

A BRIDE OF THE PLAINS

BY BARONESS ORCZY

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TO THE MEMORY OF
LOUIS KOSSUTH

What would you have said now—O patriot and selfless hero—had you lived to see the country which you loved so well, for whose liberty and national dignity you fought with such unswerving devotion—what would you say, could you see her now—tied to Austria's chariot wheel, the catspaw and the tool of that Teutonic race which you abhorred? Thank God you were spared the sight which surely would have broken your heart! You never lived to see your country free. Alas! no man for many generations to come will see that now. The Magyar peasant lad—upon the vast, mysterious plains of his native soil—will alone continue to dream of national liberty, of religious and political freedom, and vaguely hope that some day another Louis Kossuth will arise again and restore to him and to his race that sense of dignity, of justice and of right which the Teuton has striven for centuries to crush.

EMMUSKA ORCZY.

Snowfield,
Bearsted,
Kent.

A BRIDE OF THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

"God bless them all! they are good lads."

It was now close on eight o'clock and more than two hours ago since first the dawn broke over that low-lying horizon line which seems so far away, and tinged the vast immensity of the plain first with grey and then with mauve and pale-toned emerald, with rose and carmine and crimson and blood-red, until the sun—triumphant and glorious at last—woke the sunflowers from their sleep, gilded every tiny blade of grass and every sprig of rosemary, and caused every head of stately maize to quiver with delight at the warmth of his kiss.

The plain stretched its limitless expanse as far as human eye can reach—a sea of tall straight stems, with waves of brilliant green and plume-crowned crests shimmering like foam in the sunlight.

As far as human eye can see!—and further, much further still!—the sea of maize, countless upright stems, hundreds of thousands of emerald green sheaths crowned with flaxen tendrils like a maiden's hair; down on the ground—a carpet for the feet of the majestic corn—hundreds and thousands of orange-coloured pumpkins turning their huge shiny carcasses to the ripening rays of the sun, and all around in fantastic lines, rows of tall sunflowers, a blaze of amber, with thick velvety hearts laden with seed.

And all of it stretching out apparently to infinity beyond that horizon line which is still hidden by a silvery haze, impalpable womb that cradles the life-giving heat.

Stately stems of maize—countless as the pebbles on a beach, as the specks of foam upon the crest of a wave, limitless as the sea and like the sea mutable, ever-changing, restless—bending to every breath of the summer breeze, full of strange, sweet sounds, of moanings and of sighs, as the emerald sheaths tremble in the wind, or down below the bright yellow carcasses of the pumpkins crack and shiver in the growing heat.

An ocean of tall maize and gaily-coloured pumpkins as far as the eye can reach, and long, dividing lines of amber-coloured sunflowers, vivid and riotous, flaunting their crude colouring in the glowing sunlight.

Here and there the dull, dark green of hemp breaks the unvarying stretches of maize, and far away there is a tanya (cottage) with a group of stunted acacias near it, and a well whose tall, gaunt arm stretches weirdly up to the sky, whilst to the south the sluggish Maros winds its slow course lazily toward the parent stream.

An ocean of maize and of pumpkins and of sunflowers, with here and there the tall, crested stems of hemp, and above it the sky—blue and already glowing through the filmy mist which every minute grows more ethereal and more impalpable as veil upon veil of heat-holding vapours are drawn from before its face.

A beautiful morning in mid-September, and yet in all this vast immensity of fertile land and ripening fruit there is no sign of human toil, no sound of beast or creaking waggon, no sign of human life around that distant tanya.

The tiny lizard in his comfortable position on the summit of a gigantic pumpkin can continue his matutinal sleep in peace; the stork can continue undisturbed his preparations for his impending

long voyage over seas. Man has not yet thought to break by travail or by song the peaceful silence of the plain.

And yet the village lies not very far away, close to the Maros; the small, low, hemp-thatched houses scarcely peep above the sea of tall-stemmed maize, only the white-washed tower of the church with its red-painted roof stands out clear and abrupt against the sky.

And now the sharp, cracked sound of the Elevation bell breaks the silence of the summer's morning. The good Pater Bonifácus is saying Mass; he, at any rate, is astir and busy with his day's work and obligations. Surely it is strange that at so late an hour in mid-September, with the maize waiting to be gathered in, the population of Marosfalva should still be absent from the fields.

