Mór Jókai

Halil the Pedlar

Publio

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INTRODUCTION.

On September 28th, 1730, a rebellion burst forth in Stambul against Sultan Achmed III., whose cowardly hesitation to take the field against the advancing hosts of the victorious Persians had revolted both the army and the people. The rebellion began in the camp of the Janissaries, and the ringleader was one Halil Patrona, a poor Albanian sailor-man, who after plying for a time the trade of a petty huckster had been compelled, by crime or accident, to seek a refuge among the mercenary soldiery of the Empire. The rebellion was unexpectedly, amazingly successful. The Sultan, after vainly sacrificing his chief councillors to the fury of the mob, was himself dethroned by Halil, and Mahmud I. appointed Sultan in his stead. For the next six weeks the ex-costermonger held the destiny of the Ottoman Empire in his hands till, on November 25th, he and his chief associates were treacherously assassinated in full Divan by the secret command, and actually in the presence of, the very monarch whom he had drawn from obscurity to set upon the throne.

This dramatic event is the historical basis of Jókai's famous story, "A Feh?r R?zsa," now translated into English for the first time. No doubt the genial Hungarian romancer has idealised the rough, outspoken, masterful rebel-chief, Halil Patrona, into a great patriot-statesman, a martyr for justice and honour; yet, on the other hand, he has certainly preserved the salient features of Halil's character and, so far as I am competent to verify his authorities, has not been untrue to history though, as I opine, depending too much on the now somewhat obsolete narrative of Hammer-Purgstall ("Geschichte des osmanischen Reichs"). Almost incredible as they seem to us sober Westerns, such incidents as the tame surrender of Achmed III., the elevation of the lowliest demagogues to the highest positions in the realm, and the curious and characteristically oriental episode of the tulip-pots, are absolute facts. Naturally J?kai's splendid fancy has gorgeously embellished the plain narrative of the Turkish chroniclers. Such a subject as Halil's strange career must irresistibly have appealed to an author who is nothing if not vivid and romantic, and ever delights in startling contrasts. On the other hand, the unique episode of G?l-Bej?ze, "The White Rose," and her terrible experiences in the Seraglio are largely, if not entirely, of J?kai's own invention, and worthy, as told by him, of a place in The Thousand and One Nights.

Finally - a bibliographical note.

Originally "A Fehér Rózsa," under the title of "Halil Patrona," formed the first part of "A Janicsárok végnapjai," a novel first published at Pest in three volumes in 1854. The two tales are, however, quite distinct, and have, since then, as a matter of fact, frequently been published separately. The second part of "A Janicsárok végnapjai" was translated by me from the Hungarian original, some years ago, under the title of "The Lion of Janina," and published by Messrs. Jarrold and Sons as one of their "Jókai" Series in 1898. The striking favour with which that story was then received justifies my hope that its counterpart, which I have re-named "Halil the Pedlar," from its chief character, may be equally fortunate.

R. Nisbet Bain.

September, 1901.

HALIL THE PEDLAR.

CHAPTER I.

THE PEDLAR.

Time out of mind, for hundreds and hundreds of years, the struggle between the Shiites and the Sunnites has divided the Moslem World.

Persia and India are the lands of the Shiites; Turkey, Arabia, Egypt, and the realm of Barbary follow the tenets of the Sunna.

Much blood, much money, many anathemas, and many apostasies have marked the progress of this quarrel, and still it has not even yet been made quite clear whether the Shiites or the Sunnites are the true believers. The question to be decided is this: which of the four successors of the Prophet, Ali, Abu Bekr, Osmar, and Osman, was the true Caliph. The Shiites maintain that Ali alone was the true Caliph. The Sunnites, on the other hand, affirm that all four were true Caliphs and equally holy. And certainly the Shiites must be great blockheads to allow themselves to be cut into mince-meat by thousands, rather than admit that God would enrich the calendar with three saints distasteful to them personally.

