

Petru Dumitru

STORMY PETREL

PETRU DUMITRIU: STORMY PETREL

Translated from the Rumanian by *E. Farca*

Printed in Rumania

PETRU DUMITRIU

STORMY PETREL

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

BUCHAREST, 1956 |



Early in the autumn of 1938 three fishermen were in a tarred, flat-bottomed boat in the open sea, some dozen miles to the eastward of Gura Portiței where the water sank to a depth of some 20—30 fathom. The oldest of them was over forty, and his name was Filoftei Romanov. He was a gloomy-looking man with a heavy, emphatic gaze; when he looked at you you felt as though a leaden curtain had been drawn before your face. He took you all in, sized you up and passed sentence. For which reason people fought rather shy of Filoftei Romanov; and yet they loved him because he had never harmed anyone, worked hard and honestly, and held his peace. He seldom spoke more than a few words at a time and even then it was only to preach the Holy Gospel; that was his way.

The second fisherman was Trofim Popov, who was not yet twenty-five and held his peace still more steadfastly than Filoftei. Trofim was of the gentle, submissive kind. If you said to him "do that," he did it; "go there," he went; "stay here," there he stayed. Filoftei was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a big reddish beard and a heavy gaze before which you had to lower your

eyes. Trofim was also tall, though slim and beardless — with a blond stubble that had sprouted only since he had been at sea — and with very clear blue eyes that looked inquiringly at you like a child's. Filoftei spoke little, but Trofim not at all, except to say "yes" or "no" if ever you asked him anything — and continued in his silence.

The third fisherman in the boat was Adam Jora who at the time was 17 or 18, and as yet had no beard to show. He was even taller than the others — a head above them — and broad-shouldered too; and his grey eyes held a dark and turbulent look in anger — for by nature he was quickly roused — and he was obstinate too and rebellious.

Now, however, all three were silent. Adam and Trofim did not pull at the oars — they pushed them, so that the boat glided along slowly, very slowly, unhurriedly, stern foremost... The water lapped around its hull of tarred timber; the sun beat down through a thin film of vapour, and an unimaginable silence prevailed over the sea. The waves rolled noiselessly in gentle heavings. The water was smooth, translucent, oily. Far away in the distance, some four or five boats could be seen which were also from Danilofca; and there were certainly more of them beyond the skyline — all manned by high sea fishermen, scattered over that part of the sea.

Now while Adam and Trofim pushed at the oars, grasped tightly in their big red paws, and the boat slipped backward two or three more lengths, Filoftei squatted on its pointed poop that turned up like the toe-cap of a Turkish slipper, his knees drawn up to his ears, his hands wet, and, yard by yard, pulled in from the depths the thin, wet fishing-line. At regular

intervals, a bright steel hook hung from the line. And sometimes from that hook there hung a morsel of fish that was just as bright, though its brightness was of old silver and not of steel. At other times the bait was no longer on the hook, and then Filoftei stretched out his hand, took a bit of fish from a basket at the bottom of the boat, stuck it on the end of the hook and threw another length of line into the water. At the same time, with his left hand, he drew the next length of the long line from the water, and if the bait was missing from the hook, replaced it. Adam and Trofim pushed at the oars; the line and the hooks dripped with water, which trickled into the boat, while Filoftei, his arms wet to his elbows, drew out of the sea, length after length of the line, hook after hook, a length of line of a hundred yards, and a hundred hooks, one hundred and fifty hooks, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred... drew them out endlessly. The water lapped lazily under the keel of the boat, the oars creaked in the rowlocks, Adam and Trofim breathed hard, and Filoftei worked on silently. All wet down his spine, his shirt stuck to his back. Now and again he mumbled:

"More to the right... to the right..."

And then the younger men pushed harder at the left-hand oars against the unseen current which drew them away from the line that stretched along the sand at the bottom of the sea twenty-five fathom deep, under the grey-green waters with their big, slow roll.

"More to the right..."

Every hook that dropped into the water sounded like a stone pitched into it, and, like one, left a speck of foam on the water; you saw it dropping into the depths, its shine growing ever duller, until it disappeared into the green darkness. Another hook, and

yet another. All around the sea was deserted. The other boats had dropped away. Adam and Trofim pushed theirs onward, yard by yard.

