

CAPTAIN VAMPIRE

I. The Insult

It was May 1877. The Russians were descending like locusts upon the magnificent country of Rumania, which had been surrendered to them as prey. The population of Iasi had quadrupled; troops were cluttering the railway lines and the Cossacks were invading Bucharest, despite a specific clause in the Rumanian treaty forbidding the imperial battalions access to the capital.

One hot afternoon, a number of peasants were sowing maize and barley in the vicinity of Bucharest. It is impossible for Rumanians to remain silent for an instant, and there was no lack of topics of conversation.

"They have no respect for anything!" said one young man, shaking his long hair. "They trample the corn, break our ploughs and burn our trees like dead wood! God only knows what they won't do!"

"And then, we have to give them lodging!" said another.

"Right, Mitica," said a third to the first speaker. "It wouldn't be so bad if they didn't drink so much!"

"I have my sister to consider," Mitica Slobozianu replied, simply.

An old man with a white beard—a stereotypical *eternal father*—doffed his sheepskin cap respectfully and said, in a grave voice: "If Heliadeⁱ had lived, they wouldn't have got past Ungeny."

"Old Mani's right," the peasants said, "but it's not a good idea to remember Heliade just now."

Old Mani Isacescu paid them no heed, and said with a sigh: "Heliade! I knew him. Those were good times."

Alas, the good times are always those that are long gone.

"Our father Bismarck, who art in Varzin..."ⁱⁱ Mitica intoned, nasally. "Bah! We'll have plenty of things to ask of *our father Bismarck*, of which he won't grant a single one."

"You seem very cheerful, Mitica—thanks to the *raki*?"ⁱⁱⁱ insinuated one of the peasants.

Mitica blushed. "Don't spoil my good mood," he sighed, ceasing to smile. "It'll go away by itself soon enough. Next Sunday I've got to go to the town hall—where, depending on how unlucky I am, I'll either be enrolled in the territorial army or the regular army. They'll cut off my hair, while I wait to lose my head! There you go!" Passing his hand through his Merovingian locks, he added: "It's a shame, though."

"To the town hall!" the peasants exclaimed, unpleasantly surprised.

"Yes—like everyone else unfortunate enough to have been born in the year of our Lord 1856."

A cry of anger erupted from every bosom.

"And suppose we don't want to!" Manoli said, with a gesture of defiance.

"Well, your wishes will be overruled," Mitica replied, the *raki* having reconciled him somewhat to his fate. "To war, my friends, to war! If the Turks take us prisoner, they'll cut off our arms and legs. That'll be very amusing."

"And my son?" cried Old Mani. "What will they do with my son?"

"Your son? My God protect him—and all the other *dorobantzi*!"^{iv} Isn't he coming back today? Well, since he's a corporal, he must know a lot more than me, a humble conscript."

Old Mani did not reply. He turned away and resumed throwing maize to the wind.

“They’ll send us to Dobruja,” Mitica continued, with an ironic verve that excited his companions. “We’ll sleep in the marshes with the toads and eat *mamaliga* made with plaster—that’s good enough for poor devils like us.”^v

“What are you doing, father?” a familiar voice suddenly put in, causing the old man to shiver. “You’re sowing corn for the foreigners and preparing straw for their horses!”

“Ioan, my Ioan!” cried Old Mani, hurling himself upon his son.

“Isacescu!” said the peasants, immediately forming a circle around the soldier, as avid as could be to hear the lie given to the bad news brought by Mitica. Alas, the *dorobantz* could only confirm it.

Furious and exasperated, the peasants abandoned their work and took to their heels along the road, in the opposite direction to Bucharest.

“Say nothing to the women!” Ioan shouted after them.

Mitica and the *dorobantz* exchanged a few words.

“Are you going to Bucharest?” Ioan asked.

“And then I’ll come back here,” Mitica said. He added, with a smile: “Mariora’s waiting for you.”

“Poor Mariora!” sighed the *dorobantz*.

Mitica put his finger to his lips to command silence. Ioan made a sign to show that he understood, and remained alone with his father while his friend, whose robust cheerfulness was indestructible, went away whistling.

