Mor Jokai

The Yellow Rose

Publio

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Mór Jókai

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Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER I.

This happened when no train crossed the Hortobágy, when throughout the Alföld there was not a railway, and the water of the Hortobágy had not been regulated. The two-wheeled mill clattered gaily in the little river, and the otter lived happily among the reeds.

At the first streak of dawn, a horseman came riding across the flat Zám puszta, which lies on the far side of the Hortobágy River (taking Debreczin as the centre of the world). Whence did he come? Whither was he going? Impossible to guess. The puszta has no pathway, grass grows over hoof-print and cart track. Up to the endless horizon there is nothing but grass, not a tree, a well pole, or a hut to break the majestic green plain. The horse went its way instinctively. Its rider dozing, nodded in the saddle, first on one side, then the other, but never let slip his foot from the stirrup.

He was evidently a cowherd, for his shirt sleeves were tight at the wrists—wide sleeves would be in the way among horned beasts. His waistcoat was blue, his jacket, with its rows of buttons, black, and so was his cloak, worked in silken flowers, and hanging loosely strapped over his shoulder. The slackly gathered reins were held in the left hand, while from the right wrist dangled a thick stock whip. A long loaded cudgel was fastened to the horn of the saddle in front. In the wide upturned brim of his hat he wore a single yellow rose. Once or twice the horse tossed its head, and shaking the fringed saddle cloth, woke the rider for an instant. His first movement was to his cap, to feel whether the rose was there, or if perchance it had dropped out. Then removing the cap, he smelt the flower with keen enjoyment (although it had no rose's scent), and replacing it well to one side, threw back his head as if he hoped, in that way, to catch sight of the rose. Presently (and very probably to keep himself awake) he began humming his favourite song:

"If only the inn were not so near, If only I did not find such cheer In golden quart and copper gill, I would not linger, my love, until It ever should grow so late."

But soon his head fell forward again, and he went on nodding, till all at once, with a frightened start, he saw that the yellow rose was gone!

Turning his horse he commenced searching for the flower amid that sea of grass, and the yellow blossoms of cinquefoil, and stitchwort, and water-lilies. At last he found it, stuck it in his hat, and continued his song:

"An apple-tree stands in my garden small, The blossoms it bears they hide it all. Oh there where the full carnation blows, And a maiden's heart with a true love glows Is the place where I would be."

And then he went to sleep again, lost the rose, and once more turned to look for it. When found this time, nestling among a cluster of pink thistle-heads, he nearly kicked the plant to pieces. Because—because it had dared to kiss his rose! Then he sprang back to the saddle. Now had this cowboy been superstitious he would not have decorated his hat for the third time with the yellow rose. Had he understood bird language, he would have known what the hundreds of little larks were twittering as they rose up out of sight, to greet the dawn. "Wear not—wear not your yellow rose!" But this Hortobágy peasant was hard-headed; he knew neither fear nor superstition.

He had wasted a good deal of time, however, in seeking this rose—though possibly more in winning it—for at the watering-hour he should have reached the Zám herd. By this time the overseer must be cursing him roundly. Well, let him curse! When one has a yellow rose in one's cap one is not afraid of an overseer!

The sudden neighing of his horse roused him. A horseman was approaching, whose steed, a bay with a white star, was evidently an old friend of its own. The rider was a "csikós," or horseherd, as could be seen by his wide flying sleeves, white cloak, tulip embroidered, the lasso thrown around his shoulders, and best of all, by the way he had saddled his bay—without a girth. The two herdsmen recognised one another, as well as their horses, and quickening their trot drew close together. Both men, though distinctly different, were of the true Hungarian type, such as were the first Hungarians who wandered in from Asia. The cowherd was broad-shouldered, thickset, and bony, his face roundish and his cheeks red, while there was something of impudence in the chin, mouth, eyebrows, and little waxed moustache. His chestnut hair was cropped short, and his eyes hazel, though at first sight seeming almost green.

The other, the csikós, was strong and square-chested, yet withal slightly built. He had an oval face, burnt to a golden bronze, with perfectly regular clear-cut features, eyes dark and shining, and a black moustache that turned up of itself. Over his shoulders his jet black hair fell in loose wavy ringlets.

The two horses snorted in friendly fashion, and the csikós was the first to hail his friend.

"Good day, comrade! You are up early. But maybe you have not slept at all?"

"Thanks. That's true. There was someone to send me asleep and to wake me up!"

"And where are you from now?"

"Only from the Mata puszta. I was at the vet's."

"At the vet's? Better kill your horse at once."

"Why?"

