

TALKING NOTHING

In his later years—and perhaps his earlier years too—Prince Mihály Apafi of Transylvania¹⁴ found affairs of state extremely tedious. He was obliged, however, to preside daily over long council sessions, where an assembly of ‘learned gentlemen’ taxed his ears with prolix advice. This was a great burden to him, especially since at that time his chancellor, Count Teleki, took care of all the routine business of state, leaving him to sit in restless boredom.

After these council meetings his advisors would stay for lunch, so that even over their food and drink the conversation was still of politics. When they at last departed, he would turn to his steward, Szentpáli.

‘Come thou hither, Szentpáli my old friend, and let us talk nothing!’

What follows, then, is my own sort of ‘talking nothing’. Short stories of no importance, and some not much shy of a hundred years old.

Little Jeannette

Both these stories concern Johanna Bethlen, or Countess Tholdalagi as she became. She was my grandfather’s niece and everyone addressed her in French fashion as Jeannette. I knew her in her very old age, when she was stooped and wrinkled. In 1848, however, she was a young wife and exceptionally pretty. Her husband was a major in the Hungarian revolutionary army and Jeannette, deeply in love, followed the army wherever it went, in a carriage with glass windows.

In the autumn of 1849 they came at last to Világos, where the army laid down its arms and surrendered to the Russians. When Jeannette heard of the capitulation, she flew into a rage: despite her diminutive size no one could match the ferocity of her patriotism. She stormed into the main hall of the Bohus manor, which was crammed with Russian and Hungarian officers, and pushed her way through the crowd until she was face-to-face with General Görgey, the commander of the Hungarian forces¹⁵. Looking him straight in the eye, she addressed him in a voice as sharp and piercing as a whistle.

‘Commander, you are a traitor!’

That was the fearless, resolute character of Jeannette Bethlen.