"More to the right..."

A sea fishing-line is very long and seems still longer when not even a ray hangs from any of its hundreds of hooks. And early autumn afternoons are long, too, when the blazing sun is of a milky brilliance as it streams down through a thin veil of vapour. The sky was light blue, pale, immaterial, nearly grey. The translucent, oily water slid from the crest of the waves into the depth between them, noiselessly, without a crease, without a streak of foam, without a bubble. It lapped under the tarred hull of the boat — an incitement to idleness and sleep. Idleness and sleep... the dry rowlocks creaked... the men pushed at the oars, slowly, slowly, unhurriedly... and Filoftei mumbled:

"More to the right..."

Later when he was tired out, he would murmur only:

"Right..."

The wind had dropped long ago. Now and again there came, heaven knows from where, a light breeze that one was hardly aware of — a breath, barely enough to dull a mirror. That was all — and then nothing. After it the quiet in the atmosphere was unbroken. Far away, to the northward, tall, shadowy towers of cloud which set you wondering as to their colour — were they grey or of a reddish hue? — rose slowly from the horizon. Filoftei looked at them for a moment, for two maybe... and then proceeded to examine the line again. The oarsmen rowed on silently; they wiped the sweat from their brows with their shirt sleeves and pushed on. Trofim did not think of anything. Adam Jora, who was seventeen, thought of the girl that he met in the

evening at home under the willows, at a place where nobody could find them; and when he thought of her, he felt her in his arms and his heavy, burning head grew hotter; and a fearful power surged up within him. He would have liked to grow wings and fly over the sea, and suddenly his arms seemed strong enough to bear him through the air towards the shore, and across the salt-water lake that stretched as far as the eye could reach, and up to the clayey hills, to the clumps of willows where the girl waited for him in the evening shadows.

"More to the right!" Filoftei's weary voice would whisper.

Fly into the distance? But one had to work for one's winter bread; one had to work or the master of the boat and line would give one hell. Into the distance indeed! when there was such dire poverty about; when no fish had been hauled in though they had been working so hard and so long, and would soon be short of drinking water, too, for the little keg at the bottom of the boat was nearly empty...

Adam was restless. He had not exhausted himself like the other two; he was seventeen and there was within him more strength than even he suspected. He cleared his throat and said:

"Are we staying today as well, Uncle Filoftei?"

Filoftei did not reply. And, as if he had spoken to himself, Adam also answered himself:

"I think we'll be going ashore tomorrow..."

There was silence; the hooks gave a splashing sound as they dropped into the water and — remarkable thing — Trofim's voice was heard:

"What wind would take you home, you fool? Do you want to row all the way to Portița?"

"O wonder!" Adam answered merrily. "O wonder: Saint-John-of-the-padlocked-mouth has spoken. And why shouldn't I row? Of course I would!"

"To the right..." Filoftei Romanov mumbled in a stifled voice.

Adam was silent again and went on with his work. It was difficult to be light-hearted today. They had caught nothing, there was hardly any drinking water left, the owner of the boat and of the tackle would call them to account... and the coming winter would be harder than in other years because of this last week which had been sheer loss of time...

Adam sighed and swore between his teeth. What an idea of flying back to Danilofca and holding a girl in his arms at night! Wasn't the old woman at home waiting for him to bring her money, that she might buy flour and paraffin, and a pair of boots for him, for the old ones were so worn out that his toes stuck out of their gaping toe-caps... O, to hell with poverty and all it meant!

He rowed on, his eyes half closed. The lapping of the water almost sent one to sleep and the heat was unnatural for the time of the year. True, there was a breeze now and then, but even that was hot. You sweated and your heart throbbed painfully. The air was heavy and stifling and the sea grew ever quieter, as if it were drowsing, sinking into immobility.

Adam shifted his place on the seat. He felt restless. Again he cleared his voice and spoke:

"How Eftei will swear at us for leaving his line to rot in vain... God! how he'll swear! And next year..."

