

ION POP-RETEGANUL

1853–1905



*P*edagogue, folklorist and ethnographer by vocation, he conducted many periodicals of the time. His stories, written in the vernacular, are filled with moral advice. The translations, literary history articles, folk collections (tales, legends, songs, ballads, dirges, Christmas carols, nuptial poems, etc.) he published in his lifetime brought him widespread popularity. His immense passion materialized in a remarkable folklore anthology in five volumes (1888). To the Romanian Academy, he willed 21 volumes (about 4,000 pages) ready for publication. In his view, folklore represents "the entire spiritual wealth, the treasures of the heart and mind of a nation", while folk poems are an expression of the "genius, character, beliefs, traditions, joys and sorrows, in brief, of the whole inner and outer life of the Romanians."

CRÂNCU, THE HUNTER OF THE WOODS

Once upon a time there was a man, and when that man was about to die, he called his three sons to his deathbed and told them:

"My dear children, when I go, see that you build a fire on my grave out of ninety-nine cartloads of hay and ninety-nine cartloads of wood."

Once the old man passed away, they gathered ninety-nine cartloads of hay and ninety-nine cartloads of wood. One evening when everything was set, they tried to light the fire but – all was in vain! the wood was damp, they had no tinder to strike, and they could see no traces of smoke, or fire, in any of the nearby houses. The lads looked all around hoping to see a trace of fire somewhere, but there was none, but on a mountaintop.

“Well,” the youngest said, “you stay here, and I’ll go look for fire up there on that mountain, where that distant glimmer is.”

That lad was Crancu, the hunter of the woods.

So off he went and he walked on and on until he met Eventide.

“Good evening, cousin,” said Crancu.

“Same to you,” Eventide answered. “But from where are you coming and whither are you going?”

“I come from my father’s grave,” Crancu replied, “and I journey up on this mountain, in search of the distant glimmer I’ve seen, to ask for some fire to build upon my father’s grave.”

“And when do you want to build this fire upon your father’s grave?” Eventide asked.

“This very day,” Crancu replied.

“Today you can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Because I am Eventide.”

“Are you indeed? Then you must stand still.” And Crancu set about tying Eventide’s arms behind his back and his back to a tree. “This is where you’ll stay until I untie you!”

And so Crancu went farther up the mountain. On and on he walked, until he met Midnight. To him he did what he had done to Eventide, then, walking on, he reached, or rather, met Daybreak. He did the same to him, as he had done to the others two and then walked up to the fire. He found seven giants there, sleeping around it. Over the flames, over the fire was a big cauldron, filled with water.

So Crancu took a single hot coal and was about to leave, but then he thought perhaps it was wrong to honor the memory of his father with a stolen fire, so he went back and told the giants:

“Would you lend me some fire?”

“Gladly, if you can lift this cauldron from the fire and put it back on.”

So the lad removed the cauldron and put it back on the flames.

But the giants said:

“We’ll give you fire, but only if you steal the Green Emperor’s daughters on our behalf, because we have tried, but failed.”

“Come along with me,” the lad said.

Together, they all went up to the Green Emperor’s palace, and then the lad told the giants:

“We will only be able to pull out the daughters through the chimney, so I will go down first, and you must each follow me one by one.”

And Crancu went into the chimney, followed by one of the giants. Then he cut off that giant’s head so it rolled down the chimney inside, and let the body slide down the rooftop outside. He did the same to all seven giants, and then he entered the girls’ chambers and kissed them all on the cheek as they were sleeping, but also took the ring off the youngest daugh-

ter's finger. He then went back to the fire and took a burning coal, then reached Daybreak and released him, then Midnight and Eventide and, after releasing them both, he went to his brothers, who were waiting down at his father's grave and they lit a big fire, which burned till it ceased.

"Oh, dear, you were away for so long," his brothers said.

"Long and not quite, for if you had gone instead, who knows, you might not have been back by now."

It so happened that they also had three sisters, young girls fit for marriage, and they had given them to whomever had asked their hand first: the eldest to an eagle, the middle one to a hawk and the third to a wolf. But these three beasts had magic powers.

The next morning, the Green Emperor was overjoyed to see the giants' heads lying inside his house and their bulky bodies outside on the ground, as Crancu had killed them, and ordered, that in every inn throughout the empire each man who should tell his story be treated to a free meal and drink.

The inns were all packed with people, some drinking wine, others drinking brandy and savoring expensive food and telling each other their stories.

Crancu, the hunter of the woods, also went to an inn and he ate and drank, then told the others the whole story, just as I've told it to you.

