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Our Little Hungarian Cousin



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Preface

A part of the great Austrian Empire, Hungary, is a kingdom in itself, with its own laws and its own government. Through this land runs the "beautiful blue Danube," with castles and towns upon its wooded banks; on one side the mountains, on the other the Great Plains.

Here dwell many races with quaint customs and quainter costumes, and it is of these people that you will read in Our Little Hungarian Cousin.

CHAPTER I WITH THE TZIGANES

Banda Bela, the little Gypsy boy, had tramped all day through the hills, until, footsore, weary, and discouraged, he was ready to throw himself down to sleep. He was very hungry, too.

"I shall go to the next hilltop and perhaps there is a road, and some passerby will throw me a crust. If not, I can feed upon my music and sleep," he thought to himself, as he clambered through the bushes to the top of the hill. There he stood, his old violin held tight in his scrawny hand, his ragged little figure silhouetted against the sky.

Through the central part of Hungary flows in rippling beauty the great river of the Danube. Near to Kecskés the river makes a sudden bend, the hills grow sharper in outline, while to the south and west sweep the great grass plains.

Before Banda Bela, like a soft green sea, the Magyar plain stretched away until it joined the horizon in a dim line. Its green seas of grain were cut only by the tall poplar trees which stood like sentinels against the sky. Beside these was pitched a Gypsy camp, its few tents and huts huddled together, looking dreary and forlorn in the dim twilight. The little hovels were built of bricks and stones and a bit of thatch, carelessly built to remain only until the wander spirit rose again in their breasts and the Gypsies went forth to roam the green velvet plain, or float down the Danube in their battered old boats, lazily happy in the sun.

In front of the largest hut was the fire-pot, slung from a pole over a fire of sticks burning brightly. The Gypsies were gathered about the fire for their evening meal, and the scent of *goulash* came from the kettle. Banda Bela could hardly stand from faintness, but he raised his violin to his wizened chin and struck a long chord. As the fine tone of the old violin smote the night air, the Gypsies ceased talking and looked up. Unconscious of their scrutiny, the boy played a *czardas*, weird and strange. At first there was a cool, sad strain like the night song of some bird, full of the gentle sadness of those without a home, without friends, yet not without kindness; then the time changed, grew quicker and quicker until it seemed as if the old violin danced itself, so full of wild Gypsy melody were its strains. Fuller and fuller they rose; the bow in the boy's fingers seeming to skim like a bird over the strings. The music, full of wild longing, swelled until its voice rose like the wild scream of some forest creature, then crashed to a full stop. The violin dropped to the boy's side, his eyes closed, and he fell heavily to the ground.

When Banda Bela opened his eyes he found himself lying upon the ground beside the Gypsy fire, his head upon a bundle of rags. The first thing his eyes fell upon was a little girl about six years old, who was trying to put into his mouth a bit of bread soaked in gravy. The child was dressed only in a calico frock, her head was uncovered, her hair, not straight and black like that of the other children who swarmed about, but light as corn silk, hung loosely about her face. Her skin was as dark as sun and wind make the Tziganes, but the eyes which looked into his with a gentle pity were large and deep and blue.

"Who are you?" he asked, half conscious.

"Marushka," she answered simply. "What is your name?"

"Banda Bela," he said faintly.

"Why do you play like the summer rain on the tent?" she demanded.

"Because the rain is from heaven on all the Tziganes, and it is good, whether one lies snug within the tent or lifts the face to the drops upon the heath."

"I like you, Banda Bela," said little Marushka. "Stay with us!"

"That is as your mother wills," said Banda Bela, sitting up.

"I have no mother, though her picture I wear always upon my breast," she said. "But I will ask old Jarnik, for all he says the others do," and she sped away to an old Gypsy, whose gray hair hung in matted locks upon his shoulders. In a moment she was back again, skimming like a bird across the grass.

"Jarnik says you are to eat, for hunger tells no true tale," she said.

"I am glad to eat, but I speak truth," said Banda Bela calmly.

He ate from the fire-pot hungrily, dipping the crust she gave him into the stew and scooping up bits of meat and beans.

"I am filled," he said at length. "I will speak with Jarnik."

Marushka danced across the grass in front of him like a little will-o'-the-wisp, her fair locks floating in the breeze, in the half light her eyes shining like the stars which already twinkled in the Hungarian sky.

The Gypsy dogs bayed at the moon, hanging like a crescent over the crest of the hill and silvering all with its calm radiance. Millions of fireflies flitted over the plain, and the scent of the ripened grain was fresh upon the wind.

