MIHAIL SADOVEANU

THE HATCHET

short story

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PREFACE

The hatchet was the main tool and weapon of the peasant of the Carpathian Mountains. With it he chopped firewood, forged his way through the thickets, defended himself at night-time, wielding it in hands strong and impetuous as the storms, as the whole of nature in this corner of the world with its extreme continental climate.

Such a hatchet — remnant of the barbaric Middle Ages — was given to Mihail Sadoveanu years ago, as a gift. Holding the iron adorned with tiny flowers in his hand — the vigorous hand of a fair-haired giant — and testing its edge, he thought of the deadly blow such a weapon could deal, and what a dangerous instrument it could be in the hands of a ruffian. Who knows to how many bloody trials that hatchet had been put as it was carried across the mountain paths which he, the writer, as his ancestors, knew so well.

Then, one of these sanguinary dramas which happened somewhere in the Dorna Mountains was told him by an old shepherd who knew many things. The story is that of the old Rumanian folk ballad — Miorița: a shepherd killed by two other shepherds who coveted his flocks . . .

More horned sheep has he
As teeming as can be;
And horses trained,
Dogs keen, hare-brained.

And so it happened that one day in the same year — 1929 — the writer said in his short and decisive manner:

"We are going to Stînişoara."

Without further delay, he set out for the mountains, following the same way as the heroine of his book, Vitoria, in search of her missing husband, Nechifor Lipan. He went up the Bistriţa, penetrating into the heart of the Carpathians. Accompanied by the phantom of the hatchet and the "three flocks of sheep with their three shepherds," he reached Dorna; thence he went to Neagra and then on to Stînişoara, climbing always till he reached the summit at the Talians' Cross.

Where the mountain ends
And to heaven bends . . .

as the ballad so suggestively says. Stopping there and sensing the distance, as the staunch mountain woman Vitoria was to do, he listened to the silence over the precipices and read in the winds and the clouds the terrible misadventure that had befallen Nechifor Lipan, down to the smallest details. He had hardly descended in the Suha Valley when his unleashed imagination had already buried the shepherd; the flower-adorned hatchet had wrought justice by killing the guilty; and Vitoria, her soul at peace, now that the bones of her dead husband were resting in the soil, according to the ancient tradition handed down by her ancestors, was preparing to return home, to her farm in the Tarcău.

And now here is the writer at his desk, in his home on the Copou, with its tower and fortress-like walls — consumed — as it were — by a fire which gives him no respite day or night. He fills sheet after sheet of paper with his small, spidery writing, words drop from his pen, of their own accord, eager to tell their story. Everything comes spontaneously — as if the story had been written before.

"Hush! Father is working."

The pack of children and dogs leave, they and their clamour descending to the margin of the ancient park.

The giant writes on, writes without cessation. When he stops for a while to walk in his garden, his wide cloak fluttering behind him, one sees that behind his knitted brows that laboratory of his continues to work. His meals are brief and frugal. At midnight a light still burns

and often goes on burning. His is a high fever, but of short duration, lasting for ten days. All the volumes he had already written — more than forty — were conceived in the same manner, at one stretch: but none went so smoothly, with so much ease.

Ready. The manuscript is beautifully clean, without addenda, almost without erasures; he puts it into an envelope and sends it to the editor as it is.

The publication of the novel *The Hatchet* in 1930, when the author was fifty, aroused a torrent of enthusiastic reviews. But the following fact is even more eloquent.

The author tells how two years ago, when he went fishing on the River Suha, which flows at the foot of Stinişoara, he chatted with some of the local authorities who had come to greet him.

He learnt that few pass through those parts without asking to see the place where Nechifor Lipan's bones were found — it being unimaginable that Sadoveanu should not use authentic data — and that the place spoken of in the book, upon the edge of the precipice, had been marked.

So well-known and popular has *The Hatchet* become.

PROFIRA SADOVEANU

THE HATCHET

Having made the world, the Lord God put order among the nations and gave each a distinctive sign.

He taught the gipsy to play the fiddle and to the German he gave a screw.

From among the Jews he summoned Moses and unto him he said: "Thou shalt write a law, and when the time comes shalt let the Pharisees crucify my best beloved son Jesus; after which thy nation shall endure much suffering and persecution, though in compensation I shall let gold flow over you like abundant waters."

He beckoned to the Hungarian and chose a number of gewgaws for him from among those he had at hand: "Here I give thee Hessian boots and spurs, and resin to make the ends of thy moustache stand up stiff; thou shalt be full of conceit and be fond of revelry and women."

The Turk then came forward: "A rich share of wits thou shalt not have, but by the sword shalt thou prevail over others."

To the Serb he gave a spade.

He invited the boyars and princes to coffee and the hookah: "The lot of Your Excellencies shall be to live in dalliance and wickedness and sin; in atonement for which you will be pleased to raise churches and monasteries to my glory."

Finally the mountain people came and knelt before the Seat Imperial. The Lord God looked at them in pity:

"And you, wretched folk," he said, "why are you so late?"

"We are late, most hallowed Lord, because we came at the pace of our sheep and donkeys. We walk slowly, climbing up steep paths and descending low into the ravines. And in this way do we trudge along day and night, holding our peace, with the sheep bells alone making a clamour on the silent air. The dwelling places of our wives and children are in the narrow clefts of the rocks, and lightning, thunder and torrents play havoc with us. We should like wide expanses, fields of corn and smooth-flowing waters."

