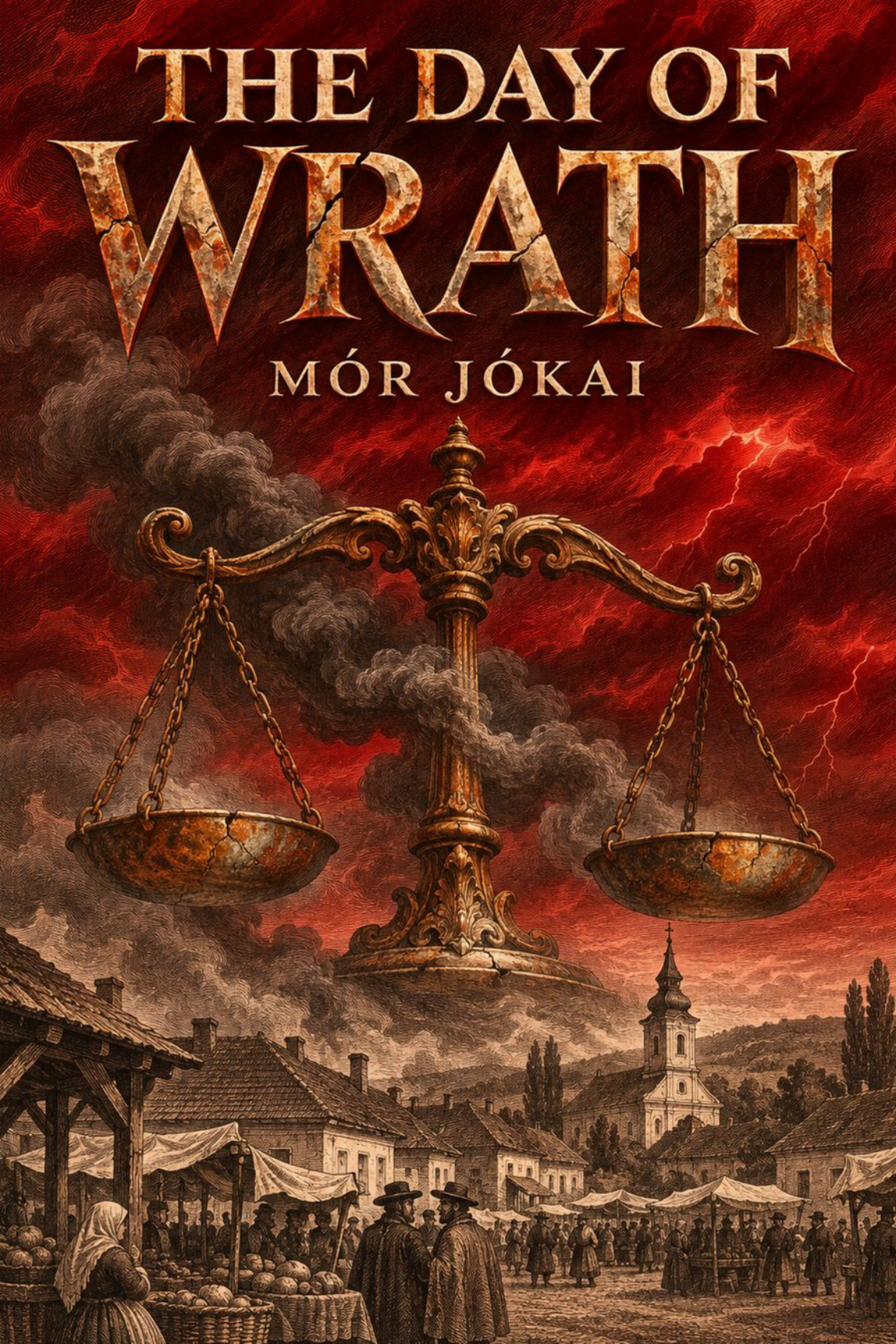
THE DAY OF WRATH

MÓR JÓKAI



The Day of Wrath

Mór Jókai

Translated by R. Nisbet Bain

THE AUTHOR



Mór Jókai

1825–1904

Illustration after the 1890s portrait in the Petőfi Literary Museum.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mór Jókai

Mór Jókai was a Hungarian novelist, journalist and public figure. He took part in the events of 1848 and later served in parliament. In The Day of Wrath he depicts a community where private rivalries and collective fears build toward violence. R. Nisbet Bain sets the novel in context in the 1900 English preface.

Sources: Petőfi Literary Museum and the historical Doubleday edition.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

The 1900 Doubleday English text with the translator's preface and all eighteen chapters.

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PREFACE.

"Szomorú Napok" was written in the darkest days of Maurus Jókai's life, and reflects the depression of a naturally generous and sanguine nature bowed down, for a time, beneath an almost unendurable load of unmerited misfortune. The story was written shortly after the collapse of the Magyar Revolution of 1848-49, when Hungary lay crushed and bleeding under the heel of triumphant Austria and her Russian ally; when, deprived of all her ancient political rights and liberties, she had been handed over to the domination of the stranger, and saw her best and noblest sons either voluntary exiles, or suspected rebels under police surveillance. Jókai also was in the category of the proscribed. He had played a conspicuous part in the Revolution; he had served his country with both pen and sword; and, now that the bloody struggle was over, and the last Honved army had surrendered to the Russians, Jókai, disillusioned and broken-hearted, was left to piece together again as best he might, the shattered fragments of a ruined career.

