

IOAN SLAVICI - SHORT STORIES

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Joan Slavici

SHORT STORIES

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IOAN SLAVICI

At the end of 1869, two Rumanian undergraduates, hailing from regions remote from one another, met in Vienna. One of them, born in a Moldavian village, possessed amazing learning at the age of twenty, gained all by himself, without the help of schools, from which he had repeatedly run away, and a vast experience of life acquired during long years of wandering all over Rumania. He had practised the hardest and most diverse trades: he had been a prompter, a docker in a Danube port, a clerk — and had had to struggle hard with privations. His name was Mihail Eminescu, and he was to flood Rumanian poetry with the brightest and most penetrating light. The other, Ioan Slavici, came from a village in Western Transylvania.

Two years Eminescu's junior, Slavici was born in the village of Șiria in 1848, when the Revolution swept almost all over Europe. He was the son of a furrier and the grandson of a *carbonaro* at the time of Bonaparte. His seventy-year-old grandfather told Slavici many tales whose echoes we find in the works he wrote later on. From his mother he learnt something very precious, especially so in Transylvania, where national oppression and official policy fomented jingoism and hatred among the various nationalities living in that province. The future writer's mother taught her son not to hate or scorn people of an other nationality.

Slavici attended elementary school in his native village, and secondary school in the towns of Arad and Timișoara. He spent his vacations travelling on foot through the villages and mountains of Transylvania. After studying for one year in Budapest, financial difficulties compelled him to give up his law studies for the time being and take employment as a clerk with a notary in a small Transylvanian town. As he tells us in one of his books of memoirs, it was here that he was to gather typical facts concerning the times and

particularly proofs of the complicity between the local authorities and some bands of robbers who assured the protection of big estates in exchange for a considerable subsidy. We shall come across this state of things in a short story written by Slavici later, *Moara cu noroc* (The Mill of Luck and Plenty).

Working in the notary's office, Slavici managed to save enough money to go to Vienna.

His meeting with Eminescu in that city had a decisive influence on the future short-story writer. Eminescu guided his studies and his readings, he encouraged him to write and patiently helped him in his first literary endeavour, even correcting the style of his first pages and pruning the great number of dialectal phrases. "As I was unable to write correctly," says Slavici with his typical modesty, "he copied out my manuscripts and corrected them very discreetly."

During this period, Slavici wrote his earliest works — a comedy, a tale and an essay.

While studying in Vienna, Slavici was doing his military service and giving lessons to earn a livelihood, but material hardships again compelled him to interrupt his studies. For a time he was a clerk at Arad, then at Oradea Mare, and after some time spent in a hospital in Vienna where he was seriously ill, he came to Rumania in 1874 and settled down in Jassy.

There he resumed his literary activity and wrote, still under Eminescu's guidance, the short story *Popa Tanda* (Father Tanda). He attended the "Junimea" literary circle and contributed to "Convorbiri Literare" (Literary Talks), the review of the circle. But like Eminescu and Caragiale, Slavici, the son of the Şiria furrier, the writer who was to focus his literary work on the life of humble people, felt an out-of-place stranger in the aristocratic circle of "Junimea." "I felt a complete stranger in the so-called fine and high society to which I have been unable to accommodate myself to this very day," Slavici wrote in a later book of memoirs, *Lumea prin care am trecut* (The People I Knew). Although he had no definite ideological conception, Slavici rejected philosophical idealism and aestheticism, the two pillars of "Junimist" ideology.

The writer moved to Bucharest where he became a low-paid office worker. Later he became a teacher, a profession he practised almost without interruption for several dozen years. He also took up journalism. In the editorial office of the "Timpul," Slavici worked with the two great writers of his time and of Rumanian literature in general, Eminescu and Caragiale. In his *Memoirs*, Slavici recalls the long and thrilling arguments the three of them had on matters of philology. Slavici held the view, which was shared by the other two and throws an interesting light on his general outlook, that "we must draw our inspiration from the heart and mind of the people, and good Rumanian is the language spoken by Rumanians everywhere."