He was silent, waiting for an answer. But Filoftei said nothing and Trofim was as dumb as usual. Adam sighed and said:

"Unless you're a damned smart chap, you've no chance at all of making any money. If you're honest and work for a wage you can only live from hand to mouth... you can't put money by; you can't even think of putting anything by..."

He was silent again, for the effort to speak seemed suddenly too great. But this time Filoftei, who had his back to him and was doubled up in the stern, answered him:

"The Scriptures say: it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Yes," Adam mumbled disgustedly. "But in the meantime he's all right in his kingdom on earth... he eats and drinks well, buys land, sells fish and roe in the town and piles up his brass... while we, poor devils of fishermen, are left to king it over the seas."

Filoftei did not answer: he thought he had hooked a fish from the depths at last; however, the hook was empty. Filoftei stuck fish bait on it and dropped it into the water again. Then he looked at Adam over his shoulder and reproved him:

"You speak like a sinner and a fool... why should you judge others?"

"I don't judge them," Adam retorted. "I just say what I see. And aren't I right?"

"More to the right..." Filoftei mumbled.

Adam Jora laughed, shaking his head and pushing hard at the left oar. Then he sighed, he hardly knew why. It was hard to breathe, there seemed to be no air or there was something wrong with his lungs; however much air he drew in, there didn't seem to be enough of it, which was irritating — made one cantankerous and obstinate. How could one put up with this Filoftei?

He might be a man in the flower of his strength, a master fisherman, and a good and honest fellow; but how could one suffer him? Seventeen-year-old Adam, big, broad-shouldered, curly-headed Adam bent over the oars so sharply that his worn old shirt, all bleached by the sun, very nearly split across his back:

"You're a saintly man, Uncle Filoftei..." he murmured with a grin.

Filoftei raised his heavy look upon him:

"When I have knocked your head off," he said in his gruff voice, "you'll learn to honour your elders..."

Adam laughed, but he was annoyed. If he could have come to grips with Filoftei, who was as strong as a bull, he would have felt relieved. The air was so heavy and so dry that it held no coolness, however much of it you drew into your lungs; somehow it seemed to burn inside you. Even Filoftei seemed to have lost patience. Trofim alone was still silent and worked doggedly at the oars, his face all red and sweating; Filoftei grumbled angrily, all wet with sweat and sea water, as he stuck fish bait on a hook:

"You confounded son of a widow, you! Pity you had no father to flog you at the right time; if poor Pavel Jora had been alive, you wouldn't have grown into such a pagan! So bad and stubborn you are, I wonder you don't beat your mother!"

He threw the hook into the water angrily while Adam laughed a merry, fiendish laugh.

"Don't judge me, Uncle Filoftei, for that'll be a sin and then you won't go to Paradise. And who knows if you won't get your head punched first!"

His strong white teeth shone and his suddenly darkened eyes seemed nearly black. A little frightened,

Trofim remained silent. Filoftei closed up within himself and said:

"I have sinned... forgive me..."

He proceeded to examine the line again. He was so brawny and vigorous that it would not have occurred to anyone that he would be afraid of coming to grips with Adam... The young fellow knew this, and also knew that Filoftei had got himself under control out of Christian meekness; he could see he was angry, and was mastering himself with difficulty. 'I can't help it if he's a fool,' he thought. 'It would have been better if we'd fought it out and let off steam.' And, panting, he went on pushing at the oars. Then, wiping the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, he spoke suddenly in his usual tone:

"Listen, Uncle Filoftei, don't you think there's something wrong with the sea today?"

Filoftei mumbled in his deep voice, without looking up:

"And what would you have us do, clever one?"

Adam sat thinking for a while, then said:

"Leave the confounded line and go ashore..."

Filoftei shrugged his shoulders.

"If we did that, Eftei would sue us for having ruined his line; and further, in the three or four hours it would take us to row to land, the whole thing'll have blown over... If you'd been my son, I'd have struck you across the mouth when you answered me just now, to teach you not to be cleverer than your elders, but your mother hadn't the guts to lick you into shape!"

Adam answered heatedly:

"You should know, Uncle Filoftei, that if the old woman ordered me to jump into the fire I'd do it; and if she's angry with me I go on my knees to her and

stay on 'em for a week ! And let me tell you that you'll never get anywhere with me if you try your cudgel tricks !"