"Than let the doctor and his old nag overtake it. He went by in his gig half an hour ago, jogging along towards the Mata herd."

"Well, well, comrade! The shepherd's white donkey has often beaten your little bay mare."

"Hm'm. What a pretty yellow rose you have got in your cap, comrade!"

"Who wins one can wear one."

"And may he never repent it!"

The csikós held up his fist with a threatening gesture, till the wide sleeve slipping back disclosed a muscular sunburnt arm.

Then both riders putting spurs to their horses went their several ways.

CHAPTER II.

The cowboy trotted towards the herd, and soon the hills of Zám, the little acacia wood, and the three tall well poles began to peep above the horizon. But it is a good ride there! Presently he took the tell-tale rose from his cap, folded it in his scarlet handkerchief, and pushed it up the knotted sleeve of his coat.

The horse-herd meanwhile spurred his horse in the opposite direction, where a low lying line of bluish mist marked the course of the Hortobágy river. He was on his way to the rose-bush where the yellow roses grew.

For on the whole Hortobágy there was but one yellow rose, and that bloomed in the innkeeper's garden.

Some foreigner had brought it from Belgium, they said; and its wonderful yellow flowers blossomed the whole summer through, from Whitsuntide to Advent, when there were still buds on the branches; yellow as pure gold they were, though their scent was more like muscatel wine than roses. Many a man had felt that scent rise to his head! And the girl who used to gather these roses, though not for herself, they called "The Yellow Rose" also.

It was quite a mystery where the old innkeeper had picked up this maiden, for wife he had none. Some stranger had evidently forgotten her there, and the old man had kept her till she grew into a delicate, slender flower. Her cheeks were not rosy like those of other girls, but a clear, creamy colour, not the tint of sickness, for the life glowed beneath, and, when she smiled, seemed to dazzle and shine like a fire within. Her mouth, with its turned-up corners, was made for laughter, and suited the darkness of her eyes, eyes so dark that none could tell whether they were black or blue, because if once a man looked into them he forgot all else in the world. Her hair was black, twisted into a plait, with yellow ribbon. Other girls damp their hair with quince juice to make it curly, but hers waved and curled of itself.

And the songs she knew! How sweetly she could sing when she liked! If happy she sang, if sad she sang, for there is a song for everything, and, without singing, a peasant maiden cannot live. Nothing makes the work so easy, the time pass so quickly, and the way so short. Early in the morning, when the sky was pink at sunrise, she might be heard singing as she weeded in the garden.

The old innkeeper did not concern himself with business, but had given the whole management of the inn into the girl's hands. She served out the wine, cooked, did the accounts. He meanwhile looked after his beehives, and was busy now, for the bees were swarming.

Suddenly a horse's hoofs resounded from the yard, the dogs barked in the joyous tone with which they were wont to greet an old

friend, and the old man called out:

"Klári! go in! Don't you hear the dogs barking; a customer must be here. See to him!"

The girl dropped her striped gown, tucked up for weeding, put on her buckled shoes, washed her hands from the watering can, and dried them with her apron, which she then threw aside, for, under it, she wore another very wide and clean, and with the household keys dangling from her waistband. She untied her gay-coloured kerchief, and smoothed her hair with her moistened palms. Then she broke off a rose from the rose-bush, and stuck it in her hair at one side.

"Picking a rose again!" grumbled the old man. "Maybe only for a gendarme!"

"Why only? Why mayn't a gendarme wear a rose in his shako as well as another fellow? Perhaps you don't think him good enough? That depends on the gendarme."

But after all it was no gendarme whom the girl found sitting at one end of the long table, but the smartest csikós on the whole puszta—Sándor Decsi.

"Sándor!" screamed the girl when she saw him, and clapping her hands, "Sándor! you have come back, my darling."

He was standing there, drumming on the table with the empty glasses, and only looked up to call out in a most sullen fashion, "Bring wine."

"Sándor!" cried the girl.

But the lad only growled, "I told you to bring wine," and let his head fall back on his hands.

"That is a nice 'good morning' after such a long absence!" exclaimed the girl, at which the herdsman came somewhat to his senses, for he knew how to be polite. Removing his cap and laying it on the table, "Good morning, miss," he said.

"Whew!" The girl pointed the rosy tip of her tongue at him, and shrugging her shoulders angrily, stamped off to the bar, shaking her shoes as she went. When she had brought the wine, however, she asked in an unaltered voice:

"Why do you call me 'miss'?"

"Because . . . . you are 'miss.'"

"I always was, but you never used to say so."

"That was another time, it was different then."