The head Mufti had already hurled three fetvas at the head of Shah Mahmud, and just as many armies of valiant Sunnites had invaded the territories of the Shiites. The redoubtable Grand Vizier, Damad Ibrahim, had already wrested from them Tauris, Erivan, Kermandzasahan, and Hamadan, and the good folks of Stambul could talk of nothing else but these victories - victories which they had extra good reason to remember, inasmuch as the Janissaries, at every fresh announcement of these triumphs, all the more vigorously exercised their martial prowess on the peaceful inhabitants they were supposed to protect, and not only upon them, but likewise upon the still more peaceful Sultan who, it must be admitted, troubled himself very little either about the Sunnites, or the victories of his Grand Vizier, being quite content with the contemplation of his perpetually blooming tulips and of the damsels of the Seraglio, who were even fairer to view than the tulips whose blooms they themselves far outshone.

The last rays of sunset were about to depart from the minarets of Stambul. The imposing shape of the City of the Seven Hills loomed forth like a majestic picture in the evening light. Below, all aflame from the reflection of the burning sky, lies the Bosphorus, wherein the Seraglio and the suburbs of Pera and Galata, with their tiers upon tiers of houses and variegated fairy palaces, mirror themselves tranquilly. The long, winding, narrow streets climb from one hill to another, and every single hill is as green as if mother Nature had claimed her due portion of each from the inhabitants, so different from our western cities, all paved and swept clean, and nothing but hard stone from end to end. Here, on the contrary, nothing but green meets the eye. The bastions are planted with vines and olive-trees, pomegranate and cypress trees stand before the houses of the rich. The poorer folks who have no gardens plant flowers on their house-tops, or at any rate grow vines round their windows which in time run up the whole house, and from out of the midst of this perennial verdure arise the shining cupolas of eighty mosques. At the end of every thoroughfare, overgrown with luxuriant grass and thick-foliaged cypresses, only the turbaned tombstones show that here is the place of sad repose. And the effect of the picture is heightened by the mighty cupola of the all-

dominating Aja Sofia mosque, which looks right over all these palaces into the golden mirror of the Bosphorus. Soon this golden mirror changes into a mirror of bronze, the sun disappears, and the tranquil oval of the sea borrows a metallic shimmer from the dark-blue sky. The kiosks fade into darkness; the vast outlines of the Rumili Hisar and the Anatoli Hisar stand out against the starry heaven; and excepting the lamps lit here and there in the khans of the foreign merchants and a few minarets, the whole of the gigantic city is wrapped in gloom.

The muezzin intone the evening *noómát* from the slender turrets of the mosques; everyone hastens to get home before night has completely set in; the mule-drivers urge on their beasts laden on both sides with leather bottles, and their tinkling bells resound in the narrow streets; the shouting water-carriers and porters, whose long shoulder-poles block up the whole street, scare out of their way all whom they meet; whole troops of dogs come forth from the cemeteries to fight over the offal of the piazzas. Every true believer endeavours as soon as possible to get well behind bolts and bars, and would regard it as a sheer tempting of Providence to quit his threshold under any pretext whatsoever before the morning invocation of the muezzin. He especially who at such a time should venture to cross the piazza of the Etmeidan would have been judged very temerarious or very ill-informed, inasmuch as three of the gates of the barracks of the Janissaries open upon this piazza; and the Janissaries, even when they are in a good humour, are not over particular as to the sort of jokes they choose to play, for their own private amusement, upon those who may chance to fall into their hands. Every faithful Mussulman, therefore, guards his footsteps from any intrusion into the Etmeidan, as being in duty bound to know and observe that text of the Koran which says, "A fool is he who plunges into peril that he might avoid."

The tattoo had already been beaten with wooden sticks on a wooden board, when two men encountered each other in one of the streets leading into the Etmeidan.

One of them was a stranger, dressed in a Wallachian *gunya*, long shoes, and with a broad reticule dangling at his side. He looked forty years old and, so far as it was possible to distinguish his figure and features in the twilight, seemed to be a strong, well-built man, with a tolerably plump face, on which at that moment no small traces of fear could be detected and something of that uncomfortable hesitation which is apt to overtake a man in a large foreign city which he visits for the very first time.

The other was an honest Mussulman about thirty years old, with a thick, coal-black beard and passionate, irritable features, whose true character was very fairly reflected in his pair of flashing black eyes. His turban was drawn deep down over his temples, obliterating his eyebrows completely, which made him look more truculent than ever.

The stranger seemed to be going towards the Etmeidan, the other man to be coming from it. The former let the latter pass, by squeezing himself against the wall, and only ventured to address him when he perceived that he had no evil intentions towards him.

