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Tales From Jokai

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I
THE CELESTIAL SLINGERS

In the days when Kuczuk was the Pasha of Grosswardein, the good city of Debreczen had a very bad time of it. This whimsical Turk, whenever some little trifle had put him out of humour with the citizens of Debreczen, would threaten to ravage the town from end to end with fire and sword, cut the men to mincemeat, carry off all the women into captivity, pack up all the treasures of the town in sacks, and sow with salt the place where once it had stood.

At first the prudent and pacific magistrates of Debreczen used to soothe the heavy displeasure of the whimsical Pasha with fair-spoken entreaties, good words, and precious gifts; but one day Master Stephen Dobozy was elected governor, and being a short-necked, fiery-tempered man, it so happened that when, for some cause or other, Kuczuk Pasha again began to murmur against them, and threatened the Debreczeners that this time he really *would* come to them, Dobozy sent back this message: "Let him come if he likes."

At this Kuczuk Pasha flew into a violent rage, immediately mounted all his troops, set off that very night, and early next morning stood before Debreczen. "Here I am!" cried he.

The city had no ramparts, no trench, no drawbridge. Its whole defence consisted of twelve rugged towers, in which the citizens were wont to keep a look-out for nomadic freebooters—mouldering brick edifices with rush roofs, which would have fallen to pieces at the first cannon-shot, provided outside with crazy wooden ladders terminating in a circumambient wooden corridor by which you could ascend into the towers, so that if the ladders were plucked away from the towers nobody would be able to get out of them again.

Each of these tower-shaped shanties guarded a gate, standing at a respectful distance therefrom, so as not to stand in the way of any possible impetuous foe who might perhaps run his foolish head against a tower and knock it down.

Nothing testifies more clearly to the true nature of these *fortresses* than the fact that a stork's nest was planted on the summit of each one of them, where the worthy animals, standing every evening on one leg, clappered for hours at a time, as if it was they who guarded the city.

Kuczuk had timed his arrival so well that at one and the same moment a division of his army halted at every gate, and a large round cannon, which he had taken the precaution to load, was planted opposite each of the white-brick towers. It was thus that he wished to speak with the Debreczeners.

Meanwhile there came hastening out of the town a Greek named Panajoti, a native of Stambul and an old acquaintance of Kuczuk Pasha. Whenever the magistrates of the town had any particularly ticklish message to deliver to the Pasha, they always sent Panajoti, well aware that he, at any rate, would not be impaled straight away.

"Well, what have the magistrates of Debreczen to say for themselves?"

"Gracious, sir, surely this Master Stephen Dobozy is a little cracked, for no sooner did thy threats reach us than he immediately packed all the women-folk, girls, and children into waggons, and sent them off to Tokai; then he proclaimed by roll of drum that whoever had anything of value was to tear it to pieces, or cut it down and fling it into the wells, and the moment the enemy attacked the town it was to be set on fire at all four quarters, especial attention being given to every tower and church, whereupon every one was to grasp the shaft of his lance, or sit on his horse if he had one, and say by which gate he meant to depart. And they were to take care never to show their faces again in the neighbourhood of Debreczen, and thus Kuczuk Pasha would be afraid when in the presence of the sublime Sultan they asked him what had become of the great city of Debreczen, which had so faithfully paid so much and so much tribute to the Porte, made presents to all the viziers one after another, supplied the Turkish armies with meal and provender, let him boast before the Divan that he has burnt it to ashes and sown the site of it with salt in a fit of pique, simply because his pipe did not draw, and see what they'll say to him then!"

That was the message which Master Stephen Dobozy sent to the Pasha, and Panajoti repeated it to him word for word.

"Accursed stiff-necked Calvinist!" exclaimed the Pasha, wrathfully, "he's quite capable of doing it, too, the rascal! But don't you be afraid that a city like Debreczen will be extirpated from the face of the earth simply because he chooses to lose his temper, for Debreczen is so necessary to this spot that if it did not exist already the Turks would have to build it. The dog knows very well that I don't want to devastate the town, else he would not speak so big to me."

Panajoti solemnly assured the Pasha that the inhabitants of Debreczen were resolved to risk the uttermost, and that the moment the Pasha blew a trumpet or aimed a gun at them, the whole place would instantly flame up and be of no further use to anybody. All their treasures had already been buried, the girls and women were safe away on the other side of the Theiss, and the men were so furious that they had all laid hold of their swords and scythes, and would be very difficult to manage, so embittered were they.

