

GYPSY BLOOD

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Gypsy blood by Konrad Bercovici

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KONRAD BERCOVICI

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BY
KONRAD BERCOVICI

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GYPSY BLOOD

GHITZA

I

THAT winter had been a very severe one in Roumania. The Danube froze solid a week before Christmas and remained so for five months. It was as if the blue waters had been suddenly turned into steel. From across the river, from the Dobrudja, on sleighs pulled by long-horned oxen, the Tartars brought barrels of frozen honey, quarters of killed lambs, poultry and game, and returned heavily laden with bags of flour and rolls of sole leather. The whole day long the crack of whips and the curses of the drivers rent the icy atmosphere. Whatever their destination, the carters were in a hurry to reach human habitation before nightfall—before the dreaded time when packs of wolves came out to prey for food.

In cold, clear nights, when even the wind was frozen still, the lugubrious howling of the wolves permitted no sleep. Indoors people spent the night praying for the lives and souls of the travellers.

All through the winter there was not one morning but some man or animal was found torn or eaten in our neighbourhood. The people of the village at first built fires on the shore to scare the beasts away, but they had to cease doing so because the thatched roofs of the huts in the village were set on fire on windy nights by flying sparks. The cold cowed the fiercest dogs. The wolves, crazed by hunger, grew more daring from day to day. They showed their heads even in daylight.

When Baba Hana, the old gypsy fortune-teller, ran into the school-house one morning and cried, "Wolf, wolf in the yard," the teacher was inclined to attribute her cry to a long drink the night before. But that very night Stan, the horseshoer, who had returned late from the inn and had evidently not closed the door as he entered the smithy, was eaten up by the beasts. And the smithy stood in the centre of the village! A stone's throw from the inn, and the thatch-roofed school, and the red painted church! Stan must have put up a hard fight. Three huge dark brown beasts, as big as yearling cows, were found brained. The body of big Stan had disappeared in the stomachs of the rest of the pack. The high leather boots and the

hand that still gripped the handle of the sledge-hammer were the only remains of the man. There was no blood, either. It had been lapped dry. That stirred the village. Not even enough to bury him—and he had been a good Christian! But the priest ordered that the slight remains of Stan be buried in the Christian way. The empty coffin was brought to the church and all the rites were carried out as if the body of Stan were there rather than in the stomachs of wild beasts.

But after Stan's death the weather began to clear as if it had been God's will that such a price be paid for His clemency. The cold diminished daily and in a few days reports were brought from everywhere on the shore that the bridge of ice was giving way. Two weeks before Easter Sunday it was warm enough to give the cows an airing. The air cleared and the rays of the sun warmed man and beast. Traffic on the frozen river had ceased.

Suddenly one morning a whip cracked, and from the bushes on the opposite side of the Danube there appeared, following one another, six tent wagons, such as are used by travelling gypsies, each wagon drawn by four horses harnessed side by side.

The people on our side of the Danube called to warn the travellers that the ice was not thick enough to hold. In a few minutes the whole village was near the river, yelling and cursing. But after they realised that the intention was to cross the Danube at any cost, the people settled down to watch what was going to happen. In front of the first wagon walked a tall, grey-bearded man trying the solidity of the ice with a heavy stick. Flanking the last wagon, in open line walked the male population of the tribe. Behind them came the women and children. No one said a word. The eyes of the whole village were on the travellers, for all felt that they were tempting Providence. Yet every one knew that Murdo, the chief of the tribe, who was well known to the whole Dobrudja, would not take such risks with his people without good reason.

They had crossed to the middle of the frozen river in steady fashion, when Murdo shouted one word and the feet of every man and beast stopped short. The crossing of the river had been planned to the slightest detail. The people on the shore became excited. The women began to cry and the children to yell. They were driven inland by the men, who