No wonder, then, if to the author of "Szomorú Napok," the whole world seemed out of joint. The book itself is, primarily, a tale of suffering, crime, and punishment; but it is also a bitter satire on the crying abuses and anomalies due to the semi-feudal condition of things which had prevailed in Hungary for centuries, the reformation and correction of which had been the chief mission of the Liberal Party in Hungary to which Jókai belonged. The brutal ignorance of the common people, the criminal neglect of the gentry which made such ignorance possible, the imbecility of mere mob-rule, and the mischievousness of demagogic pedantry—these are the objects of the author's satiric lash.

As literature, despite the occasional crudities and extravagances of a too exuberant genius that has yet to learn self-restraint, "Szomorú Napok" stands very high. It is animated by a fine, contagious indignation, and its vividly terrible episodes, which appal while they fascinate the reader, seem to be written in characters of blood

and fire. The descriptions of the plague-stricken land and the conflagration of the headsman's house must be numbered among the finest passages that have ever flowed from Jókai's pen. But the mild, idyllic strain, so characteristic of Jókai, who is nothing if not romantic, runs through the sombre and lurid tableau like a bright silver thread, and the *dénouement*, in which all enmities are reconciled, all evil-doers are punished, and Gentleness and Heroism receive their retributive crowns, is a singularly happy one.

Moreover, in "Szomorú Napok" will be found some of Jókai's most original characters, notably, the ludicrous, if infinitely mischievous, political crotcheteer, "Numa Pompilius;" the drunken cantor, Michael Kordé, whose grotesque adventure in the dog-kennel is a true *Fantasiestück à la Callot*; the infra-human Mekipiros; the half-crazy Leather-bell; and that fine, soldierly type, General Vértessy.

R. Nisbet Bain.

October, 1900.

CHAPTER I.

THE BIRD OF ILL-OMEN.

Whoever has traversed the long single street of Hétfalu will have noticed three houses whose exterior plainly shows that nobody dwells in them.

The first of these three houses is outside the village on a great green hill, round which the herds of the village peacefully crop the pasture. Only now and then does one or other of these quiet beasts start back when it suddenly comes upon a white skeleton, or a bleached bullock-horn, in the thickest patches of the high grass. The house itself has no roof, and the soot with which years of heavy rains have bedaubed the walls, points to the fact that once upon a time the place was burnt out. Now, dry white stalks of straw wave upon the mouldering balustrades.

The iron supports have been taken out of the windows, on the threshold thorns and thistles grow luxuriantly. There is no trace of a path—perhaps there never was one.

The land surrounding this house is full of all sorts of fragrant flowers.

The second house stands in the centre of the village, and was the castle of the lord of the manor. It is a dismal wilderness of a place. A stone wall, long since fallen to pieces, separated it at one time from the road. Now only a few fragments of this wall still stand upright, and the wild jasmine creeps all over it, casting down into the road its poisonous dark red cherries. The door lolls against its pillars, it looks as if it had once upon a time been torn from its hinges and then left to take care of itself. The house itself, indeed, is intact, only the windows have been taken out and the empty spaces bricked in. Every door, too, has been walled up, boards have been nailed over the ventilators in the floor, the white stone staircase leading up to the hall has been broken off and propped

up against the wall, and the same fate has befallen a red marble bench on the ground floor.

Here and there the cement has fallen away from the front of the house, and layers of red bricks peep through the gap. In other places large heaps of white stone are piled up in front of the building. In the rear of it, which used to look out upon a garden, it is plain that a good many of the windows have also been built in, and, to obliterate all trace of them, the whole wall has been whitewashed. All round about many fruit-trees seem to have been rooted up, and for three years running, the caterpillar-host has fallen upon the remnant; nobody looks after them, and they are left to perish one by one, consumed by yellow mould.

The third house is a little shanty at the far end of the village, shoved away behind a large ugly granary, with its little yard full of reeds, in the midst of which is a crooked, dilapidated pump. The panes of glass in the lead-encased frames have been frosted over, the marl of the thatched chimney is crumbling away, and the whole of the roof is of a beautiful green, like velvet, due to the luxuriantly spreading moss.

It is thirty years since these three houses were inhabited.

In the little hut, on the reed-thatched roof of which the screech-owl now lays its eggs, dwelt thirty years ago, a crazy old woman, they called her Magdolna. She must have been for a long time out of her wits; some said she had been born so, others maintained that the roof had fallen right upon her head and injured her brain; others again affirmed that the marriage of her only daughter with the hangman was the cause of her mental aberration. There were some who even remembered the time when this woman was rich and respected, and then suddenly she had become a beggar, and subsequently a crazy beggar. Be that as it may, in those days this old woman exercised a peculiar influence over the superstitious peasantry.

A sort of awe-inspiring exaltation seemed to take possession of this creature whenever she stood at the threshold of her hut, within the

walls of which she usually remained in a brown study insensible to her surroundings for days together.

When, at such times of exaltation, she stepped forth into the street, all the dogs in the village would fall a howling as they are wont to do when the headsman goes his rounds. All who met her timidly shrunk aside, for, not infrequently, she would foretell the hours of their death, and cases were known in which her prophesies had come true. She could tell at a single glance which of the young unmarried women did honour to their *pártás*1 and which did not. She could read in the faces of the children the names of their parents, and she often gave them names very different from the names they bore. The maids and young married women of the village therefore, not unnaturally, trembled before her.

1 *Pártá*—head-dress of the young peasant maids.

She recognised the stolen horse in front of the cart, and shouted to the farmer who drove it: "You stole that, and it will be stolen back again!"

At other times she would sit in the church-door, lay her crutch across the threshold, and wait to see who would dare to step across it. Woe then to whomsoever had transgressed any of the commandments! All through the summer the ague would plague him, his oxen would die, the tares would choke his corn, his limbs would be racked with pleurisy, or he would be nearly mauled to death in the village tavern.

