

MIHAIL SADOVEANU

EVENING TALES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
BUCHAREST, 1958

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FOREWORD

This book contains a selection of tales, sketches and short stories by the well-known Rumanian prose writer Mihail Sadoveanu. Some of these were written during the first years of his literary career (a few of the tales go back to the year 1904) and others during more recent years, when he had already reached the fullness of his artistic maturity. They represent but an infinitesimal part of the innumerable works published by the author in the course of his long career covering more than fifty years. The reader will observe discrepancies in the quality of some of these works: they are but the natural landmarks in the development of the author's literary possibilities. All his writings, however, even those at the very beginning of his literary activity clearly reflect his powerful and original talent.

Mihail Sadoveanu's life work is presented in more than 120 volumes, comprising simple stories, the narration of events which have long since become the subject of legends, multi-coloured descriptions of his country's landscapes, sketches and short stories, fairy-tales and charming fables equally interesting for children and grown-ups, colourful and intensely dramatic allegorical novels next to plots which, however simple, convey a deep sense of psychological analysis, historical novels and glorious epics.

It is a difficult thing to speak of Mihail Sadoveanu to people who do not know his works; one is tempted to speak about him ecstatically and in metaphors, for it is only by means of literary images that one can give a true picture of his personality and his creative work. A cold and precise description debases both the colour and the subtle charm of his great literary achievement. The use of too enthusiastic terms might

be interpreted, by any one who has not tasted the sweetness and the savour of his style, as a lack of impartiality and measure. If one has however the affinity of feeling to understand his work one cannot help being thrilled and fascinated. When we open any one of his books we enter a world in which a magic wave of reverie and nostalgia envelops our mind and soul. Deprived of this spiritual affinity all the mystery and elusive beauty of his works will remain unknown and unrevealed.

A proper understanding of the present book and of Mihail Sadoveanu's work in general is more easily achieved today as several of his masterpieces have long crossed our frontiers and been incorporated into the cultural patrimony of universal literature. Works of his have been translated into a large number of European and Asiatic languages.

The outstanding value of Sadoveanu's work is, in our opinion, due to three major attributes:

In the first place, he is the writer who, together with two other fore-runners of his — Eminescu and Creangă —, has penetrated and reflected in the most masterly manner the specific and authentic qualities of the Rumanian people. All Sadoveanu's writings, ranging from the historical novels in which he praises the feats of arms and the valour of the Rumanian people to the simplest tale or the description of the smallest patch of landscape tucked away in some nook of his country, all the heroes and events mentioned by Sadoveanu, the entire spirit of his work and the words in which it is couched, all go to express the quintessence of the Rumanian people's soul as it has survived from immemorial times to the present day.

He has thereby added a new dash of colour to the motley pattern of universal literature.

Owing to this fundamental characteristic feature of his work, Sadoveanu has not only made an essential contribution to the development of Rumanian literature but has also roused the nation's consciousness of its unity and solidarity.

A foreign traveller wishing to become acquainted with the soul and homeland of the Rumanian people would first have to read Sadoveanu's works and then study the history and geography of the country. This is,

we believe, the highest homage that can be paid to an artist anywhere — and Sadoveanu fully deserves it.

The second major attribute of M. Sadoveanu's work is his profound humanism, his great capacity for understanding the human soul, his warm compassion and overt sympathy for the great and small misfortunes of the humble people, downtrodden by an unjust social system or by individual wickedness. The chief hero in Sadoveanu's works is the hard-working common man and more particularly the Rumanian peasant, whom he portrays in his joys and sorrows, in his loves and the torturing unshared anguish of his soul, in his fights with the pagan invaders or in peace time, in times of happiness, at work on the fields, hunting and fishing or merely in contemplation of nature or dreaming his dreams.

And from all these happenings narrated by Sadoveanu there emanates a breath of love for life, a robust optimism, an exhilaration and bracing confidence such as is seldom encountered.

Next to the characters that come to life under Sadoveanu's pen we find a second hero in Nature which is a permanent witness of the happiness or suffering of the people and which, far from being a mere landscape, a scenery or a background against which the events are outlined, seems to take an active part in everything that occurs or at times becomes itself the principal focal point of the author's observations and descriptions. In Sadoveanu the natural element — the scenery — seems to vibrate together with the souls of his heroes.

The third essential element of Sadoveanu's work that gives it a beauty of its own is the style in which it is written.

He has acquired the beautiful literary style of his predecessors, the ancient Moldavian chroniclers and the bewitching narrator Ion Creangă, and has welded it at the fire of his creative genius, with the rich language spoken today by the Rumanian people thus creating the Sadoveanu literary style, a language with a new radiance and a new splendour of its own. Mihail Sadoveanu is indeed not only a great master of the Rumanian language, but also one of the foremost creators of the modern Rumanian literary style.