Banda Bela sniffed the rich, earthy smell, the kiss of the wind was kind upon his brow; he was fed and warm.

"Life is sweet," he murmured. "In the Gypsy camp is brother kindness. If they will have me, I will stay."

Old Jarnik had eyes like needles. They searched through Banda Bela with a keen glance and seemed to pierce his heart.

"The Gypsy camp has welcome for the stranger," he said at length. "Will you stay?"

"You ask me nothing," said Banda Bela, half surprised, half fearing, yet raising brave eyes to the stern old face.

"I have nothing to ask," said old Jarnik. "All I wish to know you have told me."

"But I have said nothing," said Banda Bela.

"Your face to me lies open as the summer sky. Its lines I scan. They tell me of hunger, of weariness and loneliness, things of the wild. Nothing is there of the city's evil. You may stay with us and know hunger no longer. This one has asked for you," and the old man laid his hand tenderly upon little Marushka's head. "You are hers, your only care to see that no harm comes to these lint locks. The child is dear to me. Will you stay?"

"I will stay," said Banda Bela, "and I will care for the child as for my sister. But first I will speak, since I have nothing to keep locked."

"Speak, then," said the old man. Though his face was stern, almost fierce, there was a gentle dignity about him and the boy's heart warmed to him.

"Of myself I will tell you all I know," he said. "I am Banda Bela, son of Šafařík, dead with my mother. When the camp fell with the great red sickness¹ I alone escaped. Then was I ten years old. Now I am fourteen. Since then I have wandered, playing for a crust, eating seldom, sleeping beneath the stars, my clothes the gift of passing kindness. Only my violin I kept safe, for my father had said it held always life within its strings. 'Not only food, boy,' he said, 'but joy and comfort and thoughts of things which count for more than bread.' So I lived with it, my only friend. Now I have two more, you –" he flashed a swift glance at the old man, "and this little one. I will serve you well."

"You are welcome," said old Jarnik, simply. "Now, go to sleep."

Little Marushka, who had been listening to all that had been said, slipped her hand in his and led him away to the boys' tent. She did not walk, but holding one foot in her hand, she hopped along like a gay little bird, chattering merrily.

"I like you, Banda Bela, you shall stay."

¹ Smallpox.

CHAPTER II

ALONG THE GYPSY TRAIL

Banda Bela found life in the Gypsy camp quiet, but not unpleasant. He had a place to sleep and food to eat. Jarnik was good to him and Marushka his devoted friend. Rosa, a young and very pretty Gypsy girl, was kind to the waif, and the rest of the tribe paid no attention to him. What was one ragged boy, more or less, to them? The camp fairly swarmed with them.

Since the Tziganes had crossed the mountains from India many hundred years ago, they had wandered about Hungary, and the Gypsies to whom Banda Bela had come were of the *Gletecore*, or wandering Gypsies, a better race than the *Kortoran* who dwell in mud huts or caves near the villages.

The *Gletecore* are never still. They wander from one end of Hungary to the other, playing their music, begging, stealing, sometimes carving little utensils out of wood, or tinkering for the living which seems to come to them easily, perhaps because they want but little.

There was little that Banda Bela could do, but he waited upon old Jarnik, ran errands, watched Marushka, and caught many a fine fish from the river for the fire-pot. The Danube was full of fish, delicious in flavour.

Always the little boy could make music, and his violin charmed many an hour for him, while Marushka, ever following at his heels like a little dog, learned to love his music scarcely less than he did.

One morning Marushka wakened Banda Bela by calling loudly:

"Banda Bela! Come! The sun is up. Stepan has come back, and they move the camp to-day!"

Banda Bela sprang to his feet and hurried out of the tent. Already there were signs of stir in the camp. Stepan, a young Gypsy chief, was standing beside the cart which was being loaded with camp utensils. Banda Bela had not seen him before, for the chief had been away from the band ever since the boy came.

Stepan was six feet tall; part of his coal-black hair was braided into a tight knob over his forehead, the rest hung down in matted, oily locks upon his shoulders. In his mouth was a long Weixel-wood pipe, and he wore a loose, white, cotton shirt gathered around the neck, and baggy white trousers. He was very handsome and his copper-coloured skin shone as if it was polished. All about him swarmed children and dogs, while the older Gypsies were packing up the camp effects and loading them into the two or three carts, which patient horses stood ready to draw.

"Eat quickly," cried Marushka. "There is but a crust left, I saved it for you. We go on the road to-day, and hunger will gnaw your stomach before we camp again." Banda Bela took the food, ate it hurriedly, and ran up to Stepan.