Ioan Isacescu appeared to be 22 or 23 years of age. He displayed all the distinctive features of his race; even if he had not been wearing the strange uniform of the *dorobantzi*, the slender and elegant figure, the olive complexion, the curly black hair descending over his forehead and—above all—the dark and profound eyes whose glare was unsoftened by their extremely long lashes, would have drawn from any Serb, Russian, Bulgar or Hungarian the possibly hostile and disdainful exclamation: “There’s a Rumanian!”

The shadow of a moustache stamped his upper lip. The sole fault that an artist would have found with his face, which was otherwise perfectly handsome, was the extraordinary thickness of the eyebrows, which were almost joined together, and which lent his intelligent and pensive physiognomy a hint of wildness.

“Isacescu is proud!” said young women offended by the indifference of the *dorobantz*, who spared them neither a glance nor a friendly word. My God, no! Perhaps Isacescu’s character was a little too serious, but he was certainly scornful of no one, and it was a cherished privilege to have him as a friend. In the territorial army, of which he was a member, the soldiers spent alternate periods of three weeks in their hearths and a week with their regiment. Old Mani Isacescu’s flourishing fields gave scarcely any evidence of the brief absences of Ioan—who had succeeded, by means of his activity and economy, in doubling the little capital they possessed. Even his meager wages were put into his father’s hands in full, and it was said that, although the Isacescus were not rich, they had a chance of becoming so.

The *dorobantz*, although brave to the point of temerity, hated boasting, and his horror of what one might call *staginess* had played a strange part in determining his future.

It was in 1876, at the time of the thaw. The Dimbovitza flooded the poor districts in the south of Bucharest and a great number of peasants, including Isacescu, had hastened to see the disaster. A pretty young girl of 16—who had not read Schiller’s *Diver*^{vi}—threw a flower into the river and challenged the young men to go after it. They immediately threw themselves into the muddy water like a flock of geese, to the great delight of the pretty girl, who laughed at the sight of them splashing about, trying to get the better of one another. Although he had heard the imprudent words of his neighbor, whom he had known since childhood, Ioan remained where he was on the bank. His severe gaze met the little fool’s eyes, and she blushed. From that moment on, she loved Isacescu. At first, Ioan’s response to that affection, so bizarrely originated, was lukewarm; he allowed himself to be adored by the young woman as a Hindu god by a Brahmin.

One day, though, he was astonished to find that he loved Mariora Slobozianu, if not more, then at least in an altogether different fashion to the manner in which she loved him.

Old Mani leaned on his son's arm; they left the sun-drenched plain. The maize would certainly yield a double harvest this year. But the two Isacescus were not thinking about maize!

They went along a narrow sunken path, bordered on either side by bushes and trees whose roots projected from the earth, and they chatted as they walked.

"The country's independence will be declared within the week," Ioan said. "They'll have us fire our cannons, then they'll pack us off to Giurgiu." With a smile, he added: "Probably with a double ration of *selbovitza*."^{vii}

"Giurgiu!" said Old Mani. "Giurgiu's on the Danube!"

"Yes, it's on the Danube—the right bank. They don't want to tell us because they fear a mutiny, but we've figured it out." After a pause, he continued in a lower voice: "Father, when I'm gone, you'll go to see Mariora from time to time, won't you? I'll simply tell her that we're going to garrison Giurgiu—she doesn't know that Giurgiu's on the Danube, so don't tell her!"

Old Mani replied with a nod of his head, his black eyes gleaming beneath his white eyebrows. He pointed towards Bucharest and pronounced, in a loud voice, the malediction that the Rumanian people consider irrevocable: "*A curse be upon them, their dead ancestors and their unborn children.*"

The arm he had raised to issue the curse remained outstretched. Ioan shivered, and suddenly lowered himself to the ground, setting his ear against it. The father and the son listened. A dull rumble reached their ears, similar to the steady gallop of a troop of horses.

"What's that?" the father asked.

