

# ION CREANGĂ

## 1839–1889



....*Just like the common people, his unique guide and source of inspiration, Creangă's mind holds few abstract ideas: icons and sensations prevail. His memory is of a sensorial kind; he sees splendidly; the facts that succeed one another before his playful eyes leave a deep impression in his brain irrigated by his rich blood, and the imprint never fades away. Any time he wants, Creangă is capable of resorting to it: the impression will show before him, with its wealth of colors and limpid contours, ready to lend body to ideas.*

*Nicolae IORGA*

## **N** **CHILDHOOD MEMORIES**

ow and again I pause to reminisce about the times and folks that graced the place I hail from, back in the days when – Lord, have mercy on my soul – I had just started as a tiny tot, down at my parents' house in Humulești, a village strait across the river Neamț, as you come from the town; a merry village it was, too, and large, divided in three parts holding together; the Village Hearth, the Upper Reaches and the Stragglers.

Why, Humulești was no mean village, both old and well established: with handpicked villagers, with sturdy lads, with bonny lasses who had a way with spinning – both in the village dance and in the work room – so very much so, that the whole village would spin to the refrain of whirring spindles far and wide; with a gem of church, and with a choice of priests and deacons and a choice congregation – the pride and honour of their village.

And Father Ioan who lived beneath the bill, Lord Bless him!, O what a worthy, gentle man he was... It was all through his urge that trees were planted in abundance in the church yard, which was fenced all around with goodly beams capped with a fringe of shingles; and what a sturdy cell he had built for a school, just opposite the church. You should have seen that worthy man of God going from house to house undaunted by fatigue, together with Master Vasile, son of Ilioiaia, the deacon of the church, a stalwart bachelor, as strong as he was handsome, entreating all and sundry to send their children to be taught at school. And lo, a host of boys and girls assembled to be schooled. I was one of their number, just a chit of a boy as shy as shy could be, afraid of my own shadow.

The very school-girl was Smărăndița, Father Ioan's own daughter; an impish lass she was, too, quick-witted and so zealous, that she would leave most of the boys behind, in scholarship as well as in mischief. Our priest, nevertheless, would drop by almost daily, to keep an eye on us... And there stood he one day, our Father Ioan, not empty-handed, but with a brand new wooden bench he brought to school. Having enquired of the deacon how we fared, he pondered for a while, then named the bench The White Horse, and left it in our school.

On yet another day he came again, without a hint of warning, the village tanner, gaffer Totea, in his tow. The tanner had a gift for our new school: a whip of goodly straps handsomely pleated, which Father Ioan did name Saint Nicolai, after the patron of our village church... Then he appealed to gaffer Totea to go on making whips from time to time, if peradventure he lay hands on goodly straps, the heftier, the better... Master Vasile just smiled, while all of us school children were left to stare in awe at one another. And Father Ioan gave an ordinance, and said that on Saturdays boys and girls were to be catechized, which meant the deacon would question each and every one of us concerning all the things we had learned during the week; and all mistakes were to be scored in charcoal for the record; and when all was said and done, the deacon was to flog the questioned pupil with Saint Nicolai for each mistake. As it happened, Father Ioan's damsel, bouncy and prone to mirth as was her wont, burst into giggles. More's the pity poor girl...

"Now then, young lady, come, give the horse a try – said Father Ioan exceeding ill at ease – it's time to take Saint Nicolai off his peg and do the honours." For all the intercession of gaffer Totea and Master Vasile, Smărăndița was treated to a mighty tanning, and in its aftermath she sat down, yea and wept, in bridal modesty, face hidden in her hands, her smock rippling with sobs. On seeing such a thing, we froze with horror. Father Ioan, nonetheless, bribed us into submission with the odd piece of money and wafers from the church distributed amongst us on and off, and things were running smoothly; the boys would change the blackboard every day, and every Saturday – the catechizing.

