

Mor Jokai

The Slaves of the Padishah

 Publio

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Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER I. THE GOLDEN CAFTAN.

The S— family was one of the richest in Wallachia, and consequently one of the most famous. The head of the family dictated to twelve boyars, collected hearth-money and tithes from four-and-fifty villages, lived nine months in the year at Stambul, held the Sultan's bridle when he mounted his steed in time of war, contributed two thousand lands-knechts to the host of the Pasha of Macedonia, and had permission to keep on his slippers when he entered the inner court of the Seraglio.

In the year 1600 and something, George was the name of the first-born of the S— family, but with him we shall not have very much concern. We shall do much better to follow the fortunes of the second born, Michael, whom his family had sent betimes to Bucharest to be brought up as a priest in the Seminary there. The youth had, however, a remarkably thick head, and, so far from making any great progress in the sciences, was becoming quite an ancient classman, when he suddenly married the daughter of a sub-deacon, and buried himself in a little village in Wallachia. There he spent a good many years of his life with scarce sufficient stipend to clothe him decently, and had he not tilled his soil with his own hands, he would have been hard put to it to find maize-cakes enough to live upon.

In the first year of his marriage a little girl was born to him, and for her the worthy man and his wife spared and scraped so that, in case they were to die, she might have some little trifle. So they laid aside a few halfpence out of every shilling in order that when it rose to a good round sum they might purchase for their little girl—a cow.

A cow! That was their very ultimate desire. If only they could get a cow, who would be happier than they? Milk and butter would come to their table in abundance, and they would be able to give some away besides. Her calf they would rear and sell to the butcher for a good price, stipulating for a quarter of it against the Easter festival. Then, too, a cow would give so much pleasure to the whole family. In the morning they would be giving it drink, rubbing it down, leading it out into the field, and its little bell would be sounding all day in the pasture. In the evening it would come into the yard, keeping close to the wall, where the mulberry-tree stood, and poke its head through the kitchen door. It would have a star upon its forehead, and would let you scratch its head and stroke its neck, and would take the piece of maize-cake that little Mariska held out to it. She would be able to lead the cow everywhere. This was the Utopia of the family, its every-day desire, and Papa had already planted a mulberry-tree in the yard in order that Csákó, that was to be the cow's name, might have something to rub his side against, and little Mariska every day broke off a piece of maize-cake and hid it under the window-sill. The little calf would have a fine time of it.

And lo and behold! when the halfpennies and farthings had mounted up to such a heap that they already began to think of going to the very next market to bring home the cow; when every day they could talk of nothing else, and kept wondering what the cow would be like, brindled, or brown, or white, or spotted; when they had already given it its name beforehand, and had prepared a leafy bed for it close to the house—it came to pass that a certain vagabond Turkish Sheikh shot dead the elder brother, who was living in Stambul, because he accidentally touched the edge of the holy man's garment in the street. So the poor priest received one day a long letter from Adrianople, in which he was informed that he had succeeded his brother as head of the family, and, from that hour, was the happy possessor of an annual income of 70,000 ducats.

I wonder whether they wept for that cow, which they never brought home after all?

Mr. Michael immediately left his old dwelling, travelled with his family all the way to Bucharest in a carriage (it was the first time in his life he had ever enjoyed that dignity), went through the family archives, and entered into possession of his immense domain, of whose extent he had had no idea before.

The old family mansion was near Rumnik, whither Mr. Michael also repaired. The house was dilapidated and neglected, its former possessors having lived constantly abroad, only popping in occasionally to see how things were going on. Nevertheless, it was a palace to the new heir, who, after the experience of his narrow hovel, could hardly accommodate himself to the large, barrack-like rooms, and finally contented himself with one half of it, leaving the other wing quite empty, as he didn't know what to do with it.

Having been accustomed throughout the prime of his life to deprivation and the hardest of hard work, that state of things had

become such a second nature to him, that, when he became a millionaire, he had not much taste for anything better than maize-cakes, and it was high festival with him when *puliszka*¹ was put upon the table.

1 A sort of maize pottage.

On the death of his wife, he sent his daughter on foot to the neighbouring village to learn her alphabet from the cantor, and two heydukes accompanied her lest the dogs should worry her on the way. When his daughter grew up, he entrusted her with the housekeeping and the care of the kitchen. Very often some young and flighty boyar would pass through the place from the neighbouring village, and very much would he have liked to have taken the girl off with him, if only her father would give her away. And all this time Mr. Michael's capital began to increase so outrageously that he himself began to be afraid of it. It had come to this, that he could not spend even a thousandth part of his annual income, and, puzzle his head as he might, he could not turn it over quickly enough. He had now whole herds of cows, he bought pigs by the thousand, but everything he touched turned to money, and the capital that he invested came back to him in the course of the year with compound interest. The worthy man was downright desperate when he thought upon his treasure-heaps multiplying beyond all his expectations. How to enjoy them he knew not, and yet he did not wish to pitch them away.

He would have liked to have played the grand seignior, if only thereby to get rid of some of his money, but the rôle did not suit him at all. If, for instance, he wanted to build a palace, there was so much calculating how, in what manner, and by whom it could be built most cheaply, that it scarce cost him anything at all, but then it never turned out a palace. Or if he wanted to give a feast, it was easy enough to select the handsomest of the boyars for his guests. Whatever was necessary for the feast—wine, meat, bread, honey, and sack-pipers—was supplied in such abundance from his own magazines and villages, that he absolutely despaired to think how it was that his ancestors had not only devoured their immense estates, but had even piled up debts upon them. To him this remained an insoluble problem, and after bothering his head for a long time as to what he should do with his eternally accumulating capital, he at last hit upon a good idea. The spacious garden surrounding his crazy castle had, by his especial command, been planted with all sorts of rare and pleasant plants—like basil, lavender, wild saffron, hops, and gourds—over whom a tenant had been promoted as gardener to look after them. One year the garden produced such gigantic gourds, that each one was as big as a pitcher. The astonished neighbours came in crowds to gaze at them, and the promoted ex-boyar swore a hundred times that such gourds as these the Turkish Sultan himself had not seen all his life long.