Often she sat for hours at home, among her thorns and thistles, sobbing and moaning, and at such times the common folks believed that the whole district would be visited by a hailstorm. Sometimes she roamed about for weeks, nobody knew where, nobody knew why, and during all that time the hosts of grasshoppers, wood-lice, spiders, caterpillars, and other Heaven-sent plagues, multiplied terribly throughout the land; but the moment the old woman returned they all disappeared again in a day without leaving a trace behind them.

At one time they fancied she was at the point of death.

She lay outside her hut close to the well and drank incessantly of its water. At last she collapsed altogether, she could not even lift her hands. The passers-by perceived that she was parched with thirst, was wrestling with death, and yet could not die. If they had but given her a drink of cold water, she would immediately have been freed from the torments of life, but nobody durst approach to give her to drink. On that same day the lightning thrice struck the village, and such a deluge of rain descended that the water flooded the roads and invaded the houses.

The next day there was nothing at all the matter with the old woman, but she went about bowed down, shaking and leaning heavily on her crutch as at other times.

When the spring of 1831 was passing away, all sorts of terrible premonitory signs warned the people of the frightful visitation which was about to befall humanity. Nature herself made the people anxious and uncomfortable. There were showers of falling stars, it rained blood in various places, death-headed moths flew about in the evenings, wolves, tame and fawning like dogs, appeared in the village and let themselves be beaten to death before the thresholds of the houses.

What was going to happen?—nobody could tell.

Everyone augured, feared, felt that mourning and woe were close at hand; yes, everyone.

The trees made haste to put forth their blossoms, they made even greater haste to produce their ripened fruit. All nature knew not what to do, man least of all.

In those days when a single good word spoken in season, a single lucid idea might have meant the saving of many lives, the sole prophet in the whole country-side was this crazy old woman, who, in the dolorous exaltation of her deranged mind, sometimes blindly blurted out things on which the future was to impress the seal of truth. But, for the most part, her multitudinous, ambiguous

utterances might be interpreted this way or that, according to the liking of her hearers, and obscured rather than revealed the future.

When the summer came, with its terribly hot days, the woman's madness seemed to culminate in downright frenzy, for whole nights together she went shrieking through the village. The dogs crept forth from under the gates to meet her, and she sat down beside them, put her arms round their heads, and they would howl together in hideous unison. Then she would go into the houses weeping and moaning, and would ask for a glass of water, and would moisten her hands and her eyes therewith. In some of the houses she would simply say: "Why don't you smoke the room out, there's a vile odour of death in it;" in other places she would ask for a Prayer Book, and would fold down the page at the Office of Prayers for the Dead. Or she would send messages to the other world through people who were on their legs hale and hearty, and would tell them not to forget these messages.

"Get a cross made for you!" was her most usual greeting. And woe betide the family into whose windows she cried: "Get two crosses made! Get three made! One for yourself, one for your wife, one for each of your sons and each of your daughters!"

The people lived in desperate expectation; they would have run away had they known whither to run.

And what then were the wise and learned doing all this time, they who knew right well that a mortal danger was approaching; for they had read of its ravages, they had looked upon the very face of it in pictures, they knew the pace at which it was travelling day by day—what did they do to soothe the anguish of the people, and inspire them with confidence in the tender mercies of God?

All they did was to have a cemetery ready dug for those who were to die in heaps in the course of the year.

CHAPTER II.

THE HEADSMAN'S FAMILY.

The house of the headsman is surrounded by a stone wall, its door is studded with huge nails, acacia trees rustle in front of it. Its windows are hidden by a high fence. On its roof from time to time something flap-flaps like a black flag; it is a raven which has chosen the roof of that house as a refuge. No other animal likes the hangman. The dogs bay at him, the oxen run bellowing out of his way, only the ravens acknowledge him as their host. They are his own birds.

It is late in the evening, the sun has long since set, it may be about nine or ten o'clock, and yet the sky is unusually bright. Everywhere a strange reflected glare torments the eye of man. Not a cloud is visible; there is not a star in the heavens, yet a persistent, murky yellowness embraces the whole sky like a shining mist, as if the night, instead of putting on her usual cinder-grey garment, had clothed herself in flame-coloured weeds. Any sounds that may be audible seem as if they come from an immeasurable distance, and are hollow and awe-inspiring.

Close to the horizon the pointed steeples of Hétfalu are visible, their black outlines stand out in sharp contrast against the burning sky.

The whole district is empty and deserted. At other times, in the summer evenings, one would have seen tired yet boisterous groups of peasants returning home from working in the fields and hastening back to their respective villages. The voice of the vesper bell would everywhere have been resounding, the sweetly-sad songs of the good-humoured peasant girls would have soothed the ear, mingled with the jingle of the bells of the homeing kine, and the joyous barking of the dogs bounding on in front of their masters. Now everything is dumb. The fields for the most part lie fallow and overgrown by weeds and thistles, never seen before. In other places the green wheat crop, choked by tares, has already

been mown down. Means of communication have everywhere been interrupted by the sanitary cordons. The high road is covered with broad patches of grass on both sides. Men hold handkerchiefs to their mouths and noses, and do not trust themselves to breathe. The tongues of the bells have everywhere been removed. At the end of every village stands a good-sized four-cornered piece of ground surrounded by a ditch, and within it, here and there, graves have been dug well beforehand.

Throughout this lonely wilderness the furious barking of a watch-dog suddenly resounds, to which all the dogs in the distant village instantly begin to respond. Two men are fumbling at the latch of the headsman's door, and the chained dog within the courtyard, scenting a stranger, gives him a hostile greeting.

