

MIHAIL SADOVEANU

1880 – 1961

A born prose writer, he made his debut with a historical novel, *The Hawks*, an evocation of Nicoara Potcoava's tragic destiny, masterfully rendered again in the subsequent *Potcoava Brothers*. In 1907 the historical narrative *Fleeing Times* was published; five years later, the first edition came out of a very popular novel that would become a successful movie, *The Soimaru Clan*. The *Sign of the Cancer* (1928) is another historical novel that skillfully employs lexical resources from 17th-century Romanian chronicles. Two masterpieces appeared in 1933: yet another historical novel, *The Golden Bough*, and *The Hatchet*. ● Between 1935 and 1942, when the last volume was published, Sadoveanu's 30 years of documentation produced an epic novel, *The Marten Brothers*. Many of his other remarkable writings, such as *Princess Ruxandra's Wedding*, *The Land Beyond the Dark*, *A Mill on the Sereth* also saw numerous editions due to their popularity. ● A sagacious prose writer, Sadoveanu embraced detached observation, showed respect for a hierarchy of values, and at the same time maintained the mordancy of a memoir writer. ● Revealing a cool,

scrupulously dosed brand of lyricism, molded on the talent of a great story teller, his books are subtle reflections on the progression of matter in the Universe.

THE VESPER BELL

Cricopol had been chieftain of a Cossack tribe. He had taken part in the Manchurian war. He had crossed many times through the Turkestan. He had camped on the willowy banks of the Amur and the lowlands along the river Ob. He had spent a few years as a colonist under the glorious sky of one of the most enchanting parts of Siberia, amid virgin forests, wild streams and mountain ranges gleaming against the horizon. He had pushed eastwards as far as he could go and returned, this side of the Dniester, to the plains of Bugeac where he was born. He couldn't know that the short trip to the swamps of the Danube would be the last of his wandering career.

I met him, and we became friends, on the shore of a lagoon-island fringed like the banks of the Amur with tall willow-trees. The swamp beyond us lay in a stupor; wild doves crowned the stumps of trees which lightning had struck. Away, somewhere, the world was following its course – its changing faces, its rumors and noise so remote as to be unthinkable. Here the sky looked upon the primeval wilderness of mire and rotting bottoms swarming with minute life, of birds and beasts hidden among the rank grasses, of myriads of fish under the calm surface of the water. The overwhelming peace we felt was a delusion; beneath it stirred a fierce, ruthless, complicated life.

This was the island of Lipan where the first cuckoo is heard in the Spring. The cuckoo will sing, take a look at the wilderness and then fly off into the world of people. Later, the flocks of wild geese make a stop here on their way north from the marshes of Africa. Right on their tail, the spoonbills show up. And the pink flamingoes desert the rest of the Delta for a sheltered nook on Lipan where they hatch and bring up their young.

It was for the snow-white, plumed herons, the precious egrets, that Cricopol had come to this island. He hunted all sorts of rare birds. He stuffed them himself and sold them to museums in Britain and Germany. But his most profitable industry, he told me, was hunting egrets. Their tufts of long, silky feathers were in great demand right then in the cities of the West. Fashionable women would get them from Cricopol and, without knowing he existed, love him for it.

This friend of mine had kept himself in pretty good shape. He could resist loneliness, the mosquitoes and other deadly exhalations of the swamp with the help of what he called an elixir – which referred only to its potency. As I was to find out before we had known each other very long, a friend has as good a right to partake of it as himself.

Hiding a smile in his shaggy beard, he had straightened himself up, tramped in his huge worsted boots to a hut of reeds and brought out from under a heap of Bukhara sheepskins and assorted fishing and hunting implements, a bottle of what looked to me like murky water.

"This is it..." his low voice said as he came back. "Do as I say and have a drink with me. You'd better, my friend, because the sun is going down and before we know it, dark visions will have stepped out of the reeds and willows. They're sullen and cold. With this to warm them up, we can hear them whisper."

I was still doubtful. He filled a small glass and handed it to me.

