

ION LUCA CARAGIALE

1852–1912



The legacy handed down by the virtuoso of Romanian drama, author of famous comedies (The Lost Letter, Carnival Fun, A Stormy Night) and a tragedy (The Curse), includes a wide range of literary genres, all suffused with his inimitable comic genius. Kir Ianulea holds a special position among his short stories. An adaptation from Machiavelli, it evokes early-20th-century Bucharest, a picturesque city that still preserved signs of the Phanariot way of life and radiated breathtaking lyricism. It excels in its accuracy of historical and social details and its subtle atmosphere, complemented by the authenticity of the characters.

T

hey say that a hundred or more years ago, Dardarot, the Overlord of Hell summoned all the devils, archfiends and devilkins, to gather all and sundry before him: not one should miss the event or else woe on their tails that could get shortened and their ears that could get pulled good! And when they had all congregated, the Overlord twisted his imperial and grinned awesomely, coughed so hard as to make his seat crack, glared at them satanically, and finally roared:

“You, rogues, those of you who’re not that addlebrained to see it all and still never learn, must by now have reckoned like I did that all the men-folks coming down to us from their place have only one complaint to make and that is about their wives; they lay all the blame for their damnation on their better halves; ask whoever you want why he’s landed here and he’ll say ‘because of a woman’, and only ‘a woman’. Well, well, I said to myself then,

* Mister (from Greek).

KYR* IANULEA

could this be true? Naturally, we cannot give too much credit to what people say since we all know how dearly they all cherish the truth. But still, I just don't feel like leaving such a strange thing unlooked into because it is the politics of our kingdom to know everything, without fail, and doubt... I first wanted to command you to subject all women to fierce racking and so perhaps extract from them a modicum of truth; but then it dawned on me that wouldn't advance us much; after all, we know them ladies, how shrewd and stubborn they are... Consequently, after giving the matter a great deal of consideration I decided to send the little one, Young Hell's Bells... What? He's not here? Where's Hell's Bells?"

The little one stood ensconced among the tiny devils at the back, and as Dardarot was making his point he tried to weigh his tail in his hands while also lending a ear. The moment he heard his name he dropped his tail and yelled:

"I'm here, Your Darkship!"

"If you are here why don't you come closer then? Let me take a better look at you, scoundrel! Want to do the vanishing act, eh? You sensed I was about to put you to work so you lay low, perhaps I don't see your mug and remember you, my little horny!"

And when Hell's Bells drew near the throne, Dardarot seized him by the ears and pulled him so hard that all his bones cracked – and that because of the great love he had for him since the little one was such a practical wag, and whenever the Overlord felt bored with the running of the kingdom he would call the young one to tell him jokes and play pranks.

"Listen to me, Hell's Bells, sonny... You take right away from the princely treasure the hundred thousand gold coins brought the other day by that cheese parer whom the wretched slummers buried with his everything as he had started to stink their air – say one hundred thousand gold coins. Then you'll rig yourself up as a mortal and go down to earth wherever you think fit. There – and now listen good and stop fiddling with your little tail! – you get married and live with your wife for ten years. Then pretend to pass away; leave your body there and come here and report to me everything you went through as a married man..."

Poor Hell's Bells! It hadn't been for nothing that he had kept a low profile among the small fry of the underworld no matter that he was one hell of a demon! He had simply saw it coming, the difficult task that the Overlord had assigned to him. And when he heard he had to deal with a woman on top of everything he stuck his tail between his legs; he just couldn't forget the old hag for whom he had slaved more than three years... The old woman had given him to do – straighten a curly hair, and Hell's Bells tried to soften it in his mouth, pulled it between his fingers, day and night without respite; but the more he dampened and pulled at it the curlier the hair became; and so on and so forth until his own hair began to curl. He therefore forgot about pay and all, and ran away from this mistress.

“...And you should know,” Dardarot added after pondering a bit, “that all through the ten years you spend on earth you will be subject to all the worries, foibles and nuisances earthlings are heir to... Ignorance, poverty, slavery, stupidity and even rage. So you will have to fend for yourself and save your skin from all these evils the best you can... Got my meaning, sweetie pie?”

What could sweetie pie say? There could be no objecting or screaming bloody murder for, as long as he had explained things to him, Dardarot hadn't taken his hands off him.

“Got it, your Darkship!”

“Then if you got it, dear soul, why are you still here?”

“Because you're still holding on to my ear...”

The Overlord made great fun of those words and then told him:

“Phew, you're a jocose one, confound you!”

And he spat him on the tip of the nose to ward off the evil eye. Then he let go of his ear and without smiling any more he bellowed fiercely: “Vamoose!” and he kicked him in the back right where it gets rounded off into a tail. The little one went rolling way down to the princely treasure; he took the hundred thousand gold coins and off he went, like a flash, to fulfill his mission.

On the way he took the guise of a man, neither too long in the tooth nor too unripe; you know, a man in full bloom, handsome and easy on the eyes; and after giving a great deal of thought to the matter of where exactly to go one earth he said to himself: “Know what? I'll go to Bucharest... I am familiar with the city... (He had visited it several times.) It's a good place to party. Money is dear; if you are apt to turn it you can get more than one hundred per cent profit; as the old saying has it: if you're downtrodden go to a rich burg... what the others let fall between their fingers you can pick up quite good; if you're rich, go to a poor town... and from every morsel a beggar wants to put into his mouth you can snatch away half.”

With such thoughts in his head, he landed in Bucharest and put up in the heart of the borough, at Manuc's inn. There, he called right away a middleman and told him to find him a couple of handsome houses, with many rooms for the masters, for guests and servants, somewhere in a clean neighborhood, with a garden and fountain in the yard, with cellars, kitchens, laundry rooms, stables and sheds, well, whatever it took for a well-off merchant to lead a decent life. After a few days, he had what he wanted, two houses, made spick and span, somewhere in the Merchants' district; and then all sorts of servants, horses in the stables and carriages in the shed...

The master of the house, familiar with man's foibles, and especially with a certain weakness of women who are dead on worming secrets out of a man and learning about his whereabouts, like whence he comes, on what he lives, and what he intends to do with himself. Well, he called the house-

keeper, a war painted, drugstore complexioned old bag whom he had put in charge of all the servants, making her the keeper of the keys and head of everything, and he invited her to sit down on a rug, while he sat on the sofa, puffing at the narghile, and began to recount the following.

