

The Dancing Bear

Etienne Barsony

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Fife and drum were heard from the big market-place. People went running towards it. In a village the slightest unusual bustle makes a riot. Everybody is curious to know the cause of the alarm, and whether the wheels of the world are running out of their orbit. In the middle of the great dusty market-place some stunted locust trees were hanging their faint, dried foliage, and from far off one could already see that underneath these miserable trees a tall, handsome, young man and a huge, plump dark-brown, growling bear were hugging each other.

Joco, the bear-leader, was giving a performance. His voice rang like a bugle-horn, and, singing his melancholy songs, he from time to time interrupted himself and hurrahed, whereupon the bear began to spring and roar angrily. The two stamped their feet, holding close together, like two tipsy comrades. But the iron-weighted stick in the young man's hand made it evident that the gigantic beast was quite capable of causing trouble, and was only restrained from doing so because it had learnt from experience that the least outbreak never failed to bring down vengeance upon its back. The bear was a very powerful specimen from Bosnia, with thick brown fur and a head as broad as a bull's. When he lifted himself up on his hind legs he was half a head taller than Joco, his master.

The villagers stood round them with anxious delight, and animated the bear with shouts of "Jump, Ibrahim! Hop, Ibrahim!" but nobody ventured to go near. Joco was no stranger to these people. After every harvest he visited the rich villages of Banat with his bear. They knew that he was a native of the frontier of Slavonia, and they were not particularly keen to know anything else about him. A man who leads such a vagrant life does not stay long in any one place, and has neither friends nor foes anywhere. They supposed that he spent part of the year in Bosnia, perhaps the winter, visiting, one after the other, the Servian monasteries. Now, in midsummer, when he was least to be expected, they suddenly hear his fife and drum.

Ibrahim, the big old bear, roused the whole village in less than a quarter of an hour with his far-reaching growls. The dogs crouched horror-struck, their hair standing on end, barking at him in fear and trembling.

When Joco stopped at some street corner, or in the market-place, and began to beat his rattling drum, the bear lifted himself with heavy groans on his hind legs, and then the great play began, the cruel amusement, the uncanny, fearful embracings which one could never be sure would not end fatally. For Joco is not satisfied to let Ibrahim jump and dance, but, whistling and singing, grasps the wild beast's skin, and squeezes his paws; and so the two dance together, the one roaring and groaning, the other singing with monotonous voice a melancholy song.

The company of soldiers stationed in the village was just returning from drill, and Captain Winter, Ritter von Wallishausen, turned in curiosity his horse's head towards the crowd, and made a sign to Lieutenant Vig to lead the men on. His fiery half-blood Graditz horse snuffed the disgusting odor of the wild beast, and would go no nearer.

The Captain called a hussar from the last line that passed him, and confided the stubborn horse to his charge. Then he bent his steps towards the swaying crowd. The villagers opened out a way for him, and soon the Captain stood close behind the bear-leader. But before he could fix his eyesould go no nearer.

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A few steps away from Joco a young girl sat upon the ground, gently stroking a light-colored little bear. They were both so huddled up together that the villagers scarcely noticed them, and the Captain was therefore all the better able to observe the young woman, who appeared to be withdrawing herself as much as possible from public gaze. And really she seemed to be an admirable young creature. She was slight of build, perhaps not yet fully developed, with the early ripeness of the Eastern beauty expressed in face and figure—a black cherry, at sight of which the mouth of such a gourmand as the Ritter von Wallishausen would naturally water! Her fine face seemed meant only to be the setting of her two black eyes. She wore a shirt of coarse linen, a frock of many-colored material, and a belt around her waist. Her beautifully formed bosoms covered only by the shirt, rose and fell in goddesslike shamelessness. A string of glass beads hung round her neck, and two long earrings tapped her cheeks at every movement. She made no effort to hide her bare feet, but now and then put back her untidy but beautiful black hair from her forehead and eyes; for it was so thick that if she did not do so she could not see.