"Who is there?" inquires from within an unpleasant, hoarsely screeching voice, the owner whereof at the same time soothing the big dog which, snarling fiercely, thrusts his nose between the door and the lintel, and snaps from time to time through the opening.

"Open the door, Mekipiros, and don't bawl!" answers one of the new arrivals, impatiently beating with his fists upon the door. "There's no necessity for closing the door either, for who is likely to come? Even if you left it wide open, nobody would stray in, I'll be bound, save your pal, Old Nick, and here he is."

At this well-known voice the wolf-hound ceased to bark, and when the door was opened leaped joyously upon the neck of the new-comer, whining and sniffing.

"Send this filthy sea-bear to the deuce, Mekipiros, can't you? It's licking my very nose off."

The person so addressed was a curious sport of nature. It was a square-set creature dressed completely in women's clothes. Its features were those of a semi-bestial type. It had an immense round head covered with short, tangled, unkempt hair, a large broad mouth, a stumpy, wide-spreading nose, a projecting forehead furrowed with deep wrinkles, thick bushy eyebrows, and

one half of the horny-skinned face was covered by immature furry whiskers. And this masculine creature wore women's clothes! On perceiving the new-comer, it seized the yelping dog, big as a calf though it was, by the chain with a bony hand and hurled it backwards, grinning and grunting all the time without any apparent cause.

"Come! go in and don't stand staring aimlessly about," said the new-comer turning to his comrade, who was standing in melancholy amazement on the threshold, wrapped up in a large mantle, with a broad-brimmed hat on his head.

The dog accompanied the guests as far as the door of his kennel, sniffing all the time at the heels of the stranger, whilst the gabbling Mekipiros tugged away at its chain. A hideous moustache had been painted on the monster's lip either with blood or red chalk, and he tried to call attention to it with extreme self-satisfaction.

"Is the master at home, or the missus, eh! Mekipiros?" inquired the first-comer.

"The master is singing and the mistress is dancing," replied the half-man with a bestial chuckle.

"Tell them that we have arrived, come! off you go, and look sharp about it," and with that he gave a kick accompanied by a vigorous buffet to the monster, who regarded him for a time with a broad grin, as if expecting a repetition of the dose, and then plunged clumsily through the kitchen door bellowing with mirth. Meanwhile the two men remained outside in the courtyard.

One of them was a tall fair youth clad from head to foot in a greasy leather costume. He had round washed-out features, a callous sort of apathy played around his lips, and a cold indifference to suffering was visible in his red-rimmed green eyes. What struck one most about him was the furtive, prying expression of his face; he was evidently a spy by nature, although he attempted to conceal his real character beneath a mask of stupidity and absent-mindedness. But he pricked up his ears at every word

spoken in his presence. He reminded one of a snake which, when captured, stiffens itself out and pretends to be dead, and will let itself be broken in pieces before it will move.

The other youth was a pale-faced man, plainly a prey to the most overwhelming depression. The ends of his little black moustache straggled uncared for about the corners of his mouth, his hat was pressed right down over his eyes. You could see at a glance that his mind and his body were wandering miles apart from each other.

There they stood, then, in the courtyard of the headsman's house. The appearance of this courtyard formed an overwhelming contrast with the idea one generally pictures to one's self of such a place. A pretty green lawn covered the whole courtyard, clinging to the walls were creeping fig and apricot trees; in the background was a pretty vine; heart-shaped flower-beds had been cut out of the lawn, and they were full of fine wallflowers and the most fragrant sylvan flowers of every species; further away stood melon beds, sending their far-reaching shoots in every direction, red currant bushes, a weeping willow or two, yellow rose bushes, myriad hued full-blown poppies—and little white red-eyed rabbits were bounding all over the grass plot.

And yet this is the dwelling of the headsman.

"You can come in!" cried a strong, penetrating, sonorous woman's voice from within, and the same instant Mekipiros bounded through the door with his huge shaggy head projecting far in front of him. It was plain that he had not quitted the room voluntarily, but in consequence of a vigorous impulsion from behind.

The man in leather now shoved his melancholy comrade on in front of him, and the headsman's door closed behind them.

It was a kitchen into which they had entered, in no way different from the hearth and home of ordinary men. The plates and dishes shone with cleanliness, everything was in apple-pie order, the fire flickered merrily beneath the chimney, and yet—fancy was continually finding something in every object reminiscent of

blood-curdling circumstances. That axe, for instance, stuck in a block in front of the fireplace? Two years ago the executioner had beheaded a parricide—perchance 'twas on that very block!

That rope, again, attached to that bucket, that curved piece of iron glowing red in the fire, that heavy chain dangling down from the chimney—who knows of what accursed horrible scenes they may not have been the witnesses at some time or other? Yet, perhaps, there may be nothing sinister at all about them; perhaps they are employed for quite simple, honest, culinary purposes. Still, this is the headsman's house, remember!

Here and there on the walls black spots are visible. What are they? Blood, perhaps. One's eye cannot tear itself away from them; again and again it goes back to them, and the mind cannot reconcile itself to the thought: perchance this may be the blood of some beast, the blood of some common fattened beast which man must kill that he may eat and live—for is not this the dwelling of the headsman?

A woman is roasting and frying over the hearth, a tall, muscularly built virago, to whose sinewy arms, dome-like breast, red shining cheeks, and burning eyes, the flickering flames gave a savage, uncanny look; her fine black locks are wound up in a large knot at the back of her head, her large eyebrows have grown together, and the upper surface of her red, swollen lips are amber-coloured with masculine down.