“Look here, dear *kerá* Marghioala... As I said, I am called Kyr Ianulea... I for one hail from the Sfintagora.¹ My parents, humble people, used to tend a small olive orchard. When I turned about seven my parents felt like going on a pilgrimage to the holy places; so after they managed to rustle up some coins we went together on mules to the port of Salonika. There we embarked on a big ship which was waiting with its sails in the wind to start east to Yaffa. Little time went by and the much expected wind started to blow; all the sails puffed up, the ship floated peacefully. For three sunny days and three moonlit nights we kept on sailing without any hitch. According to the custom we fasted. The third day at lunch we had beans and radishes... And guess what? Sometime in the evening both my parents held their bellies and cried terribly: ‘Oh, me, oh, me, I’m dying!’ The captain, seeing them twitch and writhe in such deadly pain called right away a Catholic monk who had come aboard at the same time with us, a wise, learned man, skilled in many a cure. But before he got there, the patients had already turned blue, and they hardly could blurt out to the monk what they had eaten – beans and radishes. The monk asked one more time:

‘I understand, my brethren. But you have to be specific: was it beans with radishes or radishes and beans?’

Then mother uttered faintly:

‘Radishes and beans...’

‘Then it doesn’t look too good!’ said the monk.

And he began to rub their bellies with rough tow... But it was all in vain that he rubbed them until their skin came off; because when the moon came out first father and then mother, soon after him, breathed their last... I was a child, what did I know, I followed the captain and the monk in tears and heard them talk like this:

‘Father, if it’s cholera I’m a goner. Forty days they won’t allow me to enter the harbor. They don’t allow me to enter, my merchandise will go bad and I’ll be left penniless and jobless!’

But the learned man said to him:

‘This isn’t cholera, just like I’m no nun. This is a sort of disease that gets eastern Christians especially during Lent... The poor people do it all wrong – for that’s how man is, subject to mistakes – I mean they eat radishes first and then beans... As you see, the radish sends its strong whiff up front, and the beans plummet forcefully towards the other end; one pushes up, the other shoves down; a fierce battle gets afoot in the bowels, cramps after cramps until the guts are all scrambled up and the membrane of the stomach blows up and that’s how man passes away because of *bellycharismòs*, as the Greek call this terrible disease.’

‘And isn’t it catching?’

‘Not at all. Don’t worry.’

They wrapped my poor parents nicely in clean sheets; they lit a wax candle at their head; another Greek monk said the prayer for the dead and in the morning when the sun rose above the breakers, ‘may they rest in peace!’ and one, two, three, off they plopped into the deep... Seeing how hard I was crying the captain took pity on me and made me first his servant, then his help, and finally his partner... I won’t tell you now, dear Kyra Marghioala, all the troubles I went through; the offenses, the swear words, the beatings that I had to put up with! The many times I was about to be swallowed up by the abyss; the many times people and circumstances let me down – especially since the moment I got a ship all to myself, without any other partner than my luck! I won’t tell you how once I managed to escape in my birthday suit as, after having sailed the waters for seven months, when I was about to enter Saint Petersburg, my ship caught fire, all loaded as it was with tin and more than two thousand liras worth of amber which I had traded for pepper and dates worth less than three hundred! I won’t tell you how many tribulations visited me in those remote seas and countries, with all those beasts, and worse, with all those people! Suffice it to say that little by little I feathered my nest good, so that I’ve come to a decent status for myself... As long as I traveled throughout the world I learnt to behave honorably; I speak quite a few foreign languages – as to Romanian I can say without boasting that I master it soundly, even if I am of humble extraction, and not too widely schooled but to tell you the truth in this no Romanian can be a match for me, be he the most distinguished scholar. I particularly cherish the language and the people here and thus, tired of so many perilous voyages, of so many worries and heartache that come with trade, I have come to settle here in Wallachia, in Bucharest, and enjoy in peace the fruit of my long labor...”

“God, Kyr Ianulea,” Kyra Marghioala exclaimed, “you did go through a pretty lot! ...But don’t you be sorry! You still haven’t suffered like others for nothing! You are handsome, strong, and rich! You sure know how to live your life!... Bully for you!”

And then Kyr Ianulea added:

“I forget something... Listen here, dear Kyra Marghioala, don’t you let out to anyone, a neighbor or anyone – not even to my father, could he return from the bottom of the sea – any of those things that you learnt from me for you see, as much as I need your services as a honest, God-fearing woman that I know you are, however gentle I may prove and however ancient you may be, I won’t hesitate and beat you up! I’ll break this pipe on your back and kick you out of service in disgrace! You get it?”

“Oh, dear me!” blubbered the old woman. “How could I? ...I am not made out like that! Kyr Ianulea, I have been employed in important princely homes... The things I’ve seen and heard!... I don’t have the time to recount them now! But never mind...”

“I tell you this only... I’ll make mincemeat out of you! You’ll be history!”

“You do that!” said the housekeeper and got up from the rug and left in a hurry to tend to her business.

By the evening, everyone in the house, and after two more days the whole district, while after a week the entire borough... the whole world knew the story of Kyr Ianulea better than he himself; his ship had burnt three times; the amber lost was worth twenty thousands liras; and from then on nobody ate radishes with beans during Lent, only beans and radishes.

So day after day, Kyr Ianulea came to meet all sorts of merchants and even boyars; he started going to their homes and inviting them to his house to party. Everybody liked him for he was a smart and gentle man, very worldly, with excellent manners, and above all, openhanded; a gallant gentleman, all generous and decorous, in a word, a true man of honor. So that those merchants and even those boyars who had more daughters than fortune tried by all means to get him hitched. Meanwhile, he had set his heart on a young girl in the neighborhood – her name was Acrivitza, and she was the eldest daughter of Hajji Canutza, a former wholesaler. The Hajji was a widower and an outstanding man, but a little out of pocket because of his considerable obligations: three daughters, all marriageable, and two more sons – good boys, all in all, but somewhat inadequate; so pale hope of getting a dowry from Acrivitza. But who needed a dowry, not Kyr Ianulea! The girl was famed for her beauty; a small flaw she had though, as from time to time, not always, she squinted; but that’s exactly what he appreciated the most about her. The girl liked him all right... He asked the Hajji for her hand in marriage and he gave it to him without much ado...

