

# MIHAIL SADOVEANU

## 1880–1961



**S**adoveanu's realism is one of the imaginary: before admiring his accuracy or lyricism in exploring various worlds, one admires the very birth of the respective world from the deep, mysterious waters of the imagination, the latent force that brings it up to the surface and organizes it, peopling it with beings and things, giving it the ground as support, and the sky above, to mirror its spirit. (...) There is no social or human drama he has not depicted: anything that means life, thought, feeling, all the relationships between man and other men, or man and nature – or God, politics, religion, institutions, and mores. Yet this ineffable synthesis of an ancient people, of its existence and myths, of its history and fantasies, is not a 'human comedy', but a mythology, with its own gods, rites and legendary heroes. Sadoveanu has been known as a great storyteller: the story he tells is the Arabian Nights of the Romanians.

*Nicolae MANOLESCU*

## HIS MAJESTY'S MARE

**I**n a golden autumn I heard many stories told at Ancuta' Inn. But this happened a long time ago in a year when heavy, terrible rains fell on Midsummer day and the people claimed they had seen a black dragon in the clouds from which the waters poured over Moldavia. And birds the like of which nobody had seen before dared the storm and flew to the east; and Old Leonte, looking in his astrology books and trying to decipher the sign of king Heraklios, proved that those birds with whitish feathers had flown up from

the islands at the end of the world and that they were the signs of wars to come between mighty kings and of rich crops for the wine growers.

And then, indeed, the White Emperor's Muscovite armies were drafted to fight against the infidels, and, in order that the prophecy comes true, God made the crops in the vineyards in the Lowlands so abundant that the wine growers could hardly find a place to store there wine. And carriers set out from our region to the mountains in the north and that was at the time of revels and story-telling at Ancuta's Inn. The carriers kept coming and going. The fiddlers played uninterruptedly. When some of them fell down with fatigue and too much drinking, others would rise from different corners of the inn and take their place.

And the drinkers broke so many pots that the women going to the fair in the city of Roman had what to be amazed by for more than two years. And around the fires, experienced and skilled men would roast large chops of lamb or of veal or dace or barbel of Moldavia. And the young Ancuta, as cute and good-looking as her mother, would walk like a goblin among the customers, her cheeks flushing, her skirt and the sleeves of her blouse tucked up; and she would have food, wine, laughter and gentle words for everybody.

And you should also know that inn of Ancuta was more of a fortress than an inn proper. It had thick walls, I mean that thick and huge, locked gates as I had never seen in my whole life. Within its walls, men, cattle, carts could find protection against the brigands...

But at that time I am talking about, there was peace in the country and good understanding among the people. The gates of the inn were open as those of the Royal palace. And you could see through them on the peaceful autumn days, you could see the valley of the Moldova river to the line of the horizon and the fogs above the fir-tree forests up to the Mountain of Ceahlau and Halauca. And after the sun sank below the horizon and the things in the distance became dim and slipped into a mysterious haziness, the fires lit the stone walls of the inn, and the black holes of the doors and latticed windows. And the fiddlers stopped playing for a while and the story-telling started.

A man would always stand there in those rich and happy days, a real pillar of the inn; he was a yeoman and a stranger in that place and I liked him very much. He would raise his glass drinking the health of everybody around, and would listen to the fiddlers playing while he stared dreamily and he would compete even with Old Leonte in deciphering the mysterious signs in this world. He was a tall, grey-haired man, with a dry face, with deep wrinkles. You could see his numerous wrinkles around his dyed moustache and at the corners of his small eyes. His eyes had a terrible and dark look and with his dyed moustache he gave the impression that he was smiling sadly.

His name was Ionita, the equerry. His lordship, Ionita the equerry had a pretty heavy purse in his belt, under his grey, coarse cloth clothes. And he had come there riding a most amazing horse. It looked like the horse in the story before it ate the embers from the tray. It was skinny and bony, a sorrel

horse and three of his legs were white-spotted. It had a high saddle and it stood behind a wall with ends and ate the bits of straw and hay that they gave it.