He went on rowing, frowning hard, his cheeks flushed. Then suddenly he burst out, his eyes aflame with anger:

"And don't you ever say a word against her again, you God-damned saintly old father confessor, you !"

Filoftei suddenly felt as if he would choke. In a wild burst of anger he was ready to throw the line overboard, leap from his perch, thrust Trofim aside and give Adam such a hiding as he'd never had before. Trofim seemed to have shrivelled up. And then Filoftei, suddenly deflated, and breathing hard, simply said in his gruff voice:

"You're a Godless devil and no mistake... whatever religion's been left in you shows only in your oaths !"

Adam sat frowning, his teeth clenched, and did not answer. Filoftei continued with some regret:

"And this is the last time you've come fishing with me. You're too wicked and blasphemous..."

Adam mumbled between his teeth:

"As if I could find no one else to go with..."

However, he felt dejected and from that moment he rowed in silence, tasting his sorrow to the full. Now and again he looked at Filoftei on the sly as if he wanted to say something. Once he even made as if to speak, but changed his mind and rowed on sullen and troubled. After that they toiled on without another word, except for Filoftei's low murmur:

"To the right..."

But for the sleepy lapping of the waves, a profound and eerie silence weighed upon them; time went by without their being aware of it and nothing moved

anywhere. The air grew drier and appeared to become less and less until, at long last, a prolonged and stifled sound, hardly audible — a mere tremor — was heard far away to the north-west. A clash of thunder had reached them from afar, but so faint that it seemed to be muffled by huge wads of cotton wool.

II

The waves were now gentle, rounded and swaying, still rising and falling without a sound; they were a greyish green with pale, troubled glints in them, as if they were not of the same water as the expanse of sea they rose from.

All along the horizon strange columns of vapour had risen like poplars or motionless figures faintly resembling the shapes of men — cotton-wool giants holding counsel on the horizon round the tiny boat lost on the immense sea; cotton-wool giants whose feet were rooted in greyish-blue mists. The three fishermen ceased their work; their hands on the oars, the younger men looked first at those strange visions that had risen from the sea, and then turned anxious eyes towards Filoftei. He had come to the end of the line, and now rose to his full height on the seat in the stern. He stood, his legs wide apart, so as not to fall with the pitch and roll of the boat, and, his arms akimbo, he too looked at the clouds — scanned the whole expanse of sky, and the remoter water with those eyes that made people feel shy. Here, however, nothing feared his heavy look. The clouds gathered slowly, as over a seething cauldron, above a circle of ever more quiet water. Filoftei again surveyed the scene around him, then raised his beard

and examined the sky once more: it was pale blue, nearly white. Filoftei looked about him once more. Was there no little rift left whence light and fresh air could come? No. Everything merged into a greyish, pinky mist which seemed to be lighted from within by a smouldering fire burning behind the thick vapour.

No, there was no hope anywhere of the weather clearing. Filoftei's face darkened; he looked down on the surrounding water, on the gentle waves that swung around the boat and then he saw the bird. And the younger men who had kept silent in their anxiety and followed each of his moves, saw it too. It was a small, dark bird, with long, narrow wings. It skimmed over the water very close to them, following the rise and fall of the rounded waves, and seemed to sink more and more in the silence of the sea. Sometimes the bird flew so low that it was lost sight of for a time between two billows, then it appeared again, an arrow flashing over the deadly gloss of the depths, with no movement of its black, narrow outspread wings. Filoftei Romanov watched it as it darted over the water gliding down on the waves and gave it an unfriendly smile. He mumbled:

"So, you've come..."

He stepped down from his seat, and sitting with his legs crossed under him, Turkish fashion, began unwinding a coil of rope. Without glancing at the other two men, he spoke quietly:

"Fasten everything in the boat..."

They too had seen the clouds; they were aware of the deadly calm of the sea, of their own blood throbbing heavily in their head and their veins, and had seen the stormy petrel. They had understood. They knew. They set to work feverishly, tying fast the fishing-tackle, the keg of drinking water, the oars, everything; they