"Sit down!" she cries to the new arrivals with a rough growling voice. "You are hungry, eh? Well, soon you shall have something to eat. There's the table"—and she went on cooking and piling up the fire; as it roared up the chimney it gave her red face an infernal expression. This was the headsman's wife.

The melancholy youth sat down abstractedly at the table, the other strode up to the hearth and began whispering to the woman, whilst from time to time they cast glances at the stranger-guest.

The man's whispers were inaudible, but it was possible to catch every word the woman said, for, try as she might, she could not soften down her thunderous voice into a whisper.

"I know him," said she, "he will soon get used to this place.... Nobody will look for him here.... Get away from here? How can he?"

Presently she placed a dish of boiled flesh before her guests. The pale youth picked at his food slowly and sadly, the other attacked it with ravenous haste, throwing a word over his shoulder to the woman the while, or urging his comrade to eat, or flinging bones to the dog and kicking him viciously in the ribs when he snapped them up.

"Can one have a word with the old man?" he inquired of the woman.

"Let him bide, the old man is plagued with his devils again. Don't you hear how he sings? Why, he voices it as lustily as any Slovak student on St Lucia's day."

And indeed from some room far away now came this verse of a well-known hymn, sung in a deep vibrating voice full of a woeful, contrite tremulousness:

"Oh, Lord, the number of our sins
And vileness, who shall purge?
Withhold the fury of Thy wrath,
Though we deserve its pouring forth,
And stay Thy chastening scourge!"

Melancholy, heart-rending was the sense of penitence conveyed by this deep, vibrating, bell-like voice. A penitential hymn in the house of the headsman!

The sad-faced youth shivered at the sound of this voice and seemed to awake suddenly from out of a reverie. He passed his hand once or twice across his forehead as if to rally his wits and

reduce the chaos within and around him to some sort of order, but gradually sank back again into his former lethargy.

A short time afterwards the same hymn was heard again; but the voice of the singer this time was not the sonorous, manly voice they had heard before, it was a heavenly, pure, childlike voice which now began to sing, full of the magic charm and sweetness of a crystal harmonica:

"Yet know we, Lord, whoso repents
And turns his heart to Thee,
Shall aye find favour in Thy sight;
Nor wilt thou hide from him Thy light,
Thy mercy he shall see."

Angels in Heaven could not have sung more sweetly than the voice that sang this verse. Who could it be? An angel proclaiming remission of sins in the house of the headsman!

"So the old cut-throat still keeps the girl under a glass case, eh?"

"He wants to bring her up as a saint on purpose to aggravate me, for he knows very well that I never could endure anything of the saintly sort."

"Apparently the old chap is stark staring mad."

"He is possessed by devils, I fancy. Last week three of his 'prentices bolted because they could not stand his sanctimoniousness any longer. Before dinner he would insist on reading to them out of the Bible for half an hour at a stretch, and if any of them dared to laugh he flung him out of doors like a puppy dog; you may imagine what a pretty figure a headsman cuts who is always preaching about the other world, and proclaiming the word of the Lord with his clenched fists."

"I'll be bound to say he has even taught Mekipiros to go down on his hams."

"Ho, ho, ho! Call him in! Come hither, Mekipiros, you bear's cub, you!"

Mekipiros came in.

"Come hither, I would box your chaps. There, take that! What, still grinning, eh? There's another then! Weep immediately, sirrah! can't you! Pull a wry mug! So! Put your hands together! Cast down your eyes! So! And now fire away!"

And the monster did indeed begin to recite a prayer. One might perhaps have expected him to mumble something altogether unintelligible. But no! He recited it to the end with a solemn voice, and his eyes remained cast down the whole time. His face even began to assume a more human expression, and when he came to the words which announced remission of sins to the truly penitent sinner, two heavy tear-drops welled forth and ran down his rough wrinkled face.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the headsman's wife, and she smacked the forehead of the suppliant repeatedly with the palm of her hand; "a lot of good may it do you!"

Suddenly, like the rolling echo of a descending thunderbolt, a song of praise uttered in an awe-inspiring voice from the adjoining room cut short this inhuman mockery.

"Who thunders so loudly in the lurid heavens above?
What means this mighty quaking? Why doth the round earth move?"

At the same instant the boiling water overflowed from the caldron and put the fire out, and they were all in darkness. There was a dead silence, when suddenly a blast of wind caught the half-open door and slammed it to violently, and in the dead silence that followed could be heard something like the cry of a bird of ill-omen or the yell of a maniac flying from the pursuit of his own soul: "Death!—a bloody death—a death of horror!"

Gradually the last sounds of this voice died away in the distance. The chained watch-dog sent a dismal howl after it.

And when the feeble light of the tallow candles shone again through the darkness, it fell upon three shapes which had sunk

upon their knees in terror, the two 'prentices of the headsman, and the monster. But the proud, defiant virago turned towards the elder of the 'prentices, and looked him up and down contemptuously.

"Then you, too, are one of them, eh?" cried she.

"Did you not hear the cry of the death-bird?" stammered he.

"What are you afraid of? Tis only my half-crazy old mother."

At night the headsman's apprentices sleep on the floor of the loft. The headsman himself has a room overlooking the courtyard; Mekipiros slept in the stable outside with the watch-dog.

All was silent. Outside, the wind had died away, not the leaf of a tree was stirring; one could distinguish the deep breathing of the sleepers.