Kyr Ianulea, like all men, was a prey to human weaknesses, and therefore a perfect slave to vainglory; he loved to live princely, one expensive party after another, dispensing precious gifts here and there. So he threw a munificent wedding like they had never seen in the Merchants’ district. All the men murmured in their beards: “He must be stinking rich, the dolt!... Oh, man, the lucky devil, the hajji struck it rich!” and the women in their turn: “Goodness, how fortunate Canutza’s squinty’s got!”

When Kyr Ianulea took her home with musicians and fiddlers the tables turned. Until the end of the wedding, Saturday night, she had been gentle and amenable as a lamb, but on Monday morning she rose from bed like a tigress... She summoned all the servants, women and men; she squinted at them so fiercely that they felt their blood curdle, except for her husband, and she said:

“You should know that from now on I am the mistress here! And that you won’t fool lady Ianuloaia like you do this oaf Ianulea! And then mind you that I have whims and who offends me just a little bit I will flog and send right away to the police station to get their dues there! That’s the long and short of it! You got me? Now out you go!”

From that moment, with every passing day the mistress turned tougher and uppity; and the more uppity she became, the more Kyr Ianulea loved her; and the more his love grew the bigger her conceit. All day long the man would yearn after a sweet word or a smile... She would pout and frown. If he tried to come near her and caress her, or humor her a little with a "Darling Acrivitza, why are you mad?" she would push him away:

"Oh, Ianulea, go away, don't you see you're no fun at all?"

Another man in his place would have blown his top or put his foot down and made her see reason, or sent her packing to her old man, Hajji Canutza... But not him! When she repulsed him, he would fall to his knees: "Dear Acrivitza, forgive me!" and wanted to kiss her hands, and she:

"Phew, Ianulea, get up! You tire me so much!"

"I won't get up until you pardon me!"

"Then stay there as long as you please!"

And she would get up herself from the sofa and leave the room, after thumbing her nose at him.

What could Kyr Ianulea do? He gazed long after her as she walked out on her high horses without turning her head although he would plead with her with tears in his eyes not to leave him like that... He just sighed, cried his eyes out and... loved her more.

This lasted for a time until the lady changed the record and devised a new means to grill him: she made believe she was jealous. So she began to show green in her eye today, then green in her eye tomorrow until she actually started to believe it. Her man used to lend money to folks now and then, and naturally, boyars, ladies, merchants, clerks, all sorts of people would come to him on business. Missus Acrivitza would put her ear at the door, to hear it all! And she wasn't content only with that: she bore a hole in the door so that she could see. And you think she kept it to herself? No way! She unabashedly told him everything she had seen and heard and then called him on the carpet: That man had said so and so and he had replied so and so: and he had grasped that woman's hand and kissed it three times, and then when she wanted to depart he took her by the waist and made sheep eyes at her, and then showed her to the door and again kissed her hand – and other poppycock like that.

And if he promised her that she had no reason whatsoever to doubt him, – after all he was bound to be polite with people, especially with the ladies, like a good merchant that he was – she started reviling him, treating him as a shameless deceitful liar. That was too much for Kyr Ianulea. He felt like kicking himself and no mistake about it. But that didn't make the missus happy. It wasn't enough that she blew out of proportion all the things that she saw and heard surreptitiously; to learn more she tipped the servants to spy on her husband; she even made a brother of hers to never let her husband out of his sight in order to expose all his philandering. Naturally, neither the servants nor the younger brother could find out anything disreputable since

the man was as dependable as they come. Then Acrivitza started heaping cuss words on the servants, blaming them for living off her bread, “the miserable, despicable, untrustworthy wretches that they are!” To her brother she reproached he was either a good-for-nothing or something else; and ordered him never again to come to her house or she’d break his legs; meanwhile she dusted the servants’ jackets like crazy and then kicked them out right before Kyr Ianulea’s eyes.

The moment other servants were hired, fresh suspicions and quarrels cropped up... In fact, you couldn’t call them quarrels because when arguing spouses say one thing or another, in turns, or the two of them at the same time; well, in the end they both chip in a word or something; but in this case, it was only she who yelled, cussed and cursed, while he listened, swallowed everything, and kept his peace. The servants, learning who was wearing the breeches in the household, tried to ingratiate themselves with the wearer; they would lay it on thick just to please her; namely that the master gallivanted around like the man about town that he was; and because the Ianulea woman was satisfied with such servants they could misbehave as much as they liked: actually, they stole their masters blind.

At the same time, Acrivitza had grown an indulged inclination for shuffling cards: her house was always filled with gamblers, one table next to another – beggar-my-neighbor, snisnapsnorum and even stud poker – jam and shorbet, cookies, wine, coffee and vodka, and narghile upon narghile, all day long, and then all night long. Besides, she didn’t know very well what was what, yet she was so self-satisfied that she thought nobody could out-play her – and naturally, she lost big time. All this expenditure and losses cramped Kyr Ianulea’s style a lot; in fact, his resources has started to go dry. As a rule, he said nothing; only now and then he could drop a word jokingly:

“Provided the cards don’t get stacked!”

That’s all the missus needed to blow her top:

“How so? Am I not allowed to enjoy the most innocent entertainment in my own house? You shouldn’t have got married if you knew yourself to be down at heels, and to boot, you married Acrivitza, the daughter of Hajji Canutza, who in her parents’ home was not used to scraping and saving! You should have taken a beggared slattern, keep her locked indoors, feed her olives and corn porridge so she do your laundry and never dare light a snuff in your home! Or one to make you wear horns that big! Is that not enough for you that I am an honest woman and I put up, wretched me, with all your dirt and infamy?... I want to live my life, that’s why I got married; otherwise I could have gone to a nunnery!... If you like it, Kyr Ianulea, if not you can take a hike and see you on the 30th of February!”

