

PETRE ISPIRESCU

1830–1887



A brilliant debut, Eternal Life and Everlasting Youth, or Prince Charming's Tale, revealed Ispirescu as an enthusiast of folk literature as early as 1862. Ten years later he published the Legends and Tales of the Romanians "to prevent their loss," and to enable those "competent and erudite to derive any light they may find therein to complete the history of our nation," in his own self-effacing words. A fellow writer, Odobescu, in a speech delivered at the Romanian Academy, said: "What in this country was done unassumingly and without any pretense of erudition by a typesetter, Petre Ispirescu, was done in Germany by first-class scholars, the Grimm brothers." And Delavrancea, in 1887: "(In) Tales of the Romanians, one hears the voice of a whole nation. With Ispirescu, there is neither dialect, nor location. He is from everywhere, from all times, naïve, fun-loving, a good yarn spinner, sad, rich, just like our people."

ETERNAL LIFE AND EVERLASTING YOUTH

Once upon a time, in the olden days, when two Sundays came together and bears fought with their tails; when wolves and lambs hugged and kissed each other like brothers; when fleas wore iron horseshoes a dozen stone each and leapt high in the sky to bring people tales therefrom; when flies would write on the walls, he who doubts our story is the biggest among liars!

...A great king reigned with his queen, and both were young and fair; and as they craved to have children, they often did what they had to do there-

for; they went to seek advice from witch doctors and philosophers, to read the stars and find out if they would have children; yet it was all in vain. Eventually, the king heard about a sage living in a nearby village, and sent for him; but the man replied to the messengers that whoever needed his advice should call on him in person. So the king and his queen gathered a few barons, warriors and footmen and set out to visit the oldster. As soon as he saw them, from a distance, the old man came out to welcome them, and said:

“I am glad to see you in good health! Whereof is your quest, my good king? Your wish will bring sadness unto you.”

“I have not come to ask you this,” the king replied. “Have you a remedy that will enable us to beget?”

“I have,” the old man said, “but one baby is all you are bound to father. He will be a charming and lovesome prince, only you will never get to enjoy his company.”

The king and his queen took the medicine, returned happily to the palace, and a few days later the queen felt big with child. The whole kingdom, the royal court, in short all their subjects rejoiced upon learning the good tidings.

Just before birth time, the baby burst into such bitter tears that no doctor was able to soothe. The king promised him the moon and the stars, but neither could he pacify the baby.

“Be quiet, my boy,” the king said, “and I’ll give you such-and-such kingdom; be quiet, my son, and so-and-so, a king’s daughter, will be your betrothed,” and so on and so forth. At long last, seeing the baby would not stop crying, he added, “Be quiet, my son, and I’ll give you eternal life and everlasting youth.”

The baby stopped crying at once, and it was born; the servants struck their timpani and blew their fifes, and all over the kingdom banquets went on for a whole week.

As the boy was growing up, he became more and more intelligent and daring. They sent him to schools and philosophers; and the knowledge other children would acquire in one year he would master in just one month; thus, the king was overcome with joy day after day. People throughout the kingdom were proud to have a future king as wise and learned as King Solomon. But for some time he had been languishing, downhearted and buried in thought; and on his fifteenth anniversary, as the king and his noblemen and courtiers were sitting around the table and celebrating, Prince Charming stood up and said:

“Father, the time has come for you to give me what you promised when I was born.”

Hearing this, the king was saddened. He replied:

“Why, my son, how could I give you such an unheard-of thing? If I promised you then, it was only to comfort you.”

"If you cannot, father, then I shall roam the world until I find the promise I was born for."

At that moment, all the noblemen and the king himself fell to their knees, beseeching him not to leave the kingdom, because – they claimed – "Your father is old now; we shall enthrone you and bring you the most beautiful princess under the sun as your wedded wife."

But there was no way they could change his mind: he stood his ground, as solid as a rock, so his father, seeing he would not be talked out of it, gave his assent, and ordered his men to supply him with provisions and all things needed on his journey.

