mrs. Zerlendi went on in the same tone:

„ It's very many years since almost no one has entered this house. Only a few friends who don't possess the special training my husband had gained. So that his bureau and library have remained unchanged since 1910. I too have been away from the country for a long time, and since I came back, I avoided insistently reminding people of my husband's name. His medical colleagues were looking upon him as a maniac at that time. No one of those able to rate it, except for Bucura Dumbravă[62], has ever seen the library I am going to show you. I wrote to her, as I did to you, that I have a rich oriental collection, and she did come, but only after much delay. I think she took very much interest in it. She told me that here she'd found books she had tried to obtain from the British Museum. Yet, she had no time to look into them thoroughly. She took a few notes and promised she'd return after a visit to India. As you know perhaps, she was visiting that country to participate in a congress of theosophy. But she never stepped on Romanian soil again, she died at Port Said..."

I can't tell whether Mrs. Zerlendi was ascribing some secret meaning to this death on the brink of returning. She fell silent again and looked at me very attentively. I felt I too had to say something, and I told her that mysteries are so active in our lives that we don't even have to look so far for them, for instance to Adyar or to Port Said. Mrs. Zerlendi didn't answer me. She rose from the armchair and invited me to follow her to the library. While crossing the drawing room, I asked her whether her husband had ever been to India.

„ It's hard to tell" she whispered hesitatingly, yet trying to smile.

[62] Bucura Dumbrava – pen name of a Romanian female writer..

2

I have seen many libraries of rich and scholarly people, but none has ever been so dear to me like the one on S. Street. When the massive oak wood door opened, I stood on the threshold, flabbergasted...It was one of those huge rooms which you seldom come across even in the largest houses built in the last century. Large windows faced the garden behind the house. The curtains had been drawn aside before our arrival and the clear light of the autumnal dusk rendered still more solemn the atmosphere in the hall, with its high ceiling, and its walls almost entirely upholstered with books. A wooden gallery surrounded the better part of the library. There were perhaps about thirty thousand volumes, most of them with leather covers, from the most varied fields of culture: medicine, history, religion, travelling, occultism, Indianistics. Mrs. Zerlendi directed me straight to the shelves on which the books referring exclusively to India had been placed. Seldom had I come across so many and so precious books in a private collection. Only much later, after I had spent the whole afternoon in front of those numberless shelves, did I really become aware of the treasures hoarded up there. There were hundreds of volumes on travelling to India, from Marco Polo and Tavernier, to Pierre Loti and Jaccolliot. You could easily see that doctor Zerlendi used to buy any book published concerning India, this being the only explanation I could find for the presence there of such farcical writers as, for instance, Louis Jaccolliot. Then there were whole collections of *Journal Asiatique* and of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* from London, not to mention the documents of so many academies, hundreds of scholarly memoirs on the languages, literatures and religions of India. Everything of significance published in the past century in the field of Indianism was there, beginning with the great Petersburgian dictionary, down to the various issues of Sanskrit texts, published in Calcutta or Benares. Those volumes of Sanskrit texts constituted a great surprise to me.

„ He started studying the Sanskrit language in 1901" Mrs. Zerlendi explained on seeing my surprise, „ and he learned it thoroughly, the best he could far from the live centres of the language..."

Indeed, there were not only elementary books, or texts an amateur could afford buying, but also books only a man who had thoroughly penetrated

the secrets of Sanskrit could order. For instance, I came across difficult comments, such as *Siddanta Kaumudi* , which proved his interest in the nuances of Sanskrit grammar; or the enormous treatise of Medhaditi on Manu's laws; or those aggressive comments to the Vedantine texts produced by the printers in Allahabad and Benares; or the countless books on Indian rituals. I was especially amazed by the presence of volumes about Indian medicine and the treatises of mysticism and asceticism. From my limited experience, I knew how profound and difficult were such texts, which cannot be understood without a laborious comment, and which often remain only half clarified in the absence of oral explanations provided by a teacher.

Bewildered, I turned my eyes to Mrs. Zerlendi. I'd been excited on entering the library, suspecting I would come across a rich archive referring to the life and works of doctor Honigberger, but I discovered the library of an Indianist scholar which, by its immensity and variety, would have aroused the jealousy of a Roth, a Jacobi or a Sylvain Levi.

„He came to this starting from Honigberger" Mrs Zerlendi explained; she did grasp what was going on in my mind and she pointed at another corner of the library where I was to find the books and documents concerning the Saxon doctor.

„ But when did he find the time to collect so many books and to study all of them?" I exclaimed in amazement.

„ He inherited part of them from his family, especially the books on history" she added. „ The rest he bought himself, especially over the last eight years. He sold several estates..."

She uttered the last words with a smile, but without any trace of regret.

„ He was well known by all the antiquarians in Leipzig, Paris and London" she continued. „ And it's true he knew how to buy. At times he bought whole libraries from the families of dead orientalists. Yet, he obviously didn't have the time to read all of them, even though in the last years he stayed awake almost all the night; he'd only sleep two or three hours."

„ This might have ruined his health" I said.

„ No, on the contrary" Mrs. Zerlendi replied. „ He possessed a huge work capacity. And he was leading a sort of special regime: he ate no meat, didn't smoke, didn't drink alcohol, or tea, or coffee..."

She seemed she wished to add something more, but stopped short and invited me to the other end of the library, where the „Honigberger corner" was. It held all of the Saxon doctor's books and very many of the works that had been published about his prodigious life. In a corner, there was a reproduction after Malknecht's engraving, the famous engraving that pictured Honigberger dressed up as Ranjit-Singh's counsellor. In cardboard folders, dr. Zerlendi had gathered countless letters written by Honigberger to the scholars of his time, copies of the portraits and engravings picturing his family and contemporaries, maps of the itineraries of all Honigberger's voyages to Asia and Africa. I was melancholically leafing through all these documents, whose value I would realise only later, wondering that such a man could live in our town only a quarter of a century before, without anyone suspecting the treasure that he had brought together.

„And why didn't he eventually write the book on Honigberger?" I asked.

„He had started putting it together," Mrs. Zerlendi spoke up, after a long hesitation, „but he suddenly stopped working on it, without ever confessing to me the real reason why. As I told you, he had written and received a tremendous amount of letters, searching for yet unpublished information and documents. By 1906, on the occasion of the Exhibition, he met one of the friends of Constantin Honigberger, the doctor's son from his first marriage, who owned some letters and documents that had come to his possession somewhat by accident. In the same autumn, my husband travelled to Iasi, from where he returned rather upset. I doubt that he had acquired the very originals, but he had taken copies of all those documents. It was then that he interrupted writing his book and his interest shifted more and more towards Indian philosophy. In time, the Honigberger project was dropped for good, and the years that followed were exclusively consecrated by my husband to the study of Sanskrit..."

Smiling, she showed me the wall of the library where I had stopped in such amazement, at the beginning of my visit.

„And did he never confess to you what had made him abandon the fruit of so many years of such passionate work?" I asked.

„He rather suggested it to me, obliquely," Mrs. Zerlendi started, „because, since his return from Iasi he had become more silent. He once told me that it was obligatory for him to thoroughly know Indian philosophy and the occult sciences, so as to understand a certain part of

Honigberger's life, that had thus far been obscure, covered in legend. At the time when he had started studying Sanskrit, he had also picked up the occult sciences. But this is an episode I know only vaguely about, because my husband never spoke to me about his last passion. I only suspected how fiercely he was interested in these studies by the number of books he was ceaselessly ordering. You can see for yourself," Mrs. Zerlendi added, showing me to another section of the library.

I find difficulty in saying that here my surprise was even greater. Everything Mrs. Zerlendi had confessed to me since I had entered the library, everything I had seen thus far, were as many puzzles and would nurture my bewilderment to such an extent, that I examined the new shelves dumfounded, overwhelmed with amazement and admiration. It could be seen at first sight that the doctor had had a happy beginning in collecting occult books. There was no trace of those vulgarizing works that especially the French booksellers had spread on the market at the end of the last century. There was no trace even of that great bulk of theosophistic books, most of them mediocre and equivocal. Only some of Leadbeater's and Annie Besant's works could be seen, along with the complete works of Mrs. Blavatsky, which, I had later the opportunity to convince myself, dr. Zerlendi had read with utmost attention. In exchange, besides Fabre d'Olivet and Rudolf Steiner, besides Stanislas de Guaita and Hartmann, the library was extremely rich in the classics of occultism, hermetism and traditional theosophy. Old editions of Swedenborg, Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Bohme, Della Riviera, Pernety, lay beside the works attributed to Pythagoras, the hermetic texts, the collections of famous alchemists, both in the old printings of Salmon and Manget and in Berthelot's modern edition. Not even the long-forgotten books on physiognomy, astrology and palm-reading were missing.

Later on, when I had the opportunity to thoroughly go through those shelves, I discovered extremely rare works, as for instance *De aqua vitae simplici et composito* by Arnaud de Villeneuve, or Christian apocrypha, such as, for instance the *Adam and Eve* that Strindberg had so long been tracing. One would have said that there was a precise intent and a clear target behind dr. Zerlendi's collecting that rich occult library. As I then gradually realised, no important author was missing, no outstanding book. Doubtlessly the doctor wasn't only after superficial information, to help him assimilate the basics of the occultist doctrine and terminology, in order

to gain a somewhat competent view on Honigberger's biography which he was documenting. His books proved to me that he had wanted to convince himself of the truth so well concealed in the hermetic tradition. Otherwise it would have been to no avail to read Agrippa von Nettesheim and the *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa*.

And it was this very vivid interest in occultism of the doctor, to which his passion for Indian philosophy, and especially for the secret schools of thought in India, were added that made me extremely curious. Especially since Mrs. Zerlendi had suggested to me that this new and last passion of her husband had started after his visit to Iasi.

„He probably didn't stop at occultist reading only." I said. „The doctor must have tried some practising as well."

„I, too, suspect this," Mrs. Zerlendi said after a few moments of hesitation. „He has never confessed anything to me. But he spent his last years almost invariably sitting at this desk, or alone, at one of our estates in Oltenia. As I was telling you, he never seemed tired, in spite of his ascetic way of living. On the contrary, I could even say that he felt better than he had felt before..."

„And yet, he died," I was telling myself, as I was listening to Mrs. Zerlendi's explanations overbrimming with shyness. It was almost dark in the room, and my hostess went across it with soft steps, to turn the lights on. Two enormous candelabra, of which countless crystal arrowheads were hanging down, flooded the library with too harsh an artificial light. I couldn't drive myself to go, I had remained, faltering, in front of the shelves with books on occultism. Mrs. Zerlendi drew near again, after shutting one of the windows – the one opening to a stone balcony – and drew up a gold-green velvet curtain.

„Now that you've seen what collections I was talking about," she started, „I can confess to you all my thoughts. For years on end I've been wondering if I'm not guilty myself as regards the results of my husband's work, as regards these drawers full of papers and letters collected while he was concerned with Honigberger's biography. I don't know precisely what he had in mind to study in the last years, but whatever research he was doing, it had started from the need of understanding Honigberger better. When I heard people speak about you, that you spent so many years in India studying the philosophies and religions there, I told myself that maybe you'll know what my husband had set out to learn, and that

Honigberger's life will present no secrets to you. This work will not have been in vain," Mrs. Zerlendi added, raising slightly her arm towards „the Honigberger corner". „Maybe you'll find some interest in writing down the Saxon doctor's life which my husband couldn't finish writing. I'd die more comforted," she went on, „knowing that my husband's material has been useful to someone and that the biography he was dreaming of will be brought to light."

I didn't know what to answer. I had never embarked thus far on an ordered work in a field that was not familiar to me. Nearly all my books had been written in haste, pressed by the needs of life, but I had always chosen my subject freely, whether it was a novel or a philosophical treatise I set out to write. Still, I felt I couldn't go on faltering forever.

„Madam," I started, „I am flattered by your confidence, and I honestly confess that I am happy at the thought that I could come back to this library without troubling you. But I do not know if I'll ever be able to bring to an end what your husband has started. First, I'm not a physician and I am not familiar with the history of XIXth century medicine. Then, a lot of things your husband was acquainted with are totally alien to me. Still, one thing I can promise: that Honigberger's biography will be written and published. I could try to collaborate with someone who is competent in all that regards XIXth century medicine and history."

„That thought occurred to me as well," Mrs. Zerlendi said. „But it's not the medical part that's important – for that you can always find certified collaborators – but the oriental-study part of the biography. If I had not known how much my husband wished that Honigberger's biography be written by a Romanian author as well – for there are enough biographies of his written by foreigners – I would have asked a specialist from England or Germany, where Honigberger is fairly well known." She stopped short, and, after a few moments of silence she raised her look and stared me in the eyes. „And then, I confess, there is also something that might seem too personal to you: the wish to see this biography written here, *by my side*. There are certain rather obscure episodes in the life of this man, as you will see, and I keep cherishing the hope that someone might clear them up for me one day..."

Only later, when I had attentively read the manuscripts and documents collected, classified and annotated by the doctor, did I realize how right

Mrs. Zerlendi had been mentioning the obscure episodes in the life of Johann Honigberger. I returned to the house on S. Street after a few days, and henceforth I would spend at least three afternoons a week in its library. That unusually beautiful and warm autumn was lasting on and on. I used to come about four p.m. and stay until late in the evening. Sometimes Mrs. Zerlendi would welcome me right in the drawing room. But usually we met in the library, which she entered long after I had sat down to work, approaching my bureau with the same discreet grace and putting forth the same unusually pale hand emerging from a black silk sleeve. Soon after her, the old female servant would step in, carrying a tray with coffee and jam. She must have said to herself that the presence of the old woman couldn't disturb me in that short spell of leisure when, the briefcase with manuscripts open in front of me, I stopped work for a while.

„ How does it go?" she would always ask me. „ Do you believe you could extract something from my husband's papers?"

However, things were advancing rather slowly. Maybe it was my fault as well, since I wasn't content with looking into the Honigberger archive, but as I was making up the inventory of it, I was also trying to explore the numerous shelves holding books on Indianism and occultism, an operation I took passionate interest in, but which also took up enough time. After the fourth visit to the house on S. Street, I managed to realize how much of Honigberger's biography the doctor had managed to write down. The final manuscript was interrupted at the time when Honigberger had returned to Aleppo, about 1822, where the Saxon doctor had introduced the new methods of vaccination, but there were a few more chapters in rough copy concerning the seven years spent by him in Syria. All this would hardly cover one quarter of Honigberger's biography proper, as the letter became interesting only after he'd come to the Court of Ranjit-Singh. About the other epochs in the life of the adventurous doctor I found only documentary material carefully classified in chronologically ordered files. On each file there stood the dates, the localities and the number of testimonies. Here and there, there were interrogation marks referring to some year, or footnotes sending to some other dossier of the apocryphal pieces, for doctor Zerlendi had come to the conclusion – confessed by him in a footnote to the first chapter – that many of Honigberger's statements accepted by his contemporary biographers were based on false data, or on documents intentionally falsified later. I didn't much understand why

Honigberger should have been interested in mystifying a life that had been indeed fabulous, as it occurred under the sign of mystery and adventure.

„ You still haven't come to the secrets my husband used to tell me about?" Mrs. Zerlendi asked me one day.

I found it hard to give her an answer. I suspected what sort of clarifications the old lady was expecting from me, and I didn't know whether I'd ever be able to reveal them to her. The cases of „ apparent death", of yogi trance, of levitation, incombustibility or invisibility Honigberger was referring to and which doctor Zerlendi had studied preferentially were very hard to explain to someone who didn't understand *theoretically* how they could be achieved. As far as Honigberger's mysterious journeys to Kashmir and the Tibet, his research in magic pharmacology, his possible participation in certain initiatic ceremonies of the Vallabhacharya sect, I myself was in confusion. If he had found out any precise information about these obscure episodes, doctor Zerlendi hadn't marked them in the files of his biography.

„ I come across mysteries at each step" I would answer evasively. „ but I haven't got used to decoding them yet..."

Mrs. Zerlendi would stay by me for a few moments, her eyes looking in the void, then she'd gradually regain her composure and leave the library with the same melancholy gait. When she lingered by me for longer spells, talking to me, she'd ask me about my travels through India; she was especially interested in details concerning the Himalayan monasteries I had come to know, a topic I am not very happy to talk about. She never told me anything about her own life, about their family. I never learned the names of her friends, the ones she sometimes mentioned though.

Whatever I found out later was only by chance. Once, three weeks after my first call, I came a little earlier than usual. It was raining on that day, a sad autumn rain it was, and the old woman servant opened the door for me with a little delay. She told me Mrs. Zerlendi wasn't feeling well, but that I could come in nevertheless. She had even built a fire in the fireplace. I stepped in timidly. The library seemed to have changed in the musty light of that autumn day. The fireplace didn't manage to heat up that huge room. Yet, I sat down to work with a sort of frenzy. It seemed to me that Mrs. Zerlendi might feel a little better knowing I was hard at work in the neighbouring room, and that perhaps in a fairly close future, I would be

able to clarify some of the „mysteries" her husband had been rummaging through.

Half an hour after my arrival, the door of the library opened and a young lady with a cigarette in her hand stepped in. She didn't look surprised at all at finding me there at the desk, the briefcases wide open in front of me.

„ So, it's you the one!", she exclaimed coming closer.

I stood up and introduced myself.

„ I knew your name, mother told it to me" she said casually. „ Let us hope you'll have more luck."

I smiled somewhat embarrassed, not understanding what exactly she meant. Then I began telling her everything I had found out about Honigberger. The young lady was watching me somehow ironically.

„ We found out all this long ago" she interrupted me. „The *others* too have discovered that much. Poor Hans, they say, had gone even further..."

I must have looked at her in such amazement that the young lady began laughing. She put out her cigarette in a copper ashtray and came up to me.

„ Or perhaps you imagined that all these mysteries were here waiting for you for almost a quarter of a century to decipher them? You are wrong, my dear sir. There have been others to try. Father was a well-known man, and his „case" didn't get extinct so soon in the memory of a large enough group of people from before the war..."

„ I am not responsible for the error you found me in" I answered, striving to look as undisturbed as possible; "Mrs. Zerlendi found it meet to reveal only some information to me, keeping silent about the rest. Anyway, my mandate is rather limited" I added, with a smile. „ I am here just to account for the documents referring to doctor Honigberger's biography."

The young woman stared me straight in the eyes, as if it had been hard for her to believe. At that moment I could take a better look at her. She was tall, thin, almost skinny, her eyes seemed to be burning in a smouldering light and her mouth nervous. She was not wearing any make-up, which added a few years to the over-thirty she was.

„I suspected that my mother had been hiding things from you," she started in a less tense voice. „Otherwise she might have disappointed you from the very start, by telling you that the work you've embarked upon today has been done by three other persons before. The last one was a German officer who had remained in Bucharest after the occupation. Poor Hans, we used to call him, because his fate was really tragical. He died in a

hunting accident on one of our estates. He pretended that he had started „understanding" Honigberger's mysteries which father used to refer to, but that he knew too little Romanian and he had to learn the language better. I don't quite understand what Honigberger's „mysteries" had to do with his improving his Romanian. In my opinion, he hadn't found out much, either..."

„Everything you're telling me," I replied, „does not discourage me at all. On the contrary, it even binds me more to this Honigberger who, until a few weeks ago, was nothing more to me than the simple name of an adventurous traveller."

The young woman smiled again and sat down in the armchair near the writing table, while she continued scrutinizing me.

"My mother is far less interested in Honigberger than you think," she spoke. "And she is right, too. Her major interest is to find out what happened to father..."

"I'm aware of that," I interrupted her. "And, since I've never dared to question her, I'll ask you to enlighten me. Why did your father die and under what circumstances?"

The young woman hesitated for a few moments, bending her head, as if she had been asking herself if she could tell me the truth, or rather I should find it out by myself, elsewhere. Eventually she slowly rose from the armchair and said:

"My father hasn't died. In any case, we don't know if and where he died. On the 10th of September 1910 he disappeared from home, and nobody has seen him ever since, nor have we heard anything about him."

We both fell silent, watching each-other. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know whether she was telling me the whole truth, or she was concealing some embarrassing details. She opened a small cigarette case of amber and picked out a cigarette.

"He must have left for the Far East, for India," I said, to break the silence. "On Honigberger's traces..."

"That's what we thought, too. I mean, that's what our friends thought, since, at the time, I was a second-grade primary school pupil, and didn't quite understand what had happened. I had come home from school and found everybody in turmoil and horror. My father had disappeared that morning or, perhaps during that night..."

"He must have wanted to make a secret departure," I said. "He probably suspected what difficulties he would have encountered if he had confessed his intentions to anyone."

"Obviously. But it's very hard to admit that he could have left for the Far East without a passport, or any money or clothes..."