One day, when they were dining together with some guests, before the servants brought in the soup, Missus Ianulea started, out of the blue, to speak about a married friend of hers that was not present:

that she shacked up with prince so-and-so, a mere boy! and the king, his father, infuriated like hell, was about to order her hair tresses cut and herself banished to a hermitage on top of a mountain;

that one day her husband caught her in broad daylight at Turloaia, partying in the open with the Russian consul and other blokes; and the Gypsy fiddlers were playing "Come on, Cossack!" and she was dancing in her slippers, with the palms of her hands on her nape, all misty, with a Cossack youth;

that one time she went to Caldarusani to make her confession to father Ioanichie and she remained there from Wednesday in the Holy Week until the blessed week after Easter; all night long she sailed with her confessor in a boat in the moonlight, singing so loud to make the whole lake resound: "Oh, sister, and little greenish wort! People will always dish the dirt!" and the father kept on wielding the oars and accompanying her in the eighth voice...

And many other wild things.

The guests, especially the ladies, made great fun; while Kyr Ianulea, a most decent man, turned all the colors of the rainbow. He restrained himself for as long as he could but then, eventually, he gave out very gently:

"Goodness, Acrivitza, my darling! How can you, knowing what a good buddy of mine her husband is... how can you, without having seen any of this with our own eyes, without any solid grounds, malign a friend that we receive almost every day in our house? ...I'm so distressed!"

"Oh, it's only natural that you should defend her; after all, you seem to be congregating all the time!"

And so she told everyone that the woman no longer made her confessions at Caldarusani; that now she was carrying a torch for Kyr Ianulea... meaning to drive a wedge between them and wreck their marriage! But she'd get her eventually and wouldn't spare her as the King did; she'd have her head shaved soldier-like, that... Cossack- and monk-lover, and all sorts of other abusive names.

Kyr Ianulea could no longer stand it; he got up very upset and spurted out, all shook up:

"Listen here, Acrivitza! I won't allow you, hear, to say any more words about a woman who – no matter what dirt you shove on her – is more decent than you; because you are, see, more hellish than hell-fire and however gentle a man be, you manage to incense him! You shut up, crazy shrew or I'll have you tied and locked up at the bedlam, get it?"

The missus rose up too and dashed to slap his face; he quickly ducked to one side; spiteful she missed him she took the soup tureen from the table and threw it into his face, scalding him from top to toe. Now Kyr Ianulea really flew into a rage: his fists clenched, he bolted forth to teach her a lesson; luckily, the guests got between them and stopped him short:

"Uncle Ianulea, cut it out, man! That won't do! It doesn't behoove!"

And to her:

“And you, miss Acrivitza, for Good’s sake! Don’t antagonize him!”

No use! The woman started to yell so loud as to raise the whole neighborhood from the dead:

“Help, help, my good people! This dastardly heathen will kill me! You want to beat me, eh? After making a mockery of this house and of my honor, you thief and rogue! If you’re drunk and feel like kicking someone go sock your trollops back there in the slums whom you pile with money while in your own home, you stint on the last nickel, cheese parer! Beat me up? Me, you fowl boor? Me, the daughter of Hajji Canutza, you dare beat me, miserable wretch, you mangy despicable low life?!... Just you wait and I’ll teach you, Turkish Gypsy!”

And she didn’t stop until she grew hoarse... Naturally, that put a crimp in the party... All the guests chimed in like crazy: “Uncle Ianulea! Missus Acrivitza!” “When they get mad, people say what not,” or “even a hand has five fingers and none are equal,” and “man’s very guts get to disagree among themselves at times,” but anyway, “it’s not a good thing to let people know such things happen in a reputable house” and so on and so forth. Eventually, they managed to patch things up between the two of them. But naturally, the whole neighborhood learnt in no time that “Hajji Canutza’s poor Acrivitza has stooped so low as to have that bully husband of hers beat her – during dinner! and with people present! – after cheating on her with whoever he sets his eyes on.” And then her lady friends: “The way the little darling was raised, and to see her in such hands! He’ll put her in her grave, the heathen!”

Kyr Ianulea forgot the whole thing very quickly and went back to “darling this, darling that,” and “baby and dear heart!” and whatever she commanded he replied:

“Whatever you say, *fos-mu, parigoria tu kosmu!*” (Sweet words which in Greek mean: “My light, blessing of the world!”)

Meanwhile, missus Acrivitza reasoned like this:

“I and this loose-pants, this cabbage-headed Ianulea won’t last together for a dog’s age... So I’d better start thinking about my future...”

Thus, day in day out, she secreted precious stones and jewels and silverware, taking them home to Hajji Canutza for safe-keeping; then she started selling valuables from the house, which her “cabbage-headed” husband had not thought, like any provident merchant, of putting down in a catalogue. At the same time, she tried to ingratiate herself with him even more, caressing and humoring him. She turned on the charm and soon had him eat out of her hand. So, one evening when they were alone in the bed chamber, Kyr Ianulea found himself hugged and kissed by the enraptured woman... Said he:

“You love me, Acrivitza?”

To this she replied, squinting at him:

“Need you ask that, Ianulica, *fos-mu?*”

Kyr Ianulea barely closed an eye all night long for the joy of having Acrivitza mellow... From then on, man, it would all be living in raptures, he imagined! Towards dawn, when he was about to fall asleep, she clutched him in her arms and said:

“Ianulica darling, I want to ask you something, but please don’t say no.”

“Have I ever said no to any of your desires, dear heart?”

“Look... My pappy would like to marry off my sisters too – he doesn’t want them to get to be old maids in his home – ‘coz the whole town has already started to tattle, you know how people are, they call them “Canutza’s mares”. He has not much to give them as proper dowry; had he not been the decent generous soul that he is he would have been so well-off today! But he has to recoup a big deal of money from the big boyars. And what good that does him if he can’t get it now? When he passes away you’ll be the principal heir, that’s a fact, and you will squeeze the boyars like the merchant you are and get what’s yours... And... you know, I’ve been thinking... Can’t we help father and make a small dowry for each girl? For who gets married today if there’s no dowry, just for love? Only I was that lucky to find you – a pleasant man and rich too, and a gentleman who loves me so much!”

And she hugged him tight and kissed him over and over.

“All right, sweet pea, we give them... How much do you say?”

“Well, what do I know... a thousand, maybe two thousand.”

“Gladly, dear heart! Remind me tomorrow to go to the Hajji and disburse the money... Now, look, let’s go back to sleep, duckie.”

But she embraced him again and said:

“...And then, you know... There’re my brothers... It won’t do to have them loiter like that any more... I was thinking of you rustling up some capital for them so they can start a business. They are all grown up and it’s not appropriate that they should live off the old man’s sweat, who dances attendance upon them and all! What do you say, isn’t that right?”

