

steel pierce through me; I see a moustache like twin sparrows. Fierce Rouman! He rode with a gun across his back, and with a knife an ell long, here, in his belt, on the left side. It was thus I always saw him. I am old, you know, nigh on a hundred, I have travelled much about the world, I have met various characters, and many people, but I tell you, a man like Cozma Racoare I have never seen! Yet he was not physically so terrible; he was a man of middle height, lean, with a brown face, a man like many another--ha! but all the same! only to have seen the eyes was to remember him. Terrible Rouman!

There was grief and bitterness in the land at that time. Turks and Greeks were overrunning the country on all sides, everywhere honest men were complaining--they were hard times! Cozma had no cares. To-day he was here, to-morrow one heard of him, who knows where! Every one fled before the storm, but he, good Lord, he never cared! They caught him and put him in chains. What need? He just shook himself, wrenched the bars with one hand, whistled to his horse, and there he was on the road again. Who did not know that Racoare had a charmed life? Ah, how many bullets were aimed at his breast! But in vain! It was said of him: only a silver bullet can slay him! Where do you see men like that nowadays? Those times are gone for ever.

Have you heard of the Feciorul Romancei? He was a fire-eater too! He robbed the other side of Muntenia, Cozma robbed this, and one night--what a night!--they both met at Milcov, exchanged booty, and were back in their homes before dawn. Were the frontier guards on the watch? Did they catch them as they rode? Why! Racoare's horse flew like a phantom, no bullet could touch him! What a road that is from here, across the mountains of Bacau, to the frontier! Eh! to do it, there and back in one night, you mark my words, that's no joke! But that horse! That's the truth of the matter, that horse of Racoare's was not like any other horse. That's clear.

Voda-Calimbach had an Arabian mare, which his servants watched as the apple of his eye; she was due to foal. One night--it was in the seventh month--Cozma got into the stall, ripped open the mare and stole the foal. But that was not all he did! You understand the foal was wrapped in a caul. Racoare cut the caul, but he cut it in such a way as to split the foal's nostrils. And look, the foal with the split nostrils grew up in the dark fed upon nut kernels; and when Cozma mounted it--well, that was a horse!

Even the wind, therefore, could not out-distance Cozma. On one occasion--I was a volunteer then--Cozma woke to find himself within the walls of Probot, with volunteers inside and the Turks outside. The Turks were battering the walls with their guns. The volunteers decided to surrender the fortress. Cozma kept his own counsel. The next day Cozma was nowhere to be found. But from the walls, up to the forest of Probot, was a line of corpses! That had been Racoare's road!

That is how it always was! His were the woods and fields! He recognized no authority, he did not know what fear was, nor love--except on one occasion. Terrible Rouman! It seems to me I can see him now, riding upon his bay horse.

At that time a Greek was managing the Vulturesht estate, and on this side, on our estate, within those ruined walls, there ruled such a minx of a Roumanian as I had never seen before. The Greek was pining for the Roumanian. And no wonder! The widow had eyebrows that met, and the eyes of the devil--Lord! Lord! such eyes would have tempted a saint. She had been married, against her will, to a Greek, to Dimitru Covas; the Greek died, and now the lady ruled alone over our estate.

As I tell you, Nicola Zamfiridi, the Greek, was dying for the lady. What did that man not do, where did he not go, what soothsayers did he not visit, all in vain! The lady would not hear of it! She hated the Greek. And yet Nicola was not ill-favoured. He was a proud Greek, bronzed, with pointed moustache and curly beard. But still he did not please the widow!