"The sun is just about gone now..." he urged me again. "In a moment, swarms of mosquitoes will come up and we must be prepared. Drink this elixir, it will make the blood glow in your veins. Then we will light a fire of reeds. These two flames are man's only safeguard in this waste of waters. If you let the swamp have its way, you end in its power, sucked in..."

I swallowed the colorless liquid in one gulp. It hit me like a blast of wind and fire, and knocked my breath out. My hands moved convulsively to clutch my throat. Wild-eyed, I caught one glimpse of death – and then as I started to breathe again, I shuddered. Cricopol was sneering. There was a long scar across his right cheek which pulled down the corner of his mouth and turned his grin into a grimace.

"What on earth...?" I said, aghast.

"It's something very good and useful..." my companion said. "I make it myself. I put crushed pepper in a bottle of liquor, any kind provided it's 90% proof, leave it in the sun to clear and then filter it through fine marsh herbs..."

He poured himself a drink in the same thick green tumbler and swallowed it as if it had been water. He filled the glass again – handed it out to see me draw myself back with a shudder – and poured the drink down his throat. This time he grunted with contentment. He took the bottle and returned it to its hiding place in the hut. Then he came back to where I was sitting, struck flint against steel, ignited some tinder and set fire to the first pile of reeds.

"How can you drink that elixir of yours?" I asked. I couldn't get over it.

"Can't do without," Cricopol replied soberly. "It keeps the mosquitoes away for one thing. And my face in the water being the only company I have... It helps."

He looked at me, his eyes wide and filled with shadows. Around us the scene had suddenly changed to a fantastic twilight – under a mist of poisonous effluvia. Flights of geese, taking off in rapid succession, were storming through the sky. But in spite of the commotion they created overhead, an

ominous stillness was spreading over the lagoon. We could just feel, in the hidden coves, the first visions of night come out: a mournful stork, a swan...

"It helps..." Cricopol repeated softly. "I live alone. When I have no company, which is practically always the case, I take as many as three drinks in one evening... Even so, when it comes, I hear it. Don't look at me like this, my head is perfectly clear. I want to tell you what I hear.

"I have been living here since the beginning of Spring, when it's time to start my hunting and other work. I earn quite enough this way. I couldn't be more satisfied. It's far better than Turkestan, for instance, where I hunted the fur-bearing tiger for which the highest prices are paid, or the Amur where malaria and the dengue are out to kill you. In the swamps of the Danube, the sun doesn't hit you on the head like a red-hot hammer, and nature has a delicate and friendly look. Then, as I told you, there is the cuckoo singing first to me. It reminds me of my childhood and of my mother who lived in a village not far from here, in Moldavia. I have come all the way from the wilderness of the yellow people to this place, on the Danube, near my mother's grave. I think this is where I wanted to be.

"I could be happier here than anywhere else. Only something is happening to me and why it should or what it is I can't understand. Maybe another man would go away. But I am staying right here because I want to find out what it means. I drink my potion, light a fire and wait until I hear something no other man can listen to but me.

"It's like this. Late in June, the geese teach their young to fly and start their journey to the northern seas. At about the same time, the flamingoes go up again. And birds fly over my fire that I have never seen by day. I am sure other wild creatures stalk out of the shrub in which they live and stand just beyond this ring of light to peer at me from the dark. I wouldn't know about them. But I can feel them stay there and watch with their unblinking eyes.

"The day of St Ilie comes and goes and then, one evening, it starts, this thing I am telling you about. The first time, last year, I was sitting by the fire, just as I am sitting now, only I had no company. The ducks had fondled the waters for a while and taken off. The peace of night was setting in. Not a stir of wind and the sky was the color of smoke.

"Two swans came out of a bush. I couldn't see them; I only heard them whisper. Then, an animal stole along the shore, I could hear it snort. A boar, or a wolf, or maybe an otter...

"Finally I was left alone, or at least free to believe I was. It's an illusion I often have inside the narrow circle of my fire; but you are never alone here. The wilderness keeps watching you through unwavering eyes.

"I was taking in the deep quiet of the evening, my ears on the alert as they always are and my eyes, half-closed, turned inwards on some dream, when suddenly, from across the lagoon, I heard a sound.