"I am just passing by," his lordship Ionita the equerry would say; "I am about to get into my saddle and go back to my own world... My sorrel horse is always ready, the saddle on it... There is no other horse like it in the whole world... I mount it, put on my hat and leave, I don't care, I don't even look back."

But he didn't leave. He stayed on with us...

## JUDGEMENT OF THE DEPRIVED

Then there stood up out of his large and loose sheepskin coat a ponderous man who had been sitting in front of a spit and he stepped forward in a swinging gait and we could see his face in the light of the fire.

The way in which he walked, heavily as if mowing with his feet, would have been enough to show you he was a shepherd. But this could easily be seen from his hood, from his ramskin hat, his wide, shining belt and mostly from his shirt rugged with being washed in whey. He was holding a long stick that he had seized by the upper end. And you could hardly see his little eyes under his projecting forehead and thick eyebrows. His long hair was curly and greased with butter and his beard was shaven with a scythe blade.

"I've been listening to everything that has been told and all have been very nice stories, indeed," he spoke in a deep voice, "and my only wish now is to listen to what happened to this tall and bony fellow."

These very words that he had addressed to the equerry clearly showed, too, that he was a man coming from the wilds.

We had hardly noticed him before, he had, however, sat there, by us, keeping silent. He had been keeping silent absorbed in drinking and all of a sudden he had then felt inclined to talking and revelling: with his left hand he threw the pot he had been drinking from, over the fire. I heard its cry in the dark as it broke into pieces, over a heap of crocks, coming to the end of its earthly existence.

"It will never be drunk from again," the shepherd spoke again, "and I'll only meet it when I have become myself a bowl of clay. For those who don't know me I should say that I'm coming not farther than from the Rarau mountain where I own a sheepfold together with some companions of mine and that I also have a couple of pit houses full of vats of cheese and sour milk and some other pit houses full of shabracks and sheepskin coats. And I am called Costandin Motoc. For those who are interested I can add that I am going to a village on the Siret river, to find out if all that was left of my parents' stock – a sister I had and whom I haven't seen since we were young – is still among the living. And if she would be dead, I'll go back to my sheep

and my companions and my sorrow, on the crest of the mountain where the wind is never tamed and neither is man's thought.

I am smiling, however, as I remember the words of a friend of mine who told me that if I passed by Ancuta's Inn I should drink a pot of wine or maybe a couple of them until my sight grows hazy and even then I mustn't tell anybody what happened to him not very far from this place. He told me about all the suffering he had to go through and yet, I can tell you that after drinking so much wine from a pot like that, I have great difficulty in remembering such a story.

"What story?" Ionita the equerry asked as usual.

"A story, honest fellow, a story like that of this man I was talking about and who is like a brother to me. Listen to me, fiddlers, tune your strings and play a ballad about Vasile the Great, the highwayman; and then, if the audience would like to listen to the story, I'll tell it; if not, I'll keep silent".

And he suddenly started singing in a shrill nasal voice, which was utterly out of tune with his massive body.

"Listen to me, then:

*Who is young and vigorous still  
Will come out on the hill  
With no club, dagger or steel,  
With no holster, gun, waistband.  
Only with his bare hand."*

I could hardly help smiling when I heard him sing in that shrill voice and my heart was light as I've always liked merrymakers. Suddenly he stopped and showed his teeth in a grin rather than in a smile:

"Let the Jim Crows hush their fiddles and hide them under their wings. I will, if you don't mind, tell you the story I mentioned before. And I'll be hanged if you don't like it."

He suddenly became gloomy, his eyes staring at the dark shadow of the inn, he fitted his staff under his armpit and leant over it as shepherds do and then he turned to us and looked around the hall without seeing any of the people sitting there as his glance had all of a sudden plunged into another, remote time.

Of all the people there only Ionita, the equerry, looked at him somewhat sidelong, impatiently and disdainfully, as the man, obviously a plebeian, a boorish peasant, had so suddenly interrupted him, just when his lordship was going to talk about matters of such great consequence.

The shepherd, however, was not at all ashamed and seemed to utterly ignore such formalities.