The Pasha perceived that Panajoti was right. For once the Debreczeners had got the better of him. So he withdrew the squadrons that he had marshalled before the gates, sent away his guns, and said that he would be merciful to Debreczen. They might take his word for it that he meant to hurt no one, and would henceforth deal graciously with them. Moreover, he warmly praised Master Stephen Dobozy for his courageous and determined conduct, and assured him that he should never have cause to repent his behaviour. On the contrary, if ever he should be in trouble let him have recourse to him, the Pasha; he might always rely on *his* patronage. And if ever he should come to Grosswardein, he was to make a point of coming to see him, the Pasha; Master Dobozy might always be quite sure that he would be made to feel perfectly at home.

And with that he returned to Grosswardein, with his guns and his army in the same order in which he had come.

The Debreczeners breathed a great sigh of relief, and every one praised and exalted his Honour the Sheriff for so valiantly showing all his claws. The Turk evidently perceived that he was a man who would stand no nonsense.

Kuczuk Pasha had no sooner arrived at Grosswardein than he sent for Badrul Beg, the vizier of the Moorish cavalry, and entrusted him with a special mission.

"This evening," said he, "before dusk, take five hundred horsemen and set off in the direction of Diószeg. Inquire of every person you meet coming or going: 'Does this road lead to Nagy-Kálló?' and then let them go again. This do before nightfall, and then turn suddenly away from the Diószeg road and wade about among the marshy meadows on the left-hand side to obliterate your traces, and when you get out into the fields on the other side you will find the shepherds who look after the sheep and oxen, and take them off with you to Létá. When you perceive the towers of Létá, cut down your guides, and, cautiously approaching the place, turn off into the great forest there. In this forest you will come upon a lime-burner, or a herdsman, who will lead you through the forest to where it comes to an end at Hadház. There again trample your guides beneath your feet, and remain in ambush. On the morrow, or the day after that, or perhaps in a week's time—and till then you will stick to the forest—you will perceive four or five hundred waggons going towards Tokai. These waggons will be packed full with select girls and women, and with lots of money and knickknacks, you may be sure. Seize every blessed one of them. If there are any men with them, cut the men down. What money you find with them distribute among your soldiers. The women-folk, on the other hand, bring hither to me. You understand what I say? Remember that you carry your head in your hands, so keep an eye upon it."

Badrul Beg understood the command and withdrew. The Moorish vizier was just the man to execute the charge committed to him, for he was capable of traversing the whole realm from end to end, through forest and morass, till he came to his appointed place without once dismounting, and there he would contentedly lounge about in ambush, with an empty belly for weeks together, till he had done what he was told to the very last iota.

But Kuczuk Pasha thus apostrophized the good Debreczeners: "So you would smile at me, you would laugh at me? You would rejoice over me, eh? Very well, laugh your fill now while you can, for the day is at hand when it will be your turn to weep."

On the broad highway leading to Tokai a long series of waggons was approaching Hadház; it was the caravan of the Debreczen women.

Five hundred waggons toiling one after another, filled with nothing but women and children, not a single man among them—no, not so much as a man's finger to raise a whip, for the women themselves even drove the horses. Those among the fugitives whom God Himself had created of the masculine gender had their hands nicely folded away under swathing-bands, and were called—babies.

Nothing but a pack of women and girls. Imagine the good humour, the racket which accompanied them on the way! They were telling each other how his Honour the Sheriff had driven the Turks from the town, how frightened they had been, and all the rest of it; they had enough to talk about for weeks to come. Rich indeed is the fancy of souls saved from a great peril.

At the head of every waggon as coachman sat a young woman driving the horses on, and singing one of those melancholy old songs which were then usually sung from the Theiss to Moldavia, perhaps this one, which began—

"The little duck is bathing in the lake so black, My mother in Poland gets ready the cooking-jack;"

or perhaps this—

"If they ask thee for me, say I'm a slave far, far away, Hands and feet in irons bound;"

which last was greatly in fashion then, God knows, and many a poor Magyar sang it from his heart.

And then a whole row of waggon-women would take up the song and make the whole canopy of heaven ring with it; the poor little larks soaring up there were quite vanquished in this singing contest.