At such times the lightest sound fills the sleepless watcher with fear. Sometimes he fancies that a man hidden beneath the bed is slowly raising his head, or that someone is lifting a latch, or the wind shakes the door as if someone were rattling it from the outside. There is a humming and a buzzing all around one. Night beetles have somehow or other lit upon a piece of paper, and they crinkle it so that it sounds as if someone were writing in the dark. Out in the street men seem to be running to and fro and muttering hoarsely in each other's ears. The church clocks strike one after another, thrice, four times—one cannot tell how often. The time is horribly long and the night is an abyss of blackness.

On a bed of straw, with a coarse coverlet thrown over them, the headsman's two apprentices sleep side by side. Are they really asleep? Can they sleep at all in such a place? Yet their eyes are closed. No, one of them is not asleep. When he perceives that his comrade does not move, he slowly pushes the coverlet from off him and creeps on all fours into the inner room; there he lies down flat on his stomach and peeps through a crevice in the rafters. Then he arises, creeps on tiptoe to the chimney and knocks at the partition wall three times, then he climbs down from his loft by

means of a ladder, withdraws the ladder from the opening, and whistles to the watch-dog to come forth. One can hear how the chained beast scratches his neck, and growling and sniffing lies down before the door of the loft.

Meanwhile the other apprentice has been carefully observing every movement of his companion with half open eyes. Whenever the first riser turns towards him he feigns to be asleep; but as soon as he takes his eyes off him he opens his own eyes again and looks after him.

When the last sound has died away, he also arises from his sleepless couch and looks through that crevice into the inner room through which his comrade had looked before. It was easy to find, the ray of a lamp pierced through the crevice in the beam, and that ray comes from the hangman's bedroom.

Carefully he bends down and looks through this little peep-hole.

He sees before him a room furnished with the most rigorous simplicity. Close to the wall stands a black chest, fastened with three locks; in the middle of the room is a strong wooden table; further away are two beds, a large one and a small one; there are also two armless four-legged chairs; in the window recess are a few shabby books; above the beds is a heavy blunderbuss. The pale light of the lamp falls upon the table. Sitting beside it is a child reading out of the Bible. At the feet of the child lies a man with his face pressed down to the ground.

The man is of mighty stature—a giant, and he lays down his head, covered with a wildered shock of grey hair, at the feet of a child whose beauty rivets the eye and makes the heart stand still.

It is a pretty little light-haired angel, twelve or thirteen years of age, her hair is of a silvery lightness, like soft feather-grass or moonbeams, her face is of a heavenly whiteness, she has the smile of an angel. The smile of this white face is so unearthly, that neither joy nor good-humour is reflected from it, but something of a

higher order, which the human heart is not pure enough to comprehend.

The old man lies there on the ground, with his fingers clutching his grey locks, and the ground on which his face has rested is wet. But the little girl, with hair like soft feather-grass, reads with a honey-sweet voice verses full of mercy and pardon from the Holy Book. From time to time her little fingers turn a leaf over, and whenever she comes to the name of the Lord she raises gentle eyes full of devout reverence.

"Pray, pray, my angel, go on praying! God will hear thy words. Oh! thy father is indeed a sinner, a great, great sinner!"

The child leant over him, kissed his grey head, and went on reading.

The old man fell a-weeping bitterly.

"Oh! thy father's hands are so bloody! Who can ever wash them clean? I have killed so many men who never offended me, never did me any harm. Oh! how they feared death! how sad they were as they waited for me! how they looked and looked to see whether a white flag would not be hoisted after all! Oh! how they begged and prayed, how they kissed my hands in order that I might wait a moment, but one moment more—life was so sweet to them, yes, so sweet! And yet I had to kill them. I murdered them—because the law commanded it."

A deep and bitter sob choked the old man's voice.

"Who will answer for me when God asks in a voice of thunder: 'Who has dared to deal out death—the prerogative of God alone?' Who will answer for me, who will defend me, when my judges will be so many pale, cold shapes, me in whose hands were Death and Terror? And if we meet together above there—or, perchance, down below, we, the executioner and the executed, and sit down at one table! oh! those bloody souls!—moving about headless, perchance, even in the other world, oh! horrible, horrible! To have to answer for the head of a man! And what if he were innocent

besides, what if the judge erred, and the blood of the condemned cries out to Heaven for vengeance? Alas! oh, Mighty Heavenly Father!"

The grey-headed giant writhed on the ground convulsively, and smote his bosom with his clenched fists. One could now catch a glimpse of his face. It was a hard, weather-beaten countenance, bronzed by the suns of many a year, large patches of his beard were grizzled, but his eyebrows were of a deep black. He was quite beside himself, every muscle writhed and quivered.

The little girl knelt down beside him and tenderly stroked his sweat-covered forehead, took his head into her lap, and did not seem to fear him terrible as he looked—like one of the damned on the verge of the grave.

The old man kissed the girl's hands and feet, and timidly, tenderly embracing her with his large, muscular, tremulous arms, bent over her, hid his face in her lap, and sobbing and groaning, spoke in a voice near to choking—it was as though his very soul was bursting away from his bosom along with these terrible words.