It is for this reason that the works of this great author are so difficult to translate into another language. Hence our fear lest many of

his literary gems should have lost through translation, most of their brilliance and shades. No efforts have been spared to offer the foreign reader as faithful a version as possible of a small part of Sadoveanu's work for his appreciation.

As for the writer's talent and originality, his work speaks for itself far more eloquently than we could. A simple "Foreword" can neither define nor circumscribe such a talent.

We hope that the reading of these short pieces or of some of the longer works will cause the foreign reader the same enchantment as that experienced by Rumanian readers during the past decades.

When perusing these few tales by Sadoveanu the foreign reader will discover and understand not only a small part of the great author's work but also a spark of the soul of the Rumanian people.

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IN THE PETRIȘOR FOREST

It was late in August, and the Petrișor forest, old and unspoilt by man, silently spread out its vaults of foliage. It climbed the gently winding slopes and rose in the distance over a steep peak topped by an old fir-tree darting skyward, the first to herald the advent of the winds with its deep-toned whistle. The forest wound gently towards the west, where the sun, shining from an eastern sky, cast its rays into its most secret recesses.

In the short grass on its edge the light fell in a warm shower of finely sifted beams; here and there a swarm of gnats flew in circles, weaving a lively pattern, sparkling an instant in the light, to disappear again a moment after. An oriole stood on the branch of a beech stretching sunwards, its gleaming feathers the colour of egg yolk, now and again putting forth its neck and trilling — its quavering notes echoing long amid the forest branches. Tiny motley-coloured birds called to one another from their post on some slender twig; there were blood-stained goldfinches, round titmice with black and grey feathers, and finches with brick-red breasts. They looked at one another with small, protruding eyes like pinheads, opened their beaks and uttered short melodious calls, then, with a flutter of wings, rose lightly, leaving the branches with their smooth, glossy leaves swaying tremulously.

As always on summer mornings at the edge of the forest, there was the hustle and bustle of small living creatures. Dragonflies, some with transparent wings and others with smaller blue wings, crossed each other; butterflies flittered above the thick grass with its swelling sweet fragrance. While in its form, on a couch of leaves and hay, dozing in the caressing warmth, there lay a reddish hare, its head on its fore paws, its ears resting on its hunched-up back. Sometimes a gleam came into its eyes to fade away slowly, and sometimes its split lips twitched as if it were dreaming.

On the forest paths it was still wet, with only an occasional movement of life; from somewhere came a faint, indistinct call; a slender branch swayed lightly and for a time the yellow leaves of past years would rustle.

Towards noon a horn was heard, echoing from glade to glade, to which the hounds gave answer. Then, too, came the sound of human voices. And soon, along the path streaming with light, came two men, searching the thickets with their eyes. One was the boyar, one could tell that by his dress: his suit of green cloth, the little hat with a jay's feather in it, the clean, shiny, hammerless gun. He was still young, with a full-moon face, high colour, a short, fair moustache and a slight paunch. A well-fed man, with merry eyes and a complacent face. The other, the gamekeeper, was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow with a thick, dark moustache and a clear, serene look. Over his left hip hung his game bag with copper studs, and in his hand he swung a gun under whose cocks he had placed a piece of hare-skin to prevent the gunlocks from rusting.

"Call the hounds, Vasile," the squire said, turning his head towards the keeper.

On his right hip hung a horn, and Vasile raised this to his lips and blew three prolonged blasts, directed towards the edge of the forest behind them. The sound was still echoing when a dog barked shrilly three times in response.

"That's my bloodhound," Vasile said, listening intently. Then a second bark, louder and deeper-toned, was heard. The gamekeeper began to call:

"Here, Frișca, here!"

The barking drew nearer and a fine black dog with a reddish muzzle appeared on the path some twenty paces away, looking to right and left, then leapt towards the two hunters.

"Here, Osman!" the squire shouted. "Where have you been, you old rogue?"

Like a lizard slipping through the bushes, the keeper's bitch appeared, so thin that her ribs showed through her skin. Bending over her, Vasile raised his hand. Frișca crouched close to the ground, yelping, and began to wag her tail.

"Let's go, boyar Grigoriță," the keeper said straightening himself. "We'll keep straight ahead and, when we reach the roe-deer's path, you'll see if we don't come across some. I saw a number of them only yesterday."

They started along the wet path in their high boots, their steps completely muffled. The dogs followed quietly behind in leash.

"It was here, on this edge of the forest that I shot two wolves last year," Vasile said.

"Here?" the squire asked.