... In the absence of father Ioan and the deacon, we would go out in the church yard, the book of hours open on our laps, and since their pages were a trifle sticky, they lured flies and bumble-bees galore; then we would slam the tome shut, and ten to twenty lives were wasted all at once – flies faced near extinction at our hands... Till one fine day when Father Ioan, out of the blue, demanded to inspect our books of hours. On seeing them all smeared with blood without exception, his hands shot to his head helpless grief as soon as he figured out the cause, he started taking us, one at a time, for a ride on the White Horse, whilst he kept fondling us with good Saint Nicolai by way of atonement for the tribulations of the righteous flies and the righteous bumble-bees which had been put by us to such ordeals.

Not long after that happened, one day in May, just before Whitsuntide, Master Vasile, the fool, for lack of a better name, was consulted by the fiend to ask Costaches' Nica to have me catechized. Now Nica, older than I was, as unsurpassed in learning as a lame frog in height, was a variance with me in account of Father Ioan's Smărăndița, whom, in spite of myself, and to my sorrow, I'd taken a swipe at because she wouldn't let me catch my flies... and Nica took to questioning me, and, behold, he started scoring masses of mistakes upon a piece of shingle: one, two, three, all the way to nine and twenty. "Well, well, well! Things are looking pretty grim, I reasoned with myself; he isn't through with questioning me yet, and by the look of it, there'll be a whole lot more mistakes to reckon with!..." I started seeing black before my eyes, as my frame shook with fury... "Now, things have come to a pretty pass, to be sure. Well, what are you to do, Nica, my boy?" I said to myself. And I kept taking furtive glances to the door of my salvation, fretting like anything, fleet ready for take-off, in the hope that the loiterer who was outside would chance to return, as the rule was no two pupils should be allowed out at the same time; and I was secretly grinding my teeth, as there was no one coming to spare me the ride, and the blessing of Nicolai the bruise-maker. Yet the true Saint Nicolai must have known of my plight, for, lo, the accursed boy promptly returned to school. Upon which I, not bothering anymore with asking for allowance, made for the door, took flight, and without even pretending to dash behind the school-house, I took to my feet and ran towards our house for all I was worth. As I happened to take a look behind, I saw two brutes already giving chase; that got me running faster still; I passed our house and did not pause to enter, but turned left into our neighbour's yard; and from the yard I snicked into the pen, and from the pen, into the maize-garden behind the boys in hot pursuit; the maize had just been hoed the second time. Before they had a chance to come abreast of me, for sheer terror, I myself don't know how, I managed to burry myself in the loose dirt at the root of a maize plat. Costache's Nica, my archenemy, and Catinca's Toader, the brute that was with him, walked past me talking to each other greatly grieved; God must have blinded them, for try as they may, they lay not hands on me. After a while, when the last rustle of the maize had died

out, and not the scraping of a hen was heard, I surfaced suddenly, dirt streaming from my head, and went straight home to mother; chocking on tears, I told her I would go to school no more – not a pain of death.

On the morrow, nonetheless, father Ioan dropped by, had a talk with father, and they somehow lured me back to school by gentle persuasion.

“For it would be a shame to have next to no learning, said father Ioan – you’ve only learned your ABC, no more: now you’ve moved on to the book of hours, and before you know it, you’ll move on to the psalter, which is the key to all the knowledge, and, one never knows what time may bring, you will peradventure become the priest of this here church of saint Nicolai; it is for you, young ones, I go to all this trouble. For I’ve got but one daughter, and I have yet to see whom I shall choose to be my son in law.”

Well, well, well, it was the mention of being priest and father Ioan’s Smărăndița that did the trick: I forgot all about them flies, and started thinking other thoughts and making other plans: took to writing, in addition to reading, to swinging the censer in church, to singing in the choir, the way young lads would do. And Father Ioan took to me, and Smărăndița would sometimes cast her eyes over me furtively, and Master Vasile would now charge me to question pupils, and all in all, a very different kettle of fish was boiling. Costache’s Nica, my mean, ungainly, husky-voiced tormentor, had no authority over me anymore.