"I prythee, pitiful Mussulman, be not wrath with me, but tell me where the Etmeidan piazza is."

The person so accosted instantly stopped short, and fixing the interrogator with a stony look, replied angrily:

"Go straight on and you'll be there immediately."

At these words the knees of the questioner smote together.

"Woe is me! worthy Mussulman, I prythee be not wrath, I did not ask thee where the Etmeidan

was because I wanted to go there, but to avoid straying into it. I am a stranger in this city, and in my terror I have been drawing near to the very place I want to avoid. I prythee leave me not here all by myself. Every house is fast closed. Not one of the khans will let me in at this hour. Take me home with you, I will not be a burden upon you, I can sleep in your courtyard, or in your cellar, if only I may escape stopping in the streets all night, for I am greatly afraid."

The Turk so addressed was carrying in one hand a knapsack woven out of rushes. This he now opened and cast a glance into it, as if he were taking counsel with himself whether the fish and onions he had just bought in the market-place for his supper would be sufficient for two people. Finally he nodded his head as if he had made up his mind at last.

"Very well, come along!" said he, "and follow me!"

The stranger would have kissed his hand, he could not thank his new friend sufficiently.

"You had better wait to see what you are going to get before you thank me," said the Turk; "you will find but scanty cheer with me, for I am only a poor man."

"Oh, as for that, I also am poor, very poor indeed," the new-comer hastened to reply with the crafty obsequiousness peculiar to the Greek race. "My name is Janaki, and I am a butcher at Jassy. The kavasses have laid their hands upon my apprentice and all my live-stock at the same time, and that is why I have come to Stambul. I shall be utterly beggared if I don't get them back."

"Well, Allah aid thee. Let us make haste, for it is already dark."

And then, going on in front to show the way, he led the stranger through the narrow winding labyrinth of baffling lanes and alleys which lead to the Hebdomon Palace, formerly the splendid residence of the Greek Emperors, but now the quarter where the poorest and most sordid classes of the populace herd together. The streets here are so narrow that the tendrils of the vines and gourds growing on the roofs of the opposite houses meet together, and form a natural baldachino for the benefit of the foot-passenger below.

Suddenly, on reaching the entrance of a peculiarly long and narrow lane, the loud-sounding note of a song, bawled by someone coming straight towards them, struck upon their ears. It was some drunken man evidently, but whoever the individual might be, he was certainly the possessor of a tremendous pair of lungs, for he could roar like a buffalo, and not content with roaring, he kept thundering at the doors of all the houses he passed with his fists.

"Alas! worthy Mussulman, I suppose this is some good-humoured Janissary, eh?" stammered the new-comer with a terrified voice.

"Not a doubt of it. A peace-loving man would not think of making such a bellowing as that."

"Would it not be as well to turn back?"

"We might meet a pair of them if we went another way. Take this lesson from me: Never turn back from the path you have once taken, as otherwise you will only plunge into still greater misfortunes."

Meanwhile they were drawing nearer and nearer to the bellowing gentleman, and before long his figure came full into view.

And certainly his figure was in every respect worthy of his voice. He was an enormous, six-foot

high, herculean fellow, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, and the disorderly appearance of his dolman and the crooked cock of his turban more than justified the suspicion that he had already taken far more than was good for him of that fluid which the Prophet has forbidden to all true believers.

"Gel, gel! Ne miktár dir, gel!" ("Come along the whole lot of you!") roared the Janissary with all his might, staggering from one side of the lane to the other, and flourishing his naked rapier in the air.

"Woe is me, my brave Mussulman!" faltered the Wallachian butcher in a terrified whisper, "wouldn't it be as well if you were to take my stick, for he might observe that I had it, and fancy I want to fight him with it."

The Turk took over the stick of the butcher as the latter seemed to be frightened of it.

"H'm! this stick of yours is not a bad one. I see that the head of it is well-studded with knobs, and that it is weighted with lead besides. What a pity you don't know how to make use of it!"

"I am only too glad if people will let me live in peace."

"Very well, hide behind me, and come along boldly, and when you pass him don't so much as look at him."

The Wallachian desired nothing better, but the Janissary had already caught sight of him from afar, and as, clinging fast to his guide's mantle, he was about to slip past the man of war, the Janissary suddenly barred the way, seized him by the collar with his horrible fist, and dragged the wretched creature towards him.