I didn't understand, so she insisted:

"The truth of the matter is that my father *disappeared* proper. And he disappeared without taking any of his suits, without a hat and leaving all his money in the drawer of the writing-table. He took no documents with him, he didn't apply for a passport and wrote no letter to either mother, or to any friend. It's very hard to understand how mysterious this disappearance had seemed to those who knew its circumstances. For some years, my father had been leading a queer sort of life, an almost ascetic one. He wouldn't see anybody. He spent his days and nights in this library and in his bedroom, where he only rested for two hours a night, in a wooden bed, without a mattress or a pillow. He would walk about very scantily dressed, wearing only some white pants, sandals and a linen shirt. These were his home clothes, both in summer and in winter. And wearing these things, which he would never have worn out in the street, he *disappeared*. We couldn't find out whether he had disappeared during the night, making his departure straight from here, from the library, or after having first withdrawn to his room. Everybody was sleeping at the time when he usually stopped work, at 3 in the morning. After two hours, at 5, he used to wake up, take his shower and then remain for a long time locked up in his room, meditating. Or at least that's what we thought he was doing, because he would never say a word to my mother. He had cut himself away from the world, from his family. At the rare times when I met him, I felt his love for me was still there, but it was another kind of love..."

"And all the inquiries of no avail?" I asked. "No trace of him was found anywhere? It's unbelievable that a man should disappear like this, without leaving any trace."

"Yet, this is exactly how things happened. We didn't find any sign that should betray his preparations for a departure. Both here and in his bedroom, things were as usual: on this desk, the books and notebooks had remained like they used to be every night, we found his watch on the night-table, in the bedroom, his keys and his wallet with small change. It was as

if he had disappeared in a matter of seconds, before having had the time to gather his things, before writing a word of explanation or pardon…" The young woman interrupted abruptly her confessions and put out her hand to me. "Now that I told you what you should have known from the beginning, I'm leaving. I'd only like you not to mention anything to my mother about our conversation. She has her superstitions and I don't wish to upset her by not taking them into account…"

4

She left before I could gather enough courage to stop her and ask her to clarify for me the numerous obscure episodes of her confession. For instance, I wanted to know how come that the mysterious disappearance of her father hadn't been subject to more discussion, in its time, or what had happened to those other men whom Mrs. Zerlendi had asked to tackle the matter of the library and about whom the young woman had told me, fugitively, that they hadn't been lucky. I sat down at the desk, somewhat dizzy because of everything I had listened to. I couldn't collect my thoughts. I was now staring at the folders in front of me and at the books surrounding me from all parts, with a new feeling. My admiration of a book-lover and Indianist had given way to a complex hard to define, in which fear, mistrust and fascination were mixing. I somehow couldn't believe, word by word, everything that my visitor had told me. And, nevertheless, in the light of her confessions, I now understood the embarrassment of the old woman to talk to me openly, her care never to mention to me the death of her husband, her hard-mastered curiosity.

I was telling myself that dr. Zerlendi's disappearance had seemed so uncanny because, probably, the man had been preparing it for a long time, down to the slightest details, burnt by the craving to reach India and burn for good all the bridges connecting him to his previous life. But it was this very departure, so thoroughly manufactured, the secrecy in which he had prepared it, his overwheming passion for India's mysteries which had fascinated me. I had never heard before of such an attempt at leaving abruptly, with no goodbyes, no farewell letters, without leaving any trace. As related to everything I had heard, the Honigberger file, which was still

open on the writing table, seemed of very little interest to me. I turned to the bookshelves containing Indian studies, where I knew the doctor's drawers with manuscripts and notes stood, the proofs of his year-long studies. I opened the first drawer and started making up the careful inventory of its content, notebook by notebook.

Here were his draft-books of Sanskrit exercises and I saw with melancholy the stems and declensions I had struggled with once, myself: *nrpah, nrpam, nrpena, nrpaya, nrpat, nrpasya, nrpe, nrpa* etc. One could see the doctor's clumsiness in spelling Sanskrit letters. But his patience had doubtlessly been enormous, since tens of pages in the draft-books were covered with the declension of the same word, stubbornly repeated like a *pensum* among colleagues. Another notebook already contained entire sentences, most of them from *Hitopadesha* and *Panchatantra*, with their literal and free translations by their side. I looked through scores of such copybooks filled to the last page with exercises, conjugations, declensions or translations. The doctor used to transcribe the new words he encountered in his exercises in a thick copybook with alphabetic indices. Some of the copybooks had certain data on their front pages, probably the time spent processing the matter contained in them. Once more I realized the amount of work the doctor had dedicated to the learning of Sanskrit: a three-hundred page copybook had been filled with exercises in less than two weeks.

In that rainy autumn afternoon, I could find nothing in the drawer holding the manuscripts that might have pointed beyond the man's savage passion for the study of the Sanskrit language. Only a mere note on the first page of an exercise copybook caught my attention for a moment. It consisted of a few words, but those were upsetting for me: *Shambala = Agartha = the invisible realm.* All the other pages were covered with the same kind of school-like exercises.

I returned next day earlier than usual. I had never entered the library in such a state of agitation and curiosity before. I had wasted almost the whole night thinking about the revelations made by Mrs. Zerlendi's daughter, and wondering what force from beyond had driven the doctor to such a brutal gesture, such a cruel parting with his family, his friends and his country. As soon as I was in the library, I made again for the drawers I had been researching on the previous day, I picked up an armful of copybooks, files and draft copybooks, and I sat down to my desk. I began

work with much more attention. The handwriting in the copybooks was becoming more and more accurate, in the end it was perfectly fluent. Mrs. Zerlendi stepped in half an hour after me; she looked weak and pale although she'd been ill only for two days.

" I am glad to see you at work with so much interest" she began, on catching sight of the pile of copybooks. " These papers haven't been looked into by anyone so far" she added, with a slight blush. " You shouldn't take into account whatever my daughter told you yesterday. Smaranda has a fantastic nature, and her imagination makes her see connections between things that have none in fact. She was a child at the time. And because Hans, her fiancé, died by his own imprudence during a hunting party after he, too, had started looking into these copybooks, Smaranda has made up a whole theory of her own. She thinks that everything related to Honigberger stands under the burden of a curse, and that all those who might study his archive, beginning with my husband, undergo all sorts of misfortunes; somehow in the way they say it happened to those who did research work in Tutankhamen's tomb. But these are only her own fantasies, and she began believing in them after reading who knows what books about Tutankhamen."

While listening to her, I became more upset, as now I didn't know any longer whom I was to believe and on whose side the truth might be. Mrs. Zerlendi seemed somehow embarrassed while speaking about her daughter. But how had she found out what the young woman had told me? I wondered. She couldn't have been listening in at the door…

" Smaranda never got consoled after Hans's death, in 1921" Mrs. Zerlendi went on. " Maybe it's because of this great pain that she sometimes loses contact with reality."

" But the young lady…", I tried to defend her.

" You needn't tell me more" Mrs. Zerlendi interrupted me. " I know what she believes and what she suggests especially to those she meets in this library."

At that time, Mrs. Zerlendi's explanations seemed a bit incoherent. Yet, she had made no mention about her husband. She hadn't said he had died, even though she had said nothing about his disappearance either. She had only tried to defend herself against Smaranda's implicit accusation of having invited others before me as well to solve one way or another

Honigberger's "mysteries", which could have well been her husband's as well.

"This is what I wanted to tell you" she whispered in a tired voice. "And now you must pardon me for returning to my room. I haven't completely recovered yet…"

Left by myself, I began smiling, as I thought Smaranda would step in next, asking me not to believe Mrs. Zerlendi's testimony. Yet, my curiosity was too strong and I soon returned to the study of those copybooks. I went on perusing them almost until dusk, but I could find nothing except for translations, tasks, transcriptions of texts, interpretations, grammatical commentaries. There was a copybook holding notes about the Vedanta and Yoga philosophies which looked more interesting, and I set it aside. Then I laid hands on a copybook with black cardboard covers, on which there was a note and a current number, like on most of the others, from which it didn't differ in fact. The first page was covered with transcription of a few passages from the *Upanishades*.

I could have certainly believed that the next pages were holding the same kind of texts, if I hadn't caught sight of the first line on the second page: " *Adau vada asit, sa cha vada ishvarabhimukha asit, sa cha vada, ishvara asit!* For one moment, I couldn't make out the meaning of these words, and I was about to turn the page, when the translation of the sentence I had just read flashed through my mind: it was the prologue of John's Gospel: " In the beginning, there was the word! And the word was with God, and God was the word!" I wondered why the doctor had transcribed this quotation in Sanskrit translation, and I went on reading in order to understand the reason why. But the next moment the emotion drove all my blood to my cheeks. The words I was reading in that alien garments of Sanskrit letters were Romanian. " I am starting this copybook on the tenth of January 1908. The one who will manage to read it to the end, will also understand my precaution to disguise my writing. I don't want that my thoughts should come under the eyes of a non-entity."

I became aware that the doctor had transcribed the quotation from John's Gospel in the front line of page two in order to draw the reader's attention that what came next were not Indian texts. He had taken all necessary precautions that no profane researcher should suspect the contents of the copybook: the same type of copybook, the same current number, the same Sanskrit writing…

I didn't dare to go on reading because of excitement. It was rather late and I had to leave in a few minutes. Had I called Mrs. Zerlendi and read to her the contents of the copybook, I might have been acting against the wishes of the author. I had to decipher it first, before communicating it to others. But there wasn't enough time for me to finish it that evening, I kept telling myself in despair.

At that moment, the door opened and let in the housekeeper. She was looking gloomier than usual, her eyes were frowning more sternly. When I saw her coming closer, I dropped my eyes to the copybook I had opened at random. What I could read at that moment made me literally suffer for not being allowed to remain by myself for a few hours running so that I should realize everything that had happened.

"We're cleaning up tomorrow and the day after," the housekeeper spoke up. "That's why I came, to let you know. Lest you come all the way down here for nothing. For if I start cleaning up, I won't be ready before two days..."

I nodded in gratitude. But the housekeeper was probably in a mood for talking. She drew nearer to the desk and pointed at the copybooks.

"All of these here devilish things will ruin one's mind," she said meaningfully. "You'd better tell the lady that you can't cope with them and see about your youth, for it would be a great pity to waste it..."

I raised my eyes from the notebook and gave her a scrutinizing look.

"This here stuff brought about the doctor's end, too," she continued.

"Is he dead?" I quickly asked.

"He took to his heels and went to the dogs" she repeated in the same tone.

"But did you see him dead?" I insisted.

"Nobody saw him dead, but he just went to the dogs out there, in the wide world, without a candle at his head... And left the house deserted... Don't you listen to the lady" she added more softly. "She, too, poor thing, has remained with her mind adrift. For after two years, her brother, the prefect, died as well, after he'd brought a Frenchman, a French scholar, here..."

"Hans," I said.

"No, master Hans came later. He wasn't a Frenchmen, that one. He came afterwards, after the war... He, too, died young..."

I didn't know what to say any more. I remained dumbfounded, staring at her. That moment, I, too, felt attracted by a weird, uncanny charm. The housekeeper was sweeping the edge of the desk with her palm.

"That's why I came" she spoke up in the end, "to tell you that we're cleaning up for a couple of days..."

She then went away with a limp and departed through the same door leading to the parlour. I looked into the notebook again. It was horrible to part with it right now, when I had just found it, and come back only after three days. Almost unaware of what I was doing, I took it and hid it under my coat, trembling in all my joints. I paused for a few more moments, to calm down my agitated breath, put the rest of the notebooks back to their place and went out on tiptoes lest I meet anyone who should guess my thoughts and guilt.

5

I remained locked indoors that evening, shutters down, lest my lamp's light should encourage some friend to intrude upon my solitude. And as the night became deeper, the time and place where I was seemed to fade into a turbid mist, so overwhelmed was my entire being with deciphering page by page Dr. Zerlendi's notes. The reading wasn't an exactly smooth one. At the beginning, the doctor had striven to write with the utmost care, because Romanian sounds are very hard to render in Sanskrit spelling. But after a few pages, the transcript became more and more approximate and one had to rather guess the word than read it. Either because of the nervousness with which he jotted down his thrilling experiences, or due to the rush, Dr. Zerlendi's writing didn't allow a fluent reading. In time, the sentences became shorter and shorter, the words more and more technical, like a conventional, ciphered language. On the brink of his last experiences, the doctor had taken care to keep his secret, using exclusively yogi terminology, inaccessible to those who, unlike him, hadn't become proficient in this science laden with traps.

"Honigberger's letter to J.E. was the clearest confirmation for me" the doctor wrote at the beginning of his private diary, without saying who J.E. was or anything about the content of that letter, which Mrs. Zerlendi had

once vaguely mentioned in one of our conversations. "Since the spring of 1907 I started believing that everything Honigberger had written in his Indian memories was not only authentic, in the strictest meaning of the word, but also that it represented only a tiny part of what he had seen and managed to achieve".There followed a series of references to Honigberger's work: cases of "fakirism", levitation, apparent death, live burial etc., facts that he was entitled to consider authentic. "I embarked on my first experiences on the 1st of July 1907. Weeks before, I had severely examined my conscience and given up tobacco, alcohol, meat, coffee, tea and everything else. I am not trying now to trace back the history of that embarrassing preliminary stage, which lasted for six months. I needed an iron will, since many times I was ready to give up and return to my historiographical games. Fortunately, Honigberger's letter proved that these things *could really be done*, and that kept my courage up. I had never imagined, though, that one could come that far and with relatively so little toil. Since only after you've acquired the first *powers* and the veils suddenly fall off your eyes, will you realise how great the humans' ignorance is and in what a painful illusion they indulge day by day up to the threshold of their death. The willpower and energy one deploys to satisfy one's social ambition or scientific vanity are, perhaps, even greater than those required to gain that extraordinary thing: your own salvation from nothingness, ignorance and pain."

The doctor described with enough details – on that 10th of January 1908 and on the next days – his first experiences. From what I could realize, he had known yogi literature before, especially Patanjali's treatise and its comments, he was familiar with Indian ascetic and mystic philosophy, but had never before tried to put them into practice. It seemed to me he had passed straight on to that difficult experience of controlling the rhythm of his breath, *pranayama*, without obtaining for a while any encouraging results.

"On the 25th of July, I fell asleep during such an exercise" he jotted down after remembering that, a few days before, an extremely violent cough had choked him. "For a long time I did these exercises after midnight, then in the morning, at dawn. A terrible oppression in my thorax and fits of dry cough were all the results I achieved. After two weeks of efforts, I understood that I could come to no results because, while striving to rhythm my breath according to Patanjali's text, I forgot to concentrate my

mind on one single object. The resistance I encountered occurred exactly because of this mental vacuum, which I was unaware of, at that time. I tried to follow again Honigberger's advice. I corked up my ears with wax and only started *pranayama* after a few moments of praying. I gained an unusual state of mental quiet. I can still remember the first sensations: it was as if I had been in the middle of a sea in turmoil, which calmed down in no time, until all there was left was an endless extent of water, with no wave, without the slightest ripple. Then I felt a sentiment of fulfilment, which I cannot compare to anything, except the feeling one has sometimes after listening to a lot of Mozart. For several days I resumed the experiment, without managing, though, to go beyond it. I would wake up after a quarter of an hour, in a vague reverie, although I knew that this was not supposed to be the result of the exercise. I resumed the spell that my own mind had spread around me. I repeated the exercise but, after some time, the result was the same: dreaminess, drowsiness or unparalleled mental placidity..."

How thrilling these confessions were to me! I too had once tried some of the experiments the doctor had indulged in with so much obstinacy, and had met the same difficulties. But he had been luckier and, in any case, had had more willpower. On the first days of September 1907 he took, almost unawares, a great step forward in these exercises of rhythmical breathing, that is, of perfect balance between inhaling and exhaling. "I started, as usual, by holding my breath for 12 seconds." This meant that he had managed to inhale for 12 seconds, keep his breath for 12 seconds and exhale for the same length of time. "The focus of the meditation was, on that day, fire." Doubtlessly he had "focused" his mind upon some recipient containing embers, trying to penetrate the essence of "fire", to retrieve that fire all over the universe, at the same time "assimilating" its principle, identifying it in as many processes within his body, reducing the infinity of combustions that together make up the universe and every single organism, to the same glowing element in front of his eyes.

"I do not realise quite well how it happened, but, after a while, *I woke up sleeping*, or rather I woke up in *sleep* without having ever fallen asleep in the real sense of the word. My body, with all its senses, was falling into an ever deeper sleep, without the mind's ever breaking off its activity for a second. Everything was asleep in me, except for lucidity. I went on meditating upon fire, meanwhile dimly realising that the world around me

was changing completely and that, if I had broken off my concentration for one single moment, I would have naturally integrated myself into this world, which was the world of sleep..."

As he himself admitted later on, Doctor Zerlendi had taken that day the first and, perhaps, the most difficult step on the path he had chosen for himself. He had achieved what is called in technical terms the continuity of awareness, that is, the transition from the awareness of the state of wakefulness to the awareness of the state of sleep, without any hiatus. The consciousness of a normal human is brutally split by sleep; nobody keeps up the continuity of his mental flow when he is asleep, nobody is aware he is asleep (in the best case he realizes, at times, that he's dreaming) and nobody continues thinking lucidly in his sleep. From the world of sleep, one only remembers a few dreams and a certain indefinite fear.

"What frightened me most in this discovery of mine – that I was a*wake in my sleep* – was the feeling that the world around me was changing completely and didn't resemble in the least the world of diurnal consciousness. It is very hard for me to define how I felt this change, because I had projected my entire mind, like a fascicle, upon fire and my senses were asleep. Still, I seemed to be in another space, where there was no need to watch in order to see, and I *could see* the room I was in, the objects, shapes, colours, changing. What happened then is beyond any description; I will still try to describe it the best I can, because no one, as far as I know, has ever dared to put into words such an experience. I kept staring at the fire, not as a pretext for a hypnotic trance, because I studied hypnotism long enough to know its techniques and effects. While watching, I was thinking about fire, *assimilating* it, penetrating my own body with my mind, identifying all the combustions within it. This was not, then, a frozen way of thinking, only thinking that was *one*, that is, it was not fragmented in several directions, it was not elicited by several objects, or distracted by some external stimulus or memory projected like an *éclat* of the subconscious. This kind of thinking only had its point of support in fire; but with it, I could penetrate in all the places where I had to identify fire. Hypnosis was, then, completely out of the question, especially since I was lucid all the time: I knew who I was, why I was sitting in that position, why I was controlling the rhythm of my breath, to what end I meditated upon fire. Nevertheless, I was simultaneously aware that I was in another space, in another world. I could no longer feel my

body; only a vague heat in the head, a heat that, in time, disappeared as well. Things seemed to be continuously flowing, without altering too much their outlines, though. In the beginning, one would have said that everything could be seen as if through a continuously rippling water, but the simile wasn't accurate at all. Things were actually flowing, some more slowly, others very quickly, but it was impossible to say *whereto* they were flowing and by what miraculous process their substance wasn't exhausted by their flowing over their natural limits. To try to be more precise about my vision, this was not an *overbrimming* of the object, but was rather as if these very brims of the object had been drawing in and distancing themselves against their will. Although I wasn't watching them, I knew they were there: a bed, two chairs, a carpet, a painting, a night table etc. – I was under the impression that they would all gather into the same point as soon as I set my eyes on one of them. This impression was not a mere fancy or illusion; it could be compared to the clear feeling of a man who is in water that he can advance or get out of the water. It was something I already knew, without realising whether I had ever experienced it before. I also had the impression that I could see farther beyond than the walls of my room would allow it. I couldn't say that things had become transparent. On the contrary, except for their continuous flowing and mobility, which was weird, somehow responding to my wish to eventually look at them, things had remained as before. Still, I could look beyond them, although, I repeat, I had not tried to do so. In any case, I had not tried to look *through* them, but *beyond* them. They were there, in front of me, and still I knew I could see farther out while they stayed in their places. This sensation was more or less like the vision one can have when watching from the corner of a room one's whole house; one cannot see through the walls, and still, one sees everything one knows there is in a neighbouring room, or in the entire house, without having the feeling that one's gaze has passed through the walls..."

6

It was clear that the doctor was writing all this after he had resumed countless times the experience of the continuity of consciousness in sleep.

According to how clearly the fragment had been written, it seemed that he had very carefully drafted the above description and then transposed it in Sanskrit lettering – which he dropped later, when he only jotted things down straight into the notebook.