But man’s ways are not God’s ways. One fine day, Saint Foca’s Day, as it happened, the mayor of the village summoned the villagers to do some toad repairs. It was rumoured the king would travel that way to the monasteries. And Master Vasile fell for it, poor man!

“Come boys, let’s lend a helping hand ourselves, to have the road mended, or else, when the king travels this way, he will say our village is more slothful than other villages.”

So off we went from school, come one, come all. Some would be shoveling with their shovels, others would push full wheelbarrows around, others would haul full wagons, others still would strain at laden bushels; in short, people would labour for all they were worthwhile. The mayor, Petrica’s Nica, together with the guard, the foreman, and some disreputable tax-collectors were milling about among the workers. And suddenly we just saw a tangle of people on the river bank, one of them blaring mightily.

“What could that be?” people wondered, rushing to the site from all the sides.

It was a press-gang. They had pressed Master Vasile into service, and now they were binding him hand and foot, and shaking him to send him to town... Now that’s what the mayor had summoned all those people for. It was by guile that lads were pressed into service, back in those days. And an accursed sight to behold it was, too. The other lads vanished into thin air, while we, children, went home crying our hearts out.

“Accursed be the wretched mayor, and as he brake a mother’s heart today, so may saint Toca break his wretched heart – his and his minions ,” the village women cursed with bitter tears from every side. Master Vasile’s mother was following her son to town, lamenting him as he’d been dead already.

“Come, Mother, never mind; there’s much more to this world than eyes can see,” Master Vasile was comforting her “there’s a good life to live for soldiers too, as long as they are righteous. Saint George and Saint Demetrios were both soldiers, together with a host of martyrs that suffered in the flesh, all for the love of Christ, if only we could ever be like them!”

So, we lost Master Vasile to his fate. Now Father Ioan was searching high and low to find another teacher, but the like of Master Vasile, obedient, hard-working and modest as a maid, was nowhere to be found. There was deacon Iordache still, it’s true, the wheezy church choir leader, but then what good was he? He did know all the verses, yea, by rote, but he was falling apart with old age, and on top of it all, he had the gift of bibbing... Our school thus fell into disuse for quite a while. Some of us, who would still cling to Father Ioan, got an education of sorts: church makes the man, as they say. On Sundays we would drone in the choir, and, what do you know, were rewarded with wafers. And when Christmas Eve, and then Epiphany Eve came, some thirty-forty of us would run from house to house, trampling a wide path in the snow before the priest; on Christmas we would neigh like young foals, while on Epiphany we would chant Kyrie eleison causing the whole village to ring with our voices. And when the priest came before the house, we would stand in two rows and open him the way, while he would proudly smoothen his beard as he was addressing the host:

“These here are my lambs, son. It is such great occasion like this one that they are waiting for, rejoicing at the prospect the whole year. Now, have you got for them, by any chance, a dish of boiled chick-peas, dumplings, hemp seed, honey buns and cabbage pies?”

“Oh, but of course, reverend Father, do come in, and sanctify our house, and bless our food, and tarry for a while – may those who come awooing also tarry.”

At the mere mention of food we would rush I, mouth all set or the onslaught...

And quite right, too, since such occasions were but rare. Now, come to think of it, we overdid it once: so wildly did we jostle, that we upset the host’s table, food and all, right in the middle of the house; Father Ioan turned all red with embarrassment, yet it was in a gentle tone of voice he said:

“Now you can see for yourselves the meaning of the words ‘good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over...’ Still, my sons, you ought to be more careful.”

On the day of our church’s patron saint, nevertheless, the feast would last a whole week long, and one only wished that the feast would last a whole week long, and one only wished that one had a large enough belly to store

away all the honey-wheat cake and all the food that came in such abundance. There were deacons and priests and bishops and all sorts of people from far and wide coming together for the Humulești church feast, and all of them were well pleased in the end. Moreover, a lot of strangers were wined and dinned by the villagers in their own houses. And, Mother, may the Lord rest her soul, was beside herself with joy whenever guests happened to call on us, and she was graced to share her daily bread with them.