"Khair evetlesszin domusz!" ("Not so fast, thou swine!") "a word in thine ear! I have just bought me a yataghan. Stretch forth thy neck! I would test my weapon upon thee and see whether it is sharp."

The poor fellow was already half-dead with terror. With the utmost obsequiousness he at once began unfastening his neck-cloth, whimpering at the same time something about his four little children: what would become of them when they had nobody to care for them.

But his conductor intervened defiantly.

"Take yourself off, you drunken lout, you! How dare you lay a hand upon my guest. Know you not that he who harms the guest of a true believer is accursed?"

"Na, na, na!" laughed the Janissary mockingly, "are you mad, my worthy Balukji, that you bandy words with the flowers of the Prophet's garden, with Begtash's sons, the valiant Janissaries? Get out of my way while you are still able to go away whole, for if you remain here much longer, I'll teach you to be a little more obedient."

"Let my guest go in peace, I say, and then go thine own way also!"

"Why, what ails you, worthy Mussulman? Has anyone offended thee? Mashallah! what business is it of thine if I choose to strike off the head of a dog? You can pick up ten more like him in the street any time you like."

The Turk, perceiving that it would be difficult to convince a drunken man by mere words, drew

nearer to him, and grasped the hand that held the yataghan.

"What do you want?" cried the Janissary, fairly infuriated at this act of temerity.

"Come! Go thy way!"

"Do you know whose hand thou art grasping? My name is Halil."

"Mine also is Halil."

"Mine is Halil Pelivan - Halil the Wrestler!"

"Mine is Halil Patrona."

By this time the Janissary was beside himself with rage at so much opposition.

"Thou worm! thou crossed-leg, crouching huckster, thou pack-thread pedlar! if thou dost not let me go immediately, I will cut off thy hands, thy feet, thine ears, and thy nose, and then hang thee up."

"And if thou leave not go of my guest, I will fell thee to the earth with this stick of mine."

"What, *thou* wilt fell *me*? Me? A fellow like thou threaten to strike Halil Pelivan with a stick? Strike away then, thou dog, thou dishonourable brute-beast, thou dregs of a Mussulman! strike away then, strike here, if thou have the courage!"

And with that he pointed at his own head, which he flung back defiantly as if daring his opponent to strike at it.

But Halil Patrona's courage was quite equal even to such an invitation as that, and he brought down the leaded stick in his hand so heavily on the Janissary's head that the fellow's face was soon streaming with blood.

Pelivan roared aloud at the blow, and, shaking his bloody forehead, rushed upon Patrona like a wounded bear, and disregarding a couple of fresh blows on the arms and shoulders which had the effect, however, of making him drop his yataghan, he grasped his adversary with his gigantic hands, lifted him up, and then hugged him with the embrace of a boa-constrictor. But now it appeared that Patrona also was by no means a novice in the art of self-defence, for clutching with both hands the giant's throat, he squeezed it so tightly that in a few seconds the Janissary began to stagger to and fro, finally falling backwards to the ground, whereupon Patrona knelt upon his breast and plucked from his beard a sufficient number of hairs to serve him as a souvenir. Pelivan, overpowered by drink and the concussion of his fall, slumbered off where he lay, while Patrona with his guest, who was already half-dead with fright, hastened to reach his dwelling.

After traversing a labyrinth of narrow, meandering lanes, and zig-zagging backwards and forwards through all kinds of gardens and rookeries, Halil Patrona arrived at last at his own house.

Were we to speak of "his own street door," we should be betraying a gross ignorance of locality, for in the place where Patrona lived the mere idea of a street never presented itself to anybody's imagination. There was indeed no such thing there. The spot was covered by half a thousand or so of wooden houses, mixed together, higgledy-piggledy, so inextricably, that the shortest way to everybody's house was through his neighbour's passage, hall, or courtyard, and inasmuch as the inmates of whole rows of these houses were in the habit of living together in the closest and most

mysterious harmony, every house was so arranged that the inhabitants thereof could slip into the neighbouring dwelling at a moment's notice. In some cases, for instance, the roofs were continuous; in others the cellars communicated, so that if ever anyone of the inhabitants were suddenly pursued, he could, with the assistance of the roofs, passages, and cellars, vanish without leaving a trace behind him.