In 1881, Slavici published his first book of short stories, *Novele din popor* (Short Stories from the People). It comprises some of his most remarkable writings, *Budulea Taichii* (Father's Own Budulea), *The Mill of Luck and Plenty* and *Father Tanda*.

The world from which the writer drew the substance of his short stories and, with few exceptions, of his whole work, is the countryside. But, in contradistinction to the reactionary *semăndătorist* current, which developed in the first decade of the 20th century, Slavici did not depict the rural world in a patriarchal garb nor did he paint it in pastoral tints. His view of the people is revealed by his ethic ideal and a certain type of hero, and shows him to be a true realist. As described by Slavici, the village is no artificial pastoral, it is the Transylvanian village with its historical traits, its fierce contradictions between the well-off — the *gazde*, as they are called in Transylvania — and the working peasants. These contradictions are present everywhere; they sometimes prevent the happiness of children of kulaks and those of destitute peasants. The penetration of capitalism into the village also generates ambition to get on in life, an ambition that takes possession of some of Slavici's heroes, and money poisons consciences and succeeds in ruining others, as in *The Mill of Luck and Plenty* and in *The Treasure*. Generally speaking, these are the main subjects of Slavici's short stories.

In *Father's Own Budulea*, the two themes combine — an ordinary man's craving for learning, and the desire of a peasant's son to rise in life and break with the village. The story contains some passages in which Slavici renders the almost revelational amazement of a common man before the mystery of the written word with the delicacy and acuteness for which he is famous. Budulea, the father of Huțu, and the hero of the story — who plays the flute, the bagpipe and the violin, "always smiling when you talked to him," at first can hardly believe that his son can read and write. Slavici describes the way he begins to understand this mystery with sympathy and humour. Budulea admits that somebody can read what he has written himself, since from his own experience he knows he can make out the signs made by himself on the tally. But he cannot understand how Huțu can read what others have written. When he realizes that the signs in books are always the same, he begins to understand that "all scholars wrote in the same way." Yet even this made his head swim. This very comprehension among an infinite number of people seemed a thing "beyond human understanding." He asks Huțu to write down the names of some well-known objects — "bagpipe, violin, flute" — and is dumbfounded as "the bagpipe is in no wise like a bagpipe while the violin looked like the flute to him." The final comprehension of the meaning of the written symbol rouses in old Budulea an innocent enthusiasm and a vivid admiration for his son who now, that he can read and write, is the equal of any learned person, "though raw yet and a child still."

For Huțu, however, learning is also a means to get on in life. Slavici does not idealize his hero. He depicts him as a capable and steady youth who works hard to be able to go on with his studies; at the same time, however, he is ruled by ambition, servile and anxious to please his superiors.

Slavici skilfully depicts the way in which the horizon of Huțu's ambition grows and widens. Huțu imagines and prepares his future according to the models he meets. At first, he only wishes to become a schoolmaster like Clăiță, the village teacher. This suits the schoolmaster's plans who would like Huțu to marry one of his five daughters and succeed him as schoolmaster. But, when Huțu attends high school in town, his ambition takes after another model, his teacher Wondracek. During his university studies his aspirations turn towards the Church and Huțu would like to become an archpriest. Now that his ambition has acquired vaster proportions, Huțu abandons his first love easily enough. "That's how things are bound to happen and you'll see in a year's time that it does not matter, that it never did matter, that it is better as it is," he says. Huțu marries Mili, the youngest daughter of Clăiță, the schoolmaster. He is elected archpriest and also works as a school inspector, in which capacity he supervises public education.

The destructive effect of money on the life and conscience of people is depicted in several short stories and in the novel *Mara. The Treasure*, a short story published some ten years after his first book, deals with the unlucky adventure of Duțu, a poor peasant who, working as a navvy, finds a large number of gold coins buried in the earth. Henceforth all Duțu's reactions are ruled by his lust of gold and his fear of being deceived. He begins to hate and mistrust his wife. He keeps reckoning what would be the best way to sell his gold coins, he dreams of going into business and "of making more and more money." He goes to Bucharest, where he is enticed by a woman of doubtful character, half actress, half prostitute. She too covets the treasure, gets Duțu into the hands of some crooks and an equally rapacious police superintendent. Finally, all Duțu's money is wormed out of him and he returns home with the memory of his mishap which obsesses him like a dreadful nightmare.