Towards evening the whole caravan halted by a green mound standing out upon the level plain. Who knows who raised it? or whether our bones or others were in it? Our bones certainly, for the whole plain around was a blank desert.

Not a village, not a town anywhere near; only a solitary hut surrounded with ricks or stacks might be seen here and there, far apart from each other; not a trace of arable land; the whole district is nothing but pasturage for flocks and herds.

From time to time the Fata Morgana exhibits her juggleries, but we are accustomed to it now, and nobody is deceived thereby. She inundates the distant landscape with an undulous sea, but nobody wishes to bathe in it. She shows us umbrageous woods, but nobody hastens to refresh himself there. She conjures up cities and palaces which nobody takes the trouble to admire. We, the sober children of men, have discovered the meaning of all these enchantments, and don't care a rap what sort of marvel this faded old fairy lays before us.

But on this particular day the Fata Morgana was in a peculiarly good humour. Very rarely does the sun burn so fiercely as it did then. The earth regularly cracked beneath it, and the beds of waterpools became dried clayey hummocks. It was just the day for the Fata Morgana's elfin extravagances. A pack of young girls, the dreamiest spectators imaginable, were ascending a green hill to gaze down upon the marvels of atmospheric phenomena.

All round about surges the boundless sea full of swiftly advancing waves; from time to time figures rise out of it silhouetted against the sky. There are swimming blue islands, which grow up and swell out as the women gaze at them, green forests overspread their shores, the shadows of the trees are visible in the water; and then, suddenly, the island sinks lower, the waves of the sea rise, and clash together over its highest point. And now on the other side arise vast aërial palaces with transparent towers and hazy blue temples, and these also are tossed up and down by that elfin wag as if they were swimming upon it, and when she has tired of them she makes endless havoc of them, and towers and cities tumble together into a heap of ruins; and then the sea also disappears, and the eye sees nothing but a flock of migratory cranes coming slowly along.

The girls on the hill begin explaining the phenomenon to each other.

"Look! that building over there was just like the church at Debreczen with the two towers. And that other one that has just fallen to pieces is like the watch-tower at the gates of Grosswardein—it is just as crazy looking."

"Girls, girls!" scolded a young bride, who was suckling her plump little baby at the foot of the hill, "one ought not to joke about such things. It is not right to recognize any place in the Fata Morgana. Woe will befall the town which she shows. Have done with such profane prattling!"

"Look!" suddenly cried they all, and the word died away on their lips; every one looked, with eyes petrified by wonder and terror.

What was it that had suddenly come to light in the sky?

Towards Hadház, high above the aërial road, the misty shape of a horseman was suddenly sketched out against the pallid sky—a real warrior on horseback, with a quiver on his shoulder, a peaked turban on his head, and his hand on his hip. The whole shape was magnified against the distant horizon into gigantic proportions, which made one's heart beat to look at it; the feet of the horse did not touch the ground, and below and through them one could see the sky. The whole thing looked like the bright-blue shape of an armed phantom cast upon the pale, yellow sky.

"O Lord, forsake us not!" murmured the terrified and helpless crowd at the sight of this strange apparition, which natural philosophers have seen so often and in so many places, and have since explained, though they know neither the why nor the wherefore of it.

The shapes of men far away swam forth into the sky, magnified into gigantic spirits of the mist. Every moment fresh and fresh shapes emerged from the aërial billows, all of them armed giants. Some only emerged from the surface of the delusive sea as far as the bodies of their horses; of others one could only see the heads and shoulders; some had their shadows joined on to their bodies, others showed double shadows glued together at different ends with heads, arms, and weapons turned upwards and downwards, and suddenly the whole thing slowly dissolved, and nought remained behind in the sky but two broad wheel-like spokes, two bright-blue ribbons of light on a misty, yellowish background, shining upwards from the earth.

"Alas, alas! the Turks and Tartars are lying in wait for us," exclaimed the women, confused, terrified, without friend or counsellor, in the midst of the wilderness.

The mothers clasped their children to their breasts, the girls scattered about their precious kerchiefs and ornaments, that while the robbers were picking them up they themselves might have time to escape. Every one believed that the danger was at their very heels.

"Let's be off! Let's be off! By the Böszörmény road! Let us fly through the pasture lands! Hasten! hasten!"