Prince Charming went to the royal stables to see the finest stallions in the kingdom and pick one for himself; but as soon as he gripped one by the tail, the horse would fall to the ground, and this happened to all of them, down to the last one. Eventually, when he was about to leave, he cast a final glance around the stable, and in a corner he saw a jaded, glanderous horse full of swellings; he went to check that horse too, and when he grabbed his tail, the horse turned his head and said:

"What are your orders, my lord? I thank God for letting me be touched by the hand of a brave man again."

Whereupon he planted his feet firmly in the ground and stood as erect as a dart. Seeing this, Prince Charming told him what he planned to do, and the horse replied:

"To fulfill your wish, you'll have to ask your father first to give you the sword, the spear, the bow, the arrow quiver, and the clothes he used to wear as a young man; as for me, six weeks from now on you will have to look after me all by yourself, and feed me on barley boiled in milk."

As his son asked for everything the horse had prescribed, the king sent for the chamberlain and ordered him to open all the wardrobes for his son to choose any clothes he pleased. After rummaging for three days and three nights, Prince Charming finally found, on the bottom of an old chest, the arms and garbs that had belonged to his father when he was a young man; but the arms were very rusty, so he cleaned them with his own hands, and after six weeks, they were shining like the sun. At the same time, he took care of the horse as told. He was head over heels in work, but in the end he succeeded.

When Prince Charming told the horse that the arms and the clothes were well cleaned and at the ready, the horse shook off all the carbuncles and swellings in a jiffy, and emerged like his mother had foaled him: a fleshy, sturdy, four-winged stallion. Prince Charming looked at him in awe, then said:

"Three days from now we're leaving."

"God give you long life, my lord! I'm ready to go right away, if you so wish," the horse replied.

Three mornings later, the court and the whole kingdom were mourning. Prince Charming, dressed like a warrior, his sword in hand, riding his chosen horse, bade farewell to the king and the queen, to all the nobles of higher or lower rank, to the soldiers and courtiers who, with tears in their eyes, were begging him to renounce his trip, lest he should lose his life; but the prince, spurring his horse, rode through the gate as quick as the wind, followed by the food and money carts and ten scores of soldiers assigned by the king to escort him.

When he crossed the border of his father's kingdom into the wilderness, Prince Charming dealt out all his possessions to the soldiers and, bidding farewells, sent them back, withholding only as much food as his horse could carry. And, taking the road east, he rode and rode, three days and nights, until he reached a broad expanse of land strewn with human bones.

While he was lying down to rest, his horse said:

"You must know, my lord, that we are now on the estate of a Giant Woodpecker who is so wicked that no trespasser on her land can get away alive. She was once an ordinary woman, but she used to nag her parents and disobey them, and their curse made her into a Giant Woodpecker; right now she is with her children, but tomorrow, in the woods before us, we shall see her coming to waste you; she is awfully big; yet have no fear, only keep your bow ready to pierce her with an arrow, and your sword and spear close at hand, to make use of them when needed."

They lay back to rest, but kept vigil, each in his turn.

The next day, at dawn, they prepared to cross through the wood. Prince Charming saddled and harnessed the horse, tightening his girth faster than usual, and off he rode; but all of a sudden he heard a terrible peck. The horse said:

"Hold fast, my lord, the Giant Woodpecker is coming!"

She was drawing near at such speed that she knocked down the trees; but the horse darted up above her like lightning, and Prince Charming shot an arrow right into her leg. As he was preparing to shoot the second arrow, she cried:

"Halt, Prince Charming, I won't do you any harm!"

And seeing he did not believe her, she wrote it in her own blood.

"Let your magic horse be praised, Prince Charming! Weren't it for him, I would have eaten you alive; now you carried the day; mind you, no mortal has ever ventured so deep into my province before; the few lunatics who dared only got so far as the field where you saw the myriad bones."

Thereupon they went to her place, and the Giant Woodpecker dined and wined him as a traveler. But as they were sitting round the table and feasting, the Giant Woodpecker was groaning with pain; so he took her leg out of his pouch and joined it back in its place, and it healed at once. Filled with joy, the Giant Woodpecker regaled him three days in a row, and asked the prince to choose one of her ravishing daughters as his wife; but he

refused, and told her straight what he was searching for. Hearing that, she said:

“With your horse and bravery, I am confident you will succeed.”