"I don't know," the son replied. "It might be a cavalry unit passing by!"

The noise grew louder.

"They're horses," murmured Ioan, still leaning down to the ground. "Russian horses—I recognize their trot."

"Russians?" Mani repeated. "Which way are they headed?"

The *dorobantz* pricked his ears more attentively.

"Northwards," he said, finally. "They're coming towards us."

Scarcely had he pronounced these words when they saw a horseman appear a few hundred yards away, at the end of the path they were following—then another, and a third: an entire unit, as Ioan had said.

"Well?" said Old Mani, interrogatively.

"They're Cossacks, headed by a Colonel," said the younger Isacescu, whose eyesight had been honed on the streets. He was not mistaken; the Cossacks were coming down the sloping path at full speed.

"Let's get out of the way, father," Ioan said. "Here they are!"

The Russians had arrived within the range of an ordinary voice. The Colonel in command of them, having seen the two Walachians, cried out in strongly-accented Rumanian: "*Loc! Facetzi loc!*"—meaning "Give way! Get out of the way!"

The command was futile. The two Isacescus had their backs to a bank that was like a wall of earth. The Russians were riding three abreast, coming like the wind, and the path was no more than ten feet wide.

"*Loc!*" repeated the officer. "*Loc!*"

They could not go back any further. Ioan was about to reply when his eyes met the sallow face of the Russian Colonel. His terrible eyebrows frowned; he had just perceived a mocking smile in the greenish eyes of the officer, who was still howling: "*Loc! Loc!*"

The Colonel aimed his horse at the two Rumanians and shouted ferociously at old Mani: "Since when does a serf keep his cap on his head before a boyar?" With a rapid gesture, he lashed out with a slender horsewhip, which passed across the old man's forehead like a lightning bolt.

Bursts of laughter sounded behind the insulter; a cry of rage replied to them. Ioan, pale with wrath and brandishing his dagger, threw himself at the horse's head. He seized the bridle with his left hand, and was about to strike its rider with his right, when the latter abruptly pulled away and drew his sword.

The saber came down violently upon the hand of the *dorobantz*; a jet of blood sprang forth, but the dagger remained firm in Ioab's iron grip.

If the Walachian was strong, the Russian was skillful. Releasing a guttural exclamation, he jammed his spurs into the flank of his chestnut horse, which set off at a gallop, dragging the *dorobantz*—who fell, bleeding, beneath the hooves of the Cossack horses.

When he got up again, Old Mani was by his side. Ioan looked around, with a strange expression; blood was dripping from his fingers, reddening the grass, but he did not feel the wound. He only saw his father, knowing and understanding but one thing: his adversary was out of reach! He calmly folded his arms across his chest and watched the Russians recede towards the horizon.

When the last soldier had disappeared from view, and the sound of the last horseshoe striking the ground had ceased to echo in his ears, he murmured in a dull voice: "For what you have just done, man with the yellow eyes—what you did to my father, and what you did to me—I swear, here before God, to repay you a hundred times over!"

ⁱ This reference is to Ion Heliade Radulescu (see the introduction).

ⁱⁱ Varzin was Bismarck's country estate in Pomerania.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Raki* is here defined as plum brandy [Nizet], although the term is often used more generally to refer to strong liquors of the region.

^{iv} The *dorobantzi* were a special corps of Rumanian infantry [Nizet].

^v *Mamaliga* is a porridge made from maize, allegedly the staple diet of Rumanian peasants [Nizet].

^{vi} In Friedrich Schiller's allegorical ballad *Der Taucher* [The Diver] (1797), a King hurls a golden goblet off a cliff into the sea, challenging his knights and vassals to recover it, and thus claim it for their own. A young page who accepts the challenge is dragged into the depths by a whirlpool. He returns, miraculously, after a magical underwater journey, but the King throws the goblet back into the sea and challenges him again, this time promising a knighthood and his daughter's hand as the reward for its recovery. The boy, fervent with desire to marry the Princess, jumps in for a second time, with the predictable result.

^{vii} *Selbovitza* is a kind of strong liquor [Nizet].