This gave Master Michael an idea. He made up his mind that he would send one of these gourds to the Sultan as a present. So he selected the finest and roundest of them, of a beautiful flesh-coloured rind, encircled by dark-green stripes, with a turban-shaped cap at the top of it, and, boring a little hole through it, drew out the pulp and filled it instead with good solid ducats of the finest stamp, and placing it on his best six-oxened wagon, he selected his wisest tenant, and, dinning well into his head where to go, what to say, and to whom to say it, sent him off with the great gourd to the Sublime Porte at Stambul.

It took the cart three weeks to get to Constantinople.

The good, worthy farmer, upon declaring that he brought gifts for the Grand Seignior, was readily admitted into the presence, and after kissing the hem of the Padishah's robe, drew the bright cloth away from the presented pumpkin and deposited it in front of the Diván.

The Sultan flew into a violent rage at the sight of the gift.

"Dost thou take me for a swine, thou unbelieving dog, that thou bringest me a gourd?" cried he.

And straightway he commanded the Kiaja Beg to remove both the gourd and the man. The gourd he was to dash to pieces on the ground, the bringer of the gourd was to have dealt unto him a hundred stripes on the soles of his feet, but the sender of the gourd was to lose his head.

The Kiaja Beg did as he was commanded. He banged the gourd down in the courtyard outside, and behold! a stream of shining ducats gushed out of it instead of the pulp. Nevertheless, faithful above all things to his orders, he had the poor farmer flung down on his face, and gave him such a sound hundred stripes on the soles of his feet that he had no wish for any more.

Immediately afterwards he hastened to inform the Sultan that the gourd had been dashed to the ground, the hundred blows with the stick duly paid, the silken cord ready packed, but that the gourd was full of ducats.

At these words the countenance of the Grand Seignior grew serene once more, like the smiling summer sky, and after ordering that the silken cord should be put back in its place, he commanded that the most magnificent of caftans should be distributed both to the bastinadoed farmer and to the boyar who had sent the gift, and that they should both be assured of the gracious favour of the Padishah.

The former had sufficient sense when he arrived at Bucharest to sell the gay garment he had received to a huckster in the bazaar, but his master's present he carefully brought home, and, after informing him of the unpleasant incident concerning himself, delivered to him his present, together with a gracious letter from the Sultan.

Master Michael was delighted with the return gift. He put on the long caftan, which reached to his heels, and was made of fine

dark-red Thibetan stuff, embroidered with gold and silken flowers. Gold lace and galloon, as broad as your hand, were piled up on the sleeves, shoulder, and back, to such an extent that the original cloth was scarcely visible, and the hem of the caftan was most wondrously embroidered with splendid tulips, green, blue, and lilac roses, and all sorts of tinsel and precious stones.

Master Michael felt himself quite another man in this caftan. The Sultan had sent him a letter. The Sultan had plainly written to him that he was to wear this caftan. This, therefore, was a command, and it was possible that the Sultan might turn up to-morrow or the next day to see whether he was wearing this caftan, and would be angry if he hadn't got it on. He must needs therefore wear it continually.

But this golden caftan did not go at all well with his coarse fur jacket, nor with his wooden sandals and lambskin cap. He was therefore obliged to send to Tergoviste for a tailor who should make him a silk dolman, vest, and embroidered stockings to match the golden caftan. He also sent to Kronstadt for a tasselled girdle, to Braila for shoes and morocco slippers, and to Tekas for an ermine kalpag with a heron's plume in it.

Of course, now that he was so handsomely dressed, it was quite out of the question for him to sit in a ramshackle old carriage, or to bestride a fifty-thaler nag. He therefore ordered splendid chargers to be sent to him from Bessarabia, and had a gilded coach made for him in Transylvania; and when the carriage and the horses were there, he could not put them into the muddy wagon-shed and the sparrow-frequented, rush-thatched stable, but had to make good stone coach-houses and stables expressly for them. Now, it would have looked very singular, and, in fact, disgusting, if the stable and coach-house had been better than the castle, whose shingle roof was a mass of variegated patches and gaping holes where the mortar had fallen out and left the bricks bare; so there was nothing for it but to pull down the old castle, and to order his steward to build up a new one in its place, and make it as beautiful and splendid as his fancy could suggest.

Thus the whole order of the world he lived in was transformed by a golden caftan.

The steward embellished the castle with golden lattices, turrets, ornamental porches and winding staircases; put conservatories in the garden, planted projecting rondelles and soaring belvederes at the corners of the castle and a regular tower in the middle of it, and painted all the walls and ceilings inside with green forests and crooked-beaked birds.

Of course, he couldn't put inside such a place as this the old rustic furniture and frippery, so he had to purchase the large, high, shining hump-backed arm-chairs, the gold-stamped leather sofas, and the lion-legged marble tables which were then at the height of fashion.

Of course, Turkey carpets had to be laid on the floor, and silver candelabra and beakers placed upon the magnificent tables; and in order that these same Turkey carpets might not be soiled by the muddy boots of farmyard hinds, a whole series of new servants had to be invented, such as footmen to stand behind the new carriage, cooks for the kitchen, and a special gardener for the conservatories, who, instead of looking after the honest, straightforward citron-trees and pumpkins, had gingerly to plant out cactuses and Egyptian thistles like dry stalks, in pots, whence, also, it came about that as there was now a regular gardener and a regular cook, pretty Mariska had no longer any occasion to concern herself either with garden or kitchen, nor did she go any more to the village rector to learn reading or writing, but they had to get her a French governess from whom she learnt good taste, elegant manners, embroidery, and harp-strumming.

And all these things were the work of the golden caftan!

CHAPTER II. MAIDENS THREE.

The family banner had scarce been hoisted on to the high tower of the new castle, the rumour of Mariska's loveliness and her father's millions had scarce been spread abroad, when the courtyard began to be all ablaze with the retinues and equipages of the most eminent zhupans,² voivodes,³ and princes; but Master Michael had resolved within himself beforehand that nobody less than the reigning Prince of Moldavia should ever receive his daughter's hand, and stolidly he kept to his resolution.

² A Servian Prince.

³ A Roumanian Prince.

Now the reigning Prince of Moldavia no doubt had an illustrious name enough, but he also had inherited a very considerable load of debt, and what with the eternal exactions of the Tartars, and the presents expected by all the leading Pashas, and other disturbing causes, he saw his people growing poorer and poorer, and his own position becoming more and more precarious every year. He therefore did not keep worthy Master Michael waiting very long when he heard, on excellent authority, that there was being reserved for him in Wallachia a beautiful and accomplished virgin, who would bring to her husband a dowry of a couple of millions, in addition to an uncorrupted heart and an old ancestral title.