Three days passed, and they were getting ready to pursue their journey. They traveled a long way, and when they crossed the Giant Woodpecker’s boundaries, they came across a beautiful meadow, with blossoming flowers on one side, and scorched grass on the other. He asked the horse:

“Why is the grass scorched?”

The horse replied:

“This is the fief of a Shrew, the Giant Woodpecker’s sister; they’re so wicked that they cannot live together; their parents’ curse fell upon them, that is why they were changed into beasts, as you saw; their hatred is as terrible as the day is long, and they seek to conquer land from each other; when the Shrew is very angry, she belches out fire and pitch; it seems she has had a brawl with her sister, and when she chased her away from her land, she burned the grass in her path; she’s more wicked than her sister, and she has got three heads. Let us rest awhile, my lord, and be ready at the crack of dawn.”

The next morning they prepared for combat like they had done before facing the Giant Woodpecker, and proceeded. Suddenly, they heard a howl and a whir as they had never heard before.

“Be ready, my lord, the wicked Shrew is coming!”

Foaming with rage and belching fire, the Shrew was whizzing like the wind; the horse darted up above her and then down on one side, and Prince Charming shot an arrow and blew off one of her heads; as he was getting ready to blow off her second head, the Shrew begged him with tears in her eyes to forgive her, as she meant no harm; and, to persuade him, she wrote it in her own blood. The Shrew regaled him even better than the Giant Woodpecker; he returned her the head he had felled with his arrow, and it stuck in place as it had been before. Three days later, they continued their journey.

Crossing the borders of the land of the Shrew, they traveled, and traveled, and traveled, until they reached a field strewn with flowers, where spring was everlasting; each flower was marvelously beautiful and its sweet odor entrancing, in the gentle breeze. There they lay down to rest, and the horse said:

“So far so good, my lord; there is only one hurdle left; great danger lies ahead; God willing, we’re going to overcome it, and prevail. Before us is the palace of Eternal Life and Everlasting Youth. That edifice is surrounded by a thick, tall wood harboring the wildest beasts in the whole world; they are countless, and they watch sleeplessly, night and day; there is no way you can fight them, and going across the wood is beyond our powers; on the contrary, we must try to fly over it.”

After a two days' rest, they prepared again; and again the horse said, catching his breath:

"My lord, tighten the girth as fast as you can, and when you mount, hold on steady in the stirrups, and cling firmly to my mane; and keep your legs close to my flanks, so you won't hamper my flight."

He mounted; they made a trial, and in a minute they were at the edge of the wood.

"My lord," the horse added, "now is the time when they feed all the animals in the yard. Let's go!"

"Let's go," Prince Charming replied, "and God help us!"

They flew high and saw the palace: it shone brighter than the sun. They soared above the wood, and just when they were about to touch down by the palace front stairs, he barely brushed the top of a tree with his foot, and hell broke loose: all the beasts in the wood were howling so ferociously that it would make one's hair stand on end. They hurried down, and indeed they would have met with their death, hadn't the lady of the palace been in the yard, feeding her cubs – for that was what she called the wild beasts in the wood.

It was rather her joy of seeing them that rescued the intruders, for no human soul had ever stopped by her place before. She bridled her beasts, quieted them, and sent them about their business. The lady of the palace was a tallish, lean and gorgeous fairy, who took his breath away from the first moment. She looked at him with eyes full of pity, and said:

"Welcome, Prince Charming! What brings you here?"

"We are looking for Eternal Life and Everlasting Youth," he answered.

"If that is what you're looking for, you have found it."

So he got off his horse and entered into the palace. There he met two other ladies, both young – her elder sisters. He thanked the fairy for having saved his neck, and the ladies, overcome with joy, cooked a delicious dinner which they served in platters made of gold. He let the horse go graze wherever he pleased; then the ladies introduced them to all the animals, so they might be able to wander through the wood without fear.