"Let me help," he said briefly.

"Who are you and what can you do?" the young chief looked him over keenly.

"I am Banda Bela. I can make music with my violin, swing an adze, cut bowls from wood, drive a horse, row a boat, catch fish, do as I am bid, and keep my tongue silent," he said.

"If you can do the last two things you have already learned much," said Stepan. "Go and help Jarnik load, for he is old and feels himself young."

Banda Bela nodded and went over to where the old man was loading one of the carts. He helped as best he could and soon the wagons were loaded and the camp deserted. The Gypsies had taken the road. It was a beautiful day. The wind blew cool and free from the river, which swept along at the foot of wooded heights, gleaming like glass in the morning sun. Ducks splashed in the water, and now and then Banda Bela saw the waters boil and bubble. Something black would flash above the surface, there would be a splash and a swirl of waters, and the radiating ripples reached the shore as a great fish would spring into the air, flash in the sunlight, and sink into the waters again.

Steamers passed down the stream on their way to Buda-Pest, or towing huge barges filled with the peasants' teams and wagons, loaded with grain to be ground at the quaint water mills, built on piles out in the stream where the current was so strong as to turn the huge wheels quickly and grind the grain, raised on the great plains of the south. To the north the mountains rose blue and beautiful. The boy saw all. His eyes shone; his cheek was flushed.

"Good is the Gypsy trail," he said to himself. "Sun, light, and wind, all free, and I am with mine own people. Life is sweet."

All day long the carts rumbled along. When the sun was high overhead the Gypsies rested beside the river. Banda Bela caught some fish, and Rosa cooked them for supper.

Next day they turned from the river and travelled over the plains. There was no shade. To the right stretched great fields of maize and flax. The dust was white and fine, and so hot it seemed almost to prick their faces like needles. It rose in white clouds around the carts and followed them in whirling columns.

In front of them from time to time other clouds of dust arose, which, upon nearing, they discovered to be peasant carts, driven with four or six horses, for the peasants in this part of Hungary are rich and prosperous. The soil is fertile and yields wonderful crops, though for ninety years it has had no rest, but the peasants are not tempted to laziness by the ease with which things grow. They begin their day's work at three o'clock in the morning and work until eight or nine at night, eating their luncheon and supper in the fields.

Banda Bela saw many of them, fine, tall fellows, working easily and well, but in his heart he was glad that he did not have to toil under the hot sun.

Shepherds were seated here and there in the fields, looking like small huts, for they wore queer conical *bundas* which covered them from their necks to their knees. These sheepskin coats are worn both winter and summer, for the shepherds say they keep out heat as well as cold.

The shepherds must watch the flocks by day and night, and when the weather is wet they sleep sitting on small round stools to keep them from the damp ground. Toward dark the Gypsy band halted by the roadside, near to a group of shepherds' huts. Here they were to stop for the night and Banda Bela was glad, for his legs ached with fatigue. He had walked nearly all day except for a short time when Marushka had asked to have him ride in the cart and play for her.

The shepherds greeted the Tziganes kindly. Jews and Armenians the Hungarians dislike, but for the Gypsies there is a fellow feeling, for all Hungarians love music and nearly all Tziganes have music at their fingers' ends and in their velvet voices.

The Gypsies pitched their tents and Banda Bela stole aside from the camp to play his beloved violin. He tuned it and then gently ran his bow up and down the strings and began a soft little melody. It was like the crooning song of a young mother to her child. The boy was a genius, playing with wonderful correctness and with a love for music which showed in every note he sounded. The shepherds paused in preparing their evening meal and listened. When he ceased playing they called to him, "If you will play more you may eat with us."

"I will play gladly, and gladly will I eat," he answered, showing in a gleaming smile his teeth, even and white as a puppy's. In the pockets of the shepherds' coats were stored all manner of good things, bacon, black bread, and wine, even *slivowitz*, the wonderfully good Hungarian brandy, which Banda Bela had tasted only once in his life, but which the Gypsies make to perfection.

The shepherds' camp had a one-roomed, straw-thatched hut, which they used as a storehouse for their coats and extra food supplies. A great well was in front of the hut. It had a huge beam of wood with a cross-piece at the top and from this hung a bucket. The boy drew up a bucketful of the water and found it deliciously cold.