So, gathering together all the boyars, retainers, and officers of his court, he set off a-wooing to Rumnik, where he was well received by the father, satisfied himself as to the young lady's good graces, demanded her hand in marriage, and, allowing an

adequate delay for the preliminaries of the wedding, fixed the glad event for the first week after Easter.

Master Michael, meantime, could think of nothing else but how he could cut as magnificent a figure as possible on the occasion. He invited to the banquet all the celebrities in Moldavia, Servia, Bosnia, and Transylvania. He did not even hesitate to hire from Versailles one of Louis XIV.'s cooks, to regulate the order and quality of the dishes. On the day of the banquet the good gentleman was visible everywhere, and saw to everything himself. Quite early, arrayed in the golden caftan, the heron-plumed kalpag, and the tasselled girdle, he strutted about the courtyard, corridors and chambers, distributing his orders and receiving his guests; and his heart fluttered when he beheld the courtyard filling with carriages, each one more brilliant than its predecessor, escorted by gold-bedizened cavaliers, from which silver-laced heydukes assisted noble ladies, in splendid pearl-embroidered costumes, to descend. There was such a rustling of silk dresses, such a rattling of swords, and such an endless procession of elegant and magnificent forms up the staircase, as to make the heart of the beholder rejoice.

Master Michael rushed hither and thither, and pride and humility were strangely blended on his face. He assured all he welcomed how happy they made him by honouring his poor dwelling with their presence; but the voice with which he said this betrayed the conviction that not one of his guests had quitted a home as splendid as his own poor dwelling.

Then he plunged into the robing-chamber of the bride, where tire-women, fetched all the way from Vienna, had been decking out Mariska from early dawn. It gave them no end of trouble to adjust her jewels and her gewgaws, and if they had heaped upon the fair bride all that her father had purchased for her, she would have been unable to move beneath the weight of her gems.

Thence the good man rushed off to the banqueting-room, where his domestics had been busy making ready two rows of tables in five long halls.

"Here shall sit the bride! That arm-chair to the right of her is for the Patriarch—it is his proper place. On the left will sit Prince Michael Apafi. He is to have the green-embossed chair, with the golden cherubim. The bridegroom will sit on the right hand of the Patriarch. You must give him that round, armless seat, so that he cannot lean back, but must hold himself proudly erect. Over there you must place Paul Béldi and his spouse, for they are always wont to sit together. Their daughter Aranka will also be there, and she must sit between them on that little blue velvet stool. Opposite to them the silk sofa is for Achmed Pasha and Feriz Beg, recollect that they won't want knife or fork. The Dean must have that painted stone bench, for a wooden bench would break beneath him, and no chair will hold him. The three-and-thirty priests must be placed all together over there—you must put none else beside them, or they would be ashamed to eat. Don't forget to pile up wreaths of flowers on the silver salvers; and remember there are peculiar reasons for not placing a pitcher of wine before Michael Teleki. Achmed Pasha must have a sherbet-bowl placed beside the can from which he drinks his wine, and then folks will fancy he is not transgressing the Koran. Place goblets of Venetian crystal before the ladies, and golden beakers before the gentlemen, the handsomest before Teleki and Bethlen, the commoner sort before the others, as they are wont to dash them against the walls. The bridegroom should have the slenderest beaker of all, for he'll have to pledge everyone, and I want no harm to befall him. Mind what I say!"

Nearly all the wedding guests had now assembled. Only two families were still expected, the Apafis and the Telekis, whom Master Michael in his pride wished to see at his table most of all. He glanced impatiently into the courtyard every time he heard the roll of a carriage, and the staircase lacqueys had strict injunctions to let him know as soon as they saw the Prince's carriage approaching.

At last the rumbling of wheels was heard. Master Michael went all the way to the gate to receive his guests, shoving aside all the vehicles in his way, and bawling to the sentinels on the tower to blow the trumpets as soon as ever they beheld the carriage on the road. The goodly host of guests also thronged the balconies, the turrets, and the rondelles, to catch a glance at the new arrivals, and before very long two carriages, each drawn by four horses, turned the corner of the well-wooded road, carriages supported on each side by footmen, lest they should topple over, and escorted by a brilliant banderium of prancing horsemen.

They were instantly recognised as the carriages of the Prince and his Prime Minister, and the voices of the trumpets never ceased till the splendid, gilded, silk-curtained vehicles had lumbered into the courtyard, although the master of the castle was already awaiting them at the outer, sculptured gate, and himself hastened to open the carriage door, doffing first of all his ermine kalpag. But he popped it on again, considerably nonplussed, when, on opening the carriage, a beardless bit of a boy, to all appearance, leapt out of it all alone, and there was not a trace of the Prince to be seen in the carriage. Perhaps he had dismounted at the foot of the hill in order to complete the journey on foot, as Master Michael himself was in the habit of doing every time he took a drive in his coach, for fear of an accident.

But the youthful jack-in-the-box lost no time in dispelling all rising suspicions by quickly introducing himself.

"I am Emeric Tököly," said he, "whom his Highness the Prince has sent to your Worship as his representative to take part in the festivities, and at the same time to express his regret that he was not able to appear personally, but only to send his hearty congratulations, inasmuch as her Highness the Princess is just now in good hopes, by the grace of God, of presenting her consort with an heir, and consequently his Highness does not feel himself capable of enduring the amenities which under these circumstances Ali Pasha might at such a time think fit to force upon him. Nevertheless he wishes your Worship, with God's will, all imaginable felicity."

Master Michael did not exactly know whether to say "I am very glad" or "I am very sorry;" and in the meanwhile, to gain time, was turning towards the second carriage, when Emeric Tököly suddenly intercepted him.

"I was also to inform your Worship that his Excellency Michael Teleki, having unexpectedly received the command to invade Hungary with all the forces of Transylvania, has sent, instead of himself, his daughter Flora to do honour to your Worship, much regretting that, because of the command aforesaid, which will brook neither objection nor delay, he has been obliged to deny himself the pleasure personally to press your Worship's hand and exchange the warm kiss of kinsmanship; but if your Worship will entrust me with both the handshake and the kiss, I will give your Worship his and take back to him your Worship's."