"Well, here is the wine anyway. Do you want anything else?"

"Thank you," said the man, "not now. Later perhaps."

The girl responded by a clicking noise with her tongue, and then sat down near him, at the end of the long bench.

The csikós raised the bottle to his lips, drained it dry, and flung it on the floor, where it smashed into a thousand fragments.

"Why have you broken the bottle?" she asked softly.

"That no one else may drink out of it." Next he tossed three ten kreuzer notes on the table—"dog tongues" the country people call them—two being for the red wine, one for the bottle. The girl meanwhile had seized a broom, and was diligently sweeping up the broken glass. Then, knowing the rule, she dived behind the wooden lattice railing off the bar, and brought out a fresh bottle. How she longed to look in his eyes! But he, evidently guessing it, pulled his hat lower over his face than before. Finally, she did manage to get possession of his cap, and then tried to transfer the yellow rose in her hair to the silk ribbon decorating its brim. But the herdsman saw, and snatched it out of her hands.

"Keep your roses for some worthier person," he said shortly.

"Sándor," began the girl at last, "do you wish to make me cry?"

"That would be false, as your words are false. Did not Ferko Lacza leave you this morning with one of your roses in his cap?"

She did not turn red at this, only so much the paler.

"God knows I——"

But a hand laid across her mouth stopped all further speech.

"Do not take God's name in vain!" cried the herdsman; "and how did those golden ear-rings get into your ears, I wonder?"

"You donkey!" Klári laughed outright. "You gave them to me yourself, only I had them gilded by the jeweller in Újváros."

Then the csikós caught hold of both her hands, and spoke his mind slowly and earnestly. "Dearest Klári," he said, "I won't call you 'miss' any more—I beg you from the bottom of my heart not to lie to me. Nothing is so detestable as lying. They say, 'lying dog,' though dogs never lie; for a dog has a different bark when he smells a thief round the farm, or scents danger, or hears his master coming, and his bark never misleads. A dog is honest enough, it is men who know how to lie, and theirs is the true yelping. As for me, it never came into my mind to lie, my tongue is not fashioned that way. Lying ill-suits a moustache, and it's a bad business when bearded lips speak lying words like a coward who fears a beating. Now, see, when the conscription was here last autumn, they summoned us all from the puszta. But the townspeople wanted to keep us, for, without herdsmen the cattle and horses would fare badly. So, first they took care to cross the palms of the committee with silver, and then the doctors whispered to us what sort of bodily defect we could feign, so as to be discharged as unfit. Ferko Lacza took to the trick! He swore he was as deaf as a door-post, could not hear a trumpet even; he, who has such good ears that if a beast lows in the blackest midnight, he can tell whether it is a stray one wandered in among the herd or a cow calling her lost calf. My eyes nearly fell out of my head! Eh, he knew how to lie, the scoundrel! When my turn came to be inspected they made out that my heart beat irregularly. 'Well, if it beats irregularly,' said I, 'it is not my heart that's in fault, but the Yellow Rose yonder, at the Hortobágy inn.' The gentlemen all nudged me to trust to the doctor, who said I had enlargement of the heart! 'Why, it's just big enough to hold one little bit of a girl, and nothing else. There is nothing in the world the matter with me!' So they took me for a soldier, but respected me. They never even cut my hair, but sent me to be 'soldier csikós' to the military stud at Mezöhegyes. And before half a year was over the Town Council put down the thousand florins ransom to buy me off, and send me back to the horses again. But I will work out those thousand florins with my two hands, though not with a lying tongue—that is another matter!"

The girl attempted to get her hands free, and to turn off the affair as a joke.

"My word, Sándor, did you learn to preach when you were eating the Emperor's bread? Really, you're so eloquent you ought to go as probationer every Sunday to Balmaz-Újváros!"

"Now, now, do not jest," said the man. "I know what is in your little head. You are thinking that maids are but a feeble folk, and have no other weapon but lying, otherwise they would be overmatched. The swift feet for the hare, the wings for the bird, and for the girl—her lying lips! But, sweetheart, I am a man who has never hurt the weaker. The hare can bide in the cover, and the bird on her nest for me, I would never disturb them. Neither would I harm the girl who speaks the truth with as much as a hard word or look. But if you lie to me, why, then I must judge you as hardly as if those pretty cheeks of yours were smeared with Vienna rouge! Look at the rose in your hand, it has hardly opened, but if I blow on it with my hot breath, one after another all the petals will unfold. Be such a rose, then, my darling, and open your heart and your soul to me. I will not be angry whatever you confess, and I will forgive you, even if it breaks my heart."