“Whether my lads will do this when I’m dead, I do not know. So let me cast myself my bread upon the waters, to make provision for the afterlife...”

When I was learning at school, Mother would learn with me at home, and she had come to know the book of hours, the psalter and the life of Alexander the Great better than me, and she was overjoyed to see I cared for study.

As for Father...he would have rather had me as Petre’s Ștefan’s Nica, a worthy husbandman in Humulești...

Mother, nevertheless, would have gladly worked all her life away for the sake of seeing me study further. So she would constantly nag Father to send me somewhere to school, for she had once heard it said in church that the learned man shall be wise, and have the unlearned for his servant.

And besides, the hags who divided by casting 41 corns upon the bottom of a sieve, all the star gazers and card readers of whom she had enquired about me, as well as all the church-going women of the village had put no end of weird notions into her head, each of them more puzzling than the other, to wit, that I’d rub shoulders with people of repute, that I’m so lucky as a frog is hairy, that I am gifted with an angel’s voice, and many more such fables. All these to the effect that Mother, who had a soft spot for me anyway, had come to believe I would turn out to be the next Cucuzel, the pride of Christendom, who would soften the hardest of hearts to the point of tears, and would draw hosts of people to the wilderness of the woods, where he would cause the whole creature to rejoice in his song.

“For goodness’ sake, woman, you must have lost your marbles”; Father would say, seeing she was so zealous for me. “Now if all were meant to be learned, as you reckon, there’d be no one left to do a spell of humble work. Haven’t you heard the story of the one who once went over to Paris, wherever that may, ox-headed and came back from there cow-headed? Tell me, pray, Luca’s Petre’s Grigore, from our village – what schools did he go to? And yet he can tell all those parables, to say nothing of the recitations at weddings. Can’t you see that wisdom is not to be learned? You either have it or you don’t, and that’s that.”

“Whether it be so or not,” Mother said, “I want my son to be a priest whatever you might say.”

“Priest, of all things,” Father said, “Hear, Hear! Can’t you see he’s good for nothing: a loiterer and a sluggard, and so slothful you wouldn’t find his like. In the morning, you’re out of breath before you wake him up. As soon as he’s awake, he asks for food. As long as he’s a young boy he’s swatting

flies with his book of hours, and all day long he roams the river banks and goes swimming, instead of taking them horses to pasture, and giving me a hand with my work according to his might. In winter he does nothing but skating and tobogganning. It's all your schooling that made him that way. Yet a little while, and he'll go awenching, and thus he'll never be of any use to me."

And, your humble narrator is privileged to inform you, I was the subject of extensive argument between Father and Mother, until later on that summer when, in the month of August, we were privileged to receive the visit of the 1848 cholera, which started taking indiscriminate toll of Humulești, so that the village would ring with lamentations left and right. Yours truly, true to form, would either rush to the gate as the bier was carried past our house, and mumbled terrible spells in its wake, or I would escort it all the way to church, receiving a lavish reward for my efforts: a bosomful of dough rings, pippins, nuts in a tinfoil wrapping, carobs and figs, which I harvested from the funeral tree and triumphantly carried back home, to father and Mother's great awe. To keep me away from the pestilence, they dispatched me to the pasture-land where our sheep were kept, to bide my time there till the outburst would subside. But that very night the cholera caught up with me, and ravaged me with cramps, and tied me up in knots, and my very soul was on fire with thirst. Yet the principal of the flock and the shepherds couldn't care less; they just turned to the other side as I hollered in agony, and went on snoring. With what little strength I had left, I crawled to the well behind the shed, and would gulp down a pailful of water in one hour, if not more. I can say I spent that whole night at the well, and went didn't get a wink of sleep. It was only at daybreak that our shepherd, Vasile Bordeianu, took pity on me, and went down all the way to Humulești, a two hours' walk away, and broke the news to father, who came to take me home by horse-wagon. And all the way I would constantly ask for water, while father tried to turn my thoughts from thirst with tales and fables, till we came to the next well. Thus we arrived in Humulești; the Lord be praised. And behold, the village medicks were already at our house: gaffer Vasile Țandura and another one, whose name I cannot recall, were frying honeycomb dregs with suet in a huge pan. And after giving me a memorable rubdown with lovage vinegar – I can remember every little thing – they spread the honeycomb dregs, still hot, upon a sheet, and swaddled me tightly in it, like a babe; and after I know not how long, I fell in a deep slumber, and it was one day later, before dusk that I woke up, as sound can be: may the Lord give rest to gaffer Tandura and his mate... And, as they say, the bad sort has nine lives. Before the evening came, I had already roamed most of the village, and even had a quick dip in the river with my friend Goian's Chiriac, a loiterer and lout, just like myself. Yet Father didn't tell me off on that occasion. He left me to my own devices for a while.