The good old gentleman was absolutely delighted with the young man's patriarchal idea, forgot the sour and solemn countenance which he had expressly put on in honour of the Prince, and, falling on the neck of the graceful young gentleman, hugged and kissed him so emphatically that the latter could scarcely free himself from his embraces; then, taking Flora Teleki, the youth's reported *fiancée*, on one arm, and Emeric himself on the other, he conducted them in this guise among his other guests, and they were the first to whom he introduced his daughter in all her bridal array.

A stately, slender brunette was Mariska, her face as pale as a lily, her eyes timidly cast down, as, leaning on her lady companion's arm, and tricked out in her festal costume, she appeared before the expectant multitude. The beauty of her rich black velvet tresses was enhanced by interwoven strings of real pearls; her figure, whose tender charms were insinuated rather than indicated by her splendid oriental dress, would not have been out of place among a group of Naiads; and that superb carriage, those haughty eyebrows, those lips of hers full of the promise of pleasure, suited very well with her bashful looks and timid movements.

Amongst the army of guests there was one man who towered above the others—tall, muscular, with broad shoulders, dome-like breast, and head proudly erect, whose long locks, like a rich black pavilion, flowed right down over his shoulders. His thick dark eyebrows and his coal-black moustache gave an emphatically resolute expression to his dark olive-coloured face, whose profile had an air of old Roman distinction.

This was the bridegroom, Prince Ghyka.

When the father of the bride introduced the new arrivals to the other guests, his first action was to present them to Prince Ghyka, not forgetting to relate how courteously the young Count had executed his commission as to the transfer of the kisses, which, having been received with general hilarity, suggested a peculiarly bold idea to the flighty young man.

While he was being embraced by one after the other, and passed on from hand to hand so to speak, he suddenly stood before the trembling bride, who scarce dared to cast a single furtive look upon him, and, greeting her in the style of the most chivalrous French courtesy, at the same time turning towards the bystanders with a proud, not to say haughty smile, pardonable in him alone, said, with an amiable *abandon*: "Inasmuch as I have been solemnly authorised to be the bearer of kisses, I imagine I shall be well within my rights if I deliver personally the kisses which my kinswomen, Princess Apafi and Dame Teleki have charged me to convey to the bride."

And before anyone had quite taken in the meaning of his concluding words, the handsome youth, with that fascinating impertinence with which he was wont to subdue men and women alike, bent over the charming bride, and while her face blushed for a moment scarlet red, imprinted a noiseless kiss upon her pure marble forehead. And this he did with such grace, with such tender sprightliness, that nothing worse than a light smile appeared upon the most rigorous faces present.

Then, turning to the company with a proud smile of self-confidence on his face: "I hope," said he, tucking Flora Teleki's hand under his arm, "that the presence of my *fiancée* is a sufficient guarantee of the respect with which I have accomplished this item of my mission."

At this there was a general outburst of laughter amongst the guests. Any sort of absurdity could be forgiven Emeric, for he managed even his most practical jokes so amiably that it was impossible to be angry with him.

But the cheeks of two damsels remained rosy-red—Mariska's and Flora's. Women don't understand that sort of joke.

The bridegroom, half-smiling, half-angry, stroked his fine moustache. "Come, come, my lad," said he, "you have been quicker in kissing my bride than I have been myself."

But now the reverend gentlemen intervened, the bells rang, the bridesmaids and the best men took possession of the bride and bridegroom, the ceremony began, and nobody thought any more of the circumstance, except, perhaps, two damsels, whose hearts had been pricked by the thoughtless pleasantry, one of them as by the thorn of a rose, the other as by the sting of a serpent.

And now, while for the next hour and a half the marriage ceremony, with the assistance of the Most Reverend Patriarch, the Venerable Archdeacon, three-and-thirty reverend gentlemen of the lower clergy, and just as many secular dignitaries, is solemnly and religiously proceeding, we will remain behind in the ante-chamber, and be indiscreet enough to worm out the contents of the two well-sealed letters which have just been brought in hot haste from Kronstadt for Emeric Tököly by a special courier, who stamped his foot angrily when he was told that he must wait till the Count came out of church.

One of the letters was from Michael Teleki, and its contents pretty much as follows:—

"My dear Sir and Son,

"Our affairs are in the best possible order. During the last few days our army, 9,000 strong, quitting Gyulafehérvár, has gone to await Achmed Pasha's forces near Déva, and will thence proceed to unite with Kiuprile's host. War, indeed, is inevitable; and Transylvania must be gloriously in the forefront of it. Do not linger where you are, but try and overtake us. It would be superfluous for me to remind you to take charge of my daughter Flora on the way. God bless you.

"Michael Teleki.

"*Datum Albæ Juliæ.*

"P.S.—Her Highness the Princess awaits a safe delivery from the mercy of God. His Highness the Prince has just finished a very learned dissertation on the orbits of the planets."

The second letter was in a fine feminine script, but one might judge from it that that hand knew how to handle a sword as well as a pen.

It was to the following effect:—

"My dear Friend,

"I have received your letter, and this is my answer to it. I can give you no very credible news in writing, either about myself or the affairs of the realm. A lover can do everything and sacrifice everything, even to life itself, for his love. (You will understand that this reference to love refers not to me, a mournful widow, but to another mournful widow, who is also your mother.) I do not judge men by what they say, but by what they do. All the same, I have every reason to think well of you, and I shall be delighted if the future should justify my good opinion of you.

"Your faithful servant,

"Ilona.

"P.S.—I shall spend midsummer at the baths of Mehadia."

The noble bridal retinue, merrily conversing, now returned from the chapel to the castle, the very sensible arrangement obtaining, that when the guests sat down to table each damsel was to be escorted to her seat by a selected cavalier known to be not displeasing to her. The only exceptions to this rule were the right reverend brigade, and Achmed Pasha and Feriz Beg, the two Turkish magnates present, whose grave dignity restrained them from participating in this innocent species of gallantry.

First of all, as the representative of the Prince of Transylvania, came Emeric Tököly, conducting the aged mother of the bridegroom, the Princess Ghyka; after him came Paul Béldi, leading the bride by the hand. Béldi's wife was escorted by the master of the house, and her pretty little golden-haired daughter Aranka hung upon her left arm.