"After some time, I felt the need to penetrate more deeply into the world of sleep, to explore that unknown space around me. Still, I didn't dare take my eyes off the embers. A strange disquietude, I could even say an incipient horror was threatening me. I don't know what made me suddenly close my eyes: it was by no means fatigue, because, I repeat, I felt myself sleeping, while my mind was more alert than ever. I was petrified to find, eyelids closed, the same vision I had when my eyes were open wide. Only the embers seemed to have changed; they were *flowing*, as well, like the other things around them, and their shining was brighter, although, I could say, much less *lively*. After faltering for a few moments, I opened my eyes again. I realised that it was useless to *watch*, to turn my pupils to a certain corner of the room; I could see in any direction I wanted, I could see wherever I threw my thoughts, whether my eyes were open or not. I thought of the garden behind the house and I saw it that very moment, as though I had been there. What an amazing spectacle! It seemed an ocean of vegetal sap in restless torment.. The trees were embracing one-another, the grass seemed to tremble like a sheaf of algae, only the fruits were more quiet, as if being carried in a long sway…

The next moment, the mirage of this vegetal storm disappeared abruptly. I was thinking of Sophie and I saw her, sleeping in the large bed in our bedroom. There was a dark-purple aura floating around her head; her body seemed to be continuously shedding its skin, so many folds seemed to pour out of her, fading away as soon as they unfolded from her limbs. I remained there for a long time, staring at her, trying to understand what was going on. Then I saw a shy little flame, flickering now at the height of her heart, then lower down, towards her belly. I suddenly became aware that Sophie was standing by me. It was a horrible moment, because I could see her very clearly in the bed, sleeping, and I could see her at the same time standing beside me, looking into my eyes with amazement, as if she had wanted to ask something. There was great bewilderment on her face; perhaps I looked different from what she had expected to see, maybe I didn't resemble the people she had seen thus far in her dream. Only later on, after having resumed this experiment several times, did I start realising

that the faces I was meeting around me were projections of the consciousnesses of various persons in their sleep." (I confess I do not understand what Doctor Zerlendi meant by this. Still, I kept this passage for the possible benefit occultists might find in it. A *sadhu* I had been accompanying around 1930, in Konarak, was telling me – but I cannot tell if it was the truth – that it is a real commotion to meet, during certain yogi meditations, the spirits of people who are asleep and who are wandering like shadows through the dimension of sleep. It seems they will watch you alertly, failing to understand how it is possible that they should meet you *there*, lucid, awake.) "A few moments before, the space around me changed suddenly. Fear had brought me back to wakefulness. I remained for a few moments in the same position I had had at the beginning of the experiment and counted the seconds again; the rhythm of my breath had remained the same: 12 seconds…"

The shift from the conscience of sleep to the conscience of wakefulness was a brutal one; the continuum had been interrupted by fear. Only after several experiments, resumed on the next day, in utmost secrecy, did the doctor manage to return to the diurnal consciousness with no hiatus, by mere willpower. He formulated the act of will as follows: "Now, I'm returning". Meanwhile, he would decrease the breathing pace from 12 to 8 seconds, slowly withdrawing from the state of sleep.

As to the next experiments, the notes are more sparse, either because the doctor *wouldn't* say more, or because he couldn't, he didn't find any appropriate description. Indeed, he confessed somewhere: "The unification of consciousness is achieved by a *continuous* transition, without any hiatus, from the state of wakefulness to that of sleep with dreams, then sleep without dreams and, finally to a cataleptic state". The union of these four states, which presupposes (as paradoxical as it might seem) blending the conscious with the subconscious and the unconscious, the gradual illumination of the obscure and impenetrable areas of psycho-mental life is, anyway, the purpose of yogi preliminary techniques.

(All Indian ascetes I have met and who accepted to give me some clues considered this phase of unification of the states of consciousness to be the most important. The one who didn't manage to achieve this experience could gain no spiritual benefit from yogi practise.)

I could find very few details about the transition from sleep with dreams to deep sleep without dreams. "I managed to set even further apart inhaling

from exhaling; 15 seconds for each, up to even 20 seconds." This meant that he breathed in once in a minute; for 20 seconds he held his breath, for another 20 seconds he inhaled and for another 20 he exhaled. "I had the impression that I was returning to a spectral world, where I could meet nothing but colours, contoured by almost no shape. Coloured spots, rather. In exchange, the sonorous universe dominated the world of shapes. Every spot of light was a source of sounds." As far as I can see, the doctor was trying to render – in a few hasty lines – the sonorous universe which starts being accessible to the initiate only after a repeated meditation upon sounds, upon those "mystical syllables" the *Mantra Yoga* treatises mention. Indeed, it seems that, starting with a certain level of consciousness, only sounds and colours are encountered – the shapes proper disappearing as if by miracle. But Dr. Zerlendi's directions are too vague for us to be able to reconstitute his experience.

The more amazing the results of the Yoga techniques were, the more reticent his confessions became. On entering cataleptic state, there was only this specification: "along with my last experience, I started finding out the thoughts of any man I concentrated upon. I checked this on Sophie, who was, at that very moment, finishing a letter to the administrator. I could very well have read the letter directly, but I didn't; I was right there near her and I could find out all her thoughts – not only the ones she was writing down in the letter – as naturally as if I had been listening to her speak."

However amazing those experiences were, Doctor Zerlendi didn't attach much importance to them. "One can reach the same result even without too rigorous an ascesis, only by a maximum of mental concentration. Although I realise very well that modern people are incapable of such a mental effort any more. They are either absent-minded or in a continuous evanescence. Ascesis is useful not to gain those powers, but to abandon yourself to them. Exploring unknown states of consciousness can be so much of a temptation that you risk spending your life without ever reaching an end. It is a new world, but it still remains *a world*. If you content yourself with exploring it, without wanting to transcend it – as you have tried to transcend the world of wakefulness – it's as if, while learning a new language, you'd try to read all the books written in that, giving up learning any other language."

I do not realise very well what stage of technical perfection the doctor was at when he started writing his diary. Almost twenty pages had been written on the 10th, 12th and 13th of January 1908; they contain a kind of short revision, for the would-be reader, of the preliminary stages, without mentioning, though, how far those stages had gone. He repeatedly mentioned the initials J.E. "I think this was J.E.'s fatal mistake" he mentioned somewhere, "that he didn't realise the irreality of the phenomena he had discovered in the spectral world. He thought that this represented the ultimate frontier that the human spirit could reach. He ascribed an absolute value to his experience; while, in fact, he still had to deal with phenomena. I think this is the explanation of his paralysis. Honigberger managed, probably, to reactivate some of his centres, but he couldn't do more. He couldn't heal his amnesia." This was an obscure passage; probably J.E. couldn't eventually master his consciousness and became the victim of his own discoveries in the supranormal world. I can remember that all occult Indian treatises speak of the new cosmic levels the ascete penetrates by Yoga techniques as being as "illusory" as the cosmos any man has access to in his normal condition. On the other hand, I do not realise if the "centres" he refers to are nervous centres, or the occult chakras mentioned in Yoga or other traditions.

In any case, it seems that this J.E. had tried, under Honigberger's direct influence, a yogi initiation and had failed lamentably, either because of what Dr. Zerlendi had suspected, or because he didn't have a favourable bodily condition for the techniques he was experimenting. "I managed to achieve that" the doctor goes on writing, referring to a complicated and obscure experience of projecting his consciousness outside his body in a state of catalepsy, "because I had, exceptionally, an "Asian-type" censory condition (?). I do not think that a European could achieve this. He cannot *perceive* his body beyond his diaphragm, and even that far is rare enough. Usually he will only perceive his head; I realise this only now, when I can see them as they have never seen themselves and none of them can hide anything from me."

The passage is cryptical enough. I suspect that an "Asian-type censory condition" could mean the diffuse experience people have about their own body, which differs from race to race. I know, for instance, that an Oriental perceives his body in a different way than we, Europeans, do. Touching an Oriental's leg or shoulder would give him the same sensation of rape we

would have if one touched our eyes or lips with the back of one's hand. As to "one's perceiving one's body beyond one's diaphragm", the expression could refer to the Westerners' incapacity of having the total *experience* of their body. Indeed, very few among us can boast that they *feel* their body as a *whole*. Most of us only feel sections of our bodies – the forehead, the heart – and only under certain circumstances. Try, for instance, to perceive your legs – in a totally relaxed posture, as for instance while sprawling in bed – and you'll see how hard it is.

"I have unified the two influxes easily enough, down to my heel," the doctor writes again about the same experience. "At that moment, I had the clear feeling I was spheric, that I had become an impenetrable, perfectly impermeable ball. I had a complete perception of autonomy, of invulnerability. The myths referring to primitive man conceived as a sphere naturally derive from this experience of unifying the influxes". I don't dare state that he was referring to the negative-positive influxes of European occult therapy. More probably the doctor was referring to the two fluids, with such a hard nature to decipher, of the occult Indian tradition, "influxes" that go across the human body and which Yogi and Tantric doctrines equate to the Sun and the Moon. But, I repeat, I daren't strongly ascertain anything, since I only have a fragmentary knowledge of the stages of initiation that he passed through.

7

Doctor Zerlendi's notes became sparser over February, March and April 1908. The few pages written during this interval are cryptical and especially refer to previous experiences. The doctor's interest in his intimate diary visibly diminished. If in the beginning he had striven hard to describe as accurately as possible an experience, soon his interest in such confessions slackened. Maybe he realised at that point how inaccessible those things were to the would-be profane reader who might come across them. Or, perhaps he was growing too detached of our world and was no longer interested in communicating his experiences at all. In any case, he almost never noted – during this time – any experiences or thoughts occurring to him on the same day. He kept coming back to what had

happened on the previous days or weeks. I'd be inclined to think that he was too absorbed by his discoveries to write them down day by day. Especially when trying some new experiments, he was so preoccupied by them that he would only put them down long after they had happened and in most cases in a very lapidary way. "Uncertain results with *muktasana* practised at dawn", he jotted down in April. I'd need a few pages to explain this cryptical sentence, referring to a certain body posture. Therefore, I won't even bother to explain it, since doctor Zerlendi's notes abound in such technical explanations regarding body postures during yogi meditation, breathing exercises or ascetic philosophy. I have explained some aspects of such practice in my book about yoga and I won't resume them in this story.

At the end of April1908, he seemed interested in the diary again. After the fugitive technical notes, there followed a long confession. "Among other things of paramount importance that Honigberger had revealed to J.E., there also appeared the existence of Shambala, of that miraculous land which, according to tradition, was situated somewhere in the North of India, and where only the initiated could penetrate. Before his insanity, J.E. had thought that this invisible land could still be accessible to the unendowed and, on a page he had written and which I found in Iasi, he had scribbled down the names of two Jesuites, Stephen Cacella and John Cabral who, he pretended, had reached Shambala. I laid hands with enough difficulty on the works of these two Jesuite missionaries, but I realized that J.E.'s allegations had been without support. Cacella and Cabral were, indeed, the first two Europeans who ever heard of Shambala and mentioned it. Being in Bhutan, on their quest for the road to Kathay, they had found out of the existence of this miraculous land, which the natives situated somewhere to the North. And it was on its quest that they started out in 1627; but they only came as far as Tibet. They didn't find Shambala, the land of miracles. Unlike J.E., as soon as I found out about Honigberger's confessions, I doubted Shambala could be identified with some ordinary territory, geographically located in the centre of Asia. I might also have been influenced in this belief by the Indian legends about Agarttha, as well as about those "White Islands" in Buddhist and Brahmanic mythology. Indeed, I had never come across any Indian text that should state one could reach those miraculous territories otherwise but by supernatural powers. All confessions speak about "the flight" of

Buddha or of other initiates to these lands hidden to profane eyes. It is well-known, on the other hand, that "flight" means, in the symbolic, secret language, man's capacity to transcend the world of senses and, consequently, to gain access to the invisible worlds. Everything I knew about Honigberger led me to believe that he had entered Shambala due to his yogi technique, in which he had attained mastery as early as 1858, but that he had probably failed in accomplishing the mission he had been entrusted with. Only this way can I explain to myself why he had returned so quickly from India and died shortly after his return, leaving that document of such great importance in the hands of a young greenhorn such as J.E..."

What a pang the above pages had given me! How many memories came upon me, suddenly, in the dead of night, on seeing those two names: Shambala and Agarttha! For I, too, had set out one day in search for the invisible land, determined not to return to the world any more before I've known it. An old wound, which I thought had long healed, started bleeding again, reminding me of those months spent in the Himalayas, very close to the border of Tibet, on the holy road of Bhadrinat, asking from hermit to hermit whether they'd heard of Shambala by chance, or of someone who might have known its secret. And who can tell if, eventually, from my hut on the left bank of the Ganges, from that *kutiar* overgrown by the jungle which I've for long contemplated only as a lost paradise – who can tell if from that very hut I wouldn't have gained the illumination to manage, after years of tests and preparations, to find the path to the invisible land. But it was written for me never to enter it, but to carry it in my melancholies to my death hour...

More horrible even is the remorse of someone who has turned back on his steps and then found out from someone else that the road he had taken was the right one. Doctor Zerlendi's confessions confirmed all my suspicions, because everything that happened afterwards happened exactly the way I had imagined it *must* happen to the one who thirstily searches for Shambala. "I always kept vividly in my mind the image of the invisible land Honigberger had entered. In fact I knew that that land was *invisible* only to the eyes of the profane. More precisely, this was only a geographically inaccessible land, that is, a land you could only know after a previous tough spiritual preparation. I imagined this Shambala to be hidden to other people not by who knows what natural obstacles, high

mountains or deep waters, but by the *space* it is part of, a qualitatively different space from the profane one. My first yogi experiences confirmed this, because I realised how different the space of profane experience is from the space of the other kinds of human knowledge. I had even started, in this very notebook, to describe these experiences in details, but I very soon realised that they are indescriptible. Whoever knows them will acknowledge this. I still continue these notes, because the agelong truth which nobody believes in any more must be confirmed, from time to time. According to me, Honigberger himself was allowed to return to Shambala so as to try to reactivate in the West a few initiation centres that had been dormant since the Middle Ages. His sudden death confirms my conviction; it is clear that he didn't know how to fulfil his mission or had ruined its chances from the beginning, and therefore died in such a mysterious way. As to me, although I haven't reached the final stage yet, I think I can feel an invisible influence about me, someone who leads me and helps me, and this enforces my conviction that, eventually, I'll succeed."

Doctor Zerlendi makes no more confessions about that invisible influence. Yet, the occult tradition talks quite enough about it, especially the Eastern one, and all that followed makes me believe that the doctor wasn't prey to some illusion when he mentioned it. The proof is that he reached his yogi accomplishment very quickly, almost vertiginously. He spent the summer of 1908 almost by himself, on one of his estates, and, later on, back in Bucharest, he summed up a few of his experiences. Some of them can be reconstructed with a certain accuracy. For instance, at a point he speaks of the weird vision he had had after certain meditations: it seemed to him that all things were upside-down, more precisely, the contrary of what they are in reality. Solid objects seemed inconsistent to him, and vice-versa; "the void" gave him the impression of "full", while dense things seemed vacuous. But there is one more thing doctor Zerlendi did not go into precise details about: he saw the whole world, in its entirety – to quote from his manuscript – "totally contrary to what it seems to a man in wakefulness", without clearing up what he means by "totally contrary". It is true, we see here a phrase that matches exactly the severe formulations of the mystics or of ritual books, since everywhere in such texts reference is made to the other world, or the world seen in ecstasy as being "totally contrary" to the one we see with our bodily eyes.

Quite as strange is the confession of the doctor regarding his "return" into the visible world, after prolonged contemplation. "In the beginning I was under the impression that I was swaying, that I'd fall down at the first step. I was devoid of my normal safety; as if I had to re-adapt to tri-dimensional space. Therefore I didn't even dare to budge for a long time. I remained petrified, waiting for a miracle to happen so that I regain the security I had before the trance. Now I can explain to myself why, after an ecstasy, saints will remain immobile for hours or even for days on end, leaving the impression that their spirit is still enraptured in godliness."

Under the 11th of September, he noted: "I've tried several times to go into cataleptic trance. First, for 12 hours; the second and third time, for 36 hours. I would tell the forest guard I'd go to the mansion and locked myself into my room, knowing I wouldn't be interrupted. For the first time I could personally experience *going out of time*. For, although the spirit remained active, the body did not participate in the flow of time any longer. Before inducing the trance, I would shave and, after 36 hours, my cheeks were as smooth as when I had entered the trance. It was normal that this should happen. Man experiences *time* through his respiratory rhythm. For any man, a certain number of "seconds" goes by between inhaling and exhaling; *life* coincides, in man, with *time*. I first entered cataleptic trance at ten in the morning and woke up at ten in the evening; during all this time, my body was lying in what some have called apparent death, without the slightest breath. The inhaling I had done at 10 a.m. continued, that is, by the exhaling at 10 p.m. During this interval, my body was removed from time. For the body the 12 hours were reduced to a few seconds; the long inhaling in the morning and the slow exhaling that preceeded waking up. On that day I only lived as a human half a day; in 24 hours my body only aged 12; life was suspended without harming my organism."

What doctor Zerlendi had experienced is, otherwise, popular enough, without having been studied enough, though. "Apparent death", a matter of so much debate in Honigberger's time, seems indeed to be an exit of time. Only thus can it be explained why, after ten or one hundred days of trance, the body keeps its weight, while the freshly shaven cheeks remain as clean as they had been. But these are states which certainly transcend the human condition and we cannot have any representation of them. Not even the most prodigious imagination can adequately have the intuition of such an "exit from time". The hints we encounter in the confessions of some saints

or in oriental occult writings are unintelligible to us all. I myself have gathered a precious collection of such confessions, most of them allegorically expressed, but they all remained to me the deepest secrets. Only death will bring to some of us a new light in this matter.

"The only amazing thing to me is that people will not learn anything from such experiences. The most outstanding scholars have contented themselves to deny the authenticity of such happenings – to which there had been hundreds of witnesses in fact – preferring to keep their old positions. As if you'd content yourself to only swim across waters, giving up the crossing of a sea simply because you cannot conceive that water can also be crossed with a boat."

8

The diary stops in September 1908 for four months. The first following notes date from the beginning of January 1909. They cannot be transcribed here, because of their technical character. They are rather mere postulations of metaphysical principles and practical yogi recipes. Some of them seem meaningless. "26th of January. The experience of the dark. Every letter is resumed from the end." He was no doubt referring to other, previous exercises, probably meditations on sounds and letters – the so-called *mantra yoga* – about which, nevertheless, I found no other explanation. What can "the experience of the dark" mean, though? Further on: "The 5th of February. Recently, *samyama* over the body. It's unbelievable, and still it's *true*." This note could gain some sense if the doctor were referring to a certain text from Patanjali, who says that by *samyama* over his own body, the yogi becomes invisible to the other people. By *samyama* Patanjali means the last three stages of yogi perfection, upon which it is hard to insist here. I still find it hard to believe that as early as the 5th of February 1909 the doctor had achieved this miracle. How could I explain, then, his surprise later? How should I explain the 18 months that followed and during which, even if we are told very little, we still know that he had been striving to gain this very power to become invisible?

In fact the text becomes more and more difficult. Some notes even seem contradictory. "March. I re-read some of the *Upanishades*. Amazing progress in understanding the original." How should I understand this confession? After all he had achieved, reading the *Upanishades* in the original could not be of much relevance. And then, what use could have been the study of Sanskrit to a man who had assimilated something more than a dead science? Only if, by chance, he had turned back on his steps or paused in his yogi perfection under some "influence" he mentions nothing about. Or, perhaps, he wasn't conducting this study in a scholarly way any longer, reading and thinking the text over, but, as they say in India, managing to gain some mysterious science by only pronouncing the sacred words, which there are considered a revelation of the Logos, in an accurate way. He indeed mentions somewhere else certain exercises, otherwise extremely obscure, of "inner utterance" of a sacred Indian text. And in early summer he speaks of equating the "mystical letters" with some states of rarefied consciousness (would I be any closer to the truth if I said "superconsciousness"?).

At the same time he confesses the "occult vision" he had gained by reactivating "the eye between the eyebrows", an eye of which Asian mysticisms and mythologies all speak in fact, and which would grant the one who is endowed with it the capacity to see at enormous distances. Still, reference to this "eye of Shiva", as Indians call it, is contradictory or, in any case, extremely obscure for a profane. Some say that the "eye of Shiva" orients one in space, so it would be a sixth sense; others, the majority, state that the new vision the initiate will gain by means of this "eye" has nothing to do with the world of shapes and of illusions, but exclusively refers to the spiritual world. Through "the eye of Shiva" man can directly contemplate the spiritual world, in other words, he gains access to levels beyond the senses. But Doctor Zerlendi doesn't clear anything up about this mystery either. Could he not – or was he not allowed to?...

Again there comes an interval of long silence, whose limits I cannot identify, because they are not dated in the immediately following notes. These notes are, in fact, almost impossible to decipher. I guess they refer to what Doctor Zerlendi called "impersonal consciousness", since I found the following passage: "The hardest thing, that is, the thing impossible to gain these days in the West, is an impersonal consciousness. Only a few mystics

have come to such a consciousness over the last centuries. All the difficulties man encounters post-mortem, all the inferni and purgatories we are told the spirits of the dead are submitted to, are due to this very incapacity to gain, while still alive, an impersonal consciousncess. The drama of the soul after death and the atrocious purifications it suffers are nothing but the stages of the painful transition from personal to impersonal consciousness..."

The page immediately following the confession above is ripped out of the notebook. I then found a note dated the 7th of January 1910. "Maybe I was punished for my impatience. But I thought you're allowed to create your own destiny. I am not that young any more. I'm not afraid of death; I know very well the yarn of the life I still have got to live. But I thought I was bound to hurry, because I am no longer useful to anybody here where I am, and I still have enough to learn there."