Hej! But stranger, what would you! Such a day is this fourteenth of September.

What? You did not know it? The fourteenth of September, the ugliest, blackest, most God-forsaken day in the whole year!

You did not know? You cannot guess? Then what kind of a stranger are you if you do not know that on this hideous fourteenth of September all the finest lads of Marosfalva and the villages around are taken away by the abominable government? Away for three years to be made into soldiers, to drill and to march, to carry guns and bayonets, to obey words of command that they don't understand, to be packed off from place to place—from Arad to Bistricz, from Kecskemét to Nagyvárád, aye? and as far as Bosnia too—wherever that may be!

Yes, kind Sir! the lads of Marosfalva and of Fekete, of Kender and of Göröz, are taken away just like that, in batches every year,

packed into one of those detestable railways like so many heads of cattle and separated from their mothers, their sisters, their sweethearts, all because a hateful government for which the people of Marosfalva do not care one brass fillér, has so decreed it.

Mind you, it is the same in all the other villages, and in every town in Hungary—so at least we have been given to understand—but we have nothing to do with other villages or with the towns: they do just as the good God wills them to do. It is our lads—the lads of Marosfalva and Kender and Fekete and Göröz—who have to be packed off in train-loads to-day and taken away from us for three years.

Three years! Why, the lad is a mere child when he goes—one-and-twenty on his last birthday, bless him!—still wanting a mother's care of his stomach and his clothes, and a father's heavy stick across his back from time to time to keep him from drink and too much love-making.

Three years! When he comes back he is a man, has notions of his own, has seen the world and cares no more about his native village and the narrow cottage where he used to run in and out bare-footed, bare-chested, bare-headed and comfortably dirty from head to foot.

Three years! And what are the chances that he come back at all? Bosnia? Where in the world is that? And if you are a soldier, why then you go to war, you get shot at, killed may be, or at any rate maimed. Three years! You may never come back! And when you do you are not the same youngster whom your mother kissed, your father whacked, and your sweetheart wept over.

Three years! Nay, but 'tis a lifetime. Mother is old, she may never see her son again. Girls are vain and fickle, they will turn their

thoughts in other directions—there are the men who have done their military service, who have paid their toll to the abominable government up at Budapest and who are therefore free to court and free to marry.

Aye! Aye! That's how it is. They must go through with it, though they hate it all—every moment of it. They hate to be packed into railway carriages like so many dried heads of maize in a barn, they hate to wear the heavy cloth clothes, the hard boots, the leather pouches and belts. My God, how they hate it!

And the rude alien sergeant, with his "Vorwärts!" and "Marsch!" and "Rechts" and "Links"—I ask you in the name of the Holy Virgin what kind of gibberish is that?

But they must all go!—all those, at least, who are whole and sound in body. Bless them! They are sound enough when they go! It is when they come back! . . .

Yes! They must all go, those who are sound in eyes and wind and limb, and it is very difficult to cheat the commission who come to take our lads away. There was Benkó, for instance; he starved himself for three months this summer, hoping to reduce his chest measurements by a few needful centimètres; but it was no use. The doctor who examined him said that with regular food and plenty of exercise he would soon put on more flesh, and he would get both for the next three years. And János—you remember?—he chopped off one of his toes—thinking that would get him off those hated three years of service; but it seems there is a new decree by which the lads need not be possessed of all ten toes in order to serve the hateful government.

No, no! It is no use trying to get out of it. They measure you, and bang your chest and your back, they look at your eyes and make you open your mouth to look at your teeth, but anyhow they take you away for three years.

They make you swear that you will faithfully serve your country and your King during that time, that you will obey your superiors, and follow your leader wherever he may command, over land and by water. By water! I ask you! When there was Albert and Jenö who could not bear even the sight of water; they would not have gone in a boat on the Maros if you had offered them a gold piece each! How could they swear that they would follow some fool of a German officer on water?

They could not swear that. They knew they could not do it. But they were clapped in prison like common malefactors and treated like brigands and thieves until they did swear. And after that—well! they had once to cross the Theiss in a ferry-boat—they were made to do it!

Oh, no! Nothing happened to them then, but Albert came back after his three years' service, with two of his front teeth gone, and we all know that Jenö now is little better than an idiot.