When winter came, Mother resumed importuning Father for my further schooling. Father retorted he had no more money left to spend on me.

“Deacon Vasile would charge us more mite only one month. While deacon Simion Fosa of Țuțuieni, the Gungler, just because he talks more pompously than others and puffs at the weed all day long, wants three farthings a month. Think of it! The lad, with the clothes he is wearing thrown into the bargain, is not worth all the farthings I’ve already spent on him.”

On hearing that, Mother no longer held her peace:

“You pitiful wretch! How will you ever know what I am talking about, unlettered as you are. When you are throwing farthings down the hatch, you don’t seem to bewail them. Todosica’s Petre, our publican, made 900 lei out of you, right? Vasile Roibu of the stragglers, just as much, and many, many more like them. You keep on forking out for Valica’s Rusta and Onofrei’s Mariuca, and don’t complain. I do know of your capers, don’t think Smaranda sleeps, o may you sleep the slumber of the just! And you have no money left for the lad, you say... Listen to me! You’ll rot in hell, and there’ll be no one to bail you out of there, unless you do your best to have one lad become a priest for you. When it comes to confession, you dash like Satan at the whiff of incense. You only go to church on Easter. That’s how you think you lay treasure in heaven?”

“Make no more words, you, woman, for church is in a man’s heart, and when I’m dead, I’ll have to fill of church,” said Father, “stop babbling like a hypocrite, the Pharisee. You’d better smite your chest and cry out like the tax-collector did: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner, who frothes at the mouth against her man for nothing.”

To cut a long story short, after all the haggling Mother and Father had on my account, it was Mother who emerged victor; for one Sunday, at Christmastide, Grandfather David Creangă of Pipirig, Mother’s father, called on us, and seeing what a cause of scandal I was to Father and Mother, said:

“Now, Ștefan, and you, Smaranduca, give no further thought to the matter; look, today is Sunday, tomorrow is Monday, and a market day, but on Tuesday, if we reach it in good health, I shall take my grandson with me, and send him to Broșteni, with my Dumitru, to the professor Nicolai Nanu at the school of Baloș, and you’ll see for yourselves, what he is going to make out of him, for my other boys, Vasile and Gheorghe, have also learned there, much to my content. For over twenty years I’ve been the mayor of Pipirig, and had a hard time doing sums. Though I can read all church books ever written, they are no help at all when one has to do sums. Nevertheless, since my boys have come back from school, they keep the records for me to the last mite, and my life is blessed; now I can be mayor for the rest of my life, and none the worse for it. Upon my word, the school of Alecu Baloș is an act of great charity for those who care to try it. And, God is my witness, what an accomplished, wise professor did he find! He’s so soft-spoken, and gives such warm reception to each and everyone, that it’s a blessing just to call



upon him. May the Lord bless the womb that carried him, for his is a good soul, and that is that. It is a blessing for us the farmers of the mountains. When I came with my father and my brothers Petrea and Alexandru and Nica from Transylvania to Pipirig, some sixty years ago, if not more, there weren't such schools in Moldavia."