Near the camp was the shepherds' cooking hut, made of reeds tied together and with a hole in the top for the escape of the smoke. The hut looked like a corn shock with a door in one side. This

door was open and Banda Bela saw a fire burning brightly, a pot hung over the embers, and a smell of *kasa* arose, as a tall shepherd tossed the meal and bacon into a kind of cake.

Marushka had strayed away from the Gypsies and now stood beside Banda Bela shyly watching the cooking in silence. She was a quiet little thing, with her golden hair unlike the bold, black-eyed little Gypsy children who rolled around the ground, half clad, snatching food from the pot and gnawing bones like hungry dogs.

"Who is this child?" asked one of the shepherds. "She is no Gypsy. What is your name, child?"

"I am Marushka," she answered sweetly. "Who are you?"

"I am a shepherd," he said, smiling at her.

"Do you tend sheep all day?" she demanded.

"No, once I was one of the *juhasz*,² but now I am past that. I am one of the *gulyas*,³ and in another year I shall be among the *csikos*."⁴

"Where are your oxen?" asked Marushka.

"There in the plain," he said, pointing to what looked like a great, still, white sea some distance away. As he spoke the sea seemed to break into waves, first rippling, then stormy, as the oxen rose to their feet, many of them tossing their heads in the air and bellowing loudly. They were immense creatures, perfectly white and very beautiful, with great dark eyes and intelligent faces.

"There are my children," said the shepherd. "But I am afraid there is a wind storm coming, for they show fear only of storm or fire." He watched the herd for a few moments, but though they snuffed the air they finally settled down quietly to rest again.

"Let us eat," said the shepherd. "Perhaps the storm has passed over."

How good the *kasa* tasted. The little Tziganes had never eaten it before, and they enjoyed it thoroughly.

The sun was sinking in the west, and the yellow fields of grain were gleaming as if tipped with gold. Dusk deepened, stars peeped out of the violet heavens. Here and there leaped sudden flame, as some shepherd, feeling lonely, signalled thus to a friend across the plain. Mists rose white and ghost-like; the land seemed turned to silver. The tired children turned to seek their camp to sleep when —

"Lie down!" cried one of the shepherds. "Lie flat on your faces and do not stir! A storm comes!" So urgent was the call that Banda Bela dropped at once flat upon the grass, grasping Marushka's hand and pulling her down beside him.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Only lie still and the storm will pass above us." She lay like a little frightened bird, trembling and quivering, but saying nothing. The great wind broke over them with a swirl as of fierce waters. It whistled and screamed, blowing with it a fine white dust, then as quickly as it had come it passed, and all was still. Banda Bela raised his head and looked around him. The wind had died down as suddenly as it had sprung up and the plain was so still that not even the grasses stirred. Their shepherd friends rose from the ground where they too had thrown themselves, and one of them called to the children to come back.

"Are you safe?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Banda Bela.

"I was frightened, but Banda Bela held my hand," said little Marushka. "Now I am very thirsty."

"The dust and wind always cause great thirst," said the herder. "But no one need be thirsty in the 'Land of a Thousand Springs!' Here is water cool and fresh in the great well, and a little sweet, white wine. Drink and then run quickly away to sleep, for it is late for small men and women."

"What are those giant things which stand so dark against the sky? They frighten me," cried Marushka, as she clung to Banda Bela and looked behind the shepherds' huts.

² Swine-herd.

³ Ox-herd.

⁴ Horse-herd.

"Only mighty haystacks, little one. Enough hay is there to last twenty regiments of soldiers fifty years, so that our cattle need never go hungry. Go now. To-morrow you camp here and I will show you many things."

"Would that those children were mine," he said to himself as the two ran away to the camp. "The boy I like, he is clean and straight, and his music stirs my soul; but the little girl reaches my very heart."

CHAPTER III

AT THE GULYAS' HUT

From the Gypsy camp came sounds of wailing. Loud and long the howls arose and Banda Bela sprang from the ground where he had spent the night, to see what was the trouble. He found a group of Gypsies gathered around the door of one of the tents, the women seated on the ground, rocking back and forth, wailing, while the men stood in stolid silence. Then Marushka stole timidly to his side and whispered, "Oh, Banda Bela, old Jarnik is dead. He died in the night." The child's eyes were red with weeping. "They did not know it till the morning. Poor old Jarnik! He was so good and kind!"

Banda Bela looked anxious. Waif and stray that he was he had grown quickly to know his friends from his enemies. Jarnik had been his friend. Now that he was gone would the other Gypsies befriend him? The lonely boy had learned to love little Marushka and hated the thought of leaving her, but he felt that without Jarnik he would not long be welcome in the Gypsy camp. Silently he took the child by the hand and led her away from the wailing crowd of Gypsies.

