

IOAN SLAVICI 1848–1925



His lack of concern with formal beauty may be striking only when compared to the works of his contemporaries, not to present-day literature. Slavici's style is far from charming: there is no cadence, harmony or nice wording in it; neither images, nor color; no skillful description of nature, and no narrative rules. The theories about content and form, cherished by his colleagues, are foreign to him. His stories are a far cry from Creangă's sweet fluency and Caragiale's polished phrasing. (...) Despite his ungainly style, Slavici's Romanian is pure and abrasive: perhaps rugged and tough, devoid of neologisms, but in perfect harmony with the characters and the world he describes – the world of Transylvanian villages, which found in Slavici one of its earliest faithful and realistic chroniclers.

Al. PHILIPPIDE

TWO CHARMED SONS WITH STARS ON THEIR FOREHEADS

There was what was; if it hadn't been, there wouldn't be a story. Once upon a time there was this emperor. The emperor ruled over an entire world and in this world there was an old shepherd with his wife, and they had three daughters: Ana, Stana, and Milky.

Ana, the eldest sister, was so beautiful that the sheep stopped grazing when they caught a glimpse of her in their midst; Stana was so beautiful that wolves protected the flock when they saw she was its mistress; and Milky,

the youngest sister, white like milk foam and with a soft hair like the wool of little lambs, was beautiful – more beautiful than both of her sisters together – beautiful as she alone could be.

One summer day, when the sun rays were cooler, the three sisters went to pick strawberries on the forest edge.

As they were picking strawberries, they soon heard tramping, as if a group of horsemen were coming closer and closer. They were who they were: it was the emperor's son, no less, going hunting with his friends and courtiers.

All of them handsome, strong warriors, brought up in the saddle, but who could be the most handsome, riding the most spirited stallion? Who else, Prince Mighty, the emperor's son. The horses' fire quelled when they saw the three sisters and the horsemen slowed down.

"Listen, sister," said Ana to Stana, "if he married me, I'd knead him a bread, so when he ate of it, he'd feel young and mighty, mightier than all the mighty men of this world."

"Me," Stana said, "if he married me, I'd spin and weave for him a shirt so wondrous, that when he put it on, he'd fight dragons, pass through water without getting wet, and through fire without getting burned."

"And me," spoke Milky, the youngest sister, "if I was his wife, I'd give birth to two charmed sons, twins with golden hair and stars on their foreheads, stars like the Morning Star."

When they pass by girls, young men, even imperial ones, see with their eyes and listen with their ears. Listening, they heard, hearing, they understood, and understanding, they pulled the reins and jumped on the girls.

"May your word be blessed, and be mine, an emperor's wife!" said the emperor's son, lifting Milky into his saddle, with her strawberries.

"And you, mine!" spoke the first warrior to Stana, doing like his master.

"And you, mine!" spoke the second warrior to Ana, lifting her, too, into his saddle.

After they did so, the warriors went to the imperial court.

Next day the weddings took place and for three days and three nights the whole empire resounded with the guests' merry partying.

Three more days and three more nights later, the news spread in the country that Ana had cooked her bread: she picked the grains, ground them, sifted the flour, kneaded and cooked the bread, as she had said when she was out strawberry picking.

After another three times three days and three times three nights, more news spread in the country, that Stana had made the shirt: she picked flax threads, cooked and scutched them, she brushed the bundle, spun the threads, wove fabric and she sewed the shirt on her husband's body, as she had said when she was out strawberry picking.

Only Milky's word had not been fulfilled yet. But everything is done in time.

When seven times seven days from the first day of the wedding were up, the emperor's son came before his warriors and other courtiers looking happy and speaking hundreds of times more softly and more kindly than before, letting everybody know that from then on he wouldn't go out of the yard for a long time, because his heart made him spend day and night with his wife. Namely, it had happened as the merciful Lord allowed, the way Milky spoke when she was out strawberry picking. And the people, the country, the whole empire were happy, waiting to see what nobody had ever seen before.

Hey! But so many things happen in this world, and of them, some good, and many evil!

Namely what happened is that the emperor's son had a stepmother, and she had a daughter, by her first husband. Woe on the man who has such in-laws!