The girl felt that the Captain's fiery gaze was meant for her and not for the little bear. She became embarrassed, and instinctively turned her head away. Just at this moment Joco turned round with Ibrahim. The tall Servian peasant let the whistle fall from his hand, and the wild dance came to an end. Ibrahim understood that the performance was over, and, putting down his front paws on the ground, licked, as he panted, the strong iron bars of his muzzle.

The Captain and Joco looked at each other. The powerful young bear-leader was as pale as death. He trembled as if something terrible had befallen him. Captain Winter looked at him searchingly. Where, he asked himself, had he met this man?

The villagers did not understand what was going on, and began to shout, "Zorka! Now, Zorka, it is your turn with Mariska." The cries of the villagers brought Joco to himself, and with a motion worthy of a player he roused the little bear to its feet. Then he made signs to the girl. Being too excited to blow his whistle, he started singing and beating the drum; but his voice trembled so much that by and by he left off singing and let the girl go through her performance alone.

Then the Captain saw something that wrought him up to ecstasy. Zorka was singing a sad Bosnian song in her tender, crooning voice, and dancing with graceful steps round the little bear, who, to tell the truth, also danced more lightly than the heavy Ibrahim, and was very amusing when he lifted his paw to his head as Hungarians do when they are in high spirits and break forth in hurrahs.

Captain Winter, however, saw nothing but the fair maid, whose pearly white teeth shone out from between her red lips. He felt he would like to slip a silk ribbon round her waist, which swayed as lightly as a reed waving to and fro in the wind, and lead her off as if she were a beautiful colored butterfly.

Zorka grew tired of the sad, melancholy song, and began to dance wildly and passionately. Perhaps her natural feminine vanity was roused within her, and she wanted to show off at her best before the handsome soldier. Her eyes sparkled; a flush spread from time to time over her face; with her sweet voice she animated the little bear, crying, "Mariska, Mariska, jump!" But after a while she seemed to forget the growling little creature altogether, and went on dancing a kind of graceful fandango of her own invention. As she swayed, it seemed as if the motion and excitement caused every fiber of her body to flash out a sort of electric glow. By the time the girl flung herself, quite exhausted, in the dust at his feet, Captain Winter was absolutely beside himself. Such a morsel of heavenly daintiness did not often drop in his path now that he was fasting in this purgatory of a village. His stay there had been one long Lent, during which joys and pleasures had been rare indeed.

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It began to grow dark. At the other end of the marketplace several officers were on their way to supper at the village inn where they always messed. The Captain turned to the man and woman in possession of the bears and ordered them in no friendly tone to go with him to the inn as his guests. Joco bowed humbly like a culprit, and gloomily led on his comrade Ibrahim. Zorka, on the contrary, looked gay as she walked along beside the light-colored bear.

The Captain looked again and again at the bear-leader walking in front of him. "Where have I seen this fellow before?" he kept asking himself. His uncertainty did not last long. His face brightened. "Oh, yes; I remember!" he

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inwardly exclaimed. Now he felt sure that this black cherry of Bosnia, this girl with the waist of a dragon-fly, was his.

The inn, once a gentleman's country-house, was built of stone. The bears were lodged in a little room which used to serve the former owner of the house as pantry, and were chained to the strong iron lattice of the window. In one corner of this little room the landlord ordered one of his servants to make a good bed of straw. "The Captain will pay for it," he said.

When everything was ready in the little room, the Captain called Joco and took him there. He knew that what he was going to do was not chivalrous; but he had already worked himself up to a blaze of excitement over the game he meant to play, and this fellow was too stupid to understand what a hazardous piece of play it was. When they were alone he stood erect before the bear-leader and looked fixedly into his eyes.

"You are Joco Hics," he said; "two years ago you deserted from my regiment."

The strong, tall, young peasant began to tremble so that his knees knocked together, but could not answer a single word. Fritz Winter, Ritter von Wallishausen, whispered into Joco's ear, his speech agitated and stuttering: "You have a woman with you," he said, "who surely is not your wife. Set her free. I will buy her from you for any price you ask. You can go away with your bears and pluck yourself another such flower where you found this one."