"Look, my little girl!—once the judges condemned a young man to death—my God! there was no trace of a beard upon his face, so young was he. For three days he was placed in the pillory, and everybody wept who beheld him—the youth was accused of having murdered his father. He could not deny that he slept in the same room, and a bloody knife was concealed in the bed. In vain he said that he was innocent, in vain he called God to witness—he must needs die. On the day when he was beheaded, two women, weeping and wailing, and dressed in deep mourning, ran beside the felon's car to the place of execution. One was his dear mother, the other his loving sister. In vain they screamed that he was innocent, that he ought not to die, and, even if he were guilty they forgave him the mourning dresses they wore, though they were the sufferers and had lost everything. It was useless, he must needs die. When he sat down in front of me in the chair of death, and took off his clothes, even then he turned to me and said: 'Woe is me

that I must die, for I am innocent.' I bound up his eyes. But my hand shook as I aimed the blow at him, and the blood that spurted on to my hand burnt like fire. Oh, my child! that blood was innocent. A year ago I executed a notorious highwayman, and as I was ascending the ladder with him, he turned and laughed in my face: 'Ha, ha!' cried he, 'it was in this very place that you beheaded a fine young fellow whom they accused of having murdered his father; it was I who killed that father of his and hid the knife in his bed, and now hang me up and look sharp about it.' Oh, my child, thou fair angel, beseech God that *He* will let me forget those words!"

"Go to sleep, go to sleep, my good father. God is good, God is wrath with no man. Why dost thou weep? Thou art not a bad man, surely, else thou wouldst not love me. Look now! Last summer two children went from the village into the woods to pluck flowers, there Heaven's warfare overtook them, and when they sought a refuge beneath a tree to avoid the rain, the lightning struck both of them dead. Yet the lightning is God's own weapon, and both the children were innocent. God knows wherefore He gives life and death, we do not. Go to sleep, my good father! God is everywhere near us, and turns away from nobody who lifts up his eyes towards Him. Look, I see Him everywhere. He watches over me when I sleep, He holds me by the hand when I walk in the darkness; I see Him if I look up at the sky, I see Him when I cast down my eyes. He abandons nobody. Kiss me and go to sleep!"

The big muscular man slowly struggled to his knees. He pressed the fair child to his bosom and raised his hard rough face. He looked up, his lips quivered, he seemed to be praying, and his tears flowed apace. Then he stood up, and the little girl embraced his arm, that huge arm of his like the trunk of a tree. Fumbling his way along, he allowed himself to be led to his bed, and plunged down upon it fully dressed as he was. After turning about restlessly for a moment or two, a loud snore like thunder, which made the whole room vibrate, proclaimed that he had fallen asleep at last. But his slumbers were restless and uneasy. Frequently he would start and

cry aloud as if in agony, or utter broken unintelligible half sentences and groan horribly.

But the fair little girl extinguished the lamp before she got ready to lie down herself. The pale light of the moon shone through the window and made her face whiter, her hair more silvery than ever, as if by enchantment. It shone right upon her snow-white bed. It shone upon her soft eyebrows, her smiling face, upon her sweet lips as they tremulously prayed.

So slumber came upon her in the shape of a snow-white moonbeam. With a smiling face, hands clasped together, and praying lips, she fell asleep—and her guardian angel stood at the head of her snow-white bed.

The youth had watched the whole scene through the rift in the door with bated breath and great amazement. When he rose to his feet, he remained for a long time, rapt in a brown study, leaning against the wall and staring blankly before him, lost in wonder that two such different beings should be slumbering together beneath the same roof.

He sighed deeply. In the stillness of the night it seemed to him as if he heard the echo of his own sigh coming back to him in whispering words. He listened attentively—he could plainly distinguish the deep droning voice of the headsman's wife, which seemed to him to come from somewhere below at the opposite end of the house.

He went in the direction of the voice, and when he came to the place where his comrade had knocked thrice on the boards near the chimney, he distinctly heard two people talking to each other in a low voice. It was the headsman's wife and her lover.

The youth turned away full of loathing. Nevertheless, it soon occurred to him that this tempestuous *tête-à-tête* could have little to do with love. The voice of the headsman's wife frequently arose in anger.

"Let him go to hell!" he heard her exclaim.

"Hush! hush!" murmured the young 'prentice, "somebody might overhear us."

"Pooh! God and men both slumber now."

What could they be talking about? Whom did they want to harm? Such folks had it not in them to love anyone. Woe to those whom they had cause to remember!

So he crept softly to the spot and listened.

"If these people should rise they will not leave one stone upon another," the headsman's apprentice was saying.

"And do you suppose they will rise up because you tell them to?"

"I have thought the matter well out. The common folks about here do not love their masters, there is no reason why they should. Their lords have kicked and cuffed and spat upon them, and treated them worse than dogs. You have but to cast a burning fagot into the mass of discontent, and it will flame up at once. Even the wisest among them who do know something about it, are the most narrow-minded. If there be two versions of a matter they always believe the most absurd one. I told them to be on their guard against danger. I told them to look after their wells and their granaries, as their masters wanted to poison them. When they asked why? I told them that the whole kingdom was surrounded on every side by enemies, and the gentry wanted to raise a pestilence in the kingdom to keep the enemy out of it. At my words the common people at once became suspicious, for they have heard for a long time that the gentry were expecting a pestilence, and as this was the first explanation of the prophesied epidemic that had come to their ears, they believed it at once. Suspicion is contagious. And as the gentry have since had the imprudence to order a separate graveyard to be dug for the corpses of those who may die of the cholera (naturally in order to prevent the dead bodies from spreading the contagion), the common folks have believed my words as if I were a prophet, and quite expect that the gentry are going to poison the poor people.

The digging of the churchyard they take to be a first move in that direction."

"Devilish clever of you, Ivan, I must say."

"And then don't forget the announcement of the Kassa doctors to the effect that if the common folks will not take the salutary bismuth powder voluntarily, it must be forced upon them, thrown into their wells and scattered about their barns. It looks as if everyone was intent upon playing into our hands."

"Does the young chap upstairs suspect anything?"