And, after a few days: "I now know the path to Shambala. I know how to get there. I can even say something more: very recently, three men from our continent have arrived there. Each of them started out alone and reached Shambala by means of his own. The Dutchman has even travelled as far as Colombo without concealing his identity. I know all these things out of my long trances, when I can see Shambala in all its grandeur, I see that green miracle among the snow-covered mountains, those strange houses, those ageless people who talk so little to each-other, although they understand so well each-other's thoughts. If it hadn't been for them, to pray and think for all the others, the entire continent would be shattered by all the demonic forces the modern world has unleashed since the Renaissance. Is the fate of our Europe sealed? Can nothing more be done for this world, which is prey to obscure spiritual forces that drag it unawares ever closer to cataclysm? I'm very much afraid that Europe will have the fate of Atlantis and perish soon enough by being submerged under waters. If people knew that only the spiritual forces emanating from Shambala keep postponing that tragic shift of the globe's axis which is well-known in geology and which will make our world crumble into the waters, making who knows what new continent emerge..."

The fear of the tragic end of our continent also appears in other pages of the diary. I'm under the impression that the doctor started to see the series of cataclysms to come over Europe more and more clearly.

This coincides with an entire series of more or less apocalyptic prophecies, regarding *Kaliyaga*, the "dark age", whose end we are nearing, we are told, at a quick step. The legend of the imminent end of the world circulates throughout India in highly diversified variants. But doctor Zerlendi speaks of a possible "change of the globe's axis", which would be the immediate cause of the disaster. As I understand, according to him, such a change of axis would bring about a terrible seismic catastrophe, in which some continents would sink or modify their actual configuration – while new continents would emerge from the waters. The fact that he mentions the name of Atlantis several times makes me believe that he considered the existence of this continent a fact, and connected its disappearance to who knows what kind of spiritual degenerescence of its inhabitants. What seems to me worth pointing at, in all these tragic foresages, is the fact that they are made several years before World War I, when the world was still cherishing the illusion of infinite progress.

Then, suddenly, on the 11th of May 1910, the doctor returns to the Yogi exercises by which the invisibility of the body can be gained. It is easy to understand why I don't transcribe here these petrifying confessions. A strange sense of panic got hold of me while reading Doctor Zerlendi's lines. I had read thus far enough documents, more or less authentic, about this Yogi miracle, but things had never been said so clearly and in such details before. When I started the present story, I was still faltering, not knowing whether I would have to transcribe this very horrifying page or not. Arrived to this point, after so many weeks of uncertainty and uneasiness, I realised that such a thing cannot be confessed. I am conforted by the thought that those who know what "*samyama* over one's own body" means will know where to find explanations.

9

It seems, nevertheless, that the experience of invisibility wasn't devoid of danger. The effort to make one's body unseen to the eyes of others, of *withdrawing* it from light, provokes such a stir throughout the organism, that the doctor remained unconscious for many hours, after such an experience. "I'll probably not resort to this means to reach Shambala" he

noted in June 1910. "The time of my final departure is drawing near, but I still don't know if I'll have enough powers to leave unseen by the others."

And later in that month, he wrote: "Sometimes it's as if I myself am afraid of the forces I have concentrated in myself. My will does not falter, but these forces which have helped me so far to penetrate into unseen worlds are hard enough for me to control. This morning, while in my room in contemplation, I suddenly felt the atmosphere rarefy and my body lose amazingly much weight. Unwittingly, I was rising, and, although I tried to cling to objects, I soon felt I was touching the ceiling. What was horrible in all this was that the levitation had happened without my will, only due to the forces contemplation had unleashed. I had almost lost control completely, and one second's break in my attention would have made me crash back inertly on the floor."

I have heard about such strange happenings before, when the one who tries to master occult qualities doesn't manage, at some point, to keep up his lucidity and willpower and then runs the risk to become the victim of the magic powers his own meditation had conjured. I was being told, in Hardwar, that the yogi is prey to the utmost danger not at the beginning, but at the end of his ascension, when he becomes the master of lethal powers. In the world of mythology, we find out that those who "fell" the lowest were the very ones who had managed to ascend the closest to divinity. Luciferic pride is, itself, nothing but one form of the obscure powers one unleashes by one's own perfection and which, eventually, manage to crush one."

Later on, on the 16th of August: "What an awful detachment from the entire world! There's only one thought that still thrills me: Shambala. My testament has been written since the year when Smaranda was born. Any other note made now, right before my departure, would be suspicious."

Then, maybe later on the same day, some lines jotted down in haste: "I'm afraid that, still, this notebook might get in the hands of someone who'd destroy it, not suspecting its content. My efforts to confess some extraordinary things will have been useless, in this case. But I do not regret..." There followed an entire erased line, which I could, none-the-less, partially decipher: "If the one who reads and understands... tries to use... graver... than he thought." Doubtlessly the doctor had thought on leaving to give some words of advice to the would-be reader, reminding him, at the same time, of the risks he would run, in case he recklessly

disclosed what he had read. I do not realise what made him give up these pieces of advice and erase the sentence he had started. I still respected his will, not disclosing his most important experience.

19th of August. "I again woke up invisible and my horror was so much greater since I hadn't done anything to induce this. I paced the courtyard for hours on end, realising only by accident that I was invisible. The servants would pass by me without seeing me; in the beginning I thought they were not attentive, but glancing around I didn't see my shadow. I followed one of the servants who was going to the stables. As if he had felt something uncouth behind him, he kept turning back, his eyes confused, and finally he quickened his pace, crossing himself. However hard I tried, it was impossible for me to regain visibility before midnight, when I woke up, crushed, in my bed. I think the excruciating fatigue that followed was mostly due to my efforts to become visible again. I had gained invisibility by chance, unwillingly and even unwittingly…"

This is the last longer note in the doctor's diary. What follows is not less intriguing: "13th of September. I haven't been able to come back since the night before. I took this notebook and the pen and I'm writing on the ladder to the attic. I'll then hide it among my study scrapbooks. I'm still terrified at the thought that I might get lost on the way to Shambala…"

This note is dated *two days after his disappearance*. If anyone could have deciphered the manuscript at that time, and would have read the freshly written page, he would have understood that the doctor was still in the house, very close to his folks…

10

On the third day, determined to return the notebook and read it entirely to Mrs.Zerlendi, I went to S. Street. The old housekeeper received me. The mistress of the house was ill and the young lady had left for Paris.

"How come, so suddenly?" I wondered.

"This is her habit" she answered, almost without looking at me.

It seemed she wasn't in a mood for confessions. I left my card, telling her that I'd pass by in a few days to inquire about the lady's health. But I could only return a week later. The entrance gate was closed, and only after I

shook it several times and pressed the rusty button of the doorbell in vain, did the housekeeper come out to meet me. She crossed with difficulty the garden, where the last flowers had withered, as if over night, and drew close to the gate, grumbling:

"The lady has gone to the countryside" she said, and started turning around. But she stopped again and added: "She left no word when she'd return…"

I came back several times, during that autumn and winter, to the continuously locked gate in S. Street. In the best case, I would get the following answer:

"There's no one at home…"

But sometimes the housekeeper didn't even bother to come out and answer the bell. Then I sent several letters to Mrs. Zerlendi, without ever getting any answer or acknowledgement that she ever opened my letters. It was impossible for me to understand what had happened. In no case could Mrs. Zerlendi have known that I had found and taken away her husband's diary. I was sure that nobody had seen me when I had hidden it under my coat. Even if I had been spied upon through the keyhole, I still wouldn't have been caught red-handed; I had slipped away the notebook hiding near the bookshelf, surrounded by the other scrapbooks of the doctor.

By the end of February 1935, passing by the house in S. Street and seeing the gate open, I entered. I confess that I pressed with a lot of emotion the button of the bell on the door of the glass porch. I was expecting the same grumpy old woman to meet me, but, to my surprise, a young maid opened the door. I asked if anybody was at home. "Everybody is in" she answered. I gave her my card and entered the drawing-room. After a few minutes, the bedroom door opened and Smaranda appeared. She was almost beyond recognition; she seemed ten years younger, her face was nicely made-up, the colour of her hair was different. She gave another amazed look at my card, before she put out her hand to me. She pretended wonderfully not to have met me. She told me her name, as if in front of a stranger.

"To what do I owe this visit?" she then inquired.

I told her I had worked for some time in Doctor Zerlendi's library, that the lady of the house knew me well enough – she herself had invited me to do research work in her husband's archive – and I added that I also knew her, Smaranda.

"This must be a confusion" she told me smiling. "I'm quite sure you've never been introduced to me. I generally know very few people in Bucharest and I would have doubtlessly kept in mind your name or face..."

"Still, Mrs.Zerlendi knows me very well. For weeks on end I worked here, in the library" I insisted, pointing my arm at the massive oak door.

Smaranda followed my gesture, then gave me a puzzled look, as if she couldn't believe her eyes.

"What you're telling me is quite strange" she added, "because indeed this was my father's library in the past. But that was many years ago, very many years ago. Under the occupation, that library, which was indeed exceptionally rich, got lost..."

I started laughing, not knowing what to answer.

"I find what you're telling me very hard to believe" I answered, after a long break, during which I stared her in the eyes, determined to make her understand that I had seen through her game. "Only about two months have passed since I worked in this library. I know it shelf by shelf and I can tell you by heart all there is in it."

I would have liked to continue, but Smaranda dashed to the bedroom door and shouted:

"Mother, come here for a moment, please!"

Mrs. Zerlendi appeared, holding a little boy by the hand. I made a deep bow, but I understood from her look that she didn't want to recognize me.

"This gentleman pretends he worked a couple of months ago in the library" she said, pointing at the massive oak door.

Mrs.Zerlendi stared at me in offended amazement, then patted the child's head and whispered to him:

"Hans, go and play,now..."

"Did you not write to me yourself to come and didn't you show me yourself to the library?" I started exasperatedly. "You even asked me to continue the biography of Doctor Honigberger that your husband had started writing" I added.

Mrs. Zerlendi was looking in amazement now at me, then at Smaranda. I admit, she was good at pretending, and I felt blood coming to my cheeks.

"My first husband, Dr. Zerlendi, did indeed some research about the life of a Saxon physician, but I confess, dear sir, that I can hardly remember his

name. 25 years have passed since the death of my first husband, and the library has ceased existing since the war..."

And, since I had remained petrified, my eyes staring at the door I had opened so many times only two months before, Mrs. Zerlendi added:

"Smaranda, show the room to this gentleman..."

I followed her unwittingly, and remained flabbergasted on the threshold, staring at the new look of the library. Only the chandelier and the curtains had remained in place. The desk, the bookshelves, the great carpet, everything had disappeared. That huge room was now a sort of living-room, in which there were two coffee-tables, several couches, a bridge table, a few furs in front of the fireplace. The walls where the shelves had been were now covered with a somewhat worn-out sort of wallpaper, partly covered with pictures and old weapons. The wooden galleries covering three walls had disappeared. I closed the door, confused.'

"You're right" I said, "the library has been plundered away. If I only knew who bought it" I added. "I would have liked to dwell some more on Honigberger..."

"But sir" Mrs Zerlendi said, "the library was plundered almost 20 years ago..."

"The most significant thing still is the fact that you don't recognize me" I said, smiling.

It seemed to me that Mrs. Zerlendi's hand trembled lightly, but I couldn't tell for sure that it really happened.

"Our amazement is even greater, sir," Smaranda started. "It is at least odd that someone should recognize the room where there was a library 20 years ago, a room in which, as far as I know, there haven't been many strangers lately..."

I was getting ready to leave. I realised that, out of reasons obscure to me, neither of them wanted to recognize me. Should they have acted like this under some invisible influence from beyond?

"I wonder if at least the old limp housekeeper I spoke to several times a few weeks ago would recognize me" I added.

"He's talking about Arnica" she whispered, frightened.

"But Arnica died 15 years ago" Smaranda exclaimed. "How could he have met her a few weeks ago..."

I felt my mind go astray and my eyes become hazy. Had I stayed there for a few more minutes, I would have collapsed there, at their feet,

unconscious. I mumbled a few words of excuse and left, almost without daring to look back any more. Only after I strolled for a long time in the streets and came to, did it seem to me I had understood the meaning of this extraordinary episode. But I didn't dare confess it to anyone, nor will I disclose it in this story. I have had enough troubles in life as it is, due to the mysteries Mrs. Zerlendi had urged me to delve into, without the doctor's permission...

*

A few months after the happenings above, I passed again on S. Street. The house at nr.17 was crumbling down. The metal fence had been partly ripped off, the pool was filled with old iron debris and slates. I stayed on to lurk for a long while, hoping I'd see either of the two women so that I could find out something about their incomprehensible behaviour. But there were only workers, and a construction site foreman urging them to work. After some time, I headed for the end of the street, almost in pain because of this mystery I could by no means penetrate up to the end. It seemed to me I saw in front of me the little boy with whom Mrs. Zerlendi had come into the drawing-room. I shouted at him:

"Hans" I told him, "how nice to meet you, Hans!"

The child looked at me in perfectly faked bewilderment:

"My name is not Hans" he answered me politely enough. "It's Stephen..."

And he went on his way, without turning his head, slowly, like a child annoyed that he hasn't met any of his playmates.

ŞTEFAN BĂNULESCU (1926 – 1998) was one of the most interesting and intriguing contemporary writers, both because he was a "collector of rare subjects" as literary historians characterize him, and because of the sparseness of his writings. His debut in literature took place in 1949, with an essay on Gogol's novellas, while his first book appeared in 1960. *Road across the Fields* is a series of reportages previously published in the press. He was an editor of the "Literary Gazette" between 1954 – 1960, then, for another year, he worked at "The Morning Star". In 1965 a book of short stories, *The Winter of Men* brought about a breakthrough in the Romanian literary world. The book was followed by a volume of poetry, *Songs of the Plain,* which passed unnoticed. After a scholarship of studies at Iowa University, the writer published *Provincial Letters*, a book of minor prose, after which, in 1977, the first part of a tetralogy the author was planning was published. *The Book of Metopolis* was to become the first volume of *The Book of the Millionnaire* and was favourably received by the critics. No other volumes followed, though. His first books were re-published, at times with addenda containing inedited texts.

"Grass rises up to our shoulders. The ground is full of quails. Dew holds out until noonish. When the day breaks, if you're hot, you can dive into the grass to bathe. That's what Arşunel's daughters do, they jump out of their sheets in the morning, run to the field and dip in where the grass is taller. Quails fly off under their armpits and red-breasted bee eaters sing on their nipples."

"Are there no wells in the field?"

"None. 'Cause no one has dug any." He'd have dug to no purpose. Only some thirty metres underneath will you hit water. And when you do, it will run deeper down. That's what happens in the field. I don't know a thing about the spot we're heading for now; I've never been there. What's the use that in the village we've left behind there are wells and that they had water, if now there's only mud pools and sand instead? The drought has sucked them dry, just as it has done to the cows' udders. There was such a drought, that the very Moon had got black; all there was left of it was a spot, like the yolk of an egg, on one side."

"It was the egg of the beginning and the end", grumbled a man walking on one edge of the convoy, but abreast with the two riders in front.

"I don't know what that egg was called" snapped after a while the one who had started speaking about Arşunel's daughters and the drought. "I said that, so that this man might understand me faster, for it is night time and he can't see my face. When the day breaks, I'll talk to him otherwise. For all I know, he's not from around here, and maybe he has never worked the land or watched the skies, dust in his eyes. I only know that much: this drought had been going on since Palm Sunday until about this time in autumn. And then there came a fifteen days' rain and this grass grew, the one we're now trampling through with the horses. That is, as if all the months, April, May, June, July and August were happening now, in September. Time has started anew, to spend all its unlived days. It's hot like in July, acacias are blooming like in April and autumn grapes are ripening. A jade of an old man had started, a couple of days ago, to hang on to young girls and was presenting them with yellow kerchiefs. Bees swarmed in September and made their hives in the cracks the drought had

dug in the pillars of the gates. Lucky the young ones! They lure each other with honeycombs at night, at the gates, and in the morning they are sick of honey. They also say that, in this time, Fuierea, whom nobody had seen since the height of the drought, showed up on horseback. Fuierea's wife had eloped because of hunger and thirst. Nobody knows with whom. He said she'd been taken away by a white swirl, one day at noontime. Fuierea left to look for her on horseback, but he would return every night to see whether his wife had perchance come back in his absence. He had cut a path, running to and fro on his horse. In these parts, only Ivancel has run that much, to get his pay for the arm he'd lost in battle at Mărăşeşti, ten years ago. In the midst of the drought, Fuierea ceased coming to check whether his wife had returned. And the ground caved in under the place he had ceaselessly trodden. Some widows, who hadn't lived their love through, said so; I didn't pay much attention to the path. Some people said that they'd heard at times Fuierea, at night, riding his horse under the dirt of the path, as he went on looking for his wife. I, for one, never heard him; every evening my bones were broken with work and I fell asleep quickly. But I saw the poppies. The thing with the poppies is true. When the drought was over, after it had rained for a while, I went out one day to the edge of the village, towards the place where Fuierea's deserted house was still standing. In the courtyard, he had a tall poplar tree, full of dirt up to its top, for it was blown full of the dust brought by the north wind, all the year round. After the drought, I say, when there was neither Fuierea, nor his wife around, we all saw red-blooming poppies at the armpit of each branch. You could see them from far, tall as some bushes among the branches of the poplar tree. And the latter had dried up from top to bottom. That's about all. If there's anything else you want to know, ask me before these people wake up" – he said, pointing back, over his shoulder.

For a while, only the grass could be heard, sweeping past the horses' bellies. Nor was there any other sound from the long convoy of riders and carts following the chatterboxes up front, either. Only the full, continuous sweep of the grass was there, as if the people crossing the field at night had been walking in their sleep. The only ones who showed signs of wakefulness were the man who had spoken about the drought, then the stranger who was riding abreast with him, listening to his words, as well as the one at the edge of the group in front, who had mentioned the egg of the beginning and the end.

From the convoy in the back, a tall shadow emerged above the grass, driving his horse now forwards, then backwards.

"This is Corbu[63]" – said the man who had kept speaking, as he bent towards the stranger riding at his side. "You'll know Corbu even at night, for he's as lanky as a pole: he has had his shadow stand up in the evening and used it as a cover. Neither he, nor his parents have ever had an eiderdown. This Corbu has a mania: his mind is astray in fairy tales, but when he wants to voice them, they come out of his mouth as songs. He will not sing the words, for his voice doesn't help him, he says the songs as if he were speaking. What's the matter, Corbu, has sleep deserted you?"

"I can't see very far out" Corbu answered, "and I'm running to catch with my horse what I can't catch with my sight, Miron."

"Keep your wisdom clear of coincidence!" Miron, the one who had been talking about the drought, shouted at him.

"You called me from the East and I'm answering you from the West. I left home with the sunset in my shirt."

"You're so tall that the field is not long enough for you!" Miron rejoined him again, laughing, rather because he felt that, talking to Corbu, his own words had started sounding like a song.

"The field is short" Corbu answered. "When I reach back with my hand, I can feel all the dead of night. If I reach out front, behold, I strike the rising Sun's tooth of gold. Take care, Miron, when the Sun's risen, lest Dănilă should sneak through the grass and take all your corn, and leave you staring in the Sun."

With these words Corbu fell silent; his shadow could not be seen any more, he had left. The grass was growing taller and taller in front of the riders. Miron shouted at Corbu several more times, but there was no answer.

"Maybe he's fallen asleep" Miron said to the stranger. "He's got a big broad-backed horse, he can just stretch out on it and sleep; and since he's rather unshorn, his hair will mix with the horse's mane and he will prop his legs in the rings of the reins, after he's put the latter around his neck. As soon as he stretches out, he falls asleep too, as the horse will blow its warm breath onto his soles.'

[63] Corbu - raven

"Is Corbu going to *the bustard's haunt* as well?" the stranger asked. "Is there no one left behind in the village? Has everybody left for *the bustard's haunt* this night?"

"As you'll see in the morning. Almost everyone. Had you asked the men in the village whether they'd go to *the bustard's haunt* tonight, half of them would have kept silent, a quarter would have shrugged their shoulders, while the rest would have said they wouldn't. That quarter who'd said no would have been *Dănilă's kin,* and they'd have prepared secretly, as they did indeed, to reach *the bustard's haunt* before all the rest."

" These words – *Dănilă's kin* - seem to me fetched from a fairy tale" said the stranger, his mouth somewhat aslant, as he felt Miron relate things that belonged to fairy tales, so that he could fill the night and the grass more properly.