The stepmother wanted her daughter to become an emperor's wife and mistress over the empire, not Milky, the shepherd's daughter.

And now poor Milky was to suffer because it wasn't the way the stepmother wanted, but the way the Lord willed! See? That's the way the world is made: evil even in good thoughts.

Now the stepmother planned it this way, that when it happened the way Milky said, she'd let people believe and the emperor's son believe that it wasn't the way it was and the way it had been said.

But she couldn't do anything, because the emperor's son was always there, day and night, with his wife. So she thought and tried this, and tried that, with words and tricks, to make him leave, and then, Milky being left in her care, she would have the ball in her court. She knew it wouldn't be hard to find the ways and means.

The emperor's son couldn't be made to leave that easily. The words flew and the tricks were futile. Time passed, the day was getting nearer and nearer, it was going to be soon now and the emperor's son was always right there, with his wife.

When the stepmother saw there was no way, she brought herself to send a letter, note, and news to her brother, who ruled over the neighboring empire, she told him what was what, she spoke two or three words, to make him come with an army and warriors and call the emperor's son to war.

That was good, and the other, too. And it wasn't without fruit.

The emperor's son jumped sky high with anger when the news reached him that things were going badly, that this is what happened, the enemy's armies were coming, charging, and now it was going to be the way it hadn't been for a long time. I mean war, terrible war, war between two emperors!

Now he saw he had no choice, he had to do what he had to do.

That's the way emperors' sons are! No matter how much they protect their wives and how they look forward to see their sons, when they hear of war, their hearts jolt, their brains get hot, their eyes get dim, they leave wife and sons into God's care and they go to war as fast as the wind.

The emperor's son started out as fast as danger, went on like God's punishment, he fought the way he fought, the way he alone could fight, and the third day, at the crack of dawn, he was back at the imperial court, now his heart had quieted down in battle and he was full of unquenched longing to know what had happened since he left!

Hey! But what did he hear? What did he see? I even find it difficult to say it, when I see so much cruelty, such a soul without mercy, and such an ugly, horrible and terrible business, that you can't even tell the story without taking a deep breath first!

I mean it happened this way: when stars were on the wane, when the emperor's son was only three steps away from the yard gate, God's grace came down and it happened exactly the way Milky had said: two charmed sons, the emperor's sons, one like the other, with golden hair and morning stars on their foreheads.

But it wasn't meant for the world to see them.

The stepmother, evil as her thought, hurried to replace the charmed babies with two puppies and she buried the babies with golden hair and stars on their foreheads near the house corner, just under the emperor's window.

When the emperor's son came into the house and tried to hear and see, he heard nothing, he only saw the two puppies the stepmother had put in Milky's bed.

Few words were spoken. The emperor's son saw it with his own eyes and that was enough. Milky hadn't kept her word and now she was to get her punishment, nothing else.

The emperor's son had no choice, he did it against his heart, he ordered Milky to be buried in the ground up to her breasts, for people to see her and remember what happens to anyone who dares cheat on an emperor's son.

Then some other day it happened the way the stepmother wanted. The emperor's son was married the second time and again the wedding parties sounded for three days and three nights.

Hey! but the Lord doesn't bestow His grace on the unjust deed!

The two charmed sons had no rest under the ground.

On the place they were buried, two beautiful sycamore maple trees grew. When the stepmother saw them growing, she ordered them pulled out of their roots.

"Let them grow!" the emperor ordered. "I like them here, by the window! I've never seen such sycamore maples before."

So the sycamore maples grew, like other sycamore maples don't: one year every day, one year every night and at the crack of dawn, when stars are on the wane, three years in an instant. When three days and three nights were

up, the two sycamore maples were beautiful and tall, raising their branches up to the emperor's window. And, when the wind breezed and the leaves moved, the emperor listened, he listened for days to their whispers. It seemed to him he was hearing them forever sighing, like a wailing in words not understood, which his soul alone felt like a hidden, incomprehensible feeling, and it never let him rest during the day and never let him sleep at night. He got the creeps when he heard that whispering, but still, he felt he couldn't do without it.