While Crancu was telling them about his journey to the Green Emperor's palace, his brothers began pulling the sleeve of his coat to keep him from lying any further, but he told them:

"When I killed those seven ogres, I took the emperor's youngest daughter's ring. Here it is on my little finger."

So the innkeeper sent a letter to the emperor, telling him of how a lad named Crancu had bragged about being the one who had killed the ogres and who had even taken the youngest daughter's ring.

And the emperor gave solemn orders right away, to have Crancu come to him and tell his story from beginning to end, so he might know how the giants had been killed?

So Crancu went to the Green Emperor with his brothers and told him every part of the story.

Upon this, the emperor replied:

"You three brave lads who granted the last wish of your old father, you are worthy to have my daughters as wives."

And so all three lads married, and took the three sisters, the emperor's daughters, as wives and Crancu married the youngest one, who was the fairest of all.

As they were walking home, the two elder brothers with their brides ahead, and Crancu farther behind with his wife, who crossed their path but Pogan; an ogre, much bigger than a human being. He snatched away, or rather, stole the bride and took Crancu's life. No one knows how long Crancu had been lying dead, only that after a while his brother in law, the Eagle, who

had married Crancu's eldest sister, came along, and no sooner did he come, than he recognized him and fetched water-of-life to revive him and water-of-strength to fortify him, and made him as strong as three oxen, then flew off from his brother-in-law.

The two elder brothers knew not of Crancu's mishap, as they were much farther ahead. So Crancu pulled himself to his feet and began walking. On and on and on he went, and traveled a long way, may God keep harm away, until he reached a small hut in the heart of the forest. There lived his eldest sister who was wed to the Eagle.

"God bless your heart, sister!"

"And yours, brother, but what brings you here, for I haven't met a human soul ever since I came here?"

"Alas, dear sister, it's not joy but sorrow which brings me here. The ogre Pogan stole my wife from under my nose, couldn't you guide me to his whereabouts?"

"I wouldn't know, but wait until my husband gets home, for he draws water from the same well as Pogan does, and around the same time too; he will know where to guide you."

He didn't have to wait long. Soon, the Eagle arrived with two large kegs full of water, and when he got to the entrance of the hut he changed into a handsome and strong lad, a wonder to look at.

"God bless your heart, brother!"

"And yours, brother. What brings you here, to our country?"

"Alas, brother, I was done great harm. As I was walking hand in hand with my wife from my parents' in law, Pogan crossed my path and stole her from me in broad daylight; now I've come to ask your help to guide me to his place to take my wife from him."

"Gladly, brother, I'll gladly show you where he lives, but you won't need to go that far, for I think I've just seen her going to the well to draw water; I will take you to her."

So Crancu went with his brother-in-law near the well, where they saw his wife indeed, and Crancu took her home.

But Pogan had a magic horse that gave him notice whenever his master suffered any loss. And so it happened: the horse started to neigh out loud as if he were in the claws of a pack of wolves. So Pogan came out of his house and went to the stables.

"What fly has stung you? Are you pinched with hunger or parched with thirst, or else what has gotten into you?"

"Please do not haul me over the coals, master," the horse said, "don't blame me for this; it is neither hunger nor thirst which makes me neigh so, it is because Crancu, the hunter of the woods, has caught my mistress and run off with her."

"How the deuce did that happen?"

"Just as I told you, master!"

“Can we stay and rest a while, until I grab a loaf of bread and drink a mug of wine and have a nap?”

“Even longer than that!”

And once Pogan had eaten and drunk heartily and taken his forty winks, he mounted his horse and went off to track Crancu, the hunter of the woods; after a short while he caught up with the lad, once again killed him and stole his wife.

Only God knows how long Crancu lied there dead on the ground. We only know that his other brother-in-law, the Hawk, happened to find and recognize him; and seeing who he was, he leaned over him with water-of-life and water-of-strength. He sprinkled a few drops of the water-of-life to revive him, and a few drops of the water-of-strength to strengthen him, making him as strong as six oxen, then flew away.

Crancu, the hunter of the woods, woke up, and upon rubbing his eyes, discovered his wife was gone again.

Off you go, Crancu, crossing the world in search of her.

As he was wandering thus, he came across a little hut at the foot of the mountain; it was a solitary house and inside it he found his middle sister, the one who had married the Hawk.

“God bless your heart, sister!”

“Be blessed, brother! But what brings you here, whither I am the only human around?”