The mob of poor desperate creatures turned aside from the road; the waggons, greatly to the damage of the horses, plunged along over the fields where there was no sign of a track. Nobody sang any more now, whether songs or hymns, but a pious soul here and there sighed in secret as she looked behind her, first into the formidable distance, and then up into the familiar sky. "Thou, O Almighty," they whispered, "Thou who in Thy heaven hath marvellously revealed to us the lying-in-wait of our evil foes, defend us, Thy poor weak servants, from our evil pursuers, who have none to trust in save Thee alone, O God of heaven!"

And, indeed, the Lord was to work yet other marvels that day.

As the flying women were still looking timorously behind them, the sportive phenomena suddenly disappeared from earth and sky; on the break-up of the Fata Morgana the horizon became sharply visible again, and the birch forests of Hadház loomed forth faintly blue in the distance. Clouds with sharply defined silver linings arose in the sky from that direction as if the tempest were puffing gigantic frothy bubbles before it; gradually the horizon grew darker and darker, dark-blue clouds came crowding up one on the top of another; it was as though a deep voice in the distance were roaring: "Fly, fly!"

And the waggons went jingling and clattering along towards the confines of Szörmeny.

Badrul Beg had now been lying in ambush in the forest of Hadház for two days. He had performed everything which Kuczuk Pasha had commanded him in his own way. Every one from whom he had inquired the way he had cut down immediately after he had done him that service, so that he should not betray him. Every one of his band was forced to remain on the spot where he stood, nobody was allowed to quit the forest, and every inhabitant of the environs who happened to stray thither accidentally died before he could betray what he had seen. They were all shot down by arrows, arrows which utter no sound, and never brag of their heroic deeds as the big-mouthed guns do.

Nobody should betray them, nobody should carry tidings concerning them to the women and girls of Debreczen. And God?—Ah! He sees these women thus hastening to destruction, He looks at them through the mirror of the Fata Morgana, and hides from them the crafty snare laid for them in the very nick of time. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

On the evening of the third day the sentinels stationed on the border of the forest informed Badrul Beg that far off in the *puszta* a long line of dust could be seen, as if hundreds and hundreds of waggons were coming along one after another.

"It is they!"

Badrul Beg mounted to the top of a hillock, that he might see for himself—perchance he was the enormous giant whose misty form had first appeared in the sky, with the quiver on his shoulder and the peaked turban on his head.

"It is they! Only let them come nearer! Nobody can warn them of their danger—nobody!"

But suddenly the approaching line of dust stops, remains stationary for some moments, and then suddenly begins to start off sideways, and, so far from slowly creeping on nearer, darts aside among the hedges with dart-like rapidity.

Badrul Beg looked furiously around him. "Which of you can have betrayed us to them?" he cried.

As if suddenly answering his question, the whole forest fell a-soughing. The tall, slim birch trees began to rustle and shiver; a frightful hurricane had arisen over the plain, howling and roaring, and enveloping the whole firmament with clouds of yellow dust.

Badrul was not used to fear the tempest—Kuczuk Pasha did not allow him to.

"Forward with your lances!" he cried to his horsemen. "Split the tempest with the points of them! After those fugitives! Out upon the open plain!"

Hah! but out on the plain there it was another Master who commanded now. In the midst of the open country, midway between pursuers and pursued, came scudding along the bride of the tempest, the wild whirlwind, that slim fairy who dances so majestically right over the smooth plain with her comet-like head among the clouds, as if her scattered locks were floating there, while her legs, like spindles, were twirling in the dust. She sways to the left, curtseying with her slim body, and throwing back her defiant head ever higher and higher. Woe to all frail and perishable creatures who come in her way, for she will tear them to pieces and scatter them abroad. The roofs of houses, haystacks, prominent trees, if once they are caught in the savage sweep of her garment, she hurls up to the sky, and then dashes to the earth again with furious caprice. After her, murmuring and growling, comes her angry bridegroom—the thunderstorm—who pursues his defiant bride with a fiery whip in his hand; with his whip he will scourge her if he catches her. Ah! the love of the elemental spirits is terrible.

The whirlwind in an instant enveloped the band of Badrul Beg in such a cloud of dust that nobody knew from thenceforth whether he were going backwards or forwards. The air was darkened. One horseman could not see his next fellow for the whirling dust, in whose murkiness he could not even distinguish the lightning flashes, he could only hear the approaching thunder as it rolled along the sky, shook the earth, and silenced the savage howl of the tempest.