“My dear heart, don’t you know I agree to everything you say? Do remind me in the morning... Now let’s sleep a while.”

“Give me one more smoochie, Ianulica, *parigoria tu kosmu!*”

And he did, and then they slept like freshly bathed babes.

The following day the entire affair was set at rest: the two sisters were conveniently dowered and due provisions were made for both brothers; in a couple of days, after having been amply schooled by their older brother-in-law as to all the aspects of trade, as a more tested man that he was, they set out with their purse full to get merchandise – one eastward by ship, from Galatzi to Smyrna; the other westward, from Brasov to Leipzig, by carriage, as merchants traveled at that time.

Kyr Ianulea could barely contain his happiness... Parties upon parties, day and night, with no end of goodies and early fruit; merry-making and

carousing with tens of guests and fiddlers; everything that Acrivitzza desired had to come true; had she asked for the Coltea Belfry on a silver platter, Kyr Ianulea would have brought it to her on a silver platter.

And things continued like that for while, with Kyr Ianulea forking out of the chest; and burning and burning money and not once putting anything back until one day he struck rock bottom. He hadn't been in the habit and hadn't had the time to count what was in the chest; but now that it dawned on him to do that he needed not an age... Only some three and something liras were left, enough for two or three weeks of menial expenses and house-keeping... A staunch man, he reckoned like this: "So, what's the big deal? What do I care? Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow the boys will come back with the goods; we'll start a business and, with a lot of application and a little bit of luck, we'll fill the chest back... Until then don't worry, we have enough credit!"

And he began contracting debts... Middlemen knocked themselves out, seeking money for him at any cost... Until then he had demanded quite stiff interest; and now his turn had come to spit out quite a steep interest. At first, nobody noticed much; but shortly all the merchants learnt that Kyr Ianulea was going under; and as in that period money was very tight in the burg, the man's credit almost dried up; he could hardly find anything, no big deal, why, only measly sums. He had pinned all his hopes on the return of the young boys and he just couldn't understand what took them so long since all the merchants that had left at the same time, or even later, had already returned from their voyages in due time, each with his load.

Seemingly, the brothers-in-law had reason to tarry. When Kyr Ianulea was about to lose all patience, there came two pieces of tidings, one after another, and quite nasty at that... The loaded ship of the first boy had sunk when he was on his way back from Smyrna; and as he was a beginner in trading he had forgotten to insure the ship... The other youth had stumbled on another big deal at the Leipzig fair; he had met some Greeks as you can always find swarming in the bustle of big burgs; all day long he had loitered with them, changing one German beer house for another until the evening when they went to a small cafe owned by a fellow-country man, in a secreted lane behind the Town Hall, to turn the cars in a game of *endekamisi*, and later on, a quick snipsnapsnorum; and so, from the moment of lighting the candles till daylight they cleaned him out so good that the boy had no more dough to return home.

When word broke out about all this all the creditors of Kyr Ianulea really started to fret thinking that he would be left high and dry, and so they all got together at the Lime Tree Inn's coffee shop, to confer and decide what was best to do to keep a close eye on him day and night, lest he could slip away before pay-day, as welshers usually do. On the other hand, upon seeing himself gone bust Kyr Ianulea felt somewhat panic-stricken... What

could he do now that he had stooped to poverty, disrepute and disgrace? First they would throw him in jail and then, when they let him go he would have to panhandle at the door of those he had surfeited with goodies and gifts! And this was the smallest of his cares! But what was he supposed to do with the daughter of Hajji Canutza?

He didn't have to deliberate long to see that the only thing he could do was to make himself scarce, and go no matter where, way beyond the Red Apple. So, at daybreak he got up nice and easy, collected whatever dough he could find in the chest, went down to the stables and ordered to have a Tartar ambling horse saddled. Then he got on and told the servant he was going to Snagov after fresh bream as he had guests at diner that night and so he went out of the gate, at a gentle trot, and then all ahead to the back of beyond.

As he headed to the Metropolitan Church and turned left, to the Filaret Plain, dawn was already breaking so that when he climbed the hill to the Silver Knife and looked back on the valley he saw a group of riders speeding after him. Indeed, his suspicion seemed to be correct... The merchants had learnt about his French leave and had quickly took his trail together with some men from the police station. He wanted to abandon the main road and cut it under the hill, to the right, but he encountered some ditches; the horse stumbled and threw him off the saddle... The man got up, abandoned the horse and started on foot. He went to a few picket fences and jumped over them; then came another ditch and other fences and eventually, dead tired, he came on top of the hill and stopped in front of the vineyard of a stout farmer who was washing his eyes on the porch of the wine cellar, in the heat of the morning sun.

When he saw him, Kyr Ianulea told him out of breath:

"Good morning, my good man. What's your name?"

"Good morning, master. My name is Negoitza. Yours?"

"Kyr Ianulea..."

And as he could barely stand, he jumped across the ditch into the yard and said:

"Brother Negoitza, take pity and save my bacon! There are enemies chasing me, about to lay their hands on me and put me to shame! Hide me someplace over here and I'll make a rich man out of you... And if before I leave I can't prove you I can feather your nest then I agree that you yourself hand me over to my enemies... Pray, brother Negoitza, don't leave me in the lurch! Please and please again!"

Negoitza scratched his head, pondered a little and then replied:

"Listen here, Kyr Ianulea, who are your enemies? By any chance boyars? For, to tell you the truth, I will never fly in the face of boyars..."

"What boyars? They're merchants..."

"Well, then I'll get you out of this mess..."

Hardly had he shoved Kyr Ianulea under a stack on top of which he threw a bunch of corn cobs that the enemies showed up...

“Uncle,” one of them asked, “haven’t you seen a merchant – so and so – pass by?”

“I haven’t.”

“We’d pay you a handsome tip if you told us where he went.”

“But I haven’t seen him...”

“You tell us or else!” a servant roared wielding a whip...

“You could very well kill me and I still would tell you I haven’t seen him...”

“If the man says he didn’t see anybody, then he didn’t... Let’s get going, we’re wasting time.”

And off they went, some on horse back, others on foot, some going one way, the others a different way, running like crazy... When they got out of sight, Negoitza climbed in a big mulberry tree and looked around to make sure they were far off; then he came down slowly and helped the fugitive out of the hiding place.