In *The Mill of Luck and Plenty*, Slavici paints a more detailed and artistically superior picture of the degradation of a man's character dominated by the lust of gold.

Ghiță, the shoemaker, who becomes the landlord of the inn called "The Mill of Luck and Plenty," is the victim of his greed for money which will lead him on irresistibly to final ruin. He meets Lică the Reckoner, the grim chieftain of a gang of robbers who conceals his real occupation under the doubtful trade of *reckoner* — a chief of swine-herds. Lică has incredible power and numerous accomplices. In the story Slavici relates facts which he learnt when he was a

notary's clerk at Cumsălău. Lică knows he cannot be punished "and it was enough for him to mention the names of his employers to make the officer realize he would not be able to detain him; for Lică knew how to choose his patrons..." That is why, when arrested, he is saved by Árpád Vermécsy, the owner of three herds. "Whether Lică was guilty or not was not of much consequence. After all, are all murderers punished? And with such respectable people requiring their services too..."

Slavici analyses how the lust of gold ruins Ghiță and his family. His love for Ana, his wife, is subordinated to his greed and to his fear of the Reckoner. Although jealousy gnaws at him, although he realizes that, unsettled by the new atmosphere prevailing at the "Mill of Luck and Plenty," Ana is about to surrender to Lică, Ghiță almost tacitly accepts the adultery. He attempts to betray Lică, murders Ana in a new fit of jealousy and dies, killed by one of Lică's accomplices. Hemmed in by the gendarmes, Lică commits suicide and the grim and gloomy story ends with the death of the chief characters.

Several considerations of a didactic character reflect a moral view preaching resignation to the poor. We meet similar considerations in other short stories too — *The Treasure*, for instance — but they do not impair the dramatism or the social import of the story.

Money, the poisoner of souls, creates a gulf between the people of the village. There exists a certain tendency towards passivity in *The Mill of Luck and Plenty* and *The Treasure*, and also in other short stories Slavici advocates reconciliation between the wealthy and the poor, a Christian forgiveness of the injustice committed by the rich against the poor. This is the result of certain contradictions in the political and social conceptions of Slavici which persisted in his practical activity as well, and led to one delusion that the status of the Rumanians in Transylvania, an oppressed national minority, might be remedied within the Hapsburg monarchy. However — and this is the case with the books of other realist writers as well — his work reflected truth more faithfully than did his conscious perception.

In several short stories — *Pădureanca* (The Forest Girl), *Gura satului* (Village Gossip), *La Crucea din Sat* (At the Village Cross) — the contradiction between the interests, the mentality and the aspirations of villagers belonging to different classes renders love between young people difficult, sometimes even preventing it completely.

As pointed out by a commentator, in *Village Gossip*, the acute realistic observer Slavici stresses the fact that with the *gazde* wooing and marriages are bargains of unchangeable ritual. The dowry is displayed; on the day of the suitor's arrival the courtyard is filled with Miha's possessions and the proud owner looks at his "tall, strong horses... his milch cows, his greedy pigs, his frisky goats and meek sheep..."

The identification of marriage with a bargain — even though hypocritical shamefacedness did not admit it — makes the big purse refuse to let his child marry a farm-hand's offspring, while the dignity and different outlook on life of the poor peasant will not allow him to bear the humiliation caused by this love. In *The Forest Girl* the writer studies the way in which love is undermined and in the end destroyed by class antagonism. Unlike *Village Gossip* and *At the Village Cross*, in which the young people's determination causes the parents to relent, in *The Forest Girl* the love of Iorgovan for Simina comes in conflict with his reluctance, while Simina, the daughter of Neacșu, the farm-hand, succeeds in realizing all that separates her from Iorgovan.

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In 1884, a group of representatives of the moneyed classes of the Rumanian population decided to found a newspaper — "Tribuna" (The Tribune) at Sibiu, in Transylvania. They asked Slavici to become the paper's editor, and he accepted. His activity at the head of the "Tribuna" represents a period of several years of useful and methodical work for the dissemination of culture among the people.