"It's not a bad thing, Stefan, to have this here boy schooled, and I mean not for priesthood, as my Smaranda thinks, for priesthood is laden with burdens, it's wearisome to bear. And rather than a no good priest, better no priest at all. Instruction does bring solace, nonetheless. Had I been unable to read, I would have lost my wits with all I had to go through. But as it is, I open the Lives of the Saints and see all manner of things, and say: Lord, you certainly endowed your chosen ones with patience. Compared to what these books tell, our tribulations are mere a trifle. Moreover, being like unto an ox is no good for a man. There is a lot of wisdom to be gleaned from books; and to tell the truth, you are no longer taken for a fool by all and sundry. As far as I see, the lad has a good head, and considering the schooling he's had this far, he sings and read exceeding well."

And many such things did Grandfather David Creanga speak with Mother and Father most of Sunday night, and Monday night, too, for he would stay with us whenever he came from Pipirig to market to buy aught that he needed.

Early Tuesday morning, having hitched the panniers upon the horses and tying them neatly with the halts: the second to the tail of the first, the third to the tail of the second, the third to the tail of the third, the way mountain people do, Grandfather said:

"Well, Ștefan and Smaranduca, fare you well, for I'm now on my way. Come, grandson, are you ready?"

"Ready, Grandfather, let's go," I replied fighting a plate of smoked ribs and fried sausage, which Mother had set before me.

And taking my leave from my parents, off I went with Grandfather to Pipirig. As it happened, the morning was bitterly cold and chilling to the bone. And as we crossed the bridge, the Ozana, just outside Vânători, Grandfather at the back, leading the train of horses, and myself at the front, my boots did somehow slip, and I myself fell all the way into the water. Was I ever grateful to Grandfather!

"These buskins of yours are no good at all," he said as he quickly pulled me out, drenched to the bone and frozen through and through, for the icy water had rushed in from all the sides.

And in no time he pulled the boots off my feet, for they had frozen solid.

"Thonged moccasins is what you should be wearing. They give rest to the foot, and on a freezing day like this they're nice and warm. And in the time it took him to say this I was already wrapped in a thick wooly blanket, tucked into one of the panniers on a horse, and there we went our way to Pipirig.

And when Grandmother saw the sorry state I was in, crouching in that pannier like a beggar she cried her soul out. I've never seen the like of her for crying: she'd cry no matter what, that's how compassionate she was. It was out of compassion that she would eat no beef; and when she went to church on the appointed days, she would bewail all the dead buried in the churchyard, whether they be her kin or mere strangers. Grandfather, nonetheless, was a man of remarkable sobriety, who would proceed to do things his own way, and left Grandmother to her own devices, for she was but a woman.

"O Lord have mercy, David, you never seem to learn: how came you dragged the poor lad out of his house on such a day like this?"

"For you to marvel at, Nastasia," Grandfather said, and he took out a boar of skin from the scullery to cut out a pair of thonged-moccasins each, for Dumitru and myself, which he then pleated neatly round the edges, and pierced holes in their sides and through each set of holes he threaded black horse hair. And on the third day after that, with fresh changes of clothes on and two pairs of white homespun puttees apiece, we softly slipped into our moccasins and, having kissed Grandmother's hand goodbye, we cut through the village of Boboiești; once again in the company of Grandfather and Dumitru, Mother's youngest brother, and climbing past the foot of Halauca, we finally arrived in Farcasa, where we stayed overnight with father Alexievici of Dorna, who had a goitre at the bottom of his neck as big as a good-sized flagon, which made his snoring sound like a blast of the bagpipes, so that for the most of the night we couldn't get a wink of sleep because of him. It was not the poor priest's fault; and as he used to say, woe to them whose goitre is inside their head, rather than to them who wear their goitre on the outside.