"From no fairy tale. This kin of Dănilă's live in the village. To tell the truth, in the village there are but four or five kins altogether. The oldest among them is Pepene's[64]. An exhausted kin, with old apple trees in the yard and with passionate, ardent women. They say this kin might have yielded several scholars as well. I can't tell, I've never heard about them. They might have been exhausted too if they couldn't make their voices heard in the wide world. Then comes the kin of Poienaru-Păcuraru, the branchiest one. Then the short and broad-soled kin of Dordoacă – and the wind-beaten kin of Salcău. From here on, things get entangled and abductions of maidens begin. I mean a new, unknown kin mixed-up from all the previous kins pops up, one that doesn't stick to the memories of the past. That's about everything. Dănilă's kin live far apart and get their wives, whom nobody knows, from other villages. This kin bears lots of children so as to have servants they needn't pay all over the yard. You should take a look when dawn breaks, all the kins will mingle with one another except for Dănilă's, who will stay apart, but not all of them together. Each family separated from the others. Right before, there was a man here, talking about the egg of the beginning and of the end, then he got lost somewhere behind the convoy; that one belongs to Dănilă's kin. He's stayed unmarried so that he doesn't have to feed somebody for nothing. He has the tiniest horses in the village and the shortest in body.

[64] Pepene – melon, as a common noun.

They also call him *the spy of Maria Tereza.* Poor woman, she may have died long ago, and people say her spy has stayed alive. For a long time I was unable to understand why they nicknamed him in this way. As far as old toothless people can recollect, it's only the Turks that crossed the Bărăgan[65], and even those at a run. And they call this one *the spy of Maria Tereza.* It's hard to imagine what the man might be looking for so late and in such an improper place. In our parts, nicknames are the pepper and salt of each man, yet, I was unable to grasp this one's. In the end, it was one of the exhausted people of Pepene's kin who set it clear for me: they called him a thing that can't be and never has been in these parts, so that it shouldn't fit even into the lenient words of the *Ecclesiastes: what is has already been, what has been will be again.* I don't know those words well, but the people from Pepene's kin, with their shrewd minds, can say the words well, whatever way they might take them. But let's shut up a bit. There seems to be some noise over the field."

It was just the grass, like before.

"I thought I could hear something. I will tell you later what. For it will happen in the end. Until then, listen to me a bit, so that you be prepared and understand what will occur. But to achieve this, I can't help it, I've got to talk about myself. I mean I'm related to Dănilă's kin. You should see how. I come from another village, near to this one I came to later, that is, close only by the lands, which means far enough. In my former village, there was a girl I used to call *cousin* for the sake of the people, whenever I wanted her at the gate. She was only related to me by some marginal relative, that is, not at all. The girl was of the same age as I, so if we'd really wanted to become related, both of us should have taken on the world from its beginning and know each other's every joint. But a belated bachelor, Dănilă, came to our village and asked her in marriage; no one said no. I was ever gone to other places, to find out how the cuckoos sang. And as the girl kept silent and was looked upon rather like a stray in our parts, and as the said Dănilă, eager to take her and turn her into a slave, asked for no dowry, he took her to his village, wasting no look backwards. A few years after – maybe six, or eight – an uncle of mine, Matei, remembered the girl at some baptism party. This issue came upon him towards morning; his empty glass in front of him, he looked at me and

[65] Bărăgan – the Danube plain in Romania.

asked: 'Miron, where is your girl?' And he shouted at Braila's Nicu, who was sleeping over his fiddle: "Get up and play for Miron: *'All seemed dreams lit by the moon, that's why you forget them soon.'"* And the people at the party began wondering too: "It's true, what's become of the girl, we've heard nothing from her for so many years. You ought to see about it, Miron". Matei looked at me again and said: "Do what you think you should do." I left to see how things stood with the wife of Paminode Dănilă, for the name of the one who had proposed to her was Paminode. I had no acquaintances in those parts, except for Petre Uraru, a field guard over several confines. Uraru came from the kin of Dordoacă, while his wife, Victoria, from the kin of Pepene. But let's shut up a bit. Again there seems to be a queer sound in the field."

Both of them listened. The grass sounded different.

"Yes, it sounds like something hidden" the stranger said.

Miron roared with laughter, leaning backwards and stopping his horse. He put out his hand, caught the bridle of the stranger's horse and halted it too.

'You said it well, there is some hidden sound. Dănilă's kin are sneaking past to *the bustard's haunt*.'

Miron rose to his feet on the horse and, raising his hands funnel-wise to his mouth, he shouted:

"Listen, hidden kin of Dănilă! Turn your horses and ride like normal people through the grass all of us are treading!"

The equal flow of the convoy through the grass settled to a regular pace again. Nobody had answered Miron. A thick belated laugh was heard, yet, it didn't come from the edge of the field, where the dull noises had been silenced by Miron's voice, but from behind the convoy.

"This is Corbu's laughter. He's in the habit of laughing in his sleep. It means he's turned to the other side. We're beyond midnight" Miron told the stranger, "we are abreast with the *Hillocks* at *Lambs' Valley*. That's the place where we graze our lambs in spring. It's through the ravines on the edge of those *Hillocks* that the kin of Dănilă tried to pass right before. But that's a place where the ground resounds, especially at night in cloudless weather. No people will pass in carts by those *Hillocks* unless they have to. It's only the lambs' hoofs that don't resound on the hollow beneath the *Hillocks*. Within those *Hillocks* there are some ancient graves in which the Turks buried an army of theirs lost in a war nobody knows about any

longer. Wretched those poor dead! This hidden kin of Dănilă's made the bones rattle – and I remembered my lambs. Once I was grazing my lambs there, a few years after my attempt at seeing the girl Dănilă had asked in marriage, and I was asking myself how come that I couldn't tell for sure whether I had seen her or not when I left uncle Matei's christening party. It's nine years today, if not even more, since I made that attempt to see her, and I still can't tell what really happened to me. Maybe it was because I was too young and my mind would place too many things above the events and would thus crush whatever there was to understand. But it wasn't this. When I reached the village, I didn't drop in at Petre Uraru and his wife, Victoria's. I went straight to the home of Paminode Dănilă. But wait a bit, *the spy of Maria Tereza* is coming up again. I've heard him several times, but I've told you nothing."

Riding a tiny, short horse, the man mentioned turned up by the side of the two in front of the convoy.

"What's the matter with you" asked Miron, "have you lost some nail?"

The one asked turned his horse and disappeared behind the convoy.

"I went straight to Paminode's house", Miron started anew. "He didn't have a house lined up with other people's; it lay across a stretch of pasture land. I crossed the pasture, the ditches marking the boundaries between fields, and found Paminode's house behind a curtain of acacia trees. I went around the yard to find the gate, I couldn't, it had a fence that rose up to the eaves. It was too silent for me to knock at the man's fence at noon. Beyond the fence you could hear only a sort of grating to and fro and I told myself it must have been a dog dragging his chain along a wire from one end of the yard to the other. But how come it didn't bark, I wondered, for it had heard me, it kept moving ever faster, after a short while it even began struggling and rattling its chain, the wire was vibrating so that the back of my neck started hurting me too. After a while I heard a dull thud, as if someone had hit a dog. And everything became silent, like in the beginning. Up in the sky, a bird passed with stretched out wings, and it only began flapping them after leaving the house behind. I couldn't see anything in the yard either, as the tall boards of the fence were fixed together with broad bands of iron plate. I kept waiting to hear again the chain and the wire, for I was feeling too forsaken as I stood there, the sun hitting me straight on the crown of my head. But I could hear nothing. It crossed my mind to leave across the field and return at night to try and

jump the fence, to see his dog at least. But I went to Petre Uraru and told him what I wanted and what had happened to me. He took me into the house and said to me: 'Let's call Victoria, to see what she says, for she comes from Pepene's kin'. I used to get along well with Victoria. People would say we were fit for one another, but we didn't come to know our true nature in time, so that we could marry and set up a household together. Petre called her: 'Give us some dried plums and a jug of fresh water. Then I'll go to the fields in the enclosure, I've got to run about for three or four days'. Victoria fetched the plums and the water and after a while she asked: 'After so many years? You're looking for a girl who married, and who didn't call you and gave you no sign either?' Then to Petre: 'Do you think the girl this man is looking for *exists?* And that the Paminode that has house across the pasture land, its eaves nailed to the top of the fence, is indeed Paminode? What if neither she nor Paminode *exist?'* 'How's that, Victoria?' said Petre, goggling his eyes at her and gulping down another jug of water. Then Petre tried to laugh it off: 'Ha, ha, it's just legends. Do not confuse this man with that flying mind of yours from Pepene's kin'. Victoria didn't get angry: 'You're drinking water, Petre, and you didn't take a plum with it. It will give you a chill, for the water is cold. Let's admit that both Paminode and the girl do exist. There is enough place for everyone. Yet, just listen to what bailiff Dudulină told me. One Saturday about noon a big storm began, from above, it was pouring with rye ears and elder blossom. The storm overtook Dudulină on the pasture land and, scared, he ran for shelter to Paminode's. Dudulină had a rope with him. The cow he'd been grazing had torn the rope and was running on its hind legs, looking at the sky and the elder flowers coming down from above. The man reached Paminode's house; he knew the latter wouldn't open the gate for him, so he made a loop in the rope, threw it over the fence and looked into the yard for some place where he could jump without breaking some limb of his. He gave up the idea: he saw the chain, rattling of itself on the wire, the wind was blowing it from one end of the yard to the other. Paminode had not even a dumb dog, as they used to say! One end of the chain led to a window of the house. This meant that someone hiding there was drawing the end of the chain inside the house, making it rattle even on days when there was no wind at all! On seeing this, Dudulină ceased being scared of the storm and calmly set out looking for his cow.' Petre took a plum, looked at it and then placed it back in the bowl. 'Petre, you are

scared'. 'It's just legends' – Petre said, wiping his palms on the knees of his trousers – 'the man could have taken pity on his dog in such a storm and allowed it into the house. Fetch more water'. 'I will'. And Victoria brought in a full bucket. 'There are people' – Petre said after he'd dipped his jug several times into the bucket and drunk in big gulps – 'there are people who keep their dogs in the house too, it's hard to believe, but I heard it'. 'All right, Petre. Let's admit there are things without really existing. And I'll show you this is possible too: everybody knows Paminode Dănilă married the girl mentioned here over six years ago. He should have five children at most; let's say eight, if we admit she'd born twins at times. It happens rather seldom, but let's admit, the way it happened to Bucățică[66], the one living on the northern edge of the village, his wife bore him twins three times – all of them girls. But we were talking about Paminode. Let's admit he's got eight children. This means his eldest child must be five, almost six, if his wife bore him at seven months. If so, how shall we understand what happened on New Year's Eve?' 'A legend' – Petre said to me – 'they tell lots of legends about that Eve, you know, too, don't you, marriageable young girls would make them up as a sort of pastime until they are proposed to'. 'Petre, don't you mock at the stories of young people, for such stories won't grow white in winter, or fade with the lapse of years. There are enough words by the day or by the hour, you can hear so many married couples chew on them'. Petre just said 'Uh' and crushed a plum stone between his front teeth. 'You do have beautiful teeth indeed, Petre, it's for those teeth that I married you' – Victoria said, and she went on telling the story, addressing me: 'It's true it was a marriageable girl that told the story you're going to hear now. A marriageable girl along with others belonging to the Salcău kin. All of them had gathered in a room, at night, on New Year's Eve, to put barley onto the fireplace. They drew the curtains, put out the lamp and piled up burning coals on the oven plate. They were standing in the light of the embers, in white shirts down to the ground, buttoned up at the neck and devoid of any ornament, throwing barley onto the plate, waiting to see which way the grains would bounce and wherefrom their suitors would come. When the grains began springing in all directions, the girls holding yellow bandanas in their hands started singing the white shirt song, the

[66] Bucățică – Little Bit in translation.

way I myself did some time in the past. A song of youth, one they don't teach you to sing. It just grows within you, unawares. Fiddlers don't play it, for it isn't meant for the street, and Corbu's shrewd mind hasn't grazed it up. Listen to it, Petre'. And Victoria merrily rose - I hadn't thought her so tall - leant against the door leaf, looking into my eyes, her cheeks blushing and saying: „My grain of good luck should bound, and fall in the ground, with the Sun and Moon 'round. May the wind and rain and gale keep him hale. All bad grains in my cup, you embers burn them all up. All good grains, galore, you embers, make them on me pour. Among them, grain of gold, smith of old, bullock sterling, quick as a stirling, man of gold sterling. Grain of gold, smith of old, man of gold, may I bring you in my abode, on my bosom to hold. As your black eyes blink and sparkles sprink, adorn my ear with a ring… " Victoria straightened her married woman's braid a bit, then stood a while in thought, to remember what the whole thing was about. As I didn't know myself where she had left off her tale, I let my eyes stray round the room and my gaze stopped on the pillow lying on the bed. From under it, dewy wormwood leaves were showing their seesawed edges. There was a blooming willow odour about the room, coming from the branches Victoria had set on the table, on the bench and at the window sills. There was a piece of cardboard picturing yellow angels hanging above her bed, and my eyes were caught by the red flowers fastened behind its frame. I hadn't seen them on arriving. The edge of the chalices touched the glass of the icon lamp and their red shadow could be seen in the mirror of the oil. Victoria was staring into the oil herself, while she was talking to me: "After the grains had popped, the girls put out the embers with pieces of ice. They dressed up, turned on the lamp, put up the curtains and opened the door, so that the lads, who had been waiting in the street, might get in. They were meant to be ten, as many as the girls. But none of them showed up. The girls then gazed up at the eaves and counted the icicles. They were huge, their tips almost reaching down to the porch. They counted them; there were more than ten icicles. It meant the curse had not reached the lads, that is, they hadn't looked out of the window when they had sung the song of the white shirt, and so the icicles hadn't dripped upon them to freeze them and stick them to the eaves. Ten long ice floes, floes of brigand foes, the lads had failed to turn into, that is. Which meant that they were still there in the street, a-waiting. The girls called them, but they didn't come. Then the girls went out into the street to look

for them. The moon was shining, but their shadows were nowhere to be seen, they searched for them in vain. The girls returned to the courtyard, and, on entering the house, they saw the lads: they were all lined up on the porch, breaking the icicles off the eaves and munching at them. "What on earth are you doing out here?" a girl asked. "We're nibbling at something, to gain some strength", they replied. Then they all entered the house, and, in the light of the lamp, the girls saw there were two more lads than needed. They set a pan full of boiled corn grains dusted with salt on the table in front of them, for them to eat, as custom has it, and make their suitors stick to them. The lads sat down and took corn grains from the pan. The girls stood up, without touching the corn in the pan, so that their mouth should remain clean. And they were staring at the two strangers who were extra: one of them might have been seventeenish, the other nineteenish. They were Paminode Dănilă's boys and it was their first time out to call on girls." Petre wiped his forehead with his palm, stood up, pushed aside the dish of dried plums and said: "Victoria, I'm going out to the village with this man, to take a breath of fresh air." Victoria didn't move from the doorpost, and Petre didn't dare start; he remained silent, and started turning his hands over, to make time pass. "Petre, this man has come to catch up on time in its flight, and you want to walk him about, bridled, in the streets." Then she turned to me: "Are you capable of seeing what has become of her now?" "I'll take her, even if she's married." I said, feeling bitterness in my mouth. Victoria gazed over the crown of my head to her husband and told him: "Petre, when will it be Paminode Dănilă's turn to steal hay from the dale at Boulder's Woods?" "Hand over the tally, to see" Petre said, rubbing his eyes. "It's behind the stove" Victoria answered. She was standing upright, leaning against the doorpost, her palms folded behind her nape. Her skin was sunburnt, from fingertips to armpits. Her face was white, as if she had been staring only at the moon. Victoria waved her hand, to remove my stare from her and asked Petre: "Have you found the tally?" "Yes" Petre replied, putting the rings in place over the notches on the cornel wood, "Paminode Danila's turn to steal from Boulder's Wood is in two weeks from Thursday. That's what my forester's tally says, but he has stolen twice more when it was not his turn. So that my stick is too short for me to know on what day, from now in two years, he's once more entitled". "If he stole when he was not in his right, the notched Thursday when he is, is still ahead for him" Victoria retorted.

"That would mean that he should give me three parts out of four" Petre computed with the brass rings, "and next year there will still be no notch for him, and he'll steal even more, with no control". "He might as well not give you anything and live on with his unmarked years. If only he could see *the bustard*" Victoria said and undid her bun, left her black hair hang unplaited for a while and then started braiding it, her head bent to one shoulder. Her tall neck had been left naked on the left side, towards me, and her heart was pounding under a black mole, set at the tip of her white earring with green spikes. "What bustard?" Petre gaped, dropping the brass rings down on the hook at the end of the tally and standing dumfounded on his short legs. Victoria threw her braided hair to the nape of her neck and caught it up in front, to braid it once more. She was now showing the other side of her neck. Her heart had passed under the mole on the right, throbbing under the spikes of the earring. She said: "Petre, you've never seen a bustard". Petre didn't even try to budge, beyond himself as he was. "Petre," Victoria went on, "a bustard is hard even to see, let alone to catch. This man we call Miron wants to catch the bustard. He doesn't want to spend his remaining years without setting eyes on it, at least. You can catch a bustard neither in summer, nor in autumn, it's hard to even catch a glimpse of it as it stands at the end of the stubble field, basking in the sun. And you can't stare into the sun. Only in winter, when the ground is frozen can you touch it, when its wings are heavy and it can't fly and its treading resembles a hen's. And not even then is it easy. Seldom is there someone to catch the right moment. Oftentimes when it's frosty, there's no bustard and when there's a bustard, there's no frost to speak of. Have Corbu tell you once, with his hoarse voice, sing you the bustard's song, Petre." Petre stood there flabbergasted for another while, then he gasped "Ha!" and burst out laughing in coils. The brass rings were shaking on the stick with notches marking years. And Petre laughed on and on, happy that he'd understood. His white, clean teeth showed, back to his wisdom tooth. He gave me a slap on the shoulder: "So, we've got a deal, then, come two weeks from Thursday to Boulder's Wood. And you'll see the bustard in summertime, at night, in the moonlight. When it comes to hay, Paminode will even drag his wife out of bed". He gazed at his brass-ringed tally, turned it about and said in amazement: "Look, it's really true, from Thursday in two, when Paminode is to steal hay, it'll be a full moon." I looked at the notch, where Petre's thumb with its cracked nail was pointing

and I saw a white grain embedded in the wood. Petre circled the white grain with the edge of his cracked thumbnail and told me: "Paminode starts mowing in the dead of night. When the hay is neither softened by dew, nor scorched by heat. We'll reach Boulder's Wood later, when Paminode's family have all scattered under the willows, making haste, lest they be caught by daylight. At such times, Paminode will have all of his people mow, even his wife whom nobody has ever met." Petre was blabbering, as if he had been saying words learned by heart from Victoria, but which had no content, only their shell. "That's enough!" Victoria shouted at him, while still leaning motionless against the doorpost, where I knew she was. Otherwise, she was wearing a long, red dress, had red earrings, her hair was braided around her temples and she was holding a whip made of leather straps waxed with tar. Petre was staring at me inquisitively and showing Victoria to me; at a point he even touched my coat with his hand to see whether I was still the same – I was – then moved his stare, gaping even wider to Victoria, as he was unconsciously tapping my shoulder: "So, then, it's settled, two weeks from Thursday". Victoria put out the whip to him: "Take your whip. You should have been long gone to guard those acres by the pasture". "Gimme some more plums" Petre managed to say. "Take some from the trunk. See that you don't frighten the geese on your way out". After a while, I heard him out in the street. He was whistling and whipping the dust on the road with his leather-strap whip.

When night set in, I learned from close by, with Victoria, the scent of the wormwood under the pillow. I woke up alone in the morning. There was nothing left in the house, but the empty planks. I walked through the rooms, they were all empty, walls, beds, windows. I went back to the room where I had dreamed I had been with Victoria, to see whether there was something left of what I had thought was there. I looked behind the stove: Petre's tally stick with its rings was there, the white grain pointed towards me. I lifted the lid of the trunk: there were dried plums inside. The wind was blowing and I went to the window to shut it. On the sill, a red dress, twisted by the wind, was lumped up in a corner of the window. I went out to the yard, it was raining, a woman was throwing some grass over some pickets, to a flock of geese. I drew closer and whispered behind her ear: "I'll be off now and I'll return in two weeks from Thursday, wait for me, then I'll go to see the bustard at Boulder's Wood". The woman turned her face to me: her hair was tousled, her nose pointed at her pursed mouth. It

wasn't her, Victoria, any more. She brought her palms up to her ears, covering up some red earrings, and asked me rudely: "Who are you?" I went back to my village".

Miron stared across the field, he had felt something again, and, after a while he asked:

"What's the matter, Corbu?"

"My horse has fallen asleep and I have to pull it back into the world, so that he can walk and keep the pace" Corbu's hoarse voice answered from where he was. "Daybreak is drawing near and I want to be in the light, too."

"Is it true that you know a song about the bustard?" the stranger asked, seeing that Miron was silent, that he bent, tore up some grass in the horse's pace, put it to his nostrils and then threw it away.