"It was a clear, vibrant sound, not the cry of a beast. It seemed to come from a great distance, and yet I felt it could have originated right here; and I

shivered. It was unlike anything one hears in the swamps. Imagine silence breaking into sound and ringing like a bell. A few strokes come at short intervals and then it stops. I wait, knowing somehow that it will ring again. My heart is beating time, too loud. Then it skips a beat; I hold my breath: the bell is ringing again – and the sound sweeps over the waters and winds through the sedges and reeds.

“It stops. In the dark, the motionless creatures peering through the dark must prick up their ears just as I do. And the slow, even tolling comes to me again.

“That same evening, it rang a third time and, after another pause, a fourth; by then I was really frightened. The only comforting thought was that, in a few hours, I would be able to go and search the lagoon in the daylight. When you live here, you get to know every voice of this wilderness as well as your own. Only an intruder – man – can be the source of unexpected sounds.

“So, the following day, I set out to search the swamp. I went all over this island, through places where I had never set foot before. I paddled through the canals as far as my boat would take me. I even crossed to adjoining islands. There was not a sign of man anywhere. At the end of the day, I was sure there couldn’t be a human being living in these parts without my knowledge. I was alone, with the fish, the birds and the willows.

“At nightfall, I was sitting here by the fire. And where you are now, sat fear. No sooner had the ducks sailed overhead – and the swans slipped into that cove for the night – that I heard it again, the tolling bell of my solitude. The sound came and went until a certain hour that I can tell only by the stars, and then it stopped. Altogether, I heard it for twenty days, twenty clear, windless summer evenings which I spent in the open listening and looking at the sky – like the first man – to see when the Great Bear would release me from a wonder and a fear.

“I spent whole days thinking it out and searching my mind for a satisfactory explanation.

“I remembered having heard from other travellers to places where no men live that, somewhere in Sahara, when you stop for the night, you can hear a swift drumming break through the silence – a few, fantastic drops of sound falling from nowhere into that huge expanse of stillness reaching to the skies.

“Scientists ascribe that sound to the different temperatures of the strata of air and the amplification of sound waves. They say that, in the desert, your ears as well as your eyes can be deceived. During the day, the heat produces mirages; at night, due to the sharp drop of equatorial temperatures, the sound of sand grains dropping can be amplified and ring in your ears, maybe hundreds of miles away, like a roll of drums.

“Now the Arabs believe it announces the simoon; they just smile at the white men’s explanations. They smile because they don’t think, as we seem to do, that the mysteries of nature have to be explained in order to mean something. All that is asked of man is to recognize them as such and then to bow before the power of the great unknown.

"I am no wiser than other white men and I couldn't bear to hear that sound without knowing what made it. Having searched the lagoon, I started to think of a less obvious explanation. Was it the amplification of a faint rustling in the reeds? It couldn't be, with the lagoon in a deadly stupor and not a breath of wind. Or strange birds clapping their beaks in some corner of the bush where they had slipped unnoticed? That was possible. For days after that, I did nothing but look for them. In Sahara, they had their grains of sand; with me, it was the flight of unknown birds coming from a point even farther removed than those sands, like Victoria Nyanza, maybe, or Dahomey.

"You can imagine how I searched for those birds which I have never found. I would see them in my sleep, their shape and colors so real that I almost expected them to dash out of a bush before my eyes. There is nothing like a man's belief in delusions of his own making. I did hang on to those birds that have never existed as long as I could. And when I had to give them up, it was a terrible let-down. I had no other theory.

"That's when I understood what my elixir, which might be poison to others, was doing for me. It was the only way I had to set myself free. Every night, the third drink lifted from my side the fear with glassy eyes and made it vanish into the smoke of my fire of reeds."

We sat a long while without talking. I was lost in the other man's brooding thoughts.

"I know what you're thinking," Cricopol said with his twisted smile.

"Yes..." I answered, without intending to. "But tell me, has that unexplained sound stopped since last summer?"