The political views of the patrons of "Tribuna" were moderately progressive. Although the newspaper endeavoured to have a wide circulation and rally the whole Rumanian population of Transylvania, its wary policy defended the interests of the Rumanian bourgeoisie in Transylvania, which was in a state of inferiority compared with the bourgeoisie of the other nationalities of the province, the Hungarians and the Germans.

Had they been granted certain rights and the possibility of carrying out certain economic and political actions for the class they stood for, the leaders of the "Tribuna" would have been fully satisfied. However, if the political stand of the newspaper is visible in its contents, the cultural line laid down by Slavici by far exceeded the narrow limits of the publication. Except for a number of dissimilarities characteristic of a different historical moment and of local conditions, the popular realism consistently pursued by the "Tribuna" recalls the political programme advocated in 1840 in the review "Dacia Literară" (Literary Dacia) by some outstanding representatives of the 1848 Revolution.

In its columns the "Tribuna" also promoted literature with a pronounced folk character both as regards its sources and the object it had in view, a literature with folklore as its source of inspiration and accessible to the masses.

The "Tribuna" published folk poetry and translations of realistic texts taken from world literature and particularly from Russian literature, stories and short stories by Gogol, Tolstoy and Turgenyev. By publishing works of folk literature alongside texts from world literature, Slavici, the promoter of "popular realism," was offering models to contemporary Rumanian literature.

It was in the pages of the "Tribuna" that a young man of 18 made his literary *début* at the end of 1884, under an anagrammatic pen-name. It is not one of the least merits of the "Tribuna," and of Slavici personally, to have guided the first literary steps of George Coşbuc, a prominent representative of critical realism in Rumanian poetry. The years during which he contributed to the "Tribuna" were among the most fertile in Coşbuc's life and supplied the largest number of poems to his first two volumes.

The editorial line Slavici had taken in the "Tribuna" was to be continued by him ten years later. In 1894, in the review "Vatra" (The Hearth). The first article, which stated the programme of this review edited by Caragiale, Coşbuc and Slavici, stated that literature had to return to "the ancestral hearth." This was in no way a retrograde attitude such as the one adopted a little later by the *semăntorist* current, but a tendency towards "popular realism" and the firm refusal to adopt the current of "disappointed lassitude" or the aestheticism brought into poetry by the symbolists.

It is in the "Vatra" that *Mara* first appeared — a novel which Slavici was to publish in book-form only twelve years later.

Mara, the author's only novel, is a masterpiece and one of the works that are an important milestone in the development of the Rumanian novel.

Slavici has seldom gone further in his psychological analysis and, if in his whole work he refuses to deal with "pastoral romanticism" or to embellish peasant life artificially, *Mara* stands at the antipode of such an idealizing vision.

In *Mara* the central idea is the same as in some of the short stories already mentioned. Money, the lust of gold changes Mara, the humble green-grocer into a prosperous shopkeeper. This theme, handled with the complex means of the novel, is interwoven with the story of a family and with the problem of the relations between the nationalities living in Transylvania. "Mara, a poor woman, was left a widow, with two children, dear little things, but she was young and strong and hard-working and God willed that she should be lucky." This is the slightly sarcastic tone with which the book opens. Mara's luck turned out to be her ever-increasing rapacity which soon became the dominant feature of her character, drowning and smothering every other feeling.

At first Mara has an excuse — the bringing up of her two children, Trică and Persida. That's why she sells whatever she can and buys what she can find. Then she becomes toll-collector at the bridge across the Mureş and goes in for money-lending. The thought of her children's future is replaced more and more by her longing to be rich, and wealth becomes an aim in itself. Slavici depicts Mara reckoning all the profit brought in by the toll for the bridge, two *Kreutzers* per person and ten for every pair of horses or oxen: Mara counting

her coins and adding them up until there were so many of them that her eyes would fill with tears.

Her passion for the money carefully stored away in her stocking becomes stronger than her love for the children. Accustomed to haggling, she manages to get Persida brought up almost free of charge in a school kept by nuns. When her haggling is unavailing, she is reluctant to take any money from the treasure in her stocking. That is why she gives up the idea of sending Trică to school.