"What was I going to say?" he asked, smiling at us from his distant loneliness. "Well, I'd rather play the flute and let it tell you my story than use my own words for it. But this cannot be. So that I'll have to tell it as best I

can. This friend of mine used to live in the village of Fierbinti, on the sîret river, and the landowner at that time was a rich and powerful boyard, known by the name of Raducan The One-Eyed. And this boyard was an aged widower and every now and then he took a fancy for such and such wife of the people in the village and we used to laugh at that and we somehow made sport of it. And lo and behold, one day the misfortune befalls our friend, too. He learns from other well-meaning women in the village that his Ilinca had been invited by the boyard to his manor house.

“How can that be?” he jumps up.

“Well, it can; she even came back from there with a new scarf, red as fire.”

Then this friend of mine felt his heart burn with rage and the skin shrink on his back. He left his sledge in front of the pub, full of sacks as it was, he threw his whip at the horns of his oxen and pulled a hatchet from under a rug. He could only see blood in front of him and he ran to his home and pushed the door open with his shoulder. He seized his woman by the bosom and started yelling at her:

“Where have you been? Tell me where you’ve been, or else I’ll chop you to pieces with this hatchet .,”

“I’ve been nowhere, man. What’s the matter with you? Are you out of your mind?”

“Tell me where you’ve been, or else I’ll chop you up. Where’s the red scarf?”

“What scarf? You must have drunk, honey, and then you fell asleep in your cart and you had some bad dream!”

He yelled at her for a while, she kept denying it, desperately, she was trying to avoid his blows and would not stop jabbering. The man seized her by her pigtail and smote her head again and again against the corner of the chimney; and yet he couldn’t wring any confession out of her.

“Chop me to pieces, kill me, and yet I’m innocent”.

Then this friend of mine felt fatigue in his hands. He looked at her crying and he was seized, too, by a deep bitterness:

“Alack-a-day, Ilinca,” he said, “that all has come to this... We’ve only been married for four years. And the apricot trees in front of our house blossomed on the day of our wedding – and now their blooms are withered and my heart is frozen. For I loved you and I thought you were faithful to me; but now I see I’ve been terribly wrong...”

Then the woman swears on all that is dear to her and on her mother’s tomb that she hasn’t the slightest idea about what he is talking. She wipes her bleeding lips and kisses the man; she appeases him and urges him to go and fetch the cart and the oxen. And no sooner is he gone after the cart and the oxen than she puts on the red scarf, round her head, and goes out of the house through a back door, crosses the garden, goes into a lane and then makes for the boyard’s manor house.

The man takes his sledge to the barn to unload the sacks from it and then goes to the manor house to have everything recorded in the books by the accountant. But instead of the accountant, it's the boyard himself that meets him on the porch of the house. He beckons to him, inviting him to come closer and grinning at him, revealing just one tooth.

"Come here, man."

"Here I am, my lord. What's your lordship's order?"

"Well then, you, heathen," the boyard says, "what's your quarrel with your woman, why do you beat and oppress her?"

This friend of mine fails to understand for the moment:

"No quarrel, my lord, but I still don't understand how does your lordship know about it and why are you interfering between a man and his woman."

He has hardly finished saying that when Raducan The One-Eyed flashingly slaps him over his mouth. This friend of mine closes his eyes, still without understanding; and when he opens them again, he sees his Ilinca at a window, the red scarf on her head, and he finally understands. He roars wildly and feels like killing himself, like throwing himself into a well. But there's no time for that. The boyard has taken his whip from behind the door of the porch and strikes him wildly over the neck and the blows cut deep, burning traces into his face. He tries to dodge the blows moving to the left and to the right. His breath choked by the blood that fills his mouth, he tumbles down the stairs and tries to save his skin and run away. But the boyard's cowerds are waiting for him down there.

He manages to force his way through them with his fists and he jumps at his master, yelling. Raducan The One-Eyed whips him over his face again while smiling and blinking at him with his only healthy eye.

"Don't let him go, boys," he says, "he's enraged. He nearly killed his woman."

The cowerds throw themselves on him again and seize him. They beat him thoroughly until they grow tired with it and then let him go.