Joco stood motionless for a while as if turned into stone. He did not tremble any longer: the crisis was over. He had only been frightened as long as he was uncertain whether or not he would be instantly hanged if he were found out.

"In all Bosnia," he answered gloomily, "there was only one such flower and that I stole."

Before a man who was willing to share his guilt, he dared acknowledge his crime. In truth, this man was no better than himself. He only wore finer clothes.

The Captain became impatient. "Are you going to give her up, or not?" he asked. "I do not want to harm you; but I could put you in prison and in chains, and what would become of your sweetheart then?"

Joco answered proudly: "She would cry her eyes out for me; otherwise she would not have run away from her rich father's house for my sake."

Ah! thought the Captain, if it were only that! By degrees I could win her to me.

But it was not advisable to make a fuss, whether for the sake of his position or because of his wife, who lived in town.

"Joco, I tell you what," said the Captain, suddenly becoming calm. "I am going away now for a short time. I shall be gone about an hour. By that time everybody will be in bed. The officers who sup with me, and the innkeeper and his servants, will all be sound asleep. I give you this time to think it over. When I come back you will either hold out your hand to be chained or to receive a pile of gold in it. In the meantime I shall lock you in there, because I know how very apt you are to disappear." He went out, and turned the key twice in the lock. Joco was left alone.

When the hour had expired Captain Winter noisily opened the door. His eyes sparkled from the strong wine he had taken during supper, as well as from the exquisite expectation which made his blood boil.

Joco stood smiling submissively before him. "I have thought it over, sir," he said. "I will speak with the little Zorka about it."

Ritter Winter now forgot that he was speaking with a deserter, whom it was his duty to arrest. He held out his hand joyfully to the Bosnian peasant, and said encouragingly: "Go speak with her; but make haste. Go instantly."

They crept together to the pantry where the girl slept near the chained bears. Joco opened the door without making a sound, and slipped in. It seemed to the Captain that he heard whispering inside. These few moments seemed an eternity to him. At last the bear-leader reappeared and, nodding to the Captain, said: "Sir, you are expected."

Captain Winter had undoubtedly taken too much wine. He staggered as he entered the pantry, the door of which the bear-leader shut and locked directly he had entered. He then listened with such an expression on his face as belongs only to a born bandit. Almost immediately a growling was heard, and directly afterwards some terrible swearing and a fall. The growling grew stronger and stronger. At last it ended in a wild roar. A desperate cry disturbed the stillness of the night: "Help! help!"

In the yard and round about it the dogs woke up, and with terrible yelping ran towards the pantry, where the

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roaring of the bear grew ever wilder and more powerful. The rattling of the chain and the cries of the girl mingled with Ibrahim's growling. The neighbors began to wake up. Human voices, confused questionings, were heard. The inn-keeper and his servants appeared on the scene in their night clothes, but, hearing the terrible roaring, fled again into security. The Captain's cries for help became weaker and weaker. And now Joco took his iron stake, which he always kept by him, opened the door, and at one bound was at the side of the wild beast. His voice sounded again like thunder, and the iron stick fell with a thud on the bear's back. Ibrahim had smelt blood. Beneath his paws a man's mangled body was writhing. The beast could hardly be made to let go his prey. In the light that came through the small window, Joco soon found the chain from which not long before he had freed Ibrahim, and with a swift turn he put the muzzle over the beast's jaws. It was done in a twinkling. During this time Zorka had been running up and down the empty yard, crying in vain for help. Nobody had dared come near.

The following day Captain Fritz Winter, Ritter von Wallishausen, was lying between burning wax candles upon his bier. Nobody could be made responsible for the terrible accident. Why did he go to the bears when he was not sober?

But that very day the siren of Bosnia danced her wild dance again in the next village, and with her sweet, melodious voice urged the light-colored little bear: "Mariska, jump, jump!"