So now you know, stranger, why we at Marosfalva call the fourteenth day of September the very blackest in the whole calendar, and why at eight o'clock in the morning nobody is at work in the fields.

For the fourteenth day being such a black one, we must all make the most of the few hours that come before it. At nine o'clock of that miserable morning the packing of our lads into the train will commence, but until then they are making merry, bless them! They

are true Hungarians, you know! They will dance, and they will sing, they will listen to gipsy music and kiss the girls so long as there is breath in their body, so long as they are free to do it.

At nine o'clock to-day they cease to be free men, they are under the orders of corporals and sergeants and officers who will command them to go "Vorwärts" and "Rechts" and "Links" and all that God-forsaken gibberish, and put them in irons and on bread and water if they do not obey. But yesterday, on the thirteenth of September that is, they were still free to do as they liked: they could dance and sing and get drunk as much as they chose.

So the big barn that belongs to Ignác Goldstein, the Jew, is thrown open for a night's dancing and music and jollification. At five o'clock in the afternoon the gipsies tuned up; there was a supper which lasted many hours, after which the dancing began. The first csárdás was struck up at eight o'clock last evening, the last one is being danced now at eight o'clock in the morning, while the whole plain lies in silence under the shimmering sky, and while Pater Bonifácus reads his mass all alone in the little church, and prays fervently for the lads who are going away to-day for three years: away from his care and his tender, paternal attention, away from their homes, their weeping mothers and sorrowing sweethearts.

God bless them all! They are good lads, but weak, impulsive, easily led toward good or evil. They are dancing now, when they should be praying, but God bless them all! They are good lads!

CHAPTER II

"Money won't buy everything."

Inside the barn the guttering candles were burning low. No one thought of blowing them out, so they were just left to smoke and to smoulder, and to help render the atmosphere even more stifling than it otherwise would have been.

The heat has become almost unbearable—unbearable, that is, to anyone not wholly intent on pleasure to the exclusion of every other sensation, every other consciousness. The barn built of huge pine logs, straw-thatched and rafted, is filled to overflowing with people—men, women, even children—all bent upon one great, all-absorbing object—that object, forgetfulness.

The indifferent, the stolid, may call it what he will, but it is the common wish to forget that has brought all these people—young and old—together in Ignác Goldstein's barn this night—the desire to forget that hideous, fateful fourteenth of September which comes with such heartrending regularity year after year—the desire to forget that the lads, the flower of the neighbouring villages, are going away to-day . . . for three years?—nay! very likely for ever!—three years! and all packed up like cattle in a railway truck! and put under the orders of some brutal sergeant who is not Hungarian, and can only say "Vorwärts!" or "Marsch!" and is backed in his arbitrary commands by the whole weight of government, King and country.

For three years!—and there is always war going on somewhere—and that awful Bosnia! wherever it may be—lads from Hungarian

villages go there sound in body and in limb and come back bent with ague, halt, lame or blind.

Three years! More like for ever!

And therefore the whole population of Marosfalva and of the villages round spends its last happy four-and-twenty hours in trying to forget that nine o'clock of the fourteenth day of September is approaching with sure and giant strides; everyone has a wish to forget; the parents and grandparents, the sisters, the sweethearts, the lads themselves! The future is so hideous, let the joy of the present kill all thoughts of those coming three years.

Marosfalva is the rallying-point, where this final annual jollification takes place. They all come over on the thirteenth from Fekete and Görcz, and Kender, in order to dance and to sing at Marosfalva in the barn which belongs to Ignác Goldstein the Jew. Marosfalva boasts of a railway station and it is from here that at nine o'clock in the morning the lads will be entrained; so all day on the thirteenth there has been a pilgrimage along the cross-roads from the outlying villages and hamlets round Marosfalva—a stream of men and women and young children all determined to forget for a few hours the coming separation of the morrow; by five o'clock in the afternoon all those had assembled who had meant to come and dancing in the barn had begun.

Ignác Goldstein's barn has always been the setting in which the final drama of the happy year is acted. After that night spent there in dancing and music and merry-making, down goes the curtain on the comedy of life and the tragedy of tears begins.