After he ailed for three days, biting, in agony, the board he was lying on, my friend got up one night and jumped over the fence into the boyard's courtyard, looking for his woman. He stalked by the servant's room until he finally saw her. He threw himself upon her roaring, trying to slit her throat open with his nails. From his house, the boyard heard the woman crying and came out, dagger in hand.

And then, Raducan The One-Eyed, the lord and master, being witness to so much boldness felt his heart fill with wrath and he ordered his cowerds to seize this friend of mine and decided that his retribution should be according to the extremity of his behaviour. They first tied his hands behind his back and gagged his mouth to prevent him from howling. And that night they thrust his head through a hedge and kept him like that, his neck caught

between the twigs. The dogs bit his sides; the frost of January bit him too, at dawn; I can't understand how he survived.

As the net day broke, lord Raducan notices that our man still looks defiantly and orders that he should be taken out of the hedge and whipped all the way down to the well. There, the lord's servants take off his peasant's sandals, tuck his trousers up to the knees and plunge his feet to the ankles into the frozen water of the mill race so that he can feel the bite of the ice and never dare behave defiantly in the presence of a boyard again.

And then, this friend of mine had to go through other torments, too, to comply with the customary proceedings then in use in a lordly manor. They hurled him into a pit house, near a fire, to warm him up. To prevent him from running away, they locked his feet into the stocks with a huge three-pound lock. And they smoked him like fish and sprinkled ground hot pepper on the embers to make the smoke thicker and more burning. They kept him there coughing and spitting blood and God would not let him perish but rather go on suffering in this world torments that are usually waiting for us in the underground world of the Fiend.

And this happened, my good friends, thirty years ago. And this friend of mine was not compounded with dust as it would have been better for him. He remained a cripple for a while, his heart howling inside him. And then, when he could move again he left his village an exile. He crossed the Moldova river and then the Bistita river and went up to the highlands of Rarau.

There, in the mountains, under the fir trees he sat staring wildly like a madman and seeing his entire misfortune unfolding before his eyes. The red of blood and fire coloured the whole picture and he felt his heart torn by steel nails. He kept moaning and fretting and he was unable to find any strength in himself. And he was servant to the shepherds for many years and he came to have his own sheep and rams and he learned the rules of that life of reclusion.

And then, in a spring evening, this friend of mine heard the voice of Vasile the Great singing under the leafy roof of the forest, singing exactly as I sang before.

When Vasile showed up in front of his cabin, my friend immediately understood that the man was a fugitive, seeking refuge in the wilderness.

He saw him strong and proud as he was, casting fierce glances from under his eyebrows and he received him with all his love as he had enjoyed his song. His heart was filled with joy when he heard his name was Vasile, as that name was very well known to that whole country and his powerful arm was feared down in the plains. At that time Vasile the Great was the most dreaded highwayman and everybody travelling on the roads down in the plains of the country or crossing its rivers had to pay Vasile a toll.

"Come, brother Vasile, come to my fire," says my friend. "I've heard about you and I'll get a soft blanket for you to prepare a cozy bed for you."

The highwayman was glad to hear that and dismounted from his horse in front of the cabin and before long he and my man became good friends.

And Vasile told him everything about himself; and this friend of mine told the highwayman in his turn the story of his wife and the boyard.

Hearing the story, Vasile got really angry; he tore his hat and threw it to the ground:

“Listen, my man, he said,” after he heard his story, “I won’t call you a friend any more. As it seems to me that you were suckled by a coward and you’ve remained chicken-hearted.”

“What could I do, brother Vasile?” the deprived man asked.

“I could teach you what you could do, my boy!”

That’s what he said. And sitting there in the cabin by the fire and drinking bilberry brandy with my friend, Vasile taught him a lot of good things.

“You must understand, my boy, that you’ll never find faith with women,” the highwayman said. Since I’ve been a brigand I’ve learned to read their hearts. And because of one like yours I was shot in my left foot by a posse and you can see me even now stepping heavily with that foot. And this is because God made them like that and women are false like water and impermanent like blooms and therefore I curse them and forgive them. But I don’t forget to strike him who did not spare me and who oppressed me. This is what you must do, too, lest you should burst up because of the poison that fills your heart.”