On the following day we left Farcasa on the way to Borca, and continued to Pârâul Cârjei and Cotargas until we reached Broșteni. Grandfather took us to our lodgings, which he payed for out of his own pocket; we were to lodge with one Irinuca. Then he took us to the professor, and then to church, where he dedicated us to various icons; then he took his leave of us bidding us best of health and went back home; from time to time he would send us the things we needed.

As Broșteni was a straggling village, like most mountain villages, the wolf and the bear were bold enough to show their faces in it in broad daylight; one house was tucked under a crag, the next one way across the river Bistrița, beneath some other crag, wherever their owners deemed it fit to have them built. As for Irinuca, she had an ancient log hut, windows not larger than the palms of your hands, covered with shingles, fenced with fir-wood pailing, and built exactly at the foot of the mountain, on the left bank of Bistrița, not far from the bridge. Irinuca was neither young nor what we would call old; she had a husband and a slattern of a daughter, so hideously ugly that one dreaded the prospect of spending the night under the same roof with her. The good thing was she was away from Monday morning till

Saturday in the evening. She would join her father in the woods to fell trees for timber, and for the whole week worked as hard as a man for a mere pittance: two people with a yoke of oxen in winter time could barely earn their porridge. Moreover, many a labourer would come back home on Saturday with broken legs and with their oxen maimed to cap their meagre earnings.

The hut on the left bank on Bistrița, her husband, her daughter, the oxen in the woods, a he-goat and two shiny mangy she-goats that used the front porch for a stable, were all Irinuca had to her name. That, nonetheless, is no concern of mine. Let's go on with our own story.

As soon as Grandfather was off, we went to school the very next day; seeing we wore our hair long, the professor ordered one of the pupils to cut it for us. On hearing such a thing, we shed no end of tears, and prayed he wouldn't have us disfigured. To no avail, though: the professor supervised our disgrace himself, as we were shorn to the scalp. Then he placed us among the other pupils, and asked us to learn this and that to our best ability, and the "Angelus" by rote.

And that's how we fared, till we went into lent. And one fine morning we got up rife with scabies from Irinuca's mangy goats. Well, well, what were we to do? The professor would no longer allow us to come to school, Irinuca was unable to heal us, there was no one to give the news to Grandfather, our food supplies were running lower by the day; in short things had come to a pretty pass.

I don't know how it came about, but round Annunciation, late in March, the weather turned exceedingly hot, it thawed all of a sudden the torrent started running overnight, and Bistrița swell from bank to bank, almost sweeping Irinuca's house away. And in those heats, we would daub ourselves with unsettled lye, basked naked in the sun until the ashes dried upon us, and then had a dip in the Bistrița. That's what a local hag had recommended as a remedy for scabies. Now you can well imagine what that meant: bathing in the Bistrița, way up at Broșteni, twice a day in the middle of Lent. And neither cramps, nor shivers, nor any other ailment clang to us. Yet neither did we get rid of the scabies...

One day, as Irinuca was out in the village, where she would loiter for ages, we sought ways to get busy. We climbed the mountain behind her house, a length of piling hangs, and seeing the torrents run mightily, one in particular which was as white as milk, we were urged by the fiend to dislodge a huge rock from its place. And before we knew it, the rock started rolling downhill, bouncing high in the air, and crushed through Irinuca's fence and through the porch, the mangy goats abode, and plunged into the Bistrița, midstream, causing the flow to churn with to the ground, one goat was torn into pieces – a most serious matter, to be sure. We had forgotten scabies and all in our terror.

“Come get your things together before the woman comes, and let us run away by raft to my brother Vasile in Borca,” Dumitru said, for rafts were already running.