Halil Patrona's house was of wood like the rest. It consisted of a single room, yet this was a room which could be made to hold a good deal. It had a fire-place also, and if perhaps a chance guest were a little fastidious, he could at any rate always make sure of a good bed on the roof, which was embowered in vine leaves. There was certainly no extravagant display of furniture inside. A rush-mat in the middle of the room, a bench covered with a carpet in the corner, a few wooden plates and dishes, a jug on a wooden shelf, and a couple of very simple cooking-utensils in the fire-place - that was all. From the roof of the chamber hung an earthenware lamp, which Patrona kindled with an old-fashioned flint and steel. Then he brought water in a round-bellied trough for his guest to wash his hands, fetched drinking-water from the well in a long jug, whereupon he drew forward his rush-woven market-basket, emptied its contents on to the rush-mat, sat him down opposite honest Janaki, and forthwith invited his guest to fall to.

There was nothing indeed but a few small fish and a few beautiful rosy-red onions, but Halil had so much to say in praise of the repast, telling his guest where and how these fish were caught, and in what manner they ought to be fried so as to bring out the taste; how you could find out which of them had hard roes and which soft; what different sorts of flavours there are in the onion tribe, far more, indeed, than in the pine-apple; and then the pure fresh water too - why the Koran from end to end is full of the praises of fresh pure water, and Halil knew all these passages by heart, and had no need to look in the holy book for them. And then, too, he had so many interesting tales to tell of travellers who had lost their way in the desert and were dying for a drop of water, and how Allah had had compassion upon them and guided them to the springs of the oasis - so that the guest was actually entrapped into imagining that he had just been partaking of the most magnificent banquet, and he enjoyed his meat and drink, and arose from his rush-carpet well satisfied with himself and with his host.

I'll wager that Sultan Achmed, poor fellow! felt far less contented when he rose from his gorgeous and luxurious sofa, though the tables beside it were piled high with fruits and sweetmeats, and two hundred odalisks danced and sang around it.

"And now let us go to sleep!" said Halil Patrona to his guest. "I know that slumber is the greatest of all the joys which Allah has bestowed upon mankind. In our waking hours we belong to others, but the land of dreams is all our own. If your dreams be good dreams, you rejoice that they are good, and if they be evil dreams, you rejoice that they are but dreams. The night is nice and warm, you can sleep on the house-top, and if you pull your rope-ladder up after you, you need not fear that anybody will molest you."

Janaki said "thank you!" to everything, and very readily clambered to the top of the roof. There he found already prepared for him the carpet and the fur cushion on which he was to sleep. Plainly these were the only cushion and carpet obtainable in the house, and the guest observing that these were the very things he had noticed in the room below, exclaimed to Halil Patrona:

"Oh, humane Chorbadshi, you have given me your own carpet and pillow; on what will you sleep, pray?"

"Do not trouble your head about me, muzafir! I will bring forth my second carpet and my second cushion and sleep on them."

Janaki peeped through a chink in the roof, and observed how vigorously Halil Patrona performed his ablutions, and how next he went through his devotions with even greater conscientiousness than his ablutions, whereupon he produced a round trough, turned it upside down, laid it upon the rush-mat, placed his head upon the trough, and folding his arms across his breast, peacefully went to sleep in the Prophet.

The next morning, when Janaki awoke and descended to Halil, he gave him a piece of money which they call a golden denarius.

"Take this piece of money, worthy Chorbadshi," said he, "and if you will permit me to remain beneath your roof this day also, prepare therewith a mid-day meal for us both."

Halil hastened with the money to the piazza, bargained and chaffered for all sorts of eatables, and made it a matter of conscience to keep only a single copper asper of the money entrusted to him. Then he prepared for his guest pilaf, the celebrated Turkish dish consisting of rice cooked with sheep's flesh, and brought him from the booths of the master-cooks and master-sugar-bakers, honey-cakes, dulchas, pistachios, sweet pepper-cakes filled with nuts and stewed in honey, and all manner of other delicacies, at the sight and smell of which Janaki began to shout that Sultan Achmed could not be better off. Halil, however, requested him not to mention the name of the Sultan quite so frequently and not to bellow so loudly.