But the stepmother figured out what was happening. She made up her mind to destroy the sycamore maples at any price. It was hard, but women's minds squeeze juice out of rocks. Women's cunning disarms warriors; what power can't do, the sweetness of words can, and what even the sweetness of words can't do, lying tears can.

One morning the empress sat on the edge of her husband's bed and she began to lure him with caresses and love words. It took long to get to his soft spot but... emperors are human, too.

"All right!" the emperor's son spoke, willy-nilly. "Let it be your way; let's destroy the sycamore maples: but we'll use one of them to make a bed for me and the other to make a bed for you."

The empress agreed to that deal.

The sycamore maples were cut and before nightfall the beds were already made and placed in the emperor's house.

When the emperor's son lay down in his new bed, he felt he was a hundred times heavier than before and still he rested as never before; but the empress felt she was lying on thorns and brambles, so she couldn't sleep all night.

After the emperor fell asleep, the beds began to squeak. And in the squeaking the empress heard a known meaning; she felt she heard words nobody could understand but herself.

"It is hard on you, brother?" one of the beds asked.

"No! It's not hard on me," answered the bed where the emperor slept, "I feel good, because my beloved father lies on me!"

"Me, it's hard on me!" the other bed said, "because an evil soul lies on me."

And so spoke the beds and the empress heard them up to the crack of dawn.

When daylight came, the empress decided to destroy the beds. So she gave orders for two other beds to be made, identical to those, and, when the emperor went hunting, she furtively placed the new ones in the house and threw the sycamore maple beds into the fire, up to the last piece of wood.

The fire burned: and in the fire cracks, the empress thought she heard incomprehensible words.

After the beds burned so that not one piece of an ember was left, the empress gathered the ashes and spread them in the wind, to be taken nine countries and nine seas away, so part and part would part forever.

But she didn't see that right when the fire burned most beautifully, two sparks rose and, going out into the light, they fell right on the place where the two sycamore maples had grown, and once they got there, the two sparks turned into two twin little lambs, one as beautiful as the other, one as meek as the other, one having as brilliant a wool as the other. Two lambs, each worth an empire!

When the empress saw the lambs grazing under the emperor's windows, she was taken with joy, she took them in her arms and gave them to her husband.

From that moment on, the emperor's son only thought about the lambs and nothing else: he thought that in every movement of the lambs, in every cry coming out of their mouths, in every look he felt something, heavy on him, still relieving his heart.

When she saw her husband loved the lambs, the empress got evil thoughts again, and she never found peace until, with sweet and bitter, with kind words and tears, she determined the emperor's son to allow the little lambs to be killed.

The little lambs were killed. Whatever couldn't be eaten, the empress ordered to be thrown into fire... into the fire went skin, and wool, and bones, and everything there was.

Nothing was left.

Nobody noticed that right on the bottom of the pot where the meat was washed, in a crack of the staves, two pieces of the little lambs' brains were left. Later, when the emperor's housekeeper went down the valley to take water, the brain pieces were washed away and they traveled with the stream until the big river flowing right in the middle of the empire. There, the two pieces turned into two little fish with gold scales, one just like the other, the same, so people would know there were twins.

One day the imperial fishermen woke up early in the morning and threw their nets into the water. Right at the time when the last two stars were on the wane in the sky, one of the fishermen lifted his net and saw what he had never seen before: two fish with gold scales.

The fishermen gathered to see the miracle, and after they saw and wondered, they decided to take the fish the way they were, alive, to the emperor and offer them to him in honor.

"Don't take us there, because that's where we are coming from and they'll kill us there," said one of the fish.

"So what do you want me to do with you?" the fisherman asked.

"Go get dew from the leaves, let us swim in dew, put us in sunshine and then don't come back until the sun's rays have drunk the dew on us," said the second fish.

The fisherman did like he was told: he gathered dew from leaves, let the fish swim in dew, put them in sunshine and didn't go back there until the sun's rays drank the dew on them.

What did he find? What did he see? Two children, charmed sons with golden hair and stars on their foreheads, one like the other, so whoever saw them knew they were twins.

