

POVEȘTI ȘI POVEȘTIRI BILINGVE



BASME ROMÂNEȘTI ROMANIAN FAIRY TALES CONTEȘ DE FÉES ROUMAINS

Volumul I



EDITURA PARALELA 45

Aleodor the Emperor

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It happened once upon a time.

There was once an emperor. His hair was turning grey, yet he hadn't been able to beget a single child. He was wasting away, the poor emperor, with the wish, like any other man, to have a son, no matter how puny, but it was all in vain.

Yet in his old age, behold, luck smiled upon him, and he begot a sweet little child, once seen never to be forgotten. The emperor named him Aleodor. When it was time to christen the baby, the emperor summoned East and West, North and South, that they might share his great joy. The rejoicings went on for three days and three nights with feasting and merry-making, to last in their memory as long as they lived.

The older the boy grew, the sharper and more skillful he became. It was not long before the emperor felt that his end was drawing near. In his last hour, he placed the child upon his knees and said to him:

"My dear child, God is calling me to Him, and I am about to breathe my last. I foresee that you are going to become a cunning man. Even dead and in the grave, my bones will rejoice of your deeds. Concerning the rule of the empire, I have nothing to say, for skilled and cunning as you are, you're sure to do well. One thing alone I wish to tell you: do you see that mountain yonder? Don't you be tempted to hunt in those parts, for your life is at stake. That mountain lies in the lands of Half-Man-Astride-on-Half-a-Halt-Hare, and whoever crosses his boundary does not go unpunished."

Having said that, he opened his mouth, took three gasps, and drew his last breath. He left this earth as he had never existed.



The emperor died and he was laid to rest. He was mourned by his family, by the noblemen, and by his people. Having ascended his father's throne, Aleodor, though still a youngster, ruled the country like a grown man. Everyone was content with his reign, and people were proud that they were blessed to live under his rule.

Aleodor would often go hunting to spend some time away from the cares of his kingdom. He remembered his father's words and tried to obey them to the letter.

One day, lost in his thoughts as he was, he slipped and unwittingly trod upon the lands of that hideous man. He'd taken some ten to twenty steps when, lo! There the man stood before him.

Now he did not mind that he'd crossed the boundaries of that ugly and repulsive man, but he was furious with himself that he'd disobeyed what his father told him on his deathbed.

The hideous creature said to him:

"All the wicked men who encroach upon my boundaries become my slaves."

"First you must know," Aleodor answered, "that I have stepped upon your lands unwittingly and unintentionally, and that I wish you no harm."

"I thought you were brave, but I see that you intend to ask for forgiveness like any other coward."

"Nay, God forbid! I have told you the pure truth, and should you want a fight, choose: ...it's sword-fighting, mace-hurling or wrestling."

"None of those. But in order to escape punishment, there is no other way except to go and bring me the daughter of Emperor Verdesch."

Aleodor somehow hesitated and made excuses. He said that the affairs of the empire did not allow him to be away for too long, or that he did not have a guide – now this, now that – but no! The hideous man would hear none of this. He insisted on his bringing the daughter of Verdesch, the emperor, if Aleodor wished to be rid of the blame of thief for trespassing his lands and wished to stay alive.

Aleodor felt guilty. He knew that, without his knowledge, he'd done wrong by trespassing the lands of the monster. He also knew that he was better off getting rid of this evil man and having nothing whatever in common with him. So he finally pledged to do the job required of him.

Half-a-Man-Astride-on-Half-a-Halt-Hare well knew that once Aleodor had promised, he was sure to keep his word, like a decent man that he was. So he said:

"God bless you on your way and help you return victorious."



Aleodor went on his way. And as he walked, pondering and turning thoughts over in his mind on how to fulfill his errand, for he had given his word, he found himself at the border of a lake where a pike was gasping for breath on dry land.

As soon as he saw the pike, he went to pick it up and eat it to appease his hunger.