We grabbed what few belongings we had, ran to the rafting people, and off they floated with us without delay. What Irinuca might have said behind us, if anything at all, I do not know; all I know is I was scared out of my wits till we came to Borca, where we stayed overnight. On the next day, Palm Sunday, as it happened, we left Borca by way of Plaiul-Bătrân, where we joined two locals on horseback, and made for Pipirig. It was a bright Sunday, and the riders said they had never seen such an early spring in their life.

As for Dumitru and myself, we sang with joy, picking flowers as we went, and we gamboled and frolicked as if we were not the scabious two of Broșteni responsible for the carnage at Irinuca’s house. And as we went on our way, at noontime or so, the bright weather suddenly turned to a frightful storm bending the pines almost all the way to the ground. Winter had obviously kept something in store for us. It started drizzling, the drizzle turned to sleet, then it froze and it started to snow, and so hard did it snow, that without warning the road vanished before us. And it went on snowing, and it darkened all around us until we couldn’t see the next one of us.

“Now isn’t this weather acting up?” one of the riders asked with a sigh. “I would have been surprised, had the wolf eaten up this winter in such a haste.” Soon we were lost as lost could be. We had nothing left to do but press on blindly, trusting in fate alone.

“Listen, a cock is crowing”, the other rider said. ”Let’s go that way and peradventure we’ll run into some village.”

And we started climbing down some frightfully steep slopes, and went on climbing down, and got tangled in thickets of fir trees, and the horses would stumble and skid and roll down, and Dumitru and I would shiver with the bitter cold and cry; and the riders just gasped and bit their lips because of the cold and the anger; in places, the snow was waist-deep, and the night was falling when we came to a jumble of rocks, where we heard the voice of a stream which went the way we did, from high up to the valley, running against rocks in spite of itself on its down-racing course... But unlike us, it continued on its way, while we were forced to stop and count our blessings.

“Well lads, it’s time for bed,” one of the riders said, setting a whole pine on fire with his tinder-box.

“There’s no getting around some things in life. Let’s better have ourselves a feast,” the other said as he produced a frozen loaf out of his bag. He proceeded to thaw it upon the glowing embers, and let us each have a chunk of it. And o how smoothly it went down our throats, as if it had been buttered. After having a meal of sorts, we curled around the fire; snow fell from above; underneath it was wet; from one side it was freezing, from the other it was burning hot, as things are wont to be in such occasions and at such times at that. And as we tossed and turned in agony, yet another misfortune

threatened to befall us: the burning pine would have nearly set us on fire, had not one of the riders been quick enough to notice. By the look of it Irinuca's curses had caught up with us.

Day finally dawned, and after we washed in the snow and made the sign of the cross upon ourselves as it's the Christian custom, we went on after the riders back to where we had come down from. The snow was falling lighter than before, and after much till we chanced upon the road. We plodded on till dusk, when we came to Grandfather David in Pipirig. When Grandmother saw us, she was so overjoyed she started bewailing us right away.

"My David is bent on making a quick end of me, the way he carries on, and that's for sure. Look at their poor skin, unfortunate boys, all eaten up by sores! Oh, how the scabies did torment them among strangers, poor lambs!"

And after Grandmother bemoaned over us and lamented some more, as was her wont, and after feeding us the best she had, making sure we stuffed our faces properly, she ran to the scullery and came back with a pitcher of birch tar, rubbed us all over with it, from the crown of our heads to the soles of our feet, and then put us to bed on top of the oven, to keep warm. And after the same fashion she continued to rush us two or three times during a day and a night until, on Good Friday we woke up thoroughly cleansed. At about the same time news came from Broșteni about the havoc we'd wreaked, and Grandfather, without further haggling, recompensed Irinuca with four golden sovereigns.

Then, on Saturday before Easter he sent me home to my parents in Humulești. And on Easter Sunday, so flawlessly did I say the Angelus in church, that all would watch with mouth agape. And Mother was beside herself with joy over me. Father Ioan sat me at the same table with himself and Smărăndița and I cracked lots of red eggs between ourselves.

*English version by  
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