“I got you out! Now let me see your stuff, Kyr Ianulea... Are you a man of your word?”

“My dear uncle Negoitza, I can’t tell you how much obliged I am and how hard I desire to keep my word! And to make you understand that I can be true to my word I will kindly ask you to sit down next to me and learn about me and my adventures.”

And Kyr Ianulea recounted to Negoitza the long and the short of it – from the moment he had left the netherworld to carry out the princely command to the present moment – everything down to the least detail, which Negoitza listened with great delight and attention.

“And now, uncle Negoitza, listen here how I can make you roll in clover... Whenever you hear the devil’s got into a woman, a wife, or a girl, whatever, no matter the place where they live and no matter what station in life they have, you should know it’s about me that they’re talking. You go right away to the respective house for I won’t leave the woman until you chase me out... Naturally that seeing you cure their precious jewel they will offer you a reward... The husband of the respective woman or the parents of the girl will make it worthwhile to you... What do you say? You find this agreeable?”

“I surely do!” smiled Negoitza.

And Kyr Ianulea, after thanking him one more time, took off.

Hardly a month after this happening Negoitza went down to the market of the burg with some sour cherries to sell as early fruit, and he learnt from the vendors there that the devil’d been beleaguering for more than ten days one of the daughters of Zamfirache Ulierul of Colentina, the one engaged to Ilie Bogasierul of Baratzie... They tried everything... Charms, evil eye exorcisms, holy prayers... all in vain! She kept on muttering in all the languages of the world without having ever learnt them and besides she talked thirteen to the dozen all the time, revealing all sorts of secrets and bad

deeds – where could she know all those things from? – that everybody came running to listen to her, standing agape and crossing themselves:

that the pouch with gold coins belonging to steward Iordache of Dudesti, the one that couldn't be found – stolen by the copyist whom they caught on the road to Oltenitza but who escaped in the dead of the night from the cells of the police stations – was now sitting tightly covered in a light green cloth, at the bottom of the lower drawer of the chest near the fireplace in the chambers of Lady Steward Tarsitza, the aga's auntie on his mother's side, quite younger than him – it happens! – and those who didn't know the knack of it could vainly search the whole chest for they would not be able to find the real bottom;

or that the last will and testament of Agop, the tobacconist of Sfinti, made out to his niece, wasn't actually written by the deceased: it was cooked up one night afterwards by her husband, Tacor, the cafe owner of Caimata, who also sold cosmetics and hair dye... together with Avedic, the sexton of the Armenian church;

or that youngish brother, with a barely visible mustache, that dark-eyed-browed little monk who stayed with the holy archmandrite Hrisant in the yard of the metropolitan church – all ears to the teachings of the Gospels – was in fact the youngest daughter of Rustache the Coachman of Ploiesti...

and so on and so forth, only such yarns, who could remember them all?

As soon as Negoitza heard this he sold his baskets to wholesale dealers for whatever he could get and went straight to see the possessed girl; and when he arrived there he squirmed through the gents and finding the parents of the girl and her fiancée he told them would cure the girl for a hundred gold coins. Naturally, the poor folks didn't demur and coughed up a hundred! And Negoitza got close to the ear of the obsessed girl and, making believe he was exorcising her, and he said slowly and abashedly:

“Here I am, Kyr Ianulea, remember our understanding...”

“I get the picture,” the spirit whispered, “but to tell you the truth, uncle Negoitza, I didn't think you would be such a dolt to settle for only one hundred gold coins... How long would that last you? You should have asked for more! But since you blundered I forgive you this time... Now I'll go to Craiova and get into the wife of the deputy steward. Next week you be there. Don't keep me waiting too long; I have other things to attend to, other worries than you... The deputy steward loves his wife dearly, he's rich and generous. Now you reason things good for that's the last time you will have any power over me; mind you that after this I will feel released from all obligations and we won't have any more business together!”

And saying these the spirit fled away... The young woman was cured. They all started to sign themselves; the parents and the fiancée felt besides themselves with joy, and Negoitza took his hundred gold coins and headed to the vineyard to make preparations for a long trip.

The following day he sold the harvest to a man from Oltenia; the third day he bought a small horse and everything necessary to ride it, from blanket and saddle to riding cloak; the fourth day in the morning he went away. That happened on a Wednesday... In day time he rode steadily, at night he rested; with every mile he was slowly approaching his goal until the following Tuesday when our traveler reached the town limits of Craiova at dusk; there he asked several people for someone who could take in a merchant like him and they directed him to an inn across the street from a big church.

He got off his horse and entrusted it to the care of the servants while he entered the pub filled with several craftsmen. Before going to his room he titillated his palate with a glass of plum brandy and some delicatessen. Darkness had set in. He was sitting at a table, waiting for the pastrami to be grilled, and all wrapped up in thought; as he stood like that he heard bells and he asked a police man puffing from a narghile at another table what feast was the following day since such a formidable celebration was being prepared. From the police man and the innkeeper lady he learnt no holy day was coming, still, all day and all night all the churches held mass after mass to relieve the young wife of the deputy steward who was being tormented by the evil spirits and nobody seemed to find a cure for her; all the crafty hags, all the doctors from Sibiu skilled in such maladies, all the special unctions and all the prayers said by the bishop and arch-priests with the council of forty priests didn't help at all; the woman was worked by awesome furies; she jumped and hopped like mad so incredibly that they had to tie her up; when bound up, she shivered from head to toe and gnashed her teeth, as if burnt by fire; if they released her she started to hop and jump again until they restrained her anew; and this for more than a week, without a moment's respite, and without even drinking a drop of water... Everybody around looked aghast; her husband was crying his eyes out, the wretch; that's why prayers and mass were said in so many churches to propitiate the Holy Virgin to work a piece of wonder.

Negoitza quickly quaffed the brandy and chomped a slice of pastrami like a servant fearful not to keep his master waiting too long; he paid a coin to the police man and asked him to take him quickly to the respective yard. When they got there everything was a-bustle for the sick woman got ever so worse at night fall... Several women and servants had her wrapped up in soaked drapes and the miserable soul was shuddering; the priests in festive garb said mass and incensed her with their thuribles, while her husband was shedding tons of tears, and genuflecting. Then a soldier of fortune came up and announced loudly:

"Your excellency, please lend me your ears! There's here a commoner who's come all the way from Bucharest on purpose; he says he can cast out the evil spirits that are working her ladyship and he would lay down his life that he can cure her in no time."