That night, also, he made his guest mount to the top of the roof, and having noticed during the preceding night that the Greek had been perpetually shifting his position, and consequently suspecting that he was little used to so hard a couch, Halil took the precaution of stripping off his own kaftan beforehand and placing it beneath the carpet he had already surrendered to his guest.

Early next morning Janaki gave another golden denarius to Halil.

"Fetch me writing materials!" said he, "for I want to write a letter to someone, and then with God's help I will quit your house and pursue my way further."

Halil departed, went a-bargaining in the bazaar, and returned with what he had been sent for. He calculated his outlay to a penny in the presence of his guest. The *kalem* (pen) was so much, so much again the *mürekob* (ink), and the *mühür* (seal) came to this and that. The balance he returned to Janaki.

As for Janaki he went up on to the roof again, there wrote and sealed his letter, and thrust it beneath the carpet, and then laying hold of his stick again, entreated Halil, with many thanks for his hospitality, to direct him to the Pera road whence, he said, he could find his way along by himself.

Halil willingly complied with the petition of his guest, and accompanied him all the way to the nearest thoroughfare. When now Janaki beheld the Bosphorus, and perceived that the road from this point was familiar to him, so that he needed no further assistance, he suddenly exclaimed:

"Look now, my friend! an idea has occurred to me. The letter I have just written on your roof has escaped my memory entirely. I placed it beneath the carpet, and beside it lies a purse of money which I meant to have sent along with the letter. Now, however, I cannot turn back for it. I pray you, therefore, go back to your house, take this letter together with the purse, and hand them both over to the person to whom they are addressed - and God bless you for it!"

Halil at once turned round to obey this fresh request as quickly as possible.

"Give also the money to him to whom it belongs!" said the Greek.

"You may be as certain that it will reach him as if you gave it to him yourself."

"And promise me that you will compel him to whom the letter is addressed to accept the money."

"I will not leave his house till he has given me a voucher in writing for it, and whenever you come back again to me here you will find it in my possession."

"God be with you then, honest Mussulman!"

"Salem alek!"

Halil straightway ran home, clambered up to the roof by means of the rope-ladder, found both the letter and the money under the carpet, rejoiced greatly that they had not been stolen during his absence, and thrusting them both into his satchel of reeds without even taking the trouble to look at them, hastened off to the bazaar with them, where there was an acquaintance of his, a certain money-changer, who knew all about every man in Stambul, in order that he might find out from him where dwelt the man to whom the letter entrusted to him by the stranger was addressed.

Accordingly he handed the letter to the money-changer in order that he might give him full directions without so much as casting an eye upon the address himself.

The money-changer examined the address of the letter, and forthwith was filled with amazement.

"Halil Patrona!" cried he, "have you been taking part in the Carnival of the Giaours that you have allowed yourself to be so befooled? Or can't you read?"

"Read! of course I can. But I don't fancy I can know the man to whom this letter is directed."

"Well, all I can say is that you knew him very well indeed this time yesterday, for the man is yourself - none other."

Halil, full of astonishment, took the letter, which hitherto he had not regarded - sure enough it was addressed to himself.

"Then he who gave me this letter must needs be a madman, and there is a purse which I have to hand over along with it."

"Yes, I see that your name is written on that also."

"But I have nothing to do with either the purse or the letter. Of a truth the man who confided them to me must have been a lunatic."

"It will be best if you break open the letter and read it, then you will *know* what you have got to do with it."

This was true enough. The best way for a man to find out what he has to do with a letter addressed to him is, certainly, to open and read it.

And this is what was written in the letter.

"Worthy Halil Patrona!

"I told you that I was a poor man, but that was not true; on the contrary, I am pretty well to do, thank God! Nor do I wander up and down on the face of the earth in search of herds of cattle stolen

from me, but for the sake of my only daughter, who is dearer to me than all my treasures, and now also I am in pursuit of her, following clue after clue, in order that I may discover her whereabouts and, if possible, ransom her. You have been my benefactor. You fought the drunken Janissary for my sake, you shared your dwelling with me, you made me lie on your own bed while you slept on the bare ground, you even took off your kaftan to make my couch the softer. Accept, therefore, as a token of my gratitude, the slender purse accompanying this letter. It contains five thousand piastres, so that if ever I visit you again I may find you in better circumstances. God help you in all things!