Since five o'clock in the afternoon the young people have been dancing—waltzing, polkaing, dancing the csárdás—mostly the

csárdás, the dance of the nation, of the people, the most exhilarating, most entrancing, most voluptuous dance that feet of man have ever trod. The girls and lads are indefatigable, the slow and languorous Lassu (slow movement) alternates with the mad, merry csárdás, they twirl and twist, advance, retreat, separate and reunite in a mad, intoxicating whirl. Small booted feet stamp on the rough wooden floor, sending up clouds of dust. What matter if the air becomes more and more stifling? There are tears and sighs to be stifled too.

"Ho, there, *czigány!* Play up! Faster! Faster! 'Tis not a funeral dirge you are playing."

The gipsy musicians, hot and perspiring, have blown and scraped and banged for fifteen solid hours; no one would ever think of suggesting that a gipsy needed rest; the clarinetist, it is true, rolled off his seat at one time, and had to be well shaken ere he could blow again, but the leader—as good a leader, mind you, as could be found in the kingdom—had only paused when the dancers were exhausted, or when bite and sup were placed before him. There they were, perched up on a rough platform made up of packing-cases borrowed from the station-master; the *czimbalom* player in the centre, his fat, brown hands wield the tiny clappers with unerring precision, up and down the strings, with that soft, lingering tone which partakes of the *clavecins* and the harp alike. At the back the double-bass, lean and dark, with jet-black eyes that stare stolidly at his leader.

There is a second fiddle, and the fat clarinetist and, of course, the leader—he whose match could not be found in the kingdom. He stands on the very edge of the rough platform, his fiddle under his

chin, and he stoops well forward, so that his hands and instrument almost touch the foremost of the dancing pairs.

They—the dancers—crowd closely round the gipsy band, for so must the csárdás be danced, as near the musicians as possible, as close together as the wide, sweeping petticoats of the girls will allow.

Such petticoats! One on the top of the other, ten or a dozen or more, and all of different colour: the girls are proud of these petticoats—the number of them is a sign of prosperity; and now as they dance and swing from the hips these petticoats fly out, caught by the currents of air until they look like gargantuan showers of vividly-coloured petals shaken by giant hands.

Above the petticoats the girls' waists look slim in the dark, tight-fitting corslet, above which again rises the rich, olive-tinted breast and throat; full white sleeves of linen crown the bare, ruddy arms, and ribbons of national colours—red, white and green—float from the shoulders and the waist.

The smooth, thick hair is closely plaited, from the crown of the head in two long, tight plaits; it is drawn rigidly away from the forehead, giving that quaint, hard finish to the round, merry face which is so characteristic of the Asiatic ancestry.

Each one of them a little picture which seems to have stepped straight out of a Velasquez canvas, the bell-shaped skirt, the stiff corslet, the straight, tight hair and round eyes full of vitality.

The men wear their linen shirt and full trousers with fringed, embroidered ends, the leather waistcoat and broad belt covered with metal bosses and wrought with bright-coloured woollen

threads. They get very excited in the mazes of the dance, they shout to the gipsies to play faster and ever faster; each holds his partner tightly round the slim waist and swings her round and round, till she stumbles, giddy and almost faint in his arms.

And round the dancers in a semicircle the spectators stand in a dense crowd—the older folk and the girls who have not secured partners—they watch and watch, indefatigable like the dancers, untiring like the musicians. And behind this semicircle, in the dark corners of the barn, the children foot it too, with the same ardour, the same excitement as their elders.

The last csárdás of this memorable night! It is eight o'clock now, and through the apertures in the log wall the brilliant light of this late summer's morning enters triumphant and crude.

Andor is dancing with Elsa—pretty, fair-haired Elsa, the daughter of old Kapus Benkó,^[4] an old reprobate, if ever there was one. Such a handsome couple they look. Is it not a shame that Andor must go to-day—for three years, perhaps for ever?

The tears that have struggled up to Elsa's tender blue eyes, despite her will to keep them back, add to the charm of her engaging personality, they help to soften the somewhat serious expression of her young face. Her cheeks are glowing with the excitement of the dance, her graceful figure bends to the pressure of Andor's arm around her waist.

Ten or a dozen cotton petticoats are tied round that slim waist of hers, no two of a like colour, and as she twists and twirls in Andor's arms the petticoats fly out, till she looks like a huge flower of many hues with superposed corollas, blue, green, pink and

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