"I once knew the song" Corbu answered." I haven't sung it for long and alien words have overgrown it. I'd need that song now and I don't know where its well is sleeping. We're going *to bustard's haunt*, God knows who has named this way the places for which we broke away from our village, to get rid of poverty and sharecrop the corn. I'd have weighed my gains in song, in crops and in picking. *At the bustard's haunt* the entire earth is yellow with so much corn. When the sun sets, the day lingers on because of the corn".

"I've heard" said the stranger, "that you've once said the song on the bustard to Petre Uraru."

"Petre never asked for songs" Corbu answered. "Maybe you mean Victoria, his wife. She's no longer there, she's long gone. Gone the way of all flesh. Don't tell me about Petre. He would count straw on a golden tally. He had moved the celestial signs onto a stick in his yard. Dănilă's kin was notched between the Sun and the Moon. Victoria didn't have a notch of her own, among the yearly notches. Nor did Corbu, here present. True, Miron came later to our village. But since he came and for the time he stayed, he had no notch, because he's never had any straw. And when it comes to me, it seems to me I'm talking like a sinner. Petre has made a notch for my horse, once. It had let some droppings fall on some fresh hay. He made a notch to the horse, at the height of *the spy of Maria Tereza*, because it was his hay and he wouldn't have it any more."

Corbu pulled his horse nearer.

"This is Petre's song. And, you'll be amazed, but Victoria had another. Even if you consider her very last song, not even that one would fit with his. Victoria felt it wasn't meant to be any longer, although she was younger than many other girls. She had left Petre for many years, and, as I wanted to marry her, I told her what my intentions were. "Corbu," Victoria said, "don't talk to me about this any more, for my moonlit day is drawing near. Married I was, I one morning gathered my things and waited for suitors again, but that was a long time ago. My things have remained packed up. Now I've opened the bundle and I give them away of my own will, to girls, for time has passed by me, unsavoury. You have a good heart, Corbu, you should carry my trunk on your shoulder, bearing what's left of this earth's dowry, which neither fools, nor wise ones have seen as they should have." And that's exactly how it happened. I carried her coffin. And, at the end, I sang to her what she had wanted me to sing: "Gălav Laliu has long gone, lord of the cembalo song, for thirteen months he is gone, but his strings play on and on. In the wheat and the green grass, sound but no more sight, alas."

"There's little left till daybreak, Corbu, sing something else and speak like decent people would", Miron shouted at him. "When the sun's up and we've reached *the bustard's haunt,* your head should be clear, mind you, so that you might see the corn well."

"I've known one Laliu, a cembalo player, who's haunting the villages near the Danube, trying to settle down there," the stranger rejoined, so as to bring Corbu closer to daylight.

"He's stolen the name. And his songs stop short, in the cembalo's box." Then, to Miron: "Watch carefully, Miron, when it's daylight and either the corn or the sun can be seen, for I'm so hungry that I can't make the difference."

When Corbu left, Miron pulled the bridle of his horse, then turned and took his place, abreast with the stranger:

"Just a little while, and we'll rest the horses. I went alone to Boulder's Wood, that night, two weeks from Thursday. They were all mowing among the willows, there were lots of them, led by Paminode, even a six-year-old, with a scythe his size, who was chopping the grass. Among the sturdy women who were moving their scythes among the willows, I couldn't make out the girl I knew. I peeled my eyes, for it was full moon. Down at the Danube's bank, where I descended afterwards and you met

me for some years on end, when I was mending the fences at the fishery, I met some people of Păcuraru's kin. I got myself a wife from among them, instead of just loitering about. Since she was a merry girl, I didn't return to my village, lest I tear her away from her places and for fear she might grow embittered. Twice I did not know what I'd passed by. And it's so that I came back once more to this village of theirs. It's not much left till we let the horses rest. When the day breaks, stick to me."

The roosters in the carts of the convoy started crowing, one after the other.

Miron's horse was trotting on, neck stiff, in the grass and was cleaning his teeth with dew. In front, a yellow streak started growing. The corn, or the sun.

THE WILD BOARS WERE TAME

Condrat was standing, propping his oar against the thick trunks of the oak trees and pushing the boat through the forest. Ice floes and broken branches hit against the ribs of the boat, mixed with floating driftwood, old leaves and feathers of cormorants and herons. The storm was dragging the waters in whirls, among trees and shrubs. The water was not too deep, but beneath the bark of the older trees it had risen way up to their crowns – and, over the noise of the storm and the ice floes hitting the oaks with dry noises, one could hear the water ooze beneath the bark of the trees. Last year's dried-up weeds showed from underneath the water, as the storm kept raging and the boat passing.

Condrat's slow movements hardly showed the effort he was deploying to push the boat and keep it in balance through the woods. He was staring somewhere ahead with his washy blue eyes.

"Have you seen anything, Condrat?" the fat, big-bellied man cried from the other end of the boat, screaming his words out so as to be heard in the noise of the tempest and the branches.

Condrat didn't answer, he just rowed on. Without taking as much as a glimpse at the other man, he handled the oar to avoid a dry, old oak that had crashed in the water, its roots torn and sprawling out. The North wind made the water trundle, pushing the thick and long sinews of the roots over the trunk, making them meet and mingle with the branches from the top of the crown.

"Thank God it's broken, the old thing! Look how it kisses its own roots!" the big-bellied man screamed again from the other end of the boat, searching with his toothless mouth for the best place in the whipping wind from which his howling should reach Condrat. "Thank God this here old oak has broken down!"

Condrat didn't listen to the fat man, or just didn't hear him; he kept pushing the boat on with the oar.

The big-bellied man kept silent for a while, to rest. He gave a gasp of strain and swept, with his fur-lined coat's sleeve, the sweat mixed with rain and mud off his narrow forehead and red, round cheeks. He grabbed his right wooden leg with his hands and set it on the edge of the boat, so as to

keep the storm-beaten fishing boat in better balance. Then he breathed in deeply and started screaming again:

"It was already dry thirty years ago. And still as straight as a candle. People avoided cutting it off. They avoided it, saying it wasn't dry, that it was still alive, probably they thought – blast them, bloody fools – that it had gathered so much strength in itself that it could live even without any leaves. And now, see, it proved rotten like a stinking tanner's sumac. Goddamn!"

The big-bellied man spat – and the spit returned to his face.

With repeated left-right movements of the oar, Condrat was striving to free the boat from the water currents around the fallen oak, which stood in the full sweep of the storm, in a large clearing; no other tree could be seen around it for about a hundred metres' distance.

"Look, Condrat, how the clay has sucked this old thing dead. Remember when there still was earth here. This here old oak had dried up everything around itself. Not even grass would grow beneath it. And people would say: "This is the most beautiful and sturdy tree. It's the pride of our forest. They would cut firewood from younger trees, but never touched this one. Look at it now, how hollow it is, you can gaze through its trunk like through a field-glass, to better see the end of all things!"

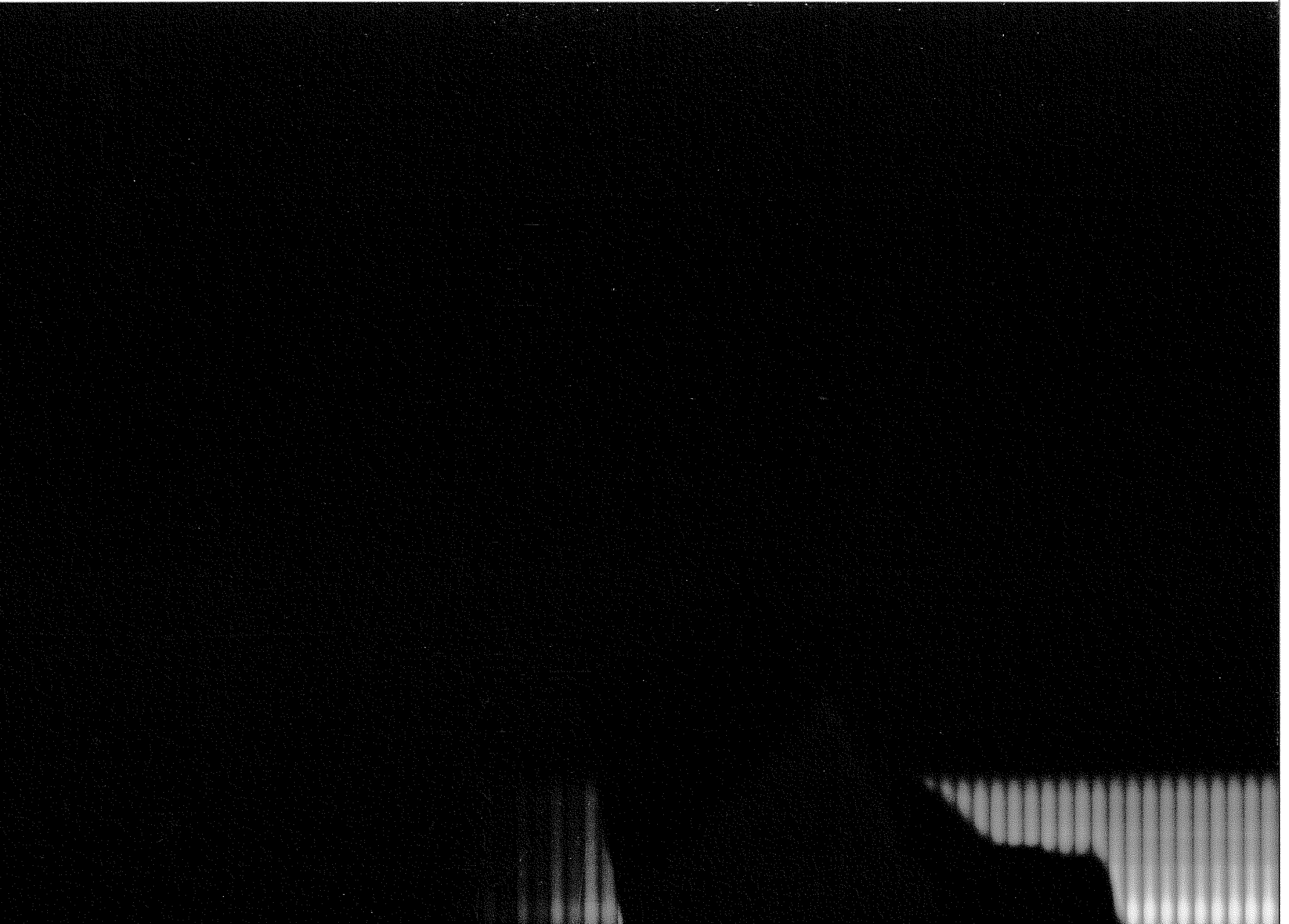
Condrat managed to get the boat out of the currents and gave it a powerful push towards the thicket of tall trees in front.

"Maybe I had better shut up, Condrat. There's nothing left for me to measure with words. Days and nights flow in and out one after the other and we pass through them like through some memories. Where there still is some ground left, you can't pass through to reach it. The polar winter birds haven't come to our Delta any more, as they used to come in times of peace, to spend their summer holidays. There's no safe passage for them from the Pole any longer. The sky is full. Cannonballs reach out far. It's almost the beginning of March – and, you'll see, cranes won't come in from the South this spring. How many birds can fly over Greece and Italy? Rommel's still in Africa. We'll have to content ourselves only with sparrows, my pet."

The big-bellied man rested for another little while, then breathed in again, set his mouth in the direction of the wind and shouted out again:

"I feel like speaking up, Condrat. I was some man, Condrat, a lofty mind, in my time, and got wasted here, among you. For all my life – be it

what it was like – I haven't had whom to talk to here, in this village. Isolated as I was, I had started talking at night, in my dreams. I went to bed, fell in deep sleep, and, around midnight, I would dream aloud. And it seems I was some swell talker, for, at the time, my wife had taken up the habit of waking up at night, getting out of bed and taking up her handwork. She would then sit on a chair, her back propped against the stove and listen to me. One morning she told me: "Tonight you spoke more beautifully than the other night. You said something about a white bird that stood on one leg in the Delta, among the reeds, and drank milk out of the stars. He drank milk out of the stars, got filled and pulled his beak back, hiding it among his feathers to sleep. But the stars remained broken. And so much milk poured out of the stars over the water below, that the water started thickening and grew so thick that it became a sort of stony ground made of milk. And then you, husband, told me: "That will do, we're moving out, getting rid of this wretched village, you just get ready, we're moving out. Give me a hand and take the house, grab it well by the eaves, take care, the eaves are rotten here and there, don't you break them. Take your knitting pins, your handwork, the chair and the stove – we're going to the banks of hardened milk. There the waters won't flood us every year. Give me a hand to lift and take away the church, as well, the saints have grown wet in it, let us put it out to dry on the sands of petrified milk". And you name them, the marvels that I would speak out at night. But in the mornings, when it was time for me to enjoy them, I forgot all about them, I only listened in stealthily, as my wife would tell my tales to the neighbours' women. She was stealing from me, Condrat, and, which is worse, I have a feeling that she wasn't even stealing the right way. My wife is rather dumb-witted. And I realised that she wasn't stealing everything I had told her at night – and many things were lost, without anyone knowing how round and beautiful they had been. And then it was daytime again, and again I had no one to talk to, all of you were tied down by the day's care, children, cattle, the water that kept flooding you and still keeps doing so and you have no place to run, for nobody cares about you. You have never paid me enough attention, Condrat – moreover, some of you even laughed behind my back, for instance Vlase. I've never had a soul to talk to, that's it. Miss Maria – pff! – that one's a dumb virgin. She rather plays the midwife and medicine-woman than to be a schoolmistress, she's even being the mayoralty of this forsaken village, where nobody would



otherwise bother to keep record of the births and deaths. Let me speak up, Condrat." But Condrat was paddling absent-mindedly, minding his own business. "Listen to me now, for, who knows, afterwards... Do you think that I didn't want, myself, to run the town hall, or at least the medicine-man? But I was touched by sclerosis, all you can see is that I lost my leg, but it has also touched the veins in my hands and I can't even grab a pen, to write down the year, the month, the day, the hour. It's your endless waters and doomed winters that have brought me down, the very same that made Ovid, that poet of delicate loves, gurgle in a false voice."

The big-bellied man's voice had now grown hoarse, he couldn't shout any more. He could no longer find the fittest place in the wind where he should yell his words towards Condrat. The wind was whirling, entangled in itself and rolling up with the rain. The fat man's words were going wasted, syllables were mixing, unfolding and flying to all winds. The fat man tried to grasp them with his hearing. Tangled as they were, their syllables turned inside out and otherwise fitted together, his words seemed to him extraordinary things – and he tried to grasp them, to memorise them, in the hope that he'd survive and tell them again, like some precious memories. But those twisted words eluded him, were stolen from him as well, and all he could hear – in the pauses between the short and repeated gusts of wind – was the croaking of ravens, the creaking of branches and the glassy splash of the ice-floes in the water. He felt his mouth empty and wry and passed his tongue over his thick lips moistened by the rain. His tongue touched something cold and downy in the corner of his lips. He put up his small, deep-sunken eyes to the sky and said, this time in a low voice, keeping his lips tight together, lest the words should flee again and in order to taste them better:

"Snowflakes. Winter's back. There'll be a blizzard again."

Condrat was rowing on through an oak thicket. Trees were growing here close to one another. They touched each-other's trunks, their wind-beaten branches interpenetrating, peeling the bark away from one-another. The saps were oozing thick and green, mixing with the ice, the rain and the snowflakes which were growing thicker and with the mud which was crusting up on the surface of the waves.

Then, suddenly, the boat came to an endless surface of water, with no tree standing up any more. The forest had abruptly ended. The waters of the Delta were spreading out everywhere, turbid and empty. The dark-

green islets of dry reeds, scattered over the water from place to place, could not cheat the eye, there was no ground beneath them. They were floating, dragged by whirlpools.

"Turn the boat!" the big-bellied man shouted out, at the top of his voice. "Get back, Condrat! That's it! There's no land any more. It's no use going on. Turn around, for Pete's sake! There's no ground in the forest, there's none anywhere! It's flooded all over, in the village, in the forest, among the reeds. Back off! We don't even have the ground to bury your child! No place for a grave. No place even left for a grave. Back to the village! Maybe we'll find some porch, some room left unfloodded at some men's place, bargain for it and bury him there."

Condrat waited, his oar hanging in the water. He was blinking often. Drops of rain and sweat were knotting up under his unshorn beard. The drizzly rain was choking the air. White spots and spikes of ice were flowing down, wriggling through it. It was a blizzard.

Condrat wanted to sit down, to coil up. He was cold. His teeth were chattering. He was staring at the bottom of the boat, eyes goggled, he saw the water pass over the planks. The child's coffin was floating in the water on the bottom of the boat. Rain and snow were falling like a sonorous fog on the lid of the coffin.

Condrat stretched out abruptly, grabbed the oar with both hands, turned the boat violently around towards the forest, furiously punching it, stretching, clenching his bony, stubbly jaws, hitting the water to and fro with the oar. His hands clung to the branches, pulling at them, to give the boat a swing. The boat gave a deep creak through the icy water, slipping quickly past the reeds and the broken branches.

"To the dunes, Condrat!" the voice hollered. "Not to the village, to the dunes! Drive it to the dunes of sand behind the village! The dunes are tall; the water hasn't touched their peaks yet. Let's try there, first. We'll bury him in the dunes. We'll weave him a bed of branches, lest he sink in the sands. Whaddaya say, wench?" the fat man screamed with his last breath towards the bottom of the boat, where a woman was crouching down by the coffin. The woman had coiled and shrivelled up to such an extent under the rain, at the bottom of the boat – she had bent and coiled up – that she could barely be seen. She couldn't even be noticed from outside the boat. She seemed to be asleep. She had slipped her hands under the thick hemp cloth covering the lid of the coffin, to keep the rain and snow off them –

and to keep them warm. And her head, face down, was buried in the cloth. Her black kerchief was dripping wet, shining, water had gathered among its creases, like in some small eaves with white edges of snow.

The tip of Condrat's oar was quickly propping now against one tree, then against another. With sharp creaks, the boat cut through the frozen mist in the water and the tangled branches, turning among the trunks in quick meanders.

The woman was still crouching, her hands under the cloth, her face buried in the thick hemp. Tired of following the boat's drift and Condrat's movements any more, of whom not even the shoulders and the head could be seen any longer from among the trees, the big-bellied man fell asleep, his nose poked into his fur-lined coat's collar, and started to snore and talk in his sleep – among snores – in a loud, screaming voice.

The woman turned at the bottom of the boat, putting up her head towards the big-bellied man. His question kept turning in her mind: "Whaddaya say, wench?" – and she kept hearing him on and on, she didn't know either that he was talking in his sleep, or what he was saying, she couldn't grasp the meaning, but his words kept ringing in her ears: "Whaddaya say, wench?" When she put up her head, without lifting it too much, though, above the cloth-covered lid, only turning it on one cheek, the tiny eaves of water in the folds of her kerchief spilled out and their snow edges melted away. The woman felt the cold water trickling down her neck, her breast, her back. She crouched down even more with cold, but she cheered up. The ice-cold water penetrating down to her skin had woken her, making her realise that she was alive. She wanted to set her head back down, as she had been before, but the fat man's previous words kept ringing in her mind: "Whaddaya say, wench?" – and she cheered up again, she even gave a small laugh, she really thought that she was taken into account and her opinion was important. And she started answering, blabbering on and on:

"What should I say, father Ichim, since you've asked me? What should I say? For I've said in all possible voices that this here is mine and Condrat's child, we have to bury him somewheres, we have to, for sure."

Nobody could hear her words. In fact, she didn't even intend to be heard. She couldn't hear herself clearly and didn't strive that her words should have some coherence. Ichim, the deacon was sleeping like a log and talking agitatedly in his sleep. At the other end of the boat, Condrat, bent

upon the oar as if they were one, was making the boat jerk forwards among the trees. The woman spoke on, just for her own pleasure. She felt the words ringing in her breast, rounding up warm on her lips – and she coiled up even more and better, in her threadbare rough wool clothes. She found there her tiny, skinny body that she had long forgotten. And she gave a small laugh, as if in front of some beautiful miracle. The icy water was running noisily by the boat. The woman spoke up even louder, cuddling more and more in her clothes, pressing her cheek tight to the hemp cloth covering the coffin.