“Alas, my dear sister, behold how I was wronged by Pogan, who stole my wife in broad daylight, and left me asleep. I would go to his place on the spot so I can get my wife and take her home, but I don’t know where he lives. This is why I came to ask you if you know where he lives?”

“Nay, I wouldn’t know, brother, but wait a while until your brother-in-law returns from the well. He went to fetch water and will be back shortly. He will know how to show you the way.”

It wasn’t long before they saw the Hawk returning with two kegs full of water and when he got to the entrance, he changed into a handsome youth, a delight to look at.

“God be with you, brother.”

“And with you; how have you been?”

“Well, but what hardships bring you here?”

“Oh, Lord, brother, misfortune has struck me. As I was taking my wife home from my parents’-in-law, Pogan crossed my path and took my wife, and put me to sleep. I took her away from him once with the help of my brother-in-law, the Eagle, but now, as we were going home, he again put me to sleep and took my wife and carried her off; I have been looking for her in vain, for I don’t know where he lives, this is why I came to you to ask where he abides, so you can tell me how to reach her.”

“You don’t need to go up to his house, for I think I’ve seen her going to get water. Come with me and I’ll show you the place, then you’ll have to find your own way around.”

And so it happened. The girl was standing by the well and along came Crancu, the hunter of the woods and off they went! Yet again, the horse gave notice to Pogan of the runaway bride and upon hearing this, Pogan said:

“Can I eat two loafs of bread and drink two mugs of wine and sleep for two hours?”

“Of course.”

And Pogan ate his two loafs of bread and drank his two mugs of wine and slept for two hours, then mounted his horse and caught up with Crancu in a flash, killed him and took Crancu’s wife away to his house. Only God knows how long Crancu lied there on the road, we only know a wolf happened to pass by. This was just his brother-in-law, who was the husband of his youngest sister. And the Wolf took a good look at him and said:

“Oh, Lord, this is Crancu, the hunter of the woods, my brother-in-law; Pogan, that sly ogre, killed him! I’ll bring the poor lad back to life!”

So the Wolf went and fetched water-of-life and water-of-strength; the water-of-life revived him, and the water-of-strength invigorated him; it gave him the strength of nine oxen. Then the Wolf left him.

After a while, Crancu the hunter recovered his senses.

“Lord, what a heavy sleep came over me!”

He believed he had merely been asleep, then looked all around for his wife; only she had vanished into thin air.

Off you go again, Crancu, looking for your wife, or else, walk home without her and make a fool of yourself in the village! And Crancu took the road again and on and on he went and found no sign of a dwelling, and no trace of even a wild beast.

Long afterwards he finally caught sight of a house near the forest; he was as happy as he could be to find that small house, for he was both tired and bitter, but was also starving as he had finished all his food. It so happened that his youngest sister, the one who had married the Wolf, was the mistress of that house.

“God be with you, sister dear!”

“May you live long, my brother, but what brings you here?”

“Don’t ask, sister, but rather give me a bite to eat, and I’ll tell you the whole story, but right now I am spent with hunger.”

And so his sister fed him, and then he started:

“Sister dear, great misfortune has befallen me; I got married and as I was taking my wife home, lo! Pogan crossed my path and put me to sleep, and stole my wife. After I woke up, I wandered about until I found my brother-in-law, the Eagle, and he gave her to me again, but that vile Pogan caught up with me and put me to sleep and took my wife a second time. When I came back to my senses, my other brother-in-law, the Hawk gave her back

to me, but Pogan, that thief, stole her again. This time I was lucky to find you, you surely must know where he lives, please guide me thither, so I can take my wife, for I'll move heaven and earth to get her, because I am mighty angry."

"I wouldn't know, my dear brother, but your brother-in-law, the Wolf, is soon to arrive from the well, and if he should know, he will surely teach you what to do."

Hardly had they waited a while, when the wolf returned from the well carrying two big kegs of water around his neck. When he got near the door, he turned into a handsome youth, one of a kind, and as no other.

"God bless your heart, brother!"

"Same to you. But what brings you here, in our country, brother?"

"Both good and bad, for this is the story with my wife, and with Pogan, the ogre; I've come now to you so you can at least direct me to his abode, because – to tell you the truth – I don't know my ways around your country, and not a place, not even a path is familiar to me."

"It wouldn't be too difficult to walk up there," the Wolf said, "and we can go to his place right away and even take your wife, but you won't be able to get to far with her. Three times did he take your wife and he killed you just as many times; we, your brothers-in-law, revived you and gave you strength; first the Eagle, then the Hawk and now me; you should find by all costs an even more powerful horse, then steal your wife and take her on horseback, lest Pogan should catch up with you riding his horse."