But the pike spoke:

"Do not kill me, Prince Handsome! But rather throw me into the water, for much help shall I be to you when least you expect it."

Aleodor listened to the pike and threw it into the water. Then the pike spoke:



"Here, keep this small scale, and when you think of me, I shall always be with you."

The young man went on his way and could not help wondering at such an occurrence. And lo! He came upon a raven with a broken wing.

As he wanted to shoot it, the raven spoke:

"Prince Handsome! Prince Handsome! Rather than burden your soul with me, better mend my wing, for I shall be of much use to you."

Aleodor, being a brave and decent young man, did as he was asked and tied the broken wing. When he was about to leave, the raven said:

"Here, brave man, keep this small feather, and when you think of me, I shall always be with you."

Aleodor took the small feather and went on his way. But he had scarcely gone some one hundred steps when he came upon a gadfly.

"Spare my life, Aleodor Your Highness, for I shall save you from death. Keep this piece of down from my wing, and when you think of me, I shall always be with you."

Hearing such words, and that it had even called him by his own name, Aleodor quickly lifted his foot and let the gadfly go on its own way.

And having covered several days' distance, he came upon the palaces of Verdesch, the emperor. Once he got there, he stood at the gate, hoping that someone would come and ask him what he was after.

He stood there one day, he stood there two days, but did anyone come to enquire what he wished? Not at all.

On the third day, Verdesch, the emperor, summoned his servants and shouted at them in anger.

"How is it possible," he said, "to leave this man standing at my gate for three days and for no one to enquire what he is after? Is that why you get your wages? Is that why you eat my bread and gain experience?"

The servants did not know which way to turn or what answer to give. They finally called Aleodor in and brought him before the emperor.

"What is you seek, young man?" asked the emperor. "And what are you waiting for at the gates of my courts?"

"My errand, Your Highness," he replied, "is a commission to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."



"Very well, my boy, but we must first make an agreement, for such is the custom at my court. You are allowed to conceal yourself wherever you wish for three days in a row. Should my daughter find you, your head shall be cut off and placed in the pear tree where one hundred other heads have been placed before. Should she not find you, then you shall take her away with all regal respect."

"I trust to God, Your Highness, that He will not let me perish. To the pear tree we shall give something else – not a human head again. Let's make the agreement."

"So is this your last word?"



"It sure is."

So they made the agreement, put it down in writing, and confirmed it.

The girl joined them, and they agreed that the following day he should hide as best he could. After having come to this agreement, he started fretting, tormenting himself with thoughts more terrible than death. He started pondering and turning thoughts over in his mind on how to find the best hiding place. It was his head that was at stake, neither more nor less. He was walking deep in thought and constantly planning, when, lo! The pike came to his mind. He took out the scale, looked at it, and thought of its owner – and behold! The pike stood before him and said:

"What do you want from me, Prince Handsome?"

"What do I want? Alas! Let me tell you what has happened to me. Could you advise me what to do?"

"Come, do not worry – leave it to me."

At once, the pike lashed its tail and turned Aleodor into a sea bream and hid him at the bottom of the sea among the other small fishes.

When the girl woke up, she took her spyglass and looked everywhere. She did not see him. The other fellows who came to ask her hand in marriage used to hide in the cellars, at the back of houses, behind haystacks, or in some ruined dwellings. Aleodor had concealed himself so well that the girl was concerned lest she be beaten. Now it came to her mind that she look with her spyglass into the sea, and she found him at the bottom among the other sea breams. Apparently her spyglass was magic.

"Come out, you rascal," she said, laughing. "Why did you shrink like a dry biscuit? A huge man like you turned into a small sea bream and hidden at the bottom of the sea!"

He had no choice but to come out.

Then she said to the emperor:

"It seems to me, father, that this young man shall get the better of me. And very charming and sweet he is, too. Were I to find his hiding place the third time too, please spare him, father, for he is no idiot like the others. His looks make him different than all other fellows."

"That we shall see," the emperor replied.