Badrul Beg's charger reared beneath him, the wind took the turban from his head and tore the pennant from his lance.

"Ah, thou god—thou God of the Magyars!" thundered the Moor, shaking his fist at the sky. "Thou hast taken the part of Thine own people, but for all that Thou shalt not save them from me!"

At the very moment when the presumptuous wretch uttered this blasphemy, a stony substance smote his shoulder, so that his arm hung down benumbed at his side.

What was that?

Nothing but a large piece of ice, coming before the rest by way of warning. Immediately afterwards heaven discharged, as from slings, its rattling, clattering stones, jagged lumps of ice came plunging down from the sky. Some of them were like birds' eggs, others like transparent nuts, others like the heads of spiked clubs, ten little pieces all glued together, with a murderous lump in the middle of a pound's weight. The lightning flashed incessantly, sending its messages from one quarter of the heavens to the other, the ice-flogged earth in the distant plain gave forth a sound as if it were about to collapse beneath the falling sky.

"Allah Kerim! Allah Akbar!" exclaimed the freebooters, vainly flying from the pursuant hailstones, which smote them down from every side with frightful velocity. The neighing of the tortured and terrified horses made the din still more terrible, and the boldest were dismayed by the sweeping lightning flashes which plunged down among them with fiery heads, illuminating the dense body of hail which seemed to have dissolved into millions of diamonds and silver bullets in its descent from above.

"There is no deliverance save with the 'Lord God!'" howled the Turks. And off they plunged whithersoever their horses took them, some in the direction of the forest they had just quitted, where the wind-shattered trees received them, others galloped on still further, and plunged into a stream which the water-spout within an hour had swollen into a raging river. Others again, flying before the hurricane, fell right within its path, were struck down and scattered about miles away. When the tempest had passed over, Badrul Beg could only find fifty horsemen. Of these about twenty lay dead on the ground, scattered far and wide, with frightful wounds on their foreheads, twisted limbs and broken legs; in some cases horse and rider had been struck dead together, others had been so buried by the ice that only their hands appeared above the frozen mass. The whole plain presented the spectacle of a desert strewn over with stones and pebbles of different sizes, but all equally white and cold.

The sons of the Ethiopian palm desert had never seen ice before.

"Lo! what wonders befall in this earth!" said Badrul Beg, in his dismay. "Who can fight against Heaven? The God of the Magyars works miracles on their behalf! Allah defend us from the wrath of this strange god!"

Nevertheless, he was not quite certain whether Kuczuk Pasha would be inclined to believe him if he were to return with a shattered host after letting the women go. How *could* he believe from mere hearsay a marvel the like of which no true believer had ever heard? But he could have no surer witness than these iron trunks, which he had brought with him to hold the jewels of the captured women, if he filled them with the cold white stones slung by the celestial slings; when he saw those the Pasha must give credence even to a story bordering upon the marvellous.

So he nicely filled four large trunks right up to the brim with ice, and binding them on the backs of two horses, himself trotted after them. For the sake of greater security, he kept the keys of all the boxes himself, and sealed up their locks with sealing-wax.

It took him a couple of days to get back to Grosswardein, for he went a bit out of his way to collect together his scattered soldiers; and a sorry lot they were, with their broken limbs, battered heads, and black and blue bodies. All the time a burning sun shone down upon them from morn to eve, and the water was dripping from under the iron trunks, and exhaling in vapour from above them at the same time. On reaching Grosswardein, he appeared before Kuczuk Pasha with a broken arm and a downcast face, and told him the whole story, the very telling of which made him tremble.

Kuczuk Pasha's face grew very wrath at this fairy tale, and not a word of it would he believe. Then Badrul Beg had the iron trunks brought forward to corroborate him, that he might see with his own eyes the stones of the celestial slingers.

And lo! when the seals were broken and the locks were opened, there was nothing at all in the trunks. There was not a trace of the celestial stones.

Badrul Beg rent his clothes.

"Merciful Allah!" he cried, "lo! the God of the Magyars has caused to disappear from the locked boxes the stones with which he stoned my warriors to death!"

"Miserable coward!" thundered Kuczuk Pasha, who did not believe a single word of it all. "I suppose the meaning of it is that those valiant amazons have given you a good drubbing?"