Feriz Beg was standing in the vestibule with a grave countenance till Aranka appeared. The little girl, on perceiving the youth, greeted him kindly, whereupon Feriz sighed deeply, and followed her. The bridegroom led the beautiful Flora Teleki by the hand.

On reaching the great hall, the company broke up into groups, the merriest of which was that which included Flora, Mariska, and Aranka.

"Be seated, ladies and gentlemen! be seated!" cried the strident voice of the host, who, full of proud self-satisfaction, ran hither and thither to see that all the guests were in the places assigned to them. Tököly was by the side of Mariska, opposite to them sat the bridegroom, with Flora Teleki by his side. Aranka was the *vis-à-vis* of Feriz Beg.

The banquet began. The endless loving-cup went round, the faces of the guests grew ever cheerier, the bride conversed in whispers with her handsome neighbour. Opposite to them the bridegroom, with equal courtesy, exchanged from time to time a word with the fair Flora, but the conversation thus begun broke down continually, and yet both the lady and the prince were persons of culture, and had no lack of mother-wit. But their minds were far away. Their lips spoke unconsciously, and the Prince grew ever gloomier as he saw his bride plunging ever more deeply into the merry chatter of her gay companion, and try as he might to entertain his own partner, the resounding laughter of the happy pair opposite drove the smile from his face, especially when Flora also grew absolutely silent, so that the bridegroom was obliged, at last, to turn to the Patriarch, who was sitting on his right, and converse with

him about terribly dull matters.

Meanwhile, a couple of Servian musicians began, to the accompaniment of a zithern, to sing one of their sad, monotonous, heroic songs. All this time Achmed Pasha had never spoken a word, but now, fired by the juice of the grape mediatized by his sherbet-bowl, he turned towards the singers and, beckoning them towards him, said in a voice not unlike a growl:

"Drop all that martial jumble and sing us instead something from one of our poets, something from Hariri the amorous, something from Gulestan!"

At these words the face of Feriz Beg, who sat beside him, suddenly went a fiery red—why, he could not have told for the life of him.

"Do you know 'The Lover's Complaint,' for instance?" inquired the Pasha of the musician.

"I know the tune, but the verses have quite gone out of my head."

"Oh! as to that, Feriz Beg here will supply you with the words quickly enough if you give him a piece of parchment and a pen."

Feriz Beg was preparing to object, with the sole result that all the women were down upon him immediately, and begged and implored him for the beautiful song. So he surrendered, and, tucking up the long sleeve of his dolman, set the writing materials before him and began to write.

They who drink no wine are nevertheless wont to be intoxicated by the glances of bright eyes, and Feriz, as he wrote, glanced from time to time at the fair face of Aranka, who cast down her forget-me-not eyes shamefacedly at his friendly smile. So Feriz Beg wrote the verses and handed them to the musicians, and then everyone bade his neighbour hush and listen with all his ears.

The musician ran his fingers across the strings of his zithern, and then began to sing the song of the Turkish poet:

"Three lovely maidens I see, three maidens embracing each other; Gentle, and burning, and bright—Sun, Moon, and Star I declare them. Let others adore Sun and Moon, but give me my Star, my beloved!" "When the Sun leaves the heavens, her adorers are whelméd in slumber; When the Moon quits the sky, sleep falls on the eyes of her lovers. But the fall of the Star is the death of the man who adores her— And oh! if *my* load-star doth fall, Machallah! I cease from the living!"

General applause rewarded the song, which it was difficult to believe had not been made expressly for the occasion.

"Who would think," said Paul Béldi to the Pasha, "that your people not only cut darts from reeds, but pens also, pens worthy of the poets of love?"

"Oh!" replied Achmed, "in the hands of our poets, blades and harps are equally good weapons; and if they bound the laurel-wreath round the brows of Hariri it was only to conceal the wounds which he received in battle."

When the banquet was over, Tököly, with courteous affability, parted from his fair neighbour, whom he immediately saw disappear in a window recess, arm-in-arm with Flora. He himself made the circuit of the table in order that he might meet the fair Aranka, but was stopped in mid-career by his host, who was so full of compliments that by the time Tököly reached the girl, he found her leaning on her mother's arm engaged in conversation with the Prince. Aranka, feeling herself out of danger when she had only a married man to deal with, had quite regained her childish gaiety, and was making merry with the bridegroom.

Tököly, with insinuating grace, wormed his way into the group, and gradually succeeded in so cornering the Prince, that he was obliged to confine his conversation to Dame Béldi, while Tököly himself was fortunate enough to make Aranka laugh again and again at his droll sallies.

The Prince was boiling over with venom, and was on the verge of forgetting himself and exploding with rage. Fortunately, Dame Béldi, observing in time the tension between the two men, curtsied low to them both, and withdrew from the room with her daughter. Whereupon, the Prince seized Tököly's hand, and said to him with choleric jocosity: "If your Excellency's own bride is not sufficient for you, will you at least be satisfied with throwing in mine, and do not try to sweep every girl you see into your butterfly-net?"

Tököly quite understood the bitter irony of these words, and replied, with a soft but offensively condescending smile: "My dear friend, your theory of life is erroneous. I see, from your face, that you are suffering from an overflow of bile. You have not had a purge lately, or been blooded for a long time."

The Prince's face darkened. He squeezed Tököly's hand convulsively, and murmured between his teeth:

"One way is as good as another. When shall we settle this little affair?"

Tököly shrugged his shoulders. "To-morrow morning, if you like."

"Very well, we'll meet by the cross."

The two men had spoken so low that nobody in the whole company had noticed them, except Feriz Beg, who, although standing at the extreme end of the room with folded arms, had followed with his eagle eyes every play of feature, every motion of the lips of the whole group, including Dame Béldi and the girl, and who now, on observing the two men grasp each other's hands, and part from each other with significant looks, suddenly planted himself before them, and said simply: "Do you want to fight a duel because of Aranka?"

"What a question?" said the Prince evasively.

"It will not be a duel," said Feriz, "for there will be three of us there," and, with that, he turned away and departed.

"How foolish these solemn men are," said Tököly to himself, "they are always seeking sorrow for themselves. It would require only a single word to make them merry, and, in spite of all I do, they will go and spoil a joke. Why, such a duel as this—all three against each other, and each one against the other two—was unknown even to the famous Round Table and to the Courts of Love. It will be splendid."

At that moment the courier, who had brought the letters, forced his way right up to Tököly, and said that he had got two important despatches for him.