"We can do no good there, little one," he said. "Come with me. I have a bit of bread from yesterday." Marushka's sobs grew less as he seated her by the roadside and gave her bits of bread to eat.

"Do not cry, little one," he said gently. "Jarnik was old and tired and now he is resting. You must be all mine to care for now. I shall ask Stepan to give you to me." He thought over the last talk he had had with Jarnik.

"Take care of the little one," the old man had said. "She has no one here in all the tribe. She is not a Gypsy, Banda Bela. We found her one day beneath a tall poplar tree beside the road, far, far from here. She could scarcely speak, only lisp her name, ask for 'Mother,' and scold of 'bad Yda.' She was dressed in pretty white clothes and we knew she was the child of rich persons. My daughter had just lost her baby and she begged for the child, so we took her with us. The Gypsies say she will bring bad luck to the tribe, for people say she is stolen, so you must care well for her. There are those in the tribe who wish her ill."

Banda Bela remembered this, and thought how he could protect the little girl from harm. Childlike, her tears soon dry, Marushka prattled about the sunshine and the sky. As they sat, a huge cloud of dust came down the road. Nearing them, it showed a peasant cart drawn by five fine horses, and in it sat a large peasant woman, broad-bosomed and kindly faced. She smiled as the children stared up at her, and the cart rumbled on and stopped at the shepherds' huts.

Attracted by the gay harness of the horses, the children wandered toward them.

"Good morning, little folk," called out their friend of the night before. "Come and eat again with me. Here is my wife come to spend a few days with me. She has good things in her pockets." Marushka went up to the peasant woman and looked into her face and then climbed into her lap. "I like you," she said, and the woman's arm went around her.

"Poor little dirty thing!" she exclaimed. "I wish I had her at home, Emeric, I would wash and dress her in some of Irma's clothes and she would be as pretty as a wild rose."

"I wash my face every morning," said Marushka, pouting a little. "The other Gypsy children never do." Her dress was open at the neck and showed her little white throat, about which was a string, and the shepherd's wife took hold of it.

"Is it a charm you wear, little one?" she asked.

"No, that is my mother's picture," said Marushka, pulling out of her dress a little silver medal.

"Let me see it." The shepherd's wife examined the bit of silver. "Emeric!" she called to her husband in excited tones. "See here! This is no Gypsy child! Beneath her dress her skin is white – her hair is gold – her eyes are like the sky, and around her neck she wears the medal of Our Lady."

She is of Christian parents. She must have been stolen by those thieving Gypsies. What do you know of Marushka?" she demanded, turning to Banda Bela, but the boy only shook his head.

"I have been with the band only a few weeks," he said. "Old Jarnik told me that they found the child deserted by the roadside and took care of her."

"A likely story," sniffed the woman. "I shall go and see this Jarnik!"

"But he cannot answer – " began Banda Bela, when the good woman interrupted —

"Not answer! Boy! there is no man, be he Gypsy or Christian, who will not answer me!" The shepherd nodded his head reminiscently.

"Jarnik won't," said Marushka. "He's dead!"

"Dead!" The woman was a little disconcerted.

"He died during the night," said Banda Bela. "There is great wailing for him now. We came away because nobody wanted us around. They will wail all day."

"Eat with us again, children," said the kind-hearted shepherd. "Your cheeks are the cheeks of famine. You are hungry, both eat! and the boy can make music for us. There will be time enough to question the Gypsies to-morrow."

Before the herder's hut a bough with several short branches protruding from it had been thrust into the ground, and upon these cooking pots had been hung. Soon *goulash* was simmering in the pot, and *kasa* was tossed together. The peasant's wife had brought bread and fine cheese, and curious-looking things which the children had never seen before.

"These are potatoes," said she. "They are new things to eat in this part of the country. The Government wants to encourage the people to earn their living from the earth. So it has made a study of all that can be raised in the country. Hungary produces grapes, maize, wheat, cereals, hemp, hops, and all manner of vegetables, and the State helps the people to raise crops in every way that it can. About five years ago the head of the Department of Agriculture decided that the people should be taught to raise potatoes, which are cheap vegetables and very nourishing. Arrangements were made with three large farms at Bars, Nyitra, and Szepes, to raise potatoes from seeds sent them by the Department. The next season these potatoes were distributed for seed to smaller farmers, with the condition that they in turn distribute potatoes for seed to other farmers. In this way nearly everyone soon was raising potatoes.

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