Whereupon they led Badrul Beg forth from his presence, and hung him up in front of the gate, and there he hung till evening. As for the Moors who were with him, they were first decimated, and then the rest had their ears cut off and were sent to Belgrade.

But the women of Debreczen at the very same time returned unharmed to the arms of their dear ones. To the very end of his life Kuczuk Pasha firmly believed that it was they who had drubbed Badrul Beg so roundly, and from henceforth he held them in the greatest respect.

This story is recorded in the archives of the noble city of Debreczen, and ye who read thereof reflect that God still exists, and that He is always able to defend His chosen from His high heaven, and now also His arm is not shortened.

II
THE COMPULSORY DIVERSION—AN OLD BARON'S YARN

I wonder, my dear fellows, if any of you know the Countess Stephen Repey, the younger one I mean, not the old lady, that little Creole princess—my little black-eyed cobold, as I call her? Mine indeed, pish! I don't mean that, of course. That is only a *façon de parler*. All of us, my dear fellows, as you very well know, have sighed after her enough, at some time or other, but none of you have had, like me, the luck to travel at night with her in the same coach. Well, naturally, her maid was there too. Still it was a great bit of luck all the same. But no more of such luck for me, thank you.

One day, at her castle of Kérekvár, it suddenly occurred to the Countess, quite late in the evening, that the Casino ball at Arad[8] was coming off on the morrow, and she must be there at all hazards. No sooner said than done. The horses were put to at once, and as there was nobody with her but me, she said: "I pray you, my dear Baron, be so good as to escort me to Arad."

[8] The Cheltenham of Hungary.

Well, when it came to "dear Baron," what on earth could I say? "Countess! *ma déesse*, it is very dark; we shall only get upset and break our legs, and how can we dance with broken legs? We shall have to cross the three Körös rivers, the bridge over one of them is sure to be crazy as usual, and in we shall plump. Then at Szalenta we shall have to pass through the deuce of a wood, full of robbers, and I shall never be able to defend you single-handed against the whole lot of them. And besides, what need is there to hurry? Early to-morrow morning, after a nice cup of tea, you have only to step into your carriage, your four bay horses will fly with us to Arad, and by the evening you will be quite ready with your toilet."

That's what I said, but you know how it always is, try and persuade a woman not to do a thing, and she'll insist on doing it all the more. She didn't want to drive her horses to death, she said, and whoever heard of wanting to rest after a short journey like that. Besides, she loved so to travel by night. What with the stars and the frogs, it was so beautiful, so romantic, and much more such stuff. But bless you, that was a mere pretext. The fact was, she had suddenly got the idea into her darling little noddle, and nothing in heaven or earth could turn her from her purpose.

Enfin, I was between two stools. I had either to go with her or remain alone in the castle. Of course I chose the former alternative, especially after she gave me permission to sit opposite to her in the coach.

I enjoyed myself splendidly, I can tell you. The Countess, by degrees, absolutely loaded me with her favours. First of all she put her handbag in my lap, to which she presently added a muff; next she hung a reticule upon my arm; finally she entrusted to me a couple of band-boxes, after that she fell asleep. I could have asked anything I liked of her, especially when the coach stumbled and she awoke in terror and began asking for all her belongings one after another, dozing off again when she was quite sure they were all there. Later on, the lady's-maid began to groan: "O Lord! how my head aches!"—whereupon I also pretended to fall asleep.

Suddenly we all started up in alarm, the coach had suddenly moved sideways, and then come to a dead stop as if it had fallen into a ditch.

My Countess also awoke and asked, stupidly, what was the matter.

The lackey leaped from the box and came to the carriage window.

"Your ladyship, I am afraid we have lost our way."

"Well, what of that?" said the Countess; "we can't stop here; there's a road in front of us, I suppose, and we are bound to arrive somewhere if we only follow it."

"Yes, but——"

"Yes, but—what do you mean? The road must lead somewhere, I suppose?"

"Saving your ladyship's presence, we are in the Szalenta wood."

"Well, the Szalenta wood is no trackless wilderness. We shall get to the end of it in a couple of hours."

"Yes, your ladyship, but the coachman is afraid."

"The coachman! What business has he to be afraid? there's nothing about that in his contract, is there?"

"He's afraid of some mischief befalling your ladyship."

"What has the coachman to do with me, I should like to know?"

Here I thought it my duty to intervene.