"Yes, at this very place, and not one, but two. Oh, and I came across others elsewhere . . . As soon as the snow falls, what else is there to do? Isn't that my job? I hate these wild beasts, and when I'm on their scent, I have no rest . . . It's like a passion with me, sir, like a passion. I can neither eat nor drink. But as I was saying, I came here, boyar Grigoriță, and found tracks on this path . . . many marks in the snow. It was after St. Andrew's Day, and the beasts were roaming in packs . . . So finding the tracks, I followed them up to the village. Then towards the swamp on the return . . . I realized they were in the swamp . . . and so I went and hid among

the bushes on the edge of the forest. And from there I began to howl for them . . . I howled once, then a second time and then I heard their answer from the swamp . . . There they were among the reeds . . . I called again and waited for a time. Then I saw them come out . . . There were six of them, with a big one in front, as big as this, sir . . ." And with an oath Vasile showed the height of the wolf by placing his hand at a goodly distance from the ground. "Again I howled. They stopped and sniffed the wind, then made for me, their tails trailing along the snow. I kept silent then. When they were near, I raised my gun and took aim at the big one in front." (At this Vasile swore again a terrible oath at the big wolf in front.) "So I took aim, sir, and when I had fired, there he lay stark dead on the snow. When the second jumped over him, I again took aim, fired and brought him down over the first."

With another oath the gamekeeper stopped and looked at the dogs behind him, checking his gun-locks.

"And the others?" asked the squire.

"The others? Oh, they turned tail and ran like hell. What had they to expect?"

The boyar smiled with satisfaction. Taking out his tobacco pouch, he offered some to the game-keeper and rolled a cigarette for himself. Vasile struck a light from his flint and they lighted their cigarettes. They continued their way in silence in the cool forest under the arches of boughs, through which the sun rays glittered here and there.

Somewhere on their way a squirrel sped up a tree, looking at them for a moment with its small black eyes from behind a branch; it leapt to another tree like a ball of chestnut-coloured hair and was lost in the foliage. The gentleman gripped his gun, then dropped it again, while Vasile said under his breath:

"Too small a little beast . . ." falling to silence again as they went on through the damp fragrance of the forest. Woodpeckers

pecked at the tree bark, melancholy calls came from afar and died away in the still world of green.

Finally the gamekeeper stopped.

"Now, sir," he said, "it's to the right; down this dale we go. And beware the undergrowth; it's devilishly thick. It's damp in the valley, too; the stream's not far away. That's where we'll see the tracks."

They went to the right, down a gentle slope through the old forest that looked like an impassable wall.

"Easy . . ." Vasile said. His voice suddenly had a strange echo, trembling in that valley like a breath of wind.

They trod warily on, then halted again. The dogs strained at the leashes. Vasile bent over the wet soil.

"See, here are fresh tracks . . ."

Boyar Grigoriță bending over, too, examined the tracks carefully. He put his game bag on his left, his hunting knife on his right, pulled down his hat and got his gun ready.

"Hey, Osman!" the forest guard spoke to the dogs. "See here! and you, Frișca! Don't you smell their stink yet?"

Suddenly the dogs, now released, darted down the slope and disappeared among the bushes.

Vasile said:

"We'll go into the glade and wait there till the dogs give chase. That bitch of mine, the one you see there, knows all their tricks. She'll bring you the deer right in front of your gun, sir."

The young squire seemed not quite at ease. He took two deep breaths, holding his gun ready as he followed Vasile. Down the gently sloping valley a little glade showed itself looking as if it were asleep under a spray of light in the undisturbed solitude.

The forester suddenly became attentive. The squire started. A dog had bayed twice from the boundless depths of the vaulted forest.

The two men waited. There was not a cry of a bird to be heard, not even a gnat winged its way through the light. The bark of the dogs was heard again, more remote, though more pressing. The forest guard put the horn to his lips and gave two calls which roused the echoes to the most distant parts of the forest.

And suddenly, when they least expected it, as they stood, their ears intent on the barking of the dogs, there came from the thick bushes a quick rustle, and a grey hind appeared, posed gracefully on its slender, nimble legs. Then like an arrow, it shot past the squire barely five steps away.

The gamekeeper gave a start. Boyar Grigoriță quickly came to life as if some instinctive fear had roused him from a dream and, raising his gun to his eye, fired two shots in succession. Through the dispersing smoke he could see the hind flee like the wind across the glade. He swallowed twice, bent his gun with trembling hands and loaded it again. But in the smoke which was slowly lifting the gamekeeper already stood with pointed gun.

"Fire!" boyar Grigoriță called out.

Vasile's gun gave a sharp report, following close upon the previous shots. The wild thing among the trees took a leap and they both saw it shortly after — a phantom among the brown tree trunks — soon lost to sight.

The keeper began to re-load his gun. Quietly he said:

"Too far..."

The gentleman was roused and angry.

"Where the devil did it come from?" he said hurriedly.

"I wasn't expecting it. I was listening to the dogs... I fired too quickly... I didn't take my time..."

"It was unexpected..." Vasile said slowly... "But never mind... The dogs will send us others. Here goes their path."

They fell to listening again. The dogs were drawing near, barking and yelping. The keeper put his horn to his lips.