The ladies asked him to stay there and live with them because, they said, they had had enough of living in seclusion; and he did not wait for a second invitation, but readily accepted, as that was precisely what he had been looking for.

Step by step, they grew accustomed to each other; he told them his story, and what he had come through before chancing upon them; and after a short time, he married the youngest of the sisters. After their wedding, the ladies of the house allowed him to go and visit every spot around, wherever he wished; however, there was one valley, which they showed him, they would not let him tread, for it boded ill; they also told him it was called The Wailing Valley.

Year after year went by, but he never counted them, for he was as young as he had been upon his arrival. He would take a walk in the wood, light-hearted; he lived in peace and quiet with his wife and sisters-in-law, he enjoyed the splendor of flowers and the sweetness of the clean air, as any happy-go-lucky man. He would often go hunting; but one day, as he was chasing a wild hare, he shot one arrow, and missed it; he shot a second arrow, and missed again; he chased the hare angrily, and shot a third arrow, which hit it; but, in the thrill of the chase, the poor prince didn't notice that he had crossed into The Wailing Valley.

He picked up the hare and took the way home; but, all of a sudden, he was struck by a thought: he began to miss his father and his mother. He dared not say it to the fine ladies; but they understood from the gloom and weariness in his eyes.

"You have crossed into The Wailing Valley, you poor devil!" they cried in fear.

"I have, my beloved ones, but I was unaware I was doing such a foolish thing; and now I'm melting like wax, longing for my parents, yet I cannot tear myself away from you either. We have spent many a day together, and I have no quarrel against any of you. I shall go see my parents just once more, and then I shall come back, and never depart again."

"Do not leave us, dearest; your parents have been dead for ages now; and if you go, we fear you will never return. Stay with us, for we feel this sounds your death knell."

Neither the three ladies' pleas, nor the horse's could appease the consuming desire to see his parents. At length, the horse told him:

"If you will not listen to me, my lord, come what may, it will be your fault alone. I am going to tell you just one thing, and if you agree with me, I shall take you back."

"I agree," the thankful prince said. "Name it."

"As soon as we get to your father's palace, I shall lay you down, and if you mean to linger as little as one hour, I'm gone."

"So be it," the prince answered.

They prepared for departure, embraced the ladies, bid their farewells, and set out, leaving the ladies bathed in tears and sick at heart.

They reached the Shrew's former estate; there they found cities; the woods had changed into pastures; he asked every person he met about the Shrew and her abode; but they answered that their grandparents had heard their great-grandparents talking such nonsense.

"How can that be?" Prince Charming wondered. "It is only a couple of days since I was here!" And he would tell everything he knew.

The people laughed at him, thinking he was a madman or a daydreamer; and he continued his journey, very upset, without noticing that his beard and hair were turning gray.

When they reached the Giant Woodpecker's manor, he put the same questions he had asked on the Shrew's estate, and received the same answers. He could not understand: how had all those places changed so much in only a few days? He was very upset again; his white beard now hung down to his waist, and his feet were trembling.

He finally set foot in his father's kingdom. There he found different people living in different cities, and all the places he used to know were now unrecognizable. In the long run, he arrived at the palace where he was born. As he dismounted, his horse kissed his hand and said:

"Farewell, my lord, I'm going back where I came from. If you wish to come along, get up on me, and let us be gone."

"Fare thee well! I hope I shall be back soon myself."

The horse sped off like the wind.

When he saw the crumbling palace buried under weeds, he sighed, and with tears in his eyes he tried to remember the palace once flooded with light, where he had spent his childhood; he looked around for a while, stopping by every room, by every nook that would remind him of things past, by the stable where he had found the horse; then he went down to the cellar, whose mouth had been covered by rubble.

Wobbling around, with his white beard down to his knees, and lifting his eyelids with his hand, all he found was a wrecked trunk. He opened its lid, and he heard a faint voice coming from inside:

"Glad to see you! Had it taken you longer, I would have died myself."

One slap from Death, who had shriveled almost into a coil in the trunk, was enough to take his life and turn him into dust at once.

Now I'm getting on my saddle, for there's nothing left to tattle.

*English version by
Adrian SOLOMON*