The following day, the raven came into Aleodor's mind. It came before him and said:

"What is it that you wish, master?"



"I say, good brother, look what has happened to me. Could you advise me what to do?"

"I shall try!"

And by touching him with its wing, it turned him into a young raven and thrust him into a flock of ravens climbing above the raging wind.

As soon as the girl woke up, she took her spyglass and looked for him in every nook. He was nowhere to be found. No trace of him on the earth. No trace of him in the rivers or the seas. She was deep in thoughts.



About noon, what did she feel like but looking upwards? And when she saw him in the heavenly heights among the flock of ravens, she started wagging her finger at him, saying:

"Alas! You scoundrel, you rascal! Come down, you man, why did you turn into such a teeny bird? You could not get rid of me, not even if you were in heaven."

He came down, for he had no other choice. The emperor was startled at his cleverness and listened to his daughter's request.

Yet as the agreement had been that he should hide three times, the emperor said: "Just for the sake of it, let us see where else he is going to hide."

On the third day, early in the morning, he thought of the gadfly. The gadfly arrived in a heartbeat. Having heard Aleodor's story, the gadfly spoke:

"Leave it to me, and I wager she will not find you."

It turned him into a louse egg and hid him right in the girl's pigtail without her knowing it.

As soon as the girl woke up she grabbed her spyglass and looked for him all day long, but she never came upon him. She was quite beside herself, for she could feel him round about her, but to set eyes on him she could not. She sought him with her spyglass on the earth, in the heavens, and in the seas, but did not see him anywhere. In the evening, tired of too much spying, she cried:

"Now, come and show up! I feel that you are quite close, but I cannot see you. You've had the better of me; yours I shall be."

When he heard her admit to being beaten, he gently climbed down her pigtail and showed up before her. The emperor had nothing more to say and gave his daughter's hand in marriage. As they were leaving, he accompanied them out of his kingdom with servants and a great deal of pomp.

On the road, they made a halt to eat breakfast. After they had something to eat, he laid his head in her lap and fell asleep. The emperor's daughter kept staring at him, and her heart melted at his beauty and his stature. She felt the urge and could not refrain from kissing him. As Aleodor woke up, he slapped her in the face, so that one could have heard the slap miles away. She wept and said:

"Aleodor dear, your hand is quite heavy."

"I slapped you for the deed you have done, for I have not taken you to be mine but for the man who sent me."

"Alas, brother, why did you not tell me this at home? Then I might have known what to do. But it does not matter; it's never too late."



They set out and reached Half-a-Man-Astride-on-Half-a-Halt-Hare safely.

"Now I have fulfilled my duty in good faith," said Aleodor, and he set out to leave.

When the girl saw that hideous creature, she shuddered with disgust and did not want to stay with him for the world.

The hideous creature tried to charm her and started flattering her with honeyed words, but the girl said:

"Go away, Satan! Or I'll send you to your mother, the Hell that bore you onto the face of the earth!"

The ugly creature was pining away with love for the girl; he lay down, his belly on the floor, and was speaking lies and frauds in order to convince the girl to marry him.

But no way! God forbid that he should come near her. For she kept him nailed at arm's length with piercing eyes. "Satan, fiend, and monster," she kept calling him.

"Go away! Vanish from the face of the earth, devil! For the world should get rid of a pest and cholera such as you!"

He kept on insisting, but seeing that he was defied at all lengths, the monster burst with spite at being disgraced by a double-dealer of a woman.

Then Aleodor took over the lands of Half-a-Man-Astride-on-Half-a-Halt-Hare and took the daughter of Verdesch, the emperor, to become his wife; then he returned to his kingdom.

When the crowds saw him returning safe and sound together with a young wife so lovely that even the stars beamed upon her, they all greeted him joyfully.

And once again ascending the throne, they ruled and lived happily to the end of their lives.

In the saddle then I sprung

This tale to tell to old and young.

*(Traducere în limba engleză de Lucia Gorea,
ilustrații de Done Stan)*