"Countess, *ma déesse*, this is no joke. This comes, you see, of nocturnal excursions. Here we are camping out in the middle of a forest, and the robbers who abound in this forest will come and take our horses, our money, and our lives. I only wish I had a revolver."

But the little demon only laughed, and, before I could prevent it, she had opened the coach door and leaped out.

"Oh! what a splendid night. How fragrant the forest is; how the glow-worms sparkle in the grass. Have you no eyes, Baron?"

Eyes, indeed! when I couldn't see three paces before me for the darkness.

"But surely I see something shining through the trees over there," she continued.

My blood grew cold within me. We were approaching some robbers' den evidently.

The coachman answered the question from his box with the voice of a man who is already being throttled.

"That, your ladyship, is the pot-house which the country people call the 'guest-detaining *csárdá*.'"[9]

[9] Inn.

"Guest detaining! Bravo! The very thing for us. Let's hasten thither."

I was desperate. "For God's sake, Countess, what would you do? Why, that *csárdá* is a notorious resort of thieves, where they would kill the whole lot of us; a regular murder-hole, whose landlord is hand in glove with all the ruffians of the district, and where numbers and numbers of people have come to an evil end."

The naughty girl only laughed at me. She told me I had read all these horrors in the story-books, and there was not a word of truth in any of them. She admitted, indeed, that if there had been another inn she would have gone to that in preference, but as this was the only one we had no choice. She then ordered the coachman to drive the horses along very gingerly, while she went before on foot to show him the way.

Every lamentation and objection was useless, we had to stumble along in the direction of that cursed *csárdá*, for she threatened to go alone if we were afraid to come too.

It is a fact that that naughty little fairy was afraid of nothing.

When we drew nearer to the *csárdá*, a merry hullabooing sort of music suddenly struck upon our ears, though all the windows were closed by shutters.

"*Mon Dieu!* it is absolutely *full* of robbers."

"You see how it is," remarked the Countess, mischievously; "we started to go to a ball, and at a ball we have arrived. *No* one, you see, can avoid his fate"—and thereupon, with appalling foolhardiness, she marched straight towards the door.

For a moment I really thought I should have turned tail, left her there, and made a bolt of it. But, *noblesse oblige*. And besides, I couldn't, for Mademoiselle Cesarine, the lady's-maid, had gripped my arm so tightly that I was powerless to release myself. The poor creature was more than half dead with fright; at any rate, she was only half alive when we followed the Countess together.

Even outside the door we could hear quite distinctly the wild dance-music and the merry uproar proceeding from a parcel of men inside; but my Countess was not a bit put out by it. Boldly she opened the door and stepped into the *csárdá*.

It was a large, long, dirty, whitewashed room, where in my first terror I could see about fifty men dancing about. Subsequently, when I was able to count them, there turned out to be only nine of them, including the landlord, who did not dance, and three gipsies who provided the music. But it seemed to me that five stalwart ruffians were quite enough to deal with our little party.

They were all tall fellows, who could easily hit the girders of the roof with their clenched fists, and strapping fellows too, with big, broad shoulders; their five muskets were piled up together in a corner.

Well, we were in a pretty tight place, it seemed to me. The rascals when they saw us instantly left off dancing, and seemed to be amazed at our audacity. But my Countess said to them, with a charming smile—

"Forgive me, my friends, for interrupting your pastime. We have lost our way, and as we couldn't go any further in the dark, we have come here for shelter, if you will give it to us."

At these words one of the fellows, sprucer and slimmer a good deal than the others, gave his spiral moustache an extra twirl, took off his vagabond's hat, clapped his heels together, and made my Countess a profound bow. He assured her she was not inconveniencing them in the least; on the contrary, they would be very glad of her society. "I am the master here," he added, "Józsi Fekete" (the famous robber, by the way), "at your ladyship's service. But who, then, is your ladyship?"

Before I could pull the Countess's mantilla to prevent her from blurting out who she was, she had already replied: "I am the Countess Repey, from Kérekvár."

"Then I am indeed fortunate," said the rascal. "I knew the old Count. He fired after me with a double musket on one occasion, though he did not hit me. Pray sit down, Countess."

A pleasant introduction, I must say.

The Countess sat down on a bench, the fellow beside her; me they didn't ask to take a seat at all.

"And where did your ladyship think of going on such a night?"

(I winked at her: "Don't tell him.")