"All right, keep them for me, I'll read them to-morrow. I won't spoil the day with tiresome business."

And so he kept it up till late at night with the merriest of the toppers. Only after midnight did he return to his room, and ordered the soldier who had brought the letters to wake him as soon as he saw the red dawn.

CHAPTER III. THREE MEN.

Tököly's servant durst not go to sleep on the off-chance of awaking at dawn in order to arouse his master, and so the sky had scarcely begun to grow grey when he roused him up. Emeric hastily dressed himself. A sort of ill-humour on his pale face was the sole reminder of the previous night's debauch.

"Here are the letters, sir," said the soldier.

"Leave me in peace with your letters," returned Emeric roughly, "I have no time now to read your scribble. Go down and saddle my horse for me, and tell the coachman to make haste and get the carriage ready, and have it waiting for me near the cross at the slope of the hill, and find out on your way down whether the old master of the house is up yet."

The soldier pocketed the letter once more, and went down grumbling greatly, while Emeric buckled on his sword and threw his pelisse over his shoulders. Soon after the soldier returned and announced that Master Michael had been up long ago, because many of his guests had to depart before dawn, amongst them the Prince, also the Turkish gentleman; the bride was to follow them in the afternoon.

"Good," said Emeric; "let the coachman wait for me in front of the Dragmuili *csarda*.⁴ You had better bring with you some cold meat and wine, and we'll have breakfast on the way." And with that he hastened to the father of the bride, who, after embracing him heartily and repeatedly, with a great flux of tears, and kissing him again and again, and sending innumerable greetings through him to every eminent Transylvanian gentleman, took an affectionate leave of him.

⁴ An inn.

Tököly hastened to bestride his horse on hearing that his adversaries had been a little beforehand with him, and, putting spurs to his horse, galloped rapidly away. Master Michael looked after him in amazement so long as he could see him racing along the steep, hilly way, till he disappeared among the woods. A soldier followed him at a considerable distance.

Emeric, on reaching the cross, found his adversaries there already. Feriz Beg had brought with him Achmed Pasha's field-surgeon. Tököly had only thought of breakfast, the Prince had thought of nothing.

"Good morning," cried the Count, leaping from his horse. The Beg returned his salute with a solemn obeisance; the Prince turned his back upon him.

"Let us go into the forest to find a nice clear space," said Tököly; and off he set in silence, leading the way, while the soldiers followed at some distance, leading the horses by the bridles.

After going about a hundred yards they came to a clear space, surrounded by some fine ash-trees. The Prince signified to the soldiers to stop here, and, without a word, began to take off his dolman and mantle and tuck up his sleeves.

It was a fine sight to behold these men—all three of them were remarkably handsome fellows. The Prince was one of those vigorous, muscular shapes, whom Nature herself seems specially to have created to head a host. As he rolled up the flapping sleeves of his gold-embroidered, calf-skin shirt, he displayed muscles capable of holding their own single-handed against a whole brigade, and the defiant look of his eye testified to his confidence in the strength of his arms, whose every muscle stood out like a hard tumour, while his fists were worthy of the heavy broadsword, whose blade was broadest towards its point.

Feriz Beg, on discarding his dolman, rolled up the sleeves of his fine shirt of Turkish linen to his shoulders, and drew from its sheath his fine Damascus scimitar, which was scarce two inches broad, and so flexible that you could have bent it double in every direction like a watch-spring. His arms did not seem to be over-encumbered with muscles, but at the first movement he made, as he lightly tested his blade, a whole array of steel springs and stone-hard sinews, or so they seemed to be, suddenly started up upon his arm, revealing a whole network of highly-developed sinews and muscles. His face was fixed and grave.

Only Emeric seemed to take the whole affair as a light joke. With a smile he drew up his lace-embroidered shirt of holland linen, bound up his hair beneath his kalpag, and folded his well-rounded arms, whose feminine whiteness, plastic, regular symmetry, and slender proportions, gave no promise whatever of anything like manly strength. His sword came from a famous Newcastle arms manufactory, and was made of a certain dark, lilac-coloured steel, somewhat bent, and with a very fine point.

"My friends," said Emeric, turning towards his opponents, "as there are three of us in this contest, and each one of the three must fight the other two, let us lay down some rule to regulate the encounter."

"I'll fight the pair of you together," said the Prince haughtily.

"I'll also fight one against two," retorted Feriz.

"Then each one for himself and everybody against everybody else," explained Tököly. "That will certainly be amusing enough; in fact, a new sort of encounter altogether, though hardly what gentlemen are used to. Now, I should consider it much nobler if we fought against each other singly, and when one of us falls, the victor can renew the combat with the man in reserve."

"I don't mind, only the sooner the better," said the Prince impatiently, and took up his position on the ground.

"Stop, my friend; don't you know that we cannot commence this contest without Feriz?"

"Pooh! I didn't come here as a spectator," cried the Prince passionately; "besides, I have nothing to do with the Beg."

"But I have to do with you," interrupted Feriz.

"Well," said Tököly, "I myself do not know what has offended him, but he chose to intervene, and such challenges as his are wont to be accepted without asking the reason why. No doubt he has private reasons of his own."

"You may stop there," interrupted Feriz. "Let Fate decide."

"By all means," observed the Count, drawing forth three pieces of money impressed with the image of King Sigismund—a gold coin, a silver coin, and a copper coin—and handed them to the Turkish leech. "Take these pieces of money, my worthy fellow, and throw them into the air. The gold coin is the Prince, the copper coin is myself. Whichever two of the three coins come down on the same side, their representatives will fight first."

The leech flung the pieces into the air, and the gold and silver pieces came down on the same side.

The Prince beckoned angrily to Feriz.

"Come, the sooner the better. Apparently I must have this little affair off my hands before I can get at Tököly."

Tököly motioned to the leech to keep the pieces of money and have his bandages ready.

"Bandages!" said the Prince ironically. "It's not first blood, but last blood, I'm after."

And now the combatants stood face to face.

For a long time they looked into each other's eyes, as if they would begin the contest with the darts of flashing glances, and then suddenly they fell to.

The Prince's onset was as furious as if he would have crushed his opponent in the twinkling of an eye with the heavy and violent

blows which he rained upon him with all his might. But Feriz Beg stood firmly on the self-same spot where he had first planted his feet, and though he was obliged to bend backwards a little to avoid the impact of the terrible blows, yet his slender Damascus scimitar, wove, as it were, a tent of lightning flashes all around him, defending him on every side, and flashing sparks now hither, now thither, whenever it encountered the antagonistic broadsword.