"Well! Where would I find such a horse?"

"Deep down in the pit of hell there is an old woman, a hag called Whizhag, she is the one with the most powerful horses. Go and serve her for a year (a year is there only three days long) and you will be offered a horse. You must choose the horse you'll find to be the poorest in appearance, all skin and bone, and then bring it hither. If you should run into any trouble, only think of your brothers-in-law."

Poor Crancu set out on his way and didn't stop until he reached the very pit of hell and the Whizhag's house where he arrived at nightfall.

"Good evening, aunt!"

"May you live long, my brave lad! But from where are you coming and whither to are you going?"

"I have come from far away, straight from the white world. I am but an unfortunate poor lad, I come to you with the hope that you'll hire me as a servant for a year."

"I'll take you," she said, "but I warn you: You must serve me willingly. Do you see those ninety-nine stakes? Ninety-nine human skulls sit atop those stakes; yours will rest on top of the hundredth; if you serve me well however, then I'll give you for each year of work a horse which you can choose from my own herd."

"And what shall be my work?"

"Well," the old woman said, "you'll sleep by day and by night you'll look after one of my mares; see that you look after her well and be back with her at dawn, for I take the milk from that mare with my coffee; unless you take good care of her, she will run back home to her colt, which sucks her milk and I won't have any left for my coffee. Then I'll eat you, and I'll stick your head on that stake next to the other ninety-nine ones, and this will make a hundred of them. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Then will you commit yourself to this?"

"I will!"

"I'll ask you again: will you be my servant and obey me of your own accord?"

"I'll serve you and do your will of my own accord."

Well. So they agreed. The hag entered the hut, where there was a girl waiting and she told her:

"Be careful, make sure that you run away, otherwise the devil knows what we'll eat tomorrow; we're starving and haven't had a well-fed human in a long time. This one seems just the right size."

"Leave it to me," the girl said, "it's a good thing that his sins brought him hither, for we'll have many a feast from his meat." And she turned in the air and changed into a mare.

As soon as day turned into night, Crancu, the hunter of the woods mounted the mare and rode swiftly into the meadow. Through the night Crancu didn't dismount the mare even for a second. But at daybreak he was overcome by a deep sleep and fell asleep; the mare then set him down upon an anthill and galloped away.

Crancu woke up at daybreak and started crying: "Poor me, my head will soon rest on top of the hag's stake!"

"Don't be afraid," said a big Hawk, his brother-in-law, "that mare is not a mare, she's an ogress, the hag's daughter, and wants to stick your head on a stake, but don't you worry; now she has turned into a crow and is flying beneath the clouds, but I'll fly after her; when you see her getting closer, knock her with the bridle and say: 'Go, hag's mare with a colt behind!'"

And the Hawk flew high into the skies, and there he found the hag's daughter as a crow, and he knocked her in the head and plucked her feathers out so hard that she barely had any feathers left and forced her to fall out of the sky. When she was close to where Crancu was standing, the lad knocked her with the bridle and said: "Go, hag's mare with a colt behind!" And all of a sudden she turned back into a mare and trotted home.

"Good morning, aunt; aren't you glad I brought your mare back?"

"As glad as if you ran a rod over my back!"

Then she gave some food to the lad and told him to go to sleep. And the lad lay down without worry and tired as he was, he soon fell asleep. Meanwhile, the hag thundered and screamed at the girl and beat her black

and blue. Why had she allowed the servant to graze her all through the night? In vain did the girl tell her everything she knew, for the hag would not listen.

When evening set in, Crancu again went out to the pasture. And again he rode the mare all night, but early in the morning, at dawn, he was overcome by sleep and hardly had he closed his eyes when he found himself on top of an anthill, and the mare had vanished into thin air.

He started lamenting and crying but the mare was gone and that was that! Then a big Eagle came his way—it was his brother-in-law:

“Why are you wailing, brother?”

“Why shouldn’t I, for see what has happened to me...”

“Don’t you worry! She has turned into a lamb underneath a sheep, see, up there in the mountain. I’ll go and get that lamb from under that sheep and bring it hither to you. When I release it, hit it with the bridle and say: ‘Go, hag’s mare with two colts behind!’”

In a short while the Eagle came carrying a lamb in his claws and dropped it next to Crancu, who hit it with the bridle and said: “Go, hag’s mare with two colts behind!”