The children grew up fast. Every day a year, every night another year and, at the crack of dawn, when stars are on the wane in the sky, three years in an instant.

And then they grew as others don't grow: three times in age, three times in strength, and again three times in wisdom. When three days and three nights were up, the children were twelve years of age, twenty-four years old in strength, and thirty-six years old in wisdom.

"Now let us go see our father," spoke one of the boys to the fisherman.

The fisherman dressed both of them up in beautiful clothes, made lamb-wool hats for them, and they covered their heads well with these, so nobody would see their golden hair and the stars on their foreheads, then the sons went to the emperor's court.

It was broad daylight when they arrived.

"We want to see the emperor!" spoke one of the boys to the guard who was standing, carrying many weapons, before the court gate.

"That's impossible, because he's having lunch," the guard answered.

"Precisely because he's having lunch!" spoke the second boy, walking through the gate, unabated.

The guards gathered, trying to chase the boys out of the yard, but the boys passed by them like quicksilver through one's fingers. Three steps forward and three steps up, and they reached the big house, where the emperor was having lunch with his courtiers.

"We want to come in!" spoke one of the boys harshly to the servants at the door.

"That's impossible," a servant answered.

"Yeah? We'll see if it's impossible or not!" the other boy cried, walking stubbornly around the servants, on their right and their left.

But there were many servants and the boys were just two. They crowded and made such noise in front of the door, that the whole yard was filled.

"What's happening outside?" asked the emperor angrily.

The boys became peaceful when they heard their father's voice.

"Two boys want to come in here by force!" said a servant, going in to see the emperor.

"By force? Come in by force at my court? Who would do that? Who are those boys?" cried the emperor in one breath.

"I don't know, Your Majesty," answered the servant, "but this sure is weird, because the boys are as strong as lion cubs, and they crossed through

the guards from the gate and now we are in trouble! And then they are so stubborn, that they didn't even take their fur hats off their heads."

The emperor reddened with anger.

"Out with them," he cried, "put the dogs on them!"

"Never mind, we'll go away," the boys said, crying when they heard those harsh words, and they started to go down the stairs.

When they were about to get off through the gate, a servant stopped them, hurrying and gasping.

"The emperor said come in, the empress wants to see you!"

The boys thought about it for a while, then they turned back, climbed the stairs and went to see the emperor wearing their fur hats.

The table was full, it was long and wide, and at it sat all the imperial guests, the emperor sat at the head of the table, the empress sat beside him on twelve silk pillows.

When the boys came in, one of the pillows under the empress fell. She was left sitting on eleven pillows.

"Take those fur hats off your heads!" a courtier cried to the boys.

"The head coverage is man's honor. We have our orders to be as we are."

"All right!" the emperor said, now kinder when he heard the words spoken by the boy. "Be as you are! But who are you? Where are you coming from? And what do you want?"

"We are twin brothers, two offshoots of a trunk torn into two, half buried in the ground and half at the head of the table; we are coming from where we started and we've arrived at the place we started from; we have traveled a long way, we have spoken with the breath of winds, we have spoken the language of beasts, and we have sung with the water, and now we speak with human words, and we wish to sing to you a song you know without knowing you know it!"

The second pillow jumped from under the empress.

"Let them go, they talk crazy!" she said to her husband.

"No, let them sing!" the emperor answered. "You are the one who wanted to see them and I want to listen to them. Sing, boys!"

The empress was silent and the boys began to sing the story of their life.

"Once upon a time there was this emperor," the boys began: the third pillow fell from under the empress.

When the boys told how the emperor's son went out to war, three pillows fell from under the empress at the same time.

When the boys finished their song, no pillow was left under the empress, and when they took off their fur hats and showed their golden hair and the stars on their foreheads, the guests, the courtiers and the emperor covered their eyes, so as not to be blinded by all that brilliance.

And then it was the way it had been ordained from the beginning. Milky was placed at the table head near her husband; the stepdaughter stayed on as the last servant at Milky's court, and they tied the evil stepmother on the tail of a mad mare and they ran around the country seven times with her, so the world would know and never forget that whoever starts out evil, ends up evil.

*English version by
Monica VOICULESCU*