The Prince's face was purple with rage. "Miserable puppy!" he thundered, gnashing his teeth; and, pressing still closer on his opponent, he dealt him two or three such terrible blows that the Beg was beaten down upon one knee, and, the same instant, a jet of blood leaped suddenly from somewhere into the face of the Prince, who thereupon staggered back and let fall his sword. In the heat of the duel he had not noticed that he had been wounded. Whilst raining down a torrent of violent blows upon his antagonist, he incautiously struck his own hand, so to speak, on the sword of Feriz Beg, just below the palm where the arteries are, and the wound which severed the sinews of the wrist constrained him to drop his sword.

Tököly at once rushed forward.

"You are wounded, Prince!" he cried.

The leech hastened forward with the bandages, the dark red blood spurted from the severed arteries like a fountain, and the Prince's face grew pale in an instant. But scarcely had the surgeon bound up his wounded right hand than his eye kindled again, and, turning to Emeric, he cried: "I have still a hand left, and I can fight with it. Put my sword into my left hand, and I'll fight to the last drop of my blood."

"Don't be impatient, Prince," said Emeric courteously; "ill-luck is your enemy to-day, but as soon as you are cured you may command me, and I will be at your service."

The Prince, who was already tottering, leaned heavily on his soldiers, who hastened towards him and conveyed him half unconscious to the carriage awaiting him. His wound was much worse than it had seemed at first, and there was no knowing whether it would not prove mortal.

Only two combatants now remained in the field—Emeric and Feriz. The Beg was still standing in his former place, and beckoned in dumb show to Emeric to come on.

"Pardon me, my worthy comrade," said the Count, "you are a little fatigued, and a combat between us would be unfair if I, who have rested, should fight with you now. Come, plump down on the grass for a little beside me. My man has brought some cold provisions for the journey; let us have a few mouthfuls together first, and then we can fight it out at our ease."

This nonchalant proposal seemed to please Feriz, and, leaning his sword against a tree, he sat down in the grass, whilst Emeric's servant unpacked the cold meat and the fruit which he had brought for his master, together with a silver calabash-shaped flask full of wine.

Emeric returned the flask to the soldier. "Look you, my son," said he, "you can drink the wine, and then fill the flask with spring water, for Feriz Beg does not drink wine, and there are no other drinking utensils; I, therefore, will also drink water, and so we shall be equal." Feriz Beg was pleased with his comrade's free and easy behaviour, took willingly of the food piled up before him, and not only drank out of the same flask, but even answered questions when they were put to him.

A faint scar was visible on the forehead of the young Beg, which the fold of his turban did not quite conceal.

"Did you get that wound from a Magyar?" inquired the Count.

"No, from an Italian, on the isle of Candia."

"I thought so at once. A Magyar does not cut with the point of his sword. I see the hand of an Italian fencing-master in it. I can even tell you the position you were in when you received it. The enemy was beside you, in front of you, on your right hand, and on your left. Now you employed that masterly circular stroke which you have just now displayed, whereby you can defend yourself on all sides at once. Then the foe in front of you suddenly rose in his saddle, and with a blow which you did not completely ward off, scarred your forehead with the point of his sword."

"It was just like that."

"It is one of the master-strokes of Basanella, and very carefully you have to watch it, for there is scarce any defence against it; the sword seems to strike up and down in the same instant, as if it were a sickle, and however high you may hold your own sword, the blow breaks through your defence. There is, indeed, only one defence against it, and that the simplest in the world—dodge back your head."

"You are quite right," said Feriz Beg smiling, and after washing his hands, he again took up his sword, "let us make an end of it."

"I don't mind," said Tököly; and lightly drawing his own sword with his delicate white hand, just as if it were a gewgaw which he was disengaging from its case to present to a lady, he took up his position on the ground.

"Just one word more," said Tököly with friendly candour. "When you fight with a single opponent, do not rush forward as if you were on a battlefield and had to do with ten men at least, for in so doing you expend much force uselessly, and allow your opponent to come up closer; rather elongate your sword and allow only your hand to play freely."

"I thank you for the advice," said Feriz smiling. Had it been anybody else he would probably have thrust back the advice into his face. But Emeric imparted it to him with such a friendly, comrade-like voice as if they had only come there for the fun of the thing.

Then the combat began. Feriz Beg, with his usual impetuosity, pressed upon his adversary as if he would pay him back his amicable counsels in kind; while Tököly calmly, composedly smiling, flung back the most violent assaults of his rival as if it were a mere sport to him, so lightly, so confidently did his sword turn in his hand, with so much finished grace did he accompany every movement—in fact, he hardly seemed to make any exertion. The most violent blows aimed at him by Feriz Beg he parried with the lightest twist of his sword, and not once did he counter, so that at last Feriz Beg, involuntarily overcome by rage, fell back and lowered his sword.

"You are only playing with me. Why don't you strike back?"

"Twice you might have received from me Basanella's master-stroke, so impetuously do you fight."

In a duel nothing is so wounding as the supercilious self-restraint of an opponent. Feriz Beg grew quite furious at Tököly's cold repose, and flung himself upon his opponent as if absolutely beside himself.

"Let us see whether you are the Devil or not," he cried.

At the same instant, when he had advanced a pace nearer to Tököly, the latter suddenly stretched forth his sword and at the instant when he parried his opponent's blow, he made a scarce perceptible backward and upward jerk with the point of his sword, and at that same instant a burning red line was visible on the temples of Feriz Beg. The young Turk lowered his sword in surprise as his face, immediately after the unnoticed stroke, began to bleed. Tököly flung away his sword and, tearing out his white pocket-handkerchief, rushed suddenly towards his opponent, stanching the wound with the liveliest sympathy, and said, in a voice tremulous with the most naïve apprehension: "Look now! didn't I tell you all along to watch for that stroke?"

By this time the leech had also come up with the bandages, and examining the wound, observed consolingly:

"A soldierly affair. Only the skin is pierced. In three days you will be all right."

Tököly, full of joy, pressed the hand of Feriz Beg.

"Henceforth we will be good friends," said he. "Before God, I protest I never gave you the slightest cause of offence."