The wretched man stood up, glimpsing a ray of hope in his misfortune, and ordered:

“Let him come!”

The moment Negoitza stepped in, with no questions asked and no explaining, the young woman stopped shivering and commanded like in her good days when taking a bath, to have the drapes taken off; she looked him straight in the eye and started to laugh merrily as if seeing an old, much expected friend, and beckoned him to come closer, calling him by his name:

“Welcome, dear Negoitza! How are you? Safe and sound? Come over here for I have something to tell you that nobody should hear!”

They just could not believe their eyes and ears. Negoitza pushed everyone aside and drew amicably to the possessed woman and whispered to her:

“Dear, excuse me for keeping you waiting a little bit. You can’t imagine the troubles I had with that nag of a horse.”

“Don’t worry,” the spirit replied in a very low voice. “I’ll be out of here in no time... From now on consider your nest feathered; I don’t owe you anything anymore. Consequently, dear Negoitza, this is the last feat you pull... I don’t want to see you hang on to me, for not only will you get nothing but you can very well cross me and if you do you will be very sorry... Careful then...”

The spirit vanished...and naturally, the possessed woman came to her senses, returning to her former self, as good as new and perhaps even merrier... Now the gifts and dignities the deputy steward showered on Negoitza I need not describe to you – obviously you can imagine for yourselves. He gave to him in perpetuity the deed to an estate, and on top of everything he also knighted him.

So now, for three months and more Negoitza had been rolling in clover, like he had never dreamt before. One day, when he was indulging in the after-dinner boyarly custom of drinking coffee and puffing at a narghile, he saw in the distance on the road coming from the east a cloud of dust drawing near... What could it be? There were a few servants coming breathlessly from the court with orders to bring him straight away to Craiova.

Negoitza wasn’t crazy about having his little routine interrupted but what could he do? When he got to the court he kissed the master’s hand; the man took him in his arms, kissed his forehead and said:

“My beloved brother Negoitza, if you care the least about me you will set out without delay to Bucharest; the carriage is ready; on the road you’ll find horses to change at every stop... The daughter of his highness, the princess is possessed like my wife was, perhaps even worse, judging by the tidings I received... You are her only salvation... Go quickly!”

“I’m cooked!” Negoitza thought but could not say a thing.

The deputy steward grabbed him in his arms, put him in the carriage and, off he went! The drivers cracked their whips and spurred the horses and then came shouts and howling... The following day at dusk they delivered Negoitza on the stairs of the princely palace in Bucharest.

The ruler and his lady, wringing their hands, welcomed him from the top of the stairs, and the prince cried in Greek the language the aristocracy used to confer in at that time:

“Oh, God has sent you, boyar! Come over, please!”

Negoitza, who didn't understand Greek a iota – how could he? – replied at random:

“Who doesn't look for it shall find it, Your Lordship, but who does look... Let's see... Let's look for it! If it is possible I would be very glad, too. Let's see...”

“Come over here!”

And saying this, the prince pushed Negoitza to the terrace at the back of the hall... There the princess was seated down on a rug, her head dangling like a puppet on a wire; she had been going on like that for five days, her teeth clenched, not getting a wink of sleep.

The moment Negoitza showed up, the princess stopped shaking her head and began to scream like demented:

“Out! Get him out! I don't want to see this swain Negoitza! Let my old man come!”

Negoitza didn't wait long and instead of being offended at being so shamefully dismissed, he shrugged as if saying “Well, so be it, if you so please!”... He turned, meaning to leave. But her Highness took him by the hand, while the ruler himself drew close to his daughter:

“Here I am! Here is your old man!”

“Not you!” the girl screamed. “I didn't mean you! Let my old man come!”

“I am your old man!” the poor soul said with bright tears in his eyes.

But the girl continued to scream even more fiercely:

“No! You're not! You are ugly! You go with Negoitza! Let captain Manoli Ghaiduri come, he's my real old man!”

On hearing such foolish talk, her ladyship passed out... Hadn't Negoitza been close by she would have dropped flat out. The ladies of the court dashed and dabbed her with rose vinegar and fumed her with smoldering feathers. And the poor prince began to strike the capped-head with his fists while his daughter started to yell louder and louder:

“You bring my old man to me! Captain Manoli, that's who I want!”

Finally, Negoitza said to the prince aside:

“Your Lordship, when we deal with such strongly possessed people we have to humor them for a while, for if we go against their will we only antagonize them even further.”

Consequently, they brought Captain Manoli to her... Seldom could you find such a Greek! Tall, broad-shouldered and mustachioed, a splendid piece of soldier! Covered in gold embroideries from head to toe, he could have done proud any princely court!

His beautiful mustaches soaked in tears, captain Manoli, the faithful servant, approached the ruler's daughter; and as soon as she saw him the little one lightened up and gave a sweet smile like any obedient child when asking nicely her father to do her a favor, and said gently:

"Pappy! Please, pappy, if you love me, chop off Negoitza's nose and ears and kick him out like the scoundrel that he is... For he's cheeky, he's greedy and never content!... I don't want to see him anymore because I can't stomach him!"

Captain Manoli loved the young princess from the bottom of his heart but he could not possibly do what she craved without his masters' saying so. At this Negoitza said to himself: "So this is what you want? All right!" and he turned to the prince and spoke like this:

"Your Highness, let everyone stand aside so I can take a closer look at the possessed girl."

They made room for him and Negoitza walked right to the young princess who was kicking and shouting as hard as she could:

"Out, Negoitza! Get out, you ruffian!"

But he didn't pay any attention to her fits and talked to her in a very low voice:

"Dearie, I should say you'd better leave now that the going is good..."

No chance! The girl started to scream even louder:

"Out with Negoitza!"

"So that's what you say, eh? You won't go, right?"

He tried to get hold of the girl's hand. But then the young princess spit him right in the face and slapped him hard.