At once she turned back into a mare and Crancu, the hunter of the woods, mounted her and rode her home.

“Good morning, aunt; aren’t you glad I bring your mare home?”

“As glad as if you ran a rod over my back.”

After he had a good meal, Crancu lay down and fell asleep, and the hag went to the girl and beat her twice as hard as before.

“Let me be, mother, for I turned into a lamb under a sheep but he found me there too. Yet tonight, I swear I’ll get away somehow. I’ll come home and turn into a ball, so you can put me under the trough at the entrance and then sit on the trough.”

In the evening Crancu went to the mare again. Hardly had it struck midnight, when the lad began to doze off and woke up to find himself once again on the anthill, with his bridle in his hand. Angered and disheartened, he started crying like a baby; just as his year of service was coming to an end, he was about to lose his head!

But right then the Wolf, his brother-in-law, showed up and told him:

“Don’t you grieve, brother; let us go to the hag’s house, for the mare has turned into a ball under the trough in the entrance, and the hag bestrides the trough. I will sneak inside the sheep and goat shed, and I will do my tricks. The hag will hear the sheep moving restlessly and the goats bleating loudly and she will come out to see what has happened. Then you must run to the entrance without fear, take the ball from underneath the trough and run off with it, hit it on the ground and say: ‘Go, hag’s mare with three colts behind!’” And Crancu could instantly see how the ball quickly changed into a mare and returned to the courtyard:

“Good morning, aunt; aren’t you glad to see me?”

"I surely am!" She couldn't understand how he had found the mare, for she knew her to be under the trough.

"Well, haven't I been a faithful servant?"

"So you have; now go to the stables and choose a horse, the one you'll like, and then be gone from here."

And Crancu got into the stables and examined all the horses, and in the farthest corner there was a reddish nag of a horse, a true bag of bones; his ribs were sticking out a mile. This was the one that Crancu chose for himself. In vain did the Whizhag protest that she would be too ashamed to let him have the worst horse she had, for he had made his decision.

"Well," the hag said, seeing she would not win, "if you have made this decision on your own, you have chosen well, and if someone else taught you to do so, you can thank him for that."

And Crancu rode away from the hag's house; then, after reaching a forest the horse said:

"Master, you must light a big fire, so we will have plenty of embers. From these I will eat my fill, and then you will discover what a horse you have chosen." So the lad lit a big, big fire made from thirty towering oak trees, then after the fire had burnt out he fanned the hot ashes away with his hat and brought the horse to eat the embers; and the horse ate on and on until there was nothing left. Then, with a mighty shake, he shed all the loose flocks of hair and stood shiny and handsome before Crancu.

"Now get on my back, master, and tell me: how fast do you want to ride: quick as wind or swift as thought?"

"Swift as thought."

And within moments they had reached Pogan's house.

It was there that they found Crancu's wife coming along carrying the kegs of water. They wasted no time, as Crancu took her and jumped onto his horse and off you go, lad!

The ogre's stallion neighed once from inside the stables so loud that the all the windowpanes in the house broke to pieces and the furious ogre came out of the house to see what had happened.

"What has gotten into you again, are you hungry? Or maybe thirsty? Because I'm sure Crancu, the hunter of the woods, didn't return from the dead to come after his wife again."

"He did return and took her away."

"What do you think: can I eat three loafs of bread, drink three mugs of wine and sleep for three hours and then go after him?"

"Like hell you can, master, for Crancu is now riding my youngest brother who's three times stronger than I am."

"Let us go then."

And off they went quick as wind, beneath the clouds, close on Crancu's tracks, but no matter how fast they rode, they could not reach him.

When the ogre's horse caught sight of Crancu's horse, he told him in their own tongue:

"Brother, brother, slow down or else I'll burst."

But Crancu's horse replied, in their language of course, so that not even the ogre understood:

"I'll gladly slow down if you throw the ogre off your back, up in the skies and then let him fall deep down into the ground, so his name should never be heard again."

And so the ogre's horse did: he threw the ogre high up in the air, and then dropped him deep down into the ground, where he turned to dust. Crancu's horse waited then for the ogre's horse and together they rode home to the lad's brothers. They were already old with many children, but Crancu, for all of his adventures, had not aged a day and was strong and handsome still as if nothing had ever troubled him in his life. But Crancu couldn't stay long there, because he soon received notice that this father-in-law was about to die and that he had called him to be his heir. So he went and ruled his kingdom justly and wisely to the end of his days, when justice in the world was spent.

And I'll get on my way,
For this is all I had to say.

*English version by
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