"I shall rejoice in your friendship," said Feriz solemnly, "but if you wish it to last, listen to my words: never approach a girl whom you do not love in order to make her love you, and if you are loved, love in return and make her happy."

"You have my word of honour on it, Feriz," replied Tököly. "Of all the girls whom I have seen since I knew you, not one of them have I loved, and by none of them do I want to be loved."

Feriz Beg could not refrain from shaking his head and smiling.

"Apparently you forget that your own bride was among them."

Tököly bit his lips in some confusion, and answered nothing; he thought it best to pass off this slip of the tongue as a mere jest. Then the two reconciled antagonists embraced and returned to the roadside cross. Tököly constrained the Beg to take his coach and go on to Ibraila, while he himself mounted his horse, and taking leave of Feriz, took the road leading to the Pass of Bozza.

The soldier-courier now fancied it was high time that the urgent letters, of which he was the bearer, should be read, and accordingly asked his master about it.

"Well, where are your two letters?" asked the Count very languidly.

"There are not two, sir, but three."

"What! have they multiplied?"

"Miss Flora gave me the third half an hour before she took coach to go home."

"Then she has gone on before, eh? Well, let us see what they write about."

Teleki's was the first letter which Emeric perused; he glanced through it rapidly, as if it had no very great claim upon his attention. When he came to that part of it where he was told to look after Flora, he paused for a little. "Well, I can easily overtake her," he thought, and he took the second letter, which was subscribed with the name of Helen. Twice he perused it, and then he returned to it a third time, and his face grew visibly redder. Involuntarily he sighed as he thrust the letter into his breast pocket just above his heart, and looked sadly in front of him, as if he were listening to the beating of his own heart.

Then he broke open the third letter.

It contained an engagement ring, nothing else. That was all—not a single accompanying word or letter.

For an instant Emeric held it in his hand in blank amazement; his steed stopped also. For some minutes his face was pale and his head hung down.

But in another instant he was again upright in his saddle, and he exclaimed in a voice loud enough to be heard afar:

"Well, it's not coming off then, so much the better!"

Then he threw away the envelope in which the ring had been, and drawing out the letter which he had thrust into his bosom, he put the ring into it and then returned it to his bosom; then, with a glowing face, he turned his horse's head and, in the best of humours, called to his soldier: "We will not go to Transylvania. Back to Mehadia!"

CHAPTER IV. AFFAIRS OF STATE.

The year was a few weeks older since we saw Tököly depart from Rumnik, after reading the three letters, and behold, Michael Teleki still lingered at Gyulafehérvár, and had *not* gone with the Transylvanian forces to Déva.

He had been feeling ill for some days, and had not been able to leave his room. A slow fever tormented his limbs, his face had lost its colour, he was hardly able to hold himself up, and every joint ached whenever he moved. He had need of repose, but not a single moment could he have to himself, and just when he would have liked to have shown the door to every worry and bother, the Prince at one moment, and the Turkish Ambassador at another, were continually pressing their affairs upon him.

At that moment his crony Nalaczi was with him, standing at the window, while Teleki sat in an arm-chair. All his members were shaken by the ague, his breath was burning hot, his face was as pale as wax, and he could scarce keep his lips together.

By his chair stood his page—young Cserei—whilst huddled up in a corner on one side was a scarce visible figure which clung close to the wall with as miserable, shamefaced an expression as if it would have liked to crawl right into it and be hidden. What with the darkness and its own miserableness, we should scarce recognise this shape if Teleki did not chance to give it a name, railing at it, from time to time, as if it were a lifeless log, without even looking at it, for, in truth, his back was turned upon it.

"I tell you, Master Szénasi, you are an infinitely useless blockhead——"

"I humbly beg——"

"Don't beg anything. Here have I, worse luck, been entrusting you with a small commission, in order that you might impart some wholesome information to the people, and instead of that you go and fool them with all sorts of old wives' stories."

"Begging your Excellency's pardon, I thought——"

"Thought? What business had you to think? You thought, perhaps, you were doing me a service with your nonsense, eh?"

"Mr. Nalaczi said as much, your Excellency."

Mr. Nalaczi seemed to be sitting on thorns all this while.

"Now just see what a big fool you are," interrupted Teleki. "Mr. Nalaczi *may* have told you, for what I know, that it might be well for you to use your influence with the common people by mentioning before them the wonders which have recently taken place, and thereby encouraging them to be loyal and friendly to each other, but I am sure he did not tell you to manufacture wonders on your own account, and terrify the people by spreading abroad rumours of coming war."

"I thought——" Here he stopped short, the worthy man was quite incapable at that moment of completing his sentence.

"Thought! You thought, I suppose, that just as I was collecting armies, you would do me a great service by preaching war? So far as I am concerned, I should like to see every sword buried in the earth."

"Begging your Excellency's pardon——"

"Get out of my sight. Never let me see you again. In three days you must leave Transylvania, or else I'll send you out, and you won't thank me for that."

"May I humbly ask what I am to do if your Excellency withdraws your favour from me?" whined the fellow.

"You may do as you like. Go to Szathmár and become the lacquey of Baron Kopp, or the scribe of Master Kászonyi. I'm just going to write to them. I'll mention your name in my letter, and you can take it."

"And if they won't accept me?"

"Then you must tack on to someone else, anyhow you shan't starve. Only get out of my sight as quickly as possible."

The "magister" withdrew in fear and trembling, wiping his eyes with his pocket-handkerchief.

"Sir," said Nalaczi, when they were alone together, "this violence does harm."

"The only way with such fellows is to bully them whatever they do, for they are deceivers and traitors at heart, and would otherwise do you mischief. Kick and beat them, chivy them from pillar to post, and make them feel how wretched their lot is, if you don't want them to play off their tricks upon you."

"I don't see it in that light. This irritability will do you no good."

"On the contrary it keeps me up. If I had not always given vent to my feelings I should have been lying on a sick-bed long ago. Take these few thalers, go after that good-for-nothing, and tell him that I am very angry with him, and therefore he must try in future to deserve my confidence better, in which case I shall not forget him. Tell him to wait in the gate for the letter I am about to write, and when once he has it in his hand let him get out of Transylvania as speedily as he can. Remind him that I don't yet know about what happened in the square at Klausenberg, and if I did know I would have him flogged out of the realm; so let him look sharp about it."