"I am quite sure," he replied, "that I came to hunt on the same spot this year because I wanted a chance to find out. And right after St Ilie, I heard the tolling come from the same mysterious place. It came and went for twenty days and then it stopped.

"This time it was even more difficult to explain the fact. My tale of birds seemed ridiculous to me now. It didn't stand up to the simplest objections.

"In Sahara, the white people have imagined a theory based on sand grains because sand is the principal element in the desert. Then here, where everything is flooded, I could use the same theory only in regard to water. But how was I to connect with water the sound of a tolling bell? What minute sound, what gurgling or trickle could ring in my ears like churchbells tolling the knell in the village where I was born?

"Will you believe me if I say that, after I gave up these theories, I started to wonder if I wasn't actually hearing the bells of a church? I knew that the nearest village was at a great distance from here. But there was just a chance for the sound to travel through the air to the glowing waters of the Delta – and here glide along their surface and come winding through the wild paths to me.

"I don't need to tell you that I was fool enough to leave the swamps and go to the mainland for a solution to my mystery. The nearest village with a church was over fifty miles away from here. And they don't use the *toaca*

any more. I should have remembered that all over the plains of Bugeac, including my native village, it's been years since the last of these vesper bells was heard, the *toca* which used to ring in the old times to warn the people that their land was invaded. On my way back to Lipan, I could have laughed out loud. If a sound from the mainland could have travelled all this way, I should have been able to hear their churchbells, such as they were. But no matter how I strained my ears after that, I never managed to hear anything I could associate with the ringing of a bell. The stillness has a drone, a crepitation of its own: you can't have perfect silence here any more than real solitude. For one thing, the insects of the earth never stop their buzzing – the more I strained my ears to catch a far-away sound, the louder I heard them. Bells maybe were ringing somewhere in their own world, beyond the wall of the horizon. All I could hear was the silence humming – and at the appointed hour, that clear, ominous peal I couldn't explain.

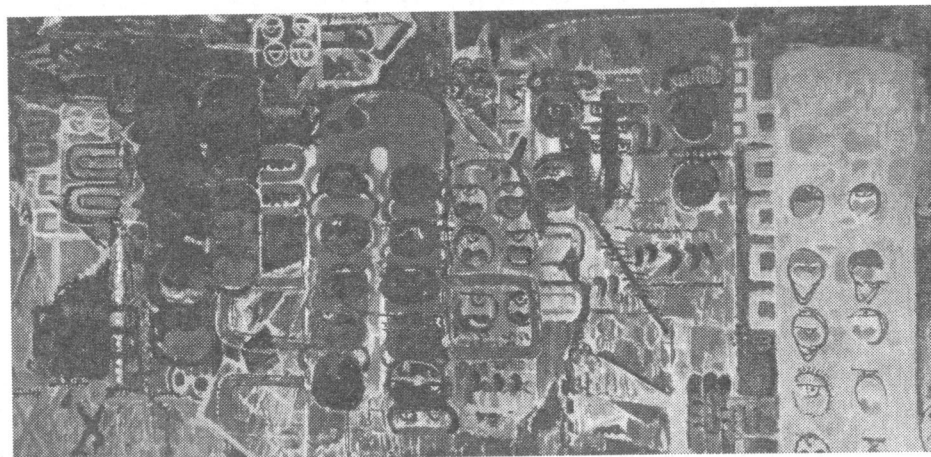
"Now all considered, maybe I took the trip to the mainland only because I was running short of liquor. Which would prove once more that our sense of realities isn't what it should be.

"So night after night I have listened to the *toaca* and feared the day to come. But nothing has happened to me so far and I am beginning to believe that the toll has no connection with my own life and death. All the same my heart sinks whenever I hear it. Like the birds and the beasts, I open my eyes wide, prick up my ears and listen... But I have a cure for it where they have nothing. And now I am waiting for next year when I shall hear it again. I couldn't stay away."

Cricopol looked at me sadly.

"You wouldn't like another drink, would you? Because I am going to have one. I drink and tell myself that my years of wandering have come to an end right here."

Translated by S. ALEXANDRIDIS



Ion Tuculescu, *My Artistic Will*