He wiped his face with his sleeve and turning to the ruler quoth:

"Your Highness, this furor is made of such a stuff that I have never seen before... I don't say there isn't any cure for it. But for now I can't do anything on my own... I need help... Here, in the district of the merchants, I have a friend skilled in treating mumps and sore ears; she's the widow of a wretch who squandered his fortune on debaucheries; he went to ruin and turned his back on the innocent woman leaving her in the lurch, poor as a church mouse... Her name is Acrivitza Ianulea, the daughter of Hajji Canutza..."

On hearing these words, the princess stopped shouting and her teeth began instead to clatter as if she had been stricken by a bout of ague.

"So, your Highness should order horses for a coach that I go fetch the Ianulea woman."

He wanted to take a step but the young princess got hold of the tail of his coat and shrieked like demented:

“Out, Negoitza!”

And...to make a long story short – because a story, no matter how beautiful if it is too long it just won't do – the child was cured then and there, as if her sickness had been just a dream; she put on nice clothes and went out with her mother for a walk, in an open carriage... Four proud trotters; twelve riding guards and just as many on foot, with their garbs fluttering, and up on the box Manoli with his right hand on the hilt of the dagger thrust in his broad belt, and with his left teasing his mustache... Great was the prince's joy when looking out of the window at the carriage solemnly passing by...

Negoitza was accommodated at the court for a while. The third day he remembered he had other business to attend in Bucharest and went straight to the merchants' district to look for the Ianulea woman... The most handsome houses had been put up for sale by the creditors... Poor woman! Abandoned by her husband, she was now living at her father's... He found her there and was drumbstruck by her beauty, especially as she was now all dressed in black from head to toe like any mourning widow... After kissing her hand, he said:

“Look here, lady, I have a debt to Kyr Ianulea of one hundred gold coins. Yesterday I heard about your misfortune and here I am, to bring you the debt!”

The woman started to cry and asked him whether he knew what could have happened to her man because she could no longer bear it, she pined after him, and would die of longing. Negoitza told her he knew nothing at all; and as token of gratitude for the fact that her husband had helped him in time of great need, he asked the lady to accept to become the owner in perpetuity of his little vineyard at Cutitul de Argint, and gave her an ownership deed, with a princely seal. After that, to relieve himself of the exorcising gift, he pondered a little and then added:

“Lady, your husband did me a lot of good; in his honor and to his memory I want to teach you something that could help you in an hour of need... Listen here very carefully, if you please... Whenever you hear the devil's got into a woman, a wife, or a girl, from no matter what place or family... you run there right away for it won't get out unless you chase it away... You tell the possessed woman only this, as if you stumbled on your man: So that's where you've been hiding, Ianulica? And poor I who was looking for you like a mad woman... *Fos-mu! Parigoria tu kosmu!*”

“How come you know these words?” the lady asked squinting at him.

“I learnt them long, long time ago from a friend,” said Negoitza, smiling at the lady's slanting look. Then he added: “You say only this. Then you get hold of the woman, with Kyr Ianulea in your mind. Look at her so sweetly as you did just now glance at me... and kiss her fiercely and don't leave her until she's perfectly cured... Naturally, that according to the amount of hysterics, your services will be rewarded nicely... You got it?”

“I got it.”

“Now, farewell, lady! And may all the good be with you!”

Negoitza returned then to court where he remained for some four or five days more, indulging in the good life and being greatly honored. When he was dining with their highnesses, with the upper crust, with the ultrasmart scholars, down in the yard, under the windows Turkish fiddlers were singing and clowns were doing tricks to the amusement of the rabble. The eighth day Negoitza made up his mind to set out to the region of Jiu... They attired him in a long cloak and the ruler and his lady gave him three silk bags with a thousand gold coins each; and the young princess a ring with a gem as big as a Turkish hazel nut, and they accompanied him with big pump down to the bottom of the stairs.

Captain Manoli asked his masters to allow him to take Negoitza home himself. On the road, he danced attendance on him all day and all night, singing soldierly songs from his far-away mountains and tambourining in Turkish drums – for he had a splendid voice indeed, both profuse and carrying. Negoitza enjoyed a lot Manoli’s company and reaching his estate he felt bound to invite the captain over, for the man was just as likable as god, and valiant and strong... In the evening they had supper together, and tasted some old Dragasani wine, drunk coffee and puffed narghile until late at night; after supper when, being somewhat tired from the journey, they had a glass too many, the captain big as he was, suddenly yielded to despair and began to wail like a woman, and falling to his knees he said to his host:

“I am poor, *bei-mu* (that means *my prince*), I have nothing valuable to present to you; but only God and my soul know how grateful I am to you! For, had the lassie wasted away... I... You see this dagger?... I would have trust it to the hilt in my bosom! ...because without that lassie what would Manoli, the poor Manoli have done?”

And he started to kiss Negoitza’s hands and asked him to receive his gift of a rosary from Jerusalem.

While captain Manoli was shedding grateful tears here, far away, in Bucharest, the metropolitan bishop was crying with sorrow because one of his holiness’ s nieces had run amuck... But fate took pity on him and did not let the servant of the All-loving Father cry too much... As soon as missus Acrivitza entered the belfry gangway the young girl’s frenzy vanished like by magic... And the Ianulea woman thanked her stars and left the metropolitan church quite satisfied.

That very night, deep down in the bottomless pit the demons congregated before Dardarot to listen to Aghiutza who had returned with his tail between his legs, dead beat.

He recounted everything he had suffered up there, much to the point and in more well-put words than mine. The Overlord split his sides and said between roars:

“Now I get the picture... Fie on you, dear Hell’s-Bells! You really carried on something scandalous, upon my truth... What do you want your reward to be for the pains taken?”

“Your Darknesss, I would dare ask two favors as payment.”

“Name them, sweet pea.”

“First I don’t want to ever again see Acrivitza and Negoitza over here! Let them go to heaven, let Saint Peter make up with them as best he can.”

“Right... And second?”

“Second, let me take a long rest here at home because all those little affairs down one earth left me dog-tired.”

“Right again! You are entitled to sleep three hundred years from now on without anyone bothering you at all!”

Upon saying this, Dardarot kicked him as he used to and send him to sleep.

And thus, missus Acrivitza and Negoitza, each in her and his time, went to heaven; and Hell’s Bells turned in and drifted into sleep so he could be sleeping even now unless he got up, the minion, to get into some fresh mischief.

*English version by
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NOTE

1. Mount Athos in Greece.