"You are the last to come," the Lord said regretfully, "and dear though you are to me, I cannot help you. You will hold what you have, for I can give you nothing besides, except a light heart to rejoice at what is yours. Everything shall seem good to you; and always your door shall be open to the fiddler, and the one with strong drinks; and your women shall be beautiful and full of love."

This was the tale Nechifor Lipan would tell now and again at christenings and weddings of which he

never missed a single one in winter time. He said he had learnt it from an old shepherd who had been a Jew in his youth but to whom God had been pleased to reveal the true faith. That shepherd also knew other things and his letters besides — a great wonder among the shepherd folk. It was from him Lipan had come to know sayings which were so full of truth and which he produced so opportunely.

"Nobody can overleap his own shadow."

"What do you mean by that?" his wife Vitoria would ask looking askance at him.

"Just a saying," he would answer, "for those who have ears to hear."

Now the wife had an inkling of what it meant, but, suspicious like every woman, she was wont to flare up whenever she was stung.

"It may be as you say, man, but those who speak most, often say least."

"And who is that meant for?" Lipan would retort.

"For wiseacres and scholars."

"Indeed! And who, if you please, is a wiseacre and a scholar?"

"Who should it be? Ask me another for that I can't answer you."

"You've got the devil in you, woman!"

"How 'in' me when he's close beside me?"

It was this tale and these sharp retorts Vitoria, Nechifor Lipan's wife, recalled as she sat alone on the threshold, spinning in the autumn light. Her hazel eyes, in which the chestnut glint of her hair seemed to be reflected, held a far-away look. The spindle

spun diligently as of its own accord. And while the village which with its shingled cottages within the fences of roughly hewn poles lay scattered on the slopes descending abruptly from the fir woods, and the Tarcău, a mere rivulet — a flash of light deep down among the rocks — were engulfed as if in the darkness of night, those keen, still youthful eyes continued to scan the unexplored horizon. Nechifor Lipan had left home to buy some sheep at Dorna and now it was getting on towards St. Andrew's Day and he had not yet returned. In her loneliness the woman strove to reach him. She could not see his face, but she heard his voice. That was how he had told the story; the woman had added nothing but a few words about the fields of corn and the smooth-flowing waters. Those were her own words sprung from an old yearning of hers, and she repeated them in her mind; a film, as of tears welling up, came over her eyes. The life of the mountain people is a hard one — especially for the women. Sometimes they were widowed before their time, as she seemed to be now.

It is the mountaineer's lot to earn his daily bread with the axe or the crook. Those with the axe fell the firs of the forest and take them to the river Bistrița, where they make them into rafts and float them as far as Galați, at the end of the world. The more industrious get a sheepfold together and remain in the mountains, alone with God and the solitudes, until the days grow short. And then, when winter draws near, they come down to the wider spaces in the marshy lowlands that their flocks may winter there. Life is easier in those places and she would

have liked to live there, only it was impossible for it was too hot in summer and, besides, the mountaineer is rooted to his place of origin, like the fir.

Nechifor Lipan had always proved good at shepherding. His sheep were well cared for and his shepherds obedient. The shepherds know more than tales; they know the secret of curd and of fermented cheese. Letters and offers of business came to him from places with strange names. To unravel them, Lipan went to Father Dănilă, after which he called at the inn for a drink with other mountaineers as good as he at such things as drinking. As soon as it got about on the Tarcău that Nechifor had had news of money coming in, the gipsy musicians appeared at Mr. Iordan's inn as if swept there by the mountain torrents. The man then came home late and in his cups. And the woman would consider it best she should show her displeasure. "The seven fiends have again got the better of you!" Nechifor would say with a laugh, stroking his thick drooping moustache. Vitoria would look keenly, possessively at that black moustache, at those eyes with their slanting eyebrows, at his whole squarely-built, broad-shouldered figure, for he had been her love for twenty years and more. That is how she had loved Lipan in her youth, that is how she loved him now when they had children as tall as themselves. When she was sharp and obstinate beyond measure, Lipan considered it was time to drive away some of the demons that possessed her. And to this end he used two charms that were little different from one another. The first was a thrashing, and the second a thrashing such

as had seldom been heard of, also described as a flogging. The woman bore the man's violence without flinching and continued in her devilish temper, while Nechifor Lipan hung his head and showed great regret and sorrow. Afterwards, the world again seemed to them good, and an easy place to live in as God had ordained it to be in the tale of the shepherd who had been a Jew.

They had as much fortune as they needed: blankets in the house, lambskins in the garret and sheep up in the mountains. And they had money too, which they had put by in a small wooden tub and covered with ashes. When they were tired of milk, cheese and the flesh of the sheep killed by the wolves, they brought vegetables from the plain. And it was also from the wide-spread, sun-soaked plain that they brought maize. Sometimes Vitoria would go alone and load the sacks of it on to five young horses. Then she would ride astride the horse in the lead like a man, the others following, their heads down, the reins of each tied to the tail of the horse in front.

From the seven babes that God had blessed them with, only two had been left them. The five others had died of measles or diphtheria, and their names and faces had been forgotten, becoming one with the flowers, the butterflies and the lambs born over the years. Husband and wife would look fondly at the two children that had been left them, Lipan making more fuss of the girl who was the older and called Minodora, a name which he had heard from a nun at Agapia and which had pleased him; the young boy was called Gheorghiță, and his mother shielded