"As I was saying, father Ichim, what say do I have in this? I've said this and that, how shouldn't I, for it's my child, after all. We'll bury him where you say and where Condrat says we should. How else? But where, if there's no land in sight? At Vlase's, my brother-in-law's, his yard is taller, it isn't completely flooded, we could do it there. As to his house, the water hasn't even reached the edge of his veranda, as it hasn't reached the school. A strong build, that house of Vlase's, he hasn't even driven a nail in it for repair in the last three-four years. Good craftsmen, from Sulina have worked on it and the pillars were carved by a Tartar from Câşla. But Vlase couldn't do it, that's what he said: "I can't, sister-in-law Fenia". He's keeping fodder for his cattle in the courtyard. Should he set it on fire? "Believe me, sister-in-law Fenia, look here, I'll chip in a penny or two, to help you, I'm no pagan, I've got kids of my own." He's got two of them, pretty big, too, you know them as well. "I'm no pagan, I'll even sail him with my boat to Tulcea, sixty kilometres from here, if you want to bury him there as Christians will, in a graveyard. And yet, I cannot. The Danube is still frozen, it's late winter, the ice hasn't molten, like on the lakes here, and it's no can-do, the thaw will catch us under way, and you know well the Danube flows through three branches, not one, and all three will rush their ice-floes over us. But one needs fodder for the cattle, sister. Should we waste our cattle, when – just you look at them – they walk about in water up to their knees? Just you look at them, sister Fenia, lest you should perchance say otherwise: the cow with a blaze has a limp. She's been a good cow for milking in her day, I was keeping her to breed; she comes all the way from Chilia Veche. What do you know, sister Fenia, on your brother Vangu's whereabouts, for as far as I remember he's a fisherman in Chilia?"

"What should I know, brother-in-law Vlase, well, I haven't heard from him lately."

"That's the way of the world, sister. We'll lose track of one-another. If you want some fodder, I'll give you a little, out of what I've got myself, it isn't much, and who knows when the waters will retire. But you, sister Fenia, you don't need any fodder, for you're breeding no cattle, good for you, it's better to have nothing when you're to lose everything. I keep them there in the yard, what should I do, six heads I've got, six heads are there. That thief in the swamps, Gura Spovidău has laid eyes on them, since this winter. And he tied horse bones under his opincas and came all the way over the ice-back, on the Danube, from the forest of Letea, where he's in hiding, to see what he could steal from around here. If Căpuci's daughter, the one with the buck teeth, hadn't turned his head on Epiphany night, making him stay and make love to her on top of the oven all through the winter, he'd have stolen my cows then. People say that even Andrei the Dead Man, the thieves' father, has shown up. All those rumours about Andrei having died again and for good for the fifth time now have been idle talk. Fiddlesticks! Someone saw him yesterday, in the woods near our dunes; he was mending his undershirt on top of a tree. Not even now will he stay still, when the waters are everywhere. Or maybe these accursed waters themselves have brought him back to life, to partake in the looting. He's watching us from the forests, together with the ravens. Do you think, sister Fenia, that this mare-bitch of a Vica, Andrei the Dead Man's daughter, who, the strumpet, has sought shelter in our village, do you think, I say, that she doesn't keep in touch with that brigand of Andrei, her father? Fenia, you just keep Condrat as far away from Vica as you can, she's only made decent people go astray with her cursed love: Petre Litră, Stavre Palici, Chizlinski, Luca Horobeț, good, decent people, with housefuls of children. She has a bias for gentle people, the she-serpent, that she may coil around them better, as she pleases. Do you think Condrat took her along fishing with his gang, this autumn, at the dam, for nothing? Keep him out of her way, Fenia, for you've got enough trouble as it is, and then, what do you think Vica is saying in her mind? Now is the time to lay hands on Condrat, when he's supposed to go to war."

Fenia, her head on the cloth, burst out into some sort of weeping. And, out of that dry, unmodulated crying, she started singing, with the same dry voice, Vica's song. She was singing it both as a dirge and as a malediction.

She was wailing for her dead child, but she was also saying, full of hate, the words in Vica's song:

Vica, you hobgoblin's seed,
What's your kin and what's your breed?
In a boat your mother bore you,
The Danube provided for you,
Gave you crib – and milk to eat,
From the Moon's night-woven teat...

Fenia moved her head from left to right above the cloth, to wipe her eyes and nose – then took up again the dishevelled yarn of her story about her meeting with brother-in-law Vlase:

"As I say, sister Fenia, that's it, you keep Condrat away. This Vica pops up, like her father Andrei, in the most unexpected places. After Bigmouth Spovidău laboured her for the first time, the lunatic ran for four full days till she reached Lake Bogdaproste. God only knows that for all that time when she stayed there, hidden in the reeds, a year or thereabouts, the very dress on her had rotten, she was walking about wrapped around the waist and breast with rush leaves, like a rain maker, and fed on fish she caught under the water with her muzzle, like otters. And where do you think Vica popped up, from Bogdaproste? In Babadag! A big city, on the railroad, having even a mosque. And how do you think Vica popped up in Babadag? Dressed in flower-printed calico, red and yellow, down to her heels and wearing blue combs in her hair. And on her feet – for she wouldn't walk about barefoot any longer – she had white velvet sandals with round buckles to them. And whom do you think she drove crazy about her in Babadag? The very Mullah, the priest of the Turks and the Tartars. She made him quit the mosque. The Mullah, a youngster of about 78, who was as unblemished as freshly whitewashed walls at Easter. The people in Babadag – delicate townspeople – pretended they neither heard nor saw a thing – for the sake of the Mullah's honour. And then Vica returned here, to our village again. As I was telling you, sister Fenia, it's a sin to bury your child in one's courtyard, for the cattle to trample upon, just like that. I have a two-oared boat, if only the Danube weren't so frozen, and even if the ice breaks, it'll be some time before the floes melt down, I would have taken him, sister, up to Tulcea." How should I leave my boy in Tulcea, among strangers, father Ichim? As for Carpena, I can't object, she's a hearty woman and was on my side: "Let her do it, Vlase,

bring him and bury him in our courtyard, for it's high and has stone pavement." "That can't be, Carpena, just you try to stick a spade into the ground in the courtyard and you'll bump into water. There's water underneath, down to the axle of the Earth." That's brother-in-law Vlase, so glib-tongued that you can't stop listening to him. And then brother-in-law Vlase took a spade and stuck it into the ground, near a stack of hay. And he started digging. He dug and dug, and he was swearing and digging, until water started gurgling and gushing upwards. A water so clear that it was a delight to look at it. As soon as Carpena saw the water in the dig, she lifted her skirts, went down on her knees, then on her belly and started gulping it down thirstily: "That's some water, husband Vlase, let's drain it and make it a well. We won't spoil the place any more, it's a pity to make it into a burial place. Thank God, Fenia, that it occurred to you to come to us, you've presented us with a good, reliable well. May it be to the memory of your child. Come, Vlase, let's go indoors and bend to the icon, for this is a holy omen." And they both went into the house, and I rowed on, down the street, to try my luck with other people. In vain do people say wicked things about Carpena – I have no reasons to. It's not that she's my sister. But she puts on no airs, she keeps wearing the same dress all the time. I know that she owns another two good dresses, except for the one she is wearing, but she never puts them on to show off. She's stuffed her good dresses with grass, grass of the good kind, mown a year ago at Periprava. And the flower-trimmed silk pillows in her trunk are also stuffed with grass; she sewed them up and set them on top of the closet in the attic. That's what Carpena did, and right did she do! Will there ever be any more grass in this world, or not? Nobody can tell."

Fenia's words grew more and more scarce and slow; she was now hardly moving her lips, wordlessly, telling to no one but herself her dishevelled stories. She felt her lips frostbitten. She remembered about her hands in a strange way: she could no longer recall where she kept them and started searching for them, moving her chin up and down the hemp cloth that had frozen into a crust. She felt under the cloth something hard, about the size of palms. Instead of rejoicing, she felt sick at finding her own hands, at having to tend to them, move them, defrost them, find a warm spot for them, when she was dog tired and completely frozen. She felt that the lid of the coffin had stuck to her fingers. The ice under the cloth was shiny. The north wind was blowing fiercely, bringing in even more snow

and water. The coarse cloth garments hung on her, heavy with moisture, cracked at the slightest movement, had frozen into ice crusts. Now she could no longer feel her whole body, not only her hands. She was striving to search for it, jerking her bony shoulder under the coarse cloth coat, there, where she suspected the thicker stitches might be. It either was her shoulder or she was wrong, because she felt it as if it had been a wet plank. "Maybe I'm drowned." She wanted to free her eyelids from the water and ice that were ceaselessly flowing down her cheeks, pressing her eyelashes down. She saw Condrat and the church singer as an image trembling in the mist of the rain and the whiteness of the snow, somewhere between the forest and the sky. The boat was no longer there, one could only see the waters sweeping away the contours of the trees, the branches, until nothing remained but a whitish, endless spot and the crows flying away in confusion. Bursting out of all this, the forest would show, all of it, emerging from underneath the water and the snow, it would emerge and then fall back upside-down, treetops pointing to the bottom, splashing into the torrents with the moustachioed, muddy roots. She could see Condrat, floating among the water and the snow in the air, flipping his oar at the branches that flew scattered in the north wind, as he was running away from her, branches at his temples and shoulders, rising, falling, she could see him again, quickly passing together with branches and clouds through the water that was stretching out endlessly, buckled to the sky with clasps of ice. The church singer would show, too, from time to time, in the fixed stare of the woman, she could see him coiled up in his fur-lined coat, slipping under the water and the snow. She could hear his words uttered in sleep, as they gurgled under the water. The church singer was fading out of sight too, he couldn't be distinguished from under the whiteness of the snow, she could only hear some disparate words of his, uttered in a deeper pitch, as it broke, cut, stabbed to fragments by the shrill, sharp sounds of the shards of the ice fragments merrily dancing in the water. And then, everything collapsed. She could only see herself, fallen on the bottom of the boat, near the coffin, without Condrat, without the singer. She called to herself. There was nothing in sight, there was nothing existent – and perhaps that was the reason why her cry hadn't reached her. Not even she existed any more. She, too, had perished, like the forest, like the clouds, like the village street, like Condrat. It was white and quiet everywhere. The

whiteness and the silence were so dense, full, thick, frozen, that one could hear the north wind swelling, tortured, somewhere outside the universe...

"Gimme the axe!"

These words sounded weakly, from outside the whiteness and the silence – and Fenia recognized in them something from Condrat's voice. "These might as well be some words of his that he lost here in the past years." Condrat was talking with poise to her and to all. "God only knows where he's been hiding these words and now they came out of their lair and are drifting with no one around and searching for the time when people were still alive. What was there when everyone was alive? Oh, yes, there was Vica." And Condrat's words came again from beyond the whiteness:

"Woman, gimme the axe!"

"They can't die, the words, they are suffering." Fenia felt pity for Condrat's words, she wanted to relieve their suffering, lest they stray where the world used to be – and she wanted to bring them here, to her side, to the dead one. She put out the floe of her hand, to remove the thick snow separating her from the man's words. She scratched the snow with her nails. She searched for a long time, tried several times to remove the thick wall of snow and ice, but she didn't manage. The words were escaping *beyond*, they were growing weaker and weaker, they were running away, astray, alone. The woman put out her ear, to stick it better to the wall of snow, she put out her hand, as well, but she rolled and fell. The wood of her palm suddenly touched a big, hot, sweaty hand, bent towards her. She clung to this hand, whose heat she suddenly recognized, and remembered in a flash that it had caressed her, Fenia, when she was young. How many years had passed since? She grabbed that hot hand of lore firmly, lest it might slip away again. Something broke, the whiteness cracked, from the sky down to the water the boat had sunk in – and Fenia saw – through that crack in the whole sky's ice – Condrat bending upon her, watching her with his light blue eyes:

"Stand up, Fenia. Gimme the axe."

Fenia tried to stand up. She dropped Condrat's hand. She felt her palm fallen down her body. She felt around and touched the axe lying on the bottom of the boat, near the spade and the shovel, near the coffin. She tried to lift the handle of the axe, she didn't know whether she had lifted it or not. She found her palm, after a while, under her cheek lying on the hemp

cloth on the lid – so she had stood up and sat back to her previous place – and a deep sleep got hold of her.

Condrat cut a few oak branches with thick sprigs on them and threw them in the boat, on the side opposite to where the woman was. He threw the axe back to its place and started pushing the boat again with the oar. The church singer was sleeping quietly, no longer talking in his sleep.

II

They had left all of the oak forest behind and had come close to the village, but they were not heading in that direction, but beyond the village, towards the sand dunes.

The wind had quietened down. The rain grew less and less thick. There were no more snow-flakes. The boat was floating on noiselessly now, unhindered. The sky was growing clear.

The white backs of the tall sand dunes appeared more and more clearly in the fog that had lowered down on the turbid, muddy surface of the water. Up on top of the dunes, crows were merrily hopping, safe from the storm and snow. They were sitting in rows and cleaning one-another's wet feathers with their beaks, croaking with delight. The woods that the three people had left behind, with its thick, leafless trees, had remained way back behind the dunes. From time to time, in the direction of the village, one could see a boat moving on the water covering the main street, but it would quickly disappear behind some remains of a house. The reed fences that had surrounded the houses had fallen in the water and were floating to and fro, alongside with remainders of doors and roofs. On the drowned porches some child would run, now and then, splashing with his feet the knee-high water. But he was quickly pulled back, behind some wall, by some mother's hand appearing for a moment. One boat only was constantly moving, at the edge of the village. It was the boat of the fiddlers, Laliu and Dache, who had been waiting all that time, in the rain and snow, to be given a sign by Condrat that some dry ground had been found and that they could come to play at the child's funeral. They had seen Condrat's boat heading for the dunes, and had stood up in their boat. Dache was questioning with his bow, Laliu was doing the same with the

sticks of his cembalo. But Condrat wasn't looking at them; he kept paddling the boat towards the dunes. And the fiddlers understood what they had to do, seeing the direction in which Condrat was heading. Dache sat down, grabbed the paddles and headed out for the dunes, while Laliu, sitting in a corner of the boat, started trying out his cembalo. He tightened a nut with his teeth, then another, until it seemed to him that the cembalo was tuned. He hit with his sticks on the strings something resembling a tune, then he stopped, straightened his back, put on some sunglasses – and remained stiff, his face composed, as he used to do whenever he was getting ready to play. None-the-less, while playing, he would always bend his head, ashamed that the restless jerks of his hands could be seen, and his face became childish, naively following the rigmarole of the sticks on the strings.

"The harlot, look at the harlot!" Fenia suddenly yelled out sharply, awakened from her sleep.

The church singer also woke up – abruptly – and looked around, dizzy. He saw in front of him the dunes of white, clean sand, a hoard of crows flocking on them. He also saw the boat heading towards them from the village, with Dache rowing and Laliu stiff, ready, wearing sunglasses, in the other corner. He finally realised where he was and why they were heading for the dunes. But at the same time he saw, stealing over the water between the taller dunes, another boat, led by a young, sturdy-bodied woman. He recognized her by the yellow kerchief, tied under her chin, and by her thick, black braids. "Vica." She was standing in the corner of the boat, wearing a white canvas, baggy-shouldered man's jacket – which had no buttons to it. This could be easily noticed, for the wind was blowing the tails of her coat away from her body, uncovering a faded, flowered, calico dress, which was tight around a thick waist and a huge bosom swelling in a red, threadbare sweater, whose loops were torn here and there. She was shod in some worn-out boots, without laces, tied up around her ankles with thick, fishing-net ropes.

"Vica", the church singer said, as if to himself. He gave a meaningful cough; still his willingly mastered coughing was heard, as loud as a roar. He unbuttoned his heavy coat, gave a long yawn and stretched out his healthy leg, to take the numbness out of it.

Vica disappeared behind a dune. But the church singer noticed that she hadn't gone away, she was lurking, she had only hidden – one could see a corner of her boat behind the white sand.

Condrat was rowing slowly, tired, as alien from what was going on as before.

"The harlot, father, she's lurking for my husband. She won't rest, not even now, when we're all dying."

The church singer gave another cough. The boat of the fiddlers was drawing near. Dache was rowing clumsily, pushing forward his round belly – tightened into a red belt, over some green trousers made of thin, summer fabric – more than he pushed the oars, with which he rather spurted the water around. He was thus splashing Laliu, who had removed his sunglasses and was agitatedly cleaning them with an end of his pink and brown striped muffler.

Condrat's boat touched with its prow the edge of the tallest dune. After estimating by sight the height of the dune, which was six metres above the water level, Condrat jumped out of the boat and started climbing the slope of the sand, oar in one hand, shovel and spade in the other. His boots were slipping in the wet sand while the man was striving to stick, with every step, the point of his footwear into the thick body of the dune, so as to advance. He was drawing near to the crest, panting hard and often. But he slipped back on his soles, and found himself boots in the frozen water, sunken more than knee-high. He stuck deep into the slope of the dune the oar on one side and the spade on the other (he had put out the shovel to the church singer), and started clambering up again, helping himself, at times, with his bare fists stuck into the sand. The crows on the crest of the dune didn't fly off on his approach. They clung together even tighter, croaking more loudly, their beaks pointing downwards, towards the spot from where the man was climbing. As he drew nearer, Condrat threw his oar at them. The birds took off, without rising very high, though. They circled above the dunes, for a while, flapping their wings grown heavy with rain. As Condrat was making his progress upwards, their circles grew larger above him. Then the birds suddenly rose, their beaks pointing towards their tails, croaking furiously, and after they once more flew round above the dunes, part of them headed for the woods, the others towards the tall windmill with broken wings at the edge of the village.

Condrat was searching for his oar, on the crest of the dune.

"Uncle Condrat, they have chased me away. Even from the flooded streets, they chased me, so that the wild boars rip me apart. I'm scared. I've got no place to go. I want to be around people, too. Why do they chase me away? I'll help with children, with old people, wherever need be. For the water is coming even higher. It's coming higher, uncle Condrat. It can be heard, I know it can be heard, for I've lived all my life on the run. I don't want to die for nothing. I want to stay near the villagers too, that I might be where all of them are. With people around, I'm not afraid to die."

Vica had climbed up, too, on the other side of the dune. She was following close in Condrat's steps, begging him, treading the crest of the sand with her sturdy feet. Her head was bent low, she was weeping and watching in amazement how her huge soles sank in the soft sand and how large puddles of water remained behind her. She cried even louder and, while pointlessly running on the crest of the hill, she saw, looking towards the village, the walls of a house crumble down, fall apart and sink, while a bed showed afloat, a man, a woman and a few children on top of it. The man jumped from the bed into the water, caught his boat, as it was being dragged away by the post – fallen, as well - it had been tied to, then he quickly gathered his folks and rags from the bed and put them in the boat.

Seeing this, Vica stopped running on the dune and dashed again to the edge of the crest. Her bulky breast was heaving, swelling up the red sweater; the tails of the white canvas coat were flying in the wind, behind her. The tips of her thick, black, plaits dripped huge drops of water, as they would hit noisily, long as they were, against her hard belly and thick hips. The north wind had started blowing again.

The roar of the water, which had decreased to a whisper for a while, started swelling again. But neither Condrat, nor the church singer or Fenia, who had remained in the boat, paid any attention to it. Vica could hear it, she could grasp the least change in the noise of waters – and started running again on the crest of the dune, begging Condrat. In the fiddlers' boat, Dache had stopped rowing, and, together with Laliu, both standing, were looking over the water as they tuned their instruments.

"Don't chase me away, uncle Condrat. That I may be around people, too. Can you hear the water coming?"

As if he hadn't seen Vica, Condrat kept on looking for his oar. He saw it, picked it up and turned around. He passed by Vica and headed for the other side of the dune. The church singer was now clambering up the slope

of the dune too, panting, more on his fours than on his feet. Moving to and fro on top of the dune, Condrat saw him, put out his oar at him and pulled him up with a powerful jerk. Fenia was climbing, too, helping herself with her hands stuck in the sand. She would stop at each step to rest her tiny, bony body, but also to stretch out on tiptoes, on the points of her worn boots, every other moment, to see what Vica was doing. She would have screamed at her, she would have cursed her, but she was short of breath because of the steep climbing and exhausted by the wake.

Only the boat with the coffin in it had remained down, at the bottom of the dune.

Condrat and the church singer started looking for a place as appropriate as possible for the grave, trying the sand here and there. They stopped on the topmost part of the crest.

"Here", the church singer shouted out. "It's about seven metres above water." He stuck in his wooden leg and stirred the sand. "It can be done here, Condrat. We'll build him a grating of branches."

"Uncle Condrat, they'll rip me apart. They've chased me away. Vlase has cursed me, saying I'm a sinner and I bring about bad luck. He cast my bed and things out in the water on the main street. I couldn't find them any more. The north wind and waters took them away. I don't wanna be alone. I wanna be with the people."

Vica had come up to them and kept repeating the same litany.

Fenia, too, had climbed up half the dune. Her pace was now quicker and quicker. She was hurrying, dragging with her the spade and shovel Condrat had left behind during his search for the burial place.

"No one will kill you," the church singer spoke to Vica, without even looking at her. "Go back to the village and look for your things and your bed and stick around with your boat. Go back!" he screamed out at her.

Broken with fatigue, tiny and her shoulders bent, Fenia had stopped behind Vica's straight, broad and tall back. Vica turned to her and – her head still down – spoke to Fenia who took a few steps back, frightened by the sturdy, strong body of the girl. Vica's heat was scorching her. And, as Fenia kept backing up, Vica would follow her, her warmth heating up from a distance the woman's hollow, old, dried-up and frozen cheeks.