“That’s true, I’m full of poison!” – that friend of mine cried. I’ll be your slave for ever, brother Vasile. Teach me how to quench the fire that consumes me.”

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As he was narrating that the shepherd had been flying into a passion and was now shaking his head and waving his hands in the light of the fire. His voice, too, was no longer calm and controlled, he was speaking too loud as if he were alone. Ionita the equerry was, however, listening carefully to him, as everybody else, and he no longer looked offended,

54 “And as I was saying,” thundered Costandin Motoc, “Vasile the Great taught my friend what to do:

“Leave your sheep with your companions,” he said, “for a while. Leave the whey and the dogs in the charge of your aids. Take with you only a horse and two clods of cheese, so that we have what to dine upon. We are going to ride down along the Bistrita river, and then further on to the Siret river, under the guise of two decent merchants. I’d like to see myself the village where everything you told me happened.”

When he heard that highwayman talking like that and saw him smile, my friend felt his heart throb with both great pain and hope.



He left his fortune to the charge of his companions, he left the highlands and the fir trees, the cold springs and the clearings and, mounting his horse, he rode down to the plains, accompanied by the highwayman, down into the world of men.

Nobody knew him any longer. And they rode like two decent merchants down to the Siret river into the village of Fierbinti and they ate cheese and drank cold water from wells with a sweep, and on a Thursday morning, on the holy day of our Lord's Ascension, they turned up in the middle of the village road, riding against the church, just when the people were coming out of it, after the divine service.

And then, among the people there, my friend recognized Raducan The One-Eyed. He felt a beastly impulse inside himself, but he managed to check it and said:

"Brother Vasile, that is my master who showed me his mercy."

"Is that so?" the highwayman replied. "That's very good!"

And he raised his voice to a thunder as he stood up in his stirrups:

"Wait a minute, folks!"

The people stopped and waited.

"Good and honourable fellows," Vasile the Great yelled, "stand still and peaceful as I have nothing against you. Know then that I am Vasile the Great, the highwayman. My name and deeds are well-known to you. We are carrying guns and are afraid of nobody; and we have companions, standing by."

The people whispered and obediently made way for them. And the boyard looked up and his beard thrust out of the collar of his large coat and there was a glimmer of awe in his healthy eye as he recognized my friend.

"We have come here," the highwayman spoke again, "to sit in judgement according to our ancient custom. As we have decided to act as judges ourselves since before we are summoned to God's Last Judgement, the courts in this world would not listen to us and do us justice. We have forgiven you for taking our woman, your lordship. However, we have shivered with our head caught in a hedge and with our ankles frozen in the icy waters of the millrace and you had us set in the stocks and we suffered there and then we felt our eyes burning in the smoke of incensed hot pepper and we spat out our soul; and you scourged us with your flail; and you pulled out our nails. You've poisoned our life and we've remembered all that each and every day and we could in no way forget that and find any comfort and conquer our grief! And therefore we have come to pay you for all that, your lordship!"

Raducan The One-Eyed understood that and he opened his eye wide and yelled at the people and his servants crying for help; he tried to escape sideways, and then forwards. But the highwayman and this friend of mine caught him between the chests of their horses and smote him down. Then they dismounted and stabbed him with their daggers. My friend waited until

he saw a pool of blood spread in the dust of the road. When the fallen man stopped moaning and drew his last breath in a sigh, my friend touched him with the tip of his boot and turned him face up, his only eye open to heaven. And none of the people said anything as they witnessed the judgement in awe.

And that was all. They left near the dead body a purse with eight golden coins, all the money they had with them, a gift for the holy church. And then they mounted their horses and rode out of the village in the light of the sun on that fair spring day. They split and hid in different secluded places until they headed to the green forests of the highlands.

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Finishing the story, the shepherd guffawed to the fire, giving vent to the bitterness he still had inside him. And then he cast an uneasy glance at us and started to laugh forcefully seeing that we kept silent. And he went back to his place and wrapped himself in his sheepskin coat and he remained there, just like before, grieved and withdrawn into himself, joyless and gloomy like the mist in the mountains.

*(from Ancuta's Inn)*

*English version by  
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