Her love for money stifles her most natural reactions and feelings. In moments of intense dramatism when her two children have escaped being drowned in the Mureș, Mara does not stop thinking how much she makes from toll-collecting and does not forget to count her *Kreutzers*.

The thought of her money left in the house which she has forgotten to lock makes her turn back as she hurries to go to Persida who is about to give birth to a child. Her moral scruples are also determined by her ruling passion.

Her son Trică, a furrier's apprentice, is called up to do his military service. As was the custom at the time — 1850 — in Transylvania under Hapsburg rule, Trică could have been exempted from his military service by paying a certain amount of money. Having realized that Trică had awakened the lust of Martha, the wife of the furrier, his master, Mara advises him almost openly to give in to her in order to obtain the money for his redemption. "What would you lose by it? It's not my disgrace, nor is it yours — it's hers! But you've got to keep your mouth shut!"

In analysing the gradual change of Mara's character, Slavici emphasizes how the heroine, at first a greengrocer, acquires the deep pride of ownership when she becomes a well-to-do merchant. But even her pride bends when it clashes with her lust of money. Mara is about to boast of the dowry she intends to give her daughter Persida. But no sooner has she satisfied the first outburst of vanity than she starts to reduce the initial amount of the dowry and finally does not give her a single copper.

The critical import of *Mara* for the evolution of the Rumanian bourgeoisie is enhanced by the episode concerning Persida and Națl Hubăr. A large part of the novel is taken up by the story of their love hampered by jingoistic prejudice.

Persida is Rumanian and Națl is German. Slavici tackles anew the problem of the life and the relations between the different nationalities living in Transylvania, a problem which he had already dealt with satirically in the short story *Crucile roșii* (The Red Crosses). In *Mara*, too, Slavici solves the problem by taking a definitely anti-c auvinistic stand. The love between Persida and Națl will succeed in overcoming prejudice. Slavici, however, does not idealize his personages. When the first blaze of love is over, Națl becomes

again the son of Hubăr, the butcher, narrow-minded, mean and easy-going, whilst Persida begins to look more and more like her mother Mara.

During the first twenty years of the 20th century, Slavici went on leading his modest life as a school-teacher and writer. He kept writing short stories and tales.

Though as a writer of fairy-tales he was not equal to Creangă — who reached the acme of the art of fairy-tale writing in Rumanian — Slavici, whose first work of this kind was *Zîna Zorilor* (Dawn Fairy), wrote tales full of humour and fancy.

During the First World War, the Rumanian bourgeoisie had divided into two clans — the partisans of the *Entente* and those who sided with the Central Powers. The division had not been decided by principle but by the financial and banking connections kept up with the respective countries.

Slavici's attitude during the First World War — a consequence of his old sympathy for the Central European Powers rather than of a firm opposition to war itself, caused him to be imprisoned after the war. In prison, the writer met the Socialists that had been arrested at the same time and particularly I. C. Frimu, the hero of the struggle waged by the working class. This encounter had a particularly strong influence on the development of his conceptions. It was just before 1920, the time of a powerful revolutionary upsurge stimulated by the grand example of the Russian Revolution, but followed by ruthless repression.

Slavici, who was seventy at the time and whose realism with deep popular roots had clashed for decades with his hazy political ideas, had the revelation of quite a different world and type of man.

With the honesty and sincerity typical of his writing, Slavici stressed the significance of this moment in his life. He ever spoke of the "good" that the hard times spent in prison had done to him.

He drew a portrait of I. C. Frimu, which reveals his admiration for the revolutionary fighter. And the writer, who had been deluded by the hackneyed phrases hurled by bourgeois propaganda against the Socialists, says to himself severely: "Have you at last realized that it is not these people who undermine the foundations of social life, but those who cudgelled them?"

Poor and forgotten, Slavici passed away a few years later, in 1925, And that such a question should have been among the last lines he wrote, gives his life an issue in perfect keeping with his work whose greatest part our people now consider to be a valuable asset of their culture.

SILVIAN IOSIFESCU