"I don't think so, but let us speak in a lower tone. I promised to hide him here. He fancies he has shot his captain dead. He caught him with his sweetheart and banged away at him; the man fell to the ground, but he did not die. But the young fellow ran away and deserted his colours. I have been persuading him to desert for a long time, as I had need of him. This, in fact, is the third time he has deserted, and if they catch him now they will undoubtedly string him up. Not a bad idea for him to fly to the headsman's house, eh? They will seek him everywhere but under the gallows-tree. And if they find him here, they won't have very much more trouble with him, that's all."

"Ho, ho, ho! Suppose he were to hear you?"

And he did hear!

"You see, this was my object all along. I shall put his pursuers on his track in any case, and they will capture him here and take him to Hétfalu, where the court-martial will pronounce sentence of death, and then have him exposed in the pillory. All the common folk about Hétfalu love the youth as if he was their own son, but they hate his father like the devil. It will be no very great masterpiece to stir up the people in these troublous times, and when they see the young fellow led out to be hanged they will be quite ready to seize their scythes and dung-forks, set him free, raise him on their shoulders, and rush with him to the castle of his father (who, by the way, has done his best to hound his son to

death), and level it with the ground, and there you have a peasant revolt in full swing straight off."

"But will the lad consent to be put at the head of such an enterprise?"

"Never fear! Death is an awful prospect. There is no road, however terrible, which a man will not take in order to avoid it. Besides, at such times a man is not himself, but does everything almost unconsciously, and thus our names will not appear in the business at all; and if it is put down, he will be looked upon as the ringleader. Not the shadow of a suspicion will fall upon us."

"Bravo, Ivan! I could kiss you for this."

"A more amazing popular rebellion than this will be has never been known. From village to village the rumour will fly that his own son has risen against his poisoner of a father at the head of the people, has cut to pieces every member of his family, and levelled his ancestral halls to the ground. He will be looked upon as a public avenger. Horribly black rumours will be noised abroad all over the kingdom, and at the tidings thereof the people will run downright mad with savage fury, and the gentry will not know which way to turn to escape the unforeseen danger which will suddenly break out at their very doors."

"You are the Devil's own son, Ivan; come and let me cuddle you."

The youth rose from the chimney-place trembling in every limb. He had heard every word they said.

For an instant he remained standing there quite beside himself, half mad, half senseless from sheer terror and amazement. Presently he began to gaze about him with desperate alertness, like a wild beast that has fallen into a trap and looks eagerly for a way out of it, rallying all its powers for a final struggle, becoming resourceful and inventive in proportion to its peril, and forgetting the very instinct of life in the longing for freedom, at last gets to fear nobody and nothing. After fruitless struggles it surrenders in

despair, lies down, closes its eyes, and the next instant once more begins the hopeless fight for liberty.

The youth looked down through the opening in the floor. The ladder had been removed, and in the courtyard below a big shaggy dog was slouching surlily about and shaking its collar, and from time to time it would tear at its skin with its teeth or worry its tail and bay at the moon.

And now there is a good sharp knife in the youth's hands. He sticks it between his teeth and looks carefully around him. In case of need he would have risked a fight with the dog, and perhaps killed it; but this could not happen without a great deal of noise, and he wished, at any price, to escape unnoticed.

The fence, too, surrounding the enclosure, was very high, how was he to get over it? Nowhere could he see the ladder.

At the extreme end of the house, right opposite the windows of the headsman's bedroom, was a large mulberry tree, whose wide-spreading branches bent down over the roof of the house. With the help of these branches one could easily get to the fence, and then a bold leap down from the top of it would do the rest.

Like a panther escaping from its cage the young man crept along the narrow window-ledge of the garret with his knife between his teeth. Wriggling along on his belly he clutched hold of the ridge of the house, and crawled cautiously on till he came to the branches of the mulberry-tree, then he seized an overhanging branch, clambered up it and scrambled to the very end of it—and all so quietly, without making the least noise.

From the extreme edge of the branch, however, to the top of the fence he had to make a timely spring, and in so doing overestimated the strength of the branch on which he stood—with a great crash it broke beneath him, and he remained clinging like grim death to the fence half-way up.

At the sound of the snapping branch the watch-dog became aware of the fugitive, and rushed barking towards him; and while he was

struggling with all his might to scramble up to the top of the fence it seized him by one of the tails of his coat and furiously tried to drag him down.

"Who is that?" a loud voice suddenly roared. The headsman had been aroused by the noise outside his window, and was now looking down into the courtyard. He there perceived a man quite unknown to him clambering up the fence, while the dog was tugging away at him to bring him down. "Ho, there! stop, whoever you are!" he thundered, and mad with rage he seized the musket and took aim at the fugitive. His eyes were wild and bloodshot.

Then a white hand lowered the weapon, and a clear ringing childish voice from behind him exclaimed:

"Wilt thou slay yet again, oh, my father?"

The man's hand sank down. For a moment he was motionless, and his face grew very pale. Then the calm look of self-possession came back to him. He embraced the child who had pushed the gun aside. Then he took aim once more. There was a loud report, and the watch-dog, without so much as a yelp, fell to the ground stiff and stark. The fugitive with a final effort leaped over the fence.

CHAPTER III.

A CHILDISH MALEFACTOR.

That house which stands all deserted in the middle of Hétfalu was not always of such a doleful appearance.

Its windows which are now nailed up or bricked in were once full of flowers; those trees which now stand around it all dried up and withered as if in mourning for their masters, and with no wish to grow green again after the many horrors which have taken place among them, those trees, I say, once threw an opulent shade on the marble bench placed beneath them, where a grave old gentleman used to sit of an evening and rejoice in the splendid wallflowers with which the courtyard abounded.

Yes, he could rejoice in the sweet flowers although his own heart was full