"Aunt Fenia, tell uncle Condrat to be careful, for he is a good man. I, too, wanna be among people. The water can be heard. Wolves swam across the water yesterday. I saw the midget winter mallards breaking their own

eggs with their beaks and running away. The herds of wild boars will dash up, looking for food and shelter. I know for sure that the flood is coming; the floes on the Danube will crack up. I've got no place to go. Vlase has chased me away yesterday, auntie Fenia, saying that the village had sent him to do so. He came to my place and told me that I should scram and go wherever I want. I'd be glad to go, auntie Fenia. Don't you think I'm crying, the Lord is my witness I'm not. But my boat is old and I stuffed rags in its cracks. Let me stay here, on the sands, at least, if the village won't have me. I'll tend to the child's grave. Don't leave me here, auntie, that the wild boars should tusk me apart. If only Vlase shouldn't come and chase me away again. Tell uncle Condrat. Vlase has rummaged my house. He ruined my stove. He didn't care that the water had risen in my house as high as the edge of the bed. He broke up my bed and threw it out in the street. He scattered my corn flour in the water on the porch. And now I can't even have corn cakes at my funeral repast - for I know I'll pass away. Uncle Vlase says that I've kept Gura Spovidău and Andrei the Dead Man at my place, in hiding, and that I'm plotting to ransack the village with them, now that the curse is upon us all. He says that, using magic weeds, I've cast a spell upon his cow, the one with a blaze on her forehead, to make her sick, and that I'll take down all six of them, so that Spovidău and Andrei the Dead Man could steal them more easily. I ain't Andrei's daughter, I really ain't, that's only in songs, for people wanted them so, to bring them joy. Look, now, that the curse is coming, the truth remains bare, with no songs to it, and I, too, am as wretched a human being as you all. But Vlase came down on me with his fists. I was just washing my hair, at the time. For if we are to die, I said to myself, at least my hair should be washed. I didn't have my sweater on. He grabbed me by my shoulders. And, once he grabbed me, and saw me mourn for my death, for that's how we'll wind up all, his heart melted at once, and I said to myself, look, Vlase is a human being, as well, and he won't be so dogged once the end is drawing near. And he started caressing me, and, as he was caressing me, out of so much kindness, something else got hold of him, I don't know how: "Vica, I only now gather how beautiful you actually are, and I'm sorry that I went about saying wicked things about you. Come, Vica, let's enjoy the time we've got left." And he was holding me tight and begging that I should let him have me, for love will wash off some of his sins. I pushed him off with my knee and he toppled over the threshold into the

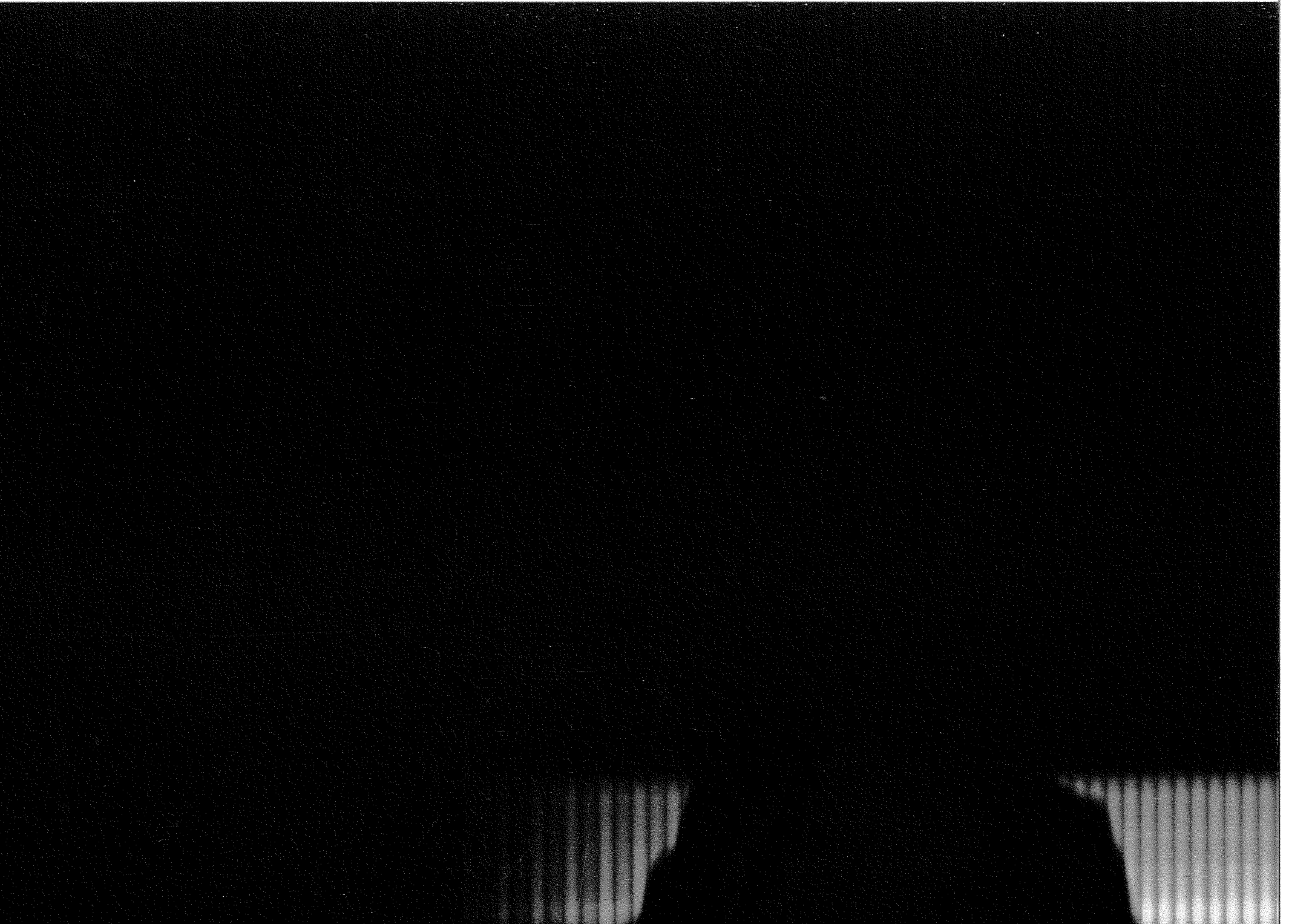
water in the courtyard. I threw on the sweater and this coat, the boots and the kerchief, I untied my boat from the pillar of the porch and ran out here. Auntie Fenia, really I harbour no thieves, I really haven't cast any spells with magic herbs, I swear I don't know anything about Spovidău's whereabouts, since he's had his way with me, at lake Bogdaproste. Don't you suspect me, too, I beg you, auntie Fenia..."

The woman couldn't go back in her steps any further; she had reached the edge of the dune. She would have liked to shout something back at Vica, to chase her away. She put up her eyes and saw the green glass beads that were dangling on the breast of Vica's bulging, red sweater. She froze staring agape to the beads. They were leaping up and down, glistening on the girl's round breast jolted with weeping. One of Fenia's feet skidded on the edge of the dune. She drew it back, with a scream, her eyes still stuck to the beauty of the beads. She couldn't see Vica's face; it was high, far too high for her. Only the stripe of the black eyelashes, down on the girl's eyes swimming in tears, enabled her to make out, high above, the roundness of the full, red, young cheekbones.

"You sham, you sham, you're screaming blue murder while you're chasing husbands away from their wives! You're wearing beads, and we are under the waters!"

"No, auntie Fenia. Really, auntie Fenia! I came out here among the sands, so as to run away from the waters and from the people. I had no idea that uncle Condrat was coming here. You're bearing me a grudge, because uncle Condrat and I... I'm a harlot, as you say. But don't curse me any more than I already have upon myself. Let me join the ranks of people as well, now, auntie Fenia, so that my sins should be pardoned too, now at the end. I've tried before, but it couldn't be. Don't be my enemy now, auntie, on this stretch of land still dry."

But Vica was talking alone. Fenia wouldn't listen to her any more; her mind had grown void with fatigue. She was freezing again and she had drawn near, tiny as she was, to the big, sturdy body of the girl and was warming up in its heat, wailing. And when Vica started wailing too, Fenia tried to lament louder and cover her voice, but all she could produce was a dry, broken scream. Vica's dirge flew full, with no interruptions. And Fenia felt content for a moment with Vica's crying – the child was thus duly honoured by the youthful crying of the girl. Then Fenia sat quietly down on the ground and forgot all about Vica; the heat of the girl's body



had brought a numbing dizziness upon her that was pushing her to sleep. She folded her knees at the height of her mouth and buried her face into her lap. Vica was confused; she stopped crying too and looked out for a more sheltered spot on the dune, where she would be in nobody's way and where she could remain.

Condrat was digging the child's grave on the highest part of the dune, taking no glimpse at the two women. He stood knee-deep in sand and was digging on, throwing the wet sand over the ridge of the dune into the water. The sand would cave in from the edge of the grave, slipping over his feet. He had trouble pulling his boots out of the clay. He would come out of the hole, until the crumbling of the sand came to a halt, then he went down again and dug on. Then again he felt his feet knee-deep in sand and had to come out again.

Fenia put up her head, saw him digging and was amazed that she hadn't felt Condrat taking out the spade and shovel of her hands.

"The branches," the church singer said. "We must bring the branches and fasten the edges."

Condrat threw the spade into the hole and started descending to the boat, to bring the branches.

"Uncle Condrat, what shall we do now, uncle Condrat? Shall we start playing? The water's growing. Can you hear it roar? We, too, have children, where shall we take them? Hurry up, uncle Condrat!"

Dache and Laliu had also reached the dune, near the boat with the coffin. They were stamping their feet in the boat, blowing in their palms to warm them up. It had started drizzling again and the wind was blowing huge flakes of snow at them.

"Start playing!" the church singer shouted.

"What shall it be, uncle Condrat?" Dache asked.

Condrat hoisted the branches from the boat up on his shoulder. He didn't answer.

"What shall we play, father, for we don't know!" Dache shouted towards the dune.

"Something", the deacon roared back, "Something with ground and grass, for I'm sick and tired of dirges. I'm done with so much wailing, I've had enough of that in thirty years!"

"And what sort of song with ground and grass shall it be, father?" Laliu asked gaping wide, then he crossed himself at the church singer's words,

saying slowly: "May this sin fall upon ourselves". "Say how it starts, father, if you know it, and we'll pick it up at once."

But the church singer didn't answer them either. He rolled up a cigarette for himself, in a scrap of newspaper and started pacing the dune, hands at his back. Then he threw the cigarette into the water. "I'm out of tobacco, I smoke rolled-up newspapers."

Vica didn't dare to approach the grave and had remained alone, frozen, on a more remote edge of the dune. Seeing that no one was paying any attention to her, she reckoned that, somehow, the people around had got used to her presence. She looked around for something to do, to show them that she, too, was some good. She untied her yellow kerchief, squeezed it out several times, twisting it in her stony fists, she shook it out in the air with a swish, then laid it out to dry on the edge of the dune, burying its corners into the sand, lest it be blown away by the north wind. But the snow, blowing in thicker, quickly covered her kerchief. Then Vica didn't know how to busy herself any more, to remain there. She bent down on a knee, pretending she was tying her shoelaces, that is, she untied the thick ropes and then lengthily tied them back. Then she untied them again. She removed her boots and poured the water out of them, one after the other. She also took off her thick, variegated woollen socks, squeezed them, standing on the sand with her feet bare and reddened with cold. She laid out her socks, near the kerchief, then set out her boots near them, the holes in their soles upwards. She wrung out the lap of her calico dress and the tails of the white canvas coat. Then she removed the coat, twisted it all out in her fists, shook it out in the north wind and wanted to put it out on the sand, near her other things, when she noticed that the stitch in its back was gaping. She took out from under the lapel of the coat a threaded needle, sat down on the sand in such a way that she could follow the others' movements and started sewing slowly, with no hurry. She saw Condrat climb the slope of the dune, back bent with the oak branches. She saw the caved-in hole in the sand and down, at the foot of the dune, the boat with the coffin, jerked to and fro by the wind and the growing water. She remained eyes pointed in that direction; the coat had fallen on her knees, she wasn't sewing it any more, and, so as to warm up her hands, she stuck them to her red cheeks. She then looked into her left palm, trying to make out her "marriage line". With her right hand, she swept away the tickling snow flakes from her tall neck, and her fingers touched the green glass

beads. She turned them on the thick, hemp thread, bead by bead, then she tucked them under the red sweater, wrinkling her cheeks when she felt the cold touch of glass on her breasts. She got scared when she saw that Fenia was staring at her with unflinching eyes. In a fright, she started undoing her black plaits, then braiding them again, throwing furtive glances at the others in the meantime.

"Father Ichim," Dache shouted, "I've found a song with ground and grass!"

"It won't work," Laliu said ashamed, more to himself, while trying out the cembalo with his sticks. "The song is from the lowlands, with lots of ground and grass. It's neither suitable for the dead, nor for the drowned."

"If it's not bawdy, play it!" the church singer hollered from the dune. "Only it shouldn't be bawdy. Any song will do, if it's not bawdy."

"It's not." Dache answered, pressing his fiddle and bow onto his chest.

Laliu cleaned the snow off the cembalo with his pink muffler. He made a grimace, ashamed at the thought of the song, bent his chest down over the strings, to keep the rain and snow away, then started to drum the tune with his sticks. Dache pressed his bow hard on the strings, sketching a would-be march. He would always start any song like that, with a short march. He cut the air aslant with his bow a few times, as if he had wanted to ward off the noise of the storm which continued puzzling his musical ear, then caught up on his violin the tune Laliu had started.

Condrat and Fenia, down on their knees in the grave, were fastening the edges of the hole with branches. Vica was sewing up her jacket, giving a start at every remote noise. The church singer, hands behind his back, was watching over the water.

Dache pulled the bow over the deepest string, put his arms out abruptly, letting Laliu run the tune alone on the strings of the cembalo, and, when he deemed it was the right moment to make his entry with his voice, started singing hoarsely:

Field, with crumbled gates that lie,
And weeds pour into the sky,
Grass, that skies and stars all fills,
And the marks left by my heels...

After having "picked up" the words of the song several times, Dache concluded by hitting in with his bow his usual short march. Nobody was paying any attention to the fiddlers except for Vica, now standing on her tiptoes.

Vica gave a sudden scream and started running along and across the dune, her thick arms pointed forwards, showing now on this side, then on the other, the bursting waters that could be seen coming swollen, with white gleams on top of the waves growing taller and taller, with huge ice floes that bounced and crumbled, hitting against one-another, throwing out slivers of ice and chips of tree-trunks, branches and roots, stirring flocks of grey birds into broken, senseless flight.

"The flood! The flood! The Danube has broken out!"

Floating islets of reeds poured in, pushed by the ice-floes, mixed up, topsy-turvy, their rhizomes pointing upwards, sank, then popped up again, dishevelled and torn.

The water around the dunes whirled suddenly, throwing about sods of earth and dried weeds pulled out from the bottom. The boat with the coffin was thrown against the slopes by a stream of ice and water coming from the oak woods and started floating adrift, dragged by the quick currents, spun around, thrown over the swirling stains of drift reeds and ripped-up branches. Vica filled her arms on the run with her kerchief, socks, boots and jacket; she let herself slide down the slope of the dune on her vast bottom, ran into the waist-high water, caught the boat and remained like that, holding on to the rope.

"The cattle, catch the cattle, the cattle have escaped!" the people in the village shouted towards the dunes.

The cows had broken the enclosure made by the people in the village across the water in the main street and started a wild stampede, lowing, swimming straight against the flood.

"To the school! To the school! Everybody to the school! Run!" some women's voices were heard.

"Tie up Vlase! Break into his house, for he won't open up! Take the kids up to Vlase's attic! The rest, to the school!" other women shouted.

"Catch the cattle! Don't let them run into the floods! Someone hit an axe at the hornless one, that's the one which leads them!"

The church singer ran towards the village in the fiddlers' boat.

"The windmill has toppled over! The ropes, bring ropes! Catch it, take its axle at least!"

Vica jumped into the boat with the coffin, grabbed the paddles and rowed towards the village, shouting: "Miss Maria, schoolmistress! Let's bury him in the staff-room, for he was a good pupil, the little one!"

"He's drowned! Petre Litră's grandfather's drowned! Search him!"

"Run to the schoolmistress! To the school! To the school! Take the fresh mothers there! You call yourselves men?" the women's voices screamed even more shrilly, entwining in the foggy air above the drowned village roads.

"Gather the fences and roofs! Put them up in front of the school! And in front of Vlase's! You sons of bitches! What have you been doing till now?"

"The foxes, the foxes! The foxes are crossing! They're swimming across the river!"

"You, there! Get out of their way, or you'll scare them!"

"Where's Dache's girl? Look for Dache's girl!"

"Everybody run! The bulk of the ice-floes is coming! To the school! To Vlase's!"

Condrat went on digging on the dune; he was now in the hole to his loins. Fenia could not be seen from above. She was crouching and fastening the oak branches along the walls. The sand would fall off from the walls, crumbling upon the branches, leaving deep hollows, broadening the grave, making it cave in on all sides. Fenia mended the wall with her palms in one place, fenced it in with branches, and right next the sand fell down again, in big moist slices, ruining everything. Whatever Condrat dug, would crumble up behind him. So that, instead of a hole, they got a mound. The mound had become so broad that it covered the whole breadth of the dune. Fenia had remained at one end of the dig, searching with her fingers in the mud for the branches that had disappeared under the sand. Condrat found himself far away, not knowing where to dig any more. The edge of the dune cracked up lengthwise, opened up and slipped aside, like a wall, rolling and melting in the water.

"Move on, Condrat, what the deuce are you two doing there? Get off from there quickly!" Luca Horobeț shouted at them in a deep voice. He had come in a hurry to the dunes, in boats, along with Chizlinski, Căpuci, Palici, Prişu, Blegu and Balcău.

"Hurry up, Condrat! The schoolmistress and Vica have lifted the planks in the staff-room and made room for the child there, underneath," Căpuci said in his thin voice.

"They set on his chest the ABC-book and his notebooks." Chizlinski added, grumbling his words.

Condrat wiped his forehead with his sleeve, pulled his feet out of the sand, gave a long gaze over the water, opened his eyes wide with amazement and started laughing. The others turned their heads to the direction where Condrat was staring.

Among the tall, thick ice-floes, throwing waterspouts about, dragging along split-up trees and islets of reeds, the wild boars were coming in herds. They were swimming in quick leaps, splitting up the water with their grey backs and their hairy, open snouts with icicles hanging under them and tufts of dried grass whitened by snow on their tusks.

Condrat shouted, pointing at the wild boars:

"Look, there, that's Vasile! The old, one-eyed wild boar that I met ten years ago on the floating reed island on lake Matița. I would feed him corn seeds out of the palm of my hand. He would leap with joy when he felt people around. It's him all right, for one of his tusks is missing! Vasile, how are you, Vasile? May you live long, you one-eyed thing, you!"

And Condrat roared with laughter, spade in one hand, shovel in the other, as he was pulling out of the mud his boots that had got stuck in the sand again.

"Vasile, I thought you'd kicked the bucket, old man. For you were lame of one leg ten years ago, when I met you, let alone your hearing, which has failed you, too. You're bob-tailed, you don't even have a tail any more. And your ears are dangling down upon your eyes, one would say that's the way you like them and you don't give a damn about the ice floes. You bloody bastard, you!"

And they all started guffawing. Horobeț laughed deep and hollow, grabbing the yellow beard that covered his breast. Căpuci had a thin giggle, Blegu puffed sideways – puff-puff -, Chizlinski snorted short, in bursts, his snub nose pointing upwards, Balcău at rare intervals – ha, ha - , Prişu covering his eyes with his palms, after he had first removed his fur cap, as he did when he laughed, while Palici had a muffled-up laughter, coming from his huge belly, which he held up on the sides with his short arms.

The herds of wild boars stopped, grunting towards the dunes. Among the old boars heading the convoy, Vasile started jumping about in the water, swirling, kicking up his hind part in a sort of caper of his own. Some other boars also wallowed more or less the same way as Vasile.

"Say, Vasile, pal," Condrat said, "how old are you, actually, for even my dad spoke about you and said you were the same as now. You're old, and still won't let time have its way with you! May you live long and enjoy it, Vasile!"

And they laughed again, faces up to the sky, only Căpuci, who had split his sides laughing, had crouched down in his boat, face on his knees; one could only see his back, jerking quickly with the chuckles he couldn't give vent to any more.

The wild boars started out, led by Vasile.

Fenia strove to understand why the people near her were laughing, she didn't manage to, looked about her to see whether by some miracle the waters had retired, but saw nothing of the sort. From the sandpit where she was crouching she could only see the men's chests and their rugged faces laughing. She crouched even more, watching the floes as they were throwing themselves wildly over the waters and pulled the kerchief away from her ears, to hear the men's guffaws better. Over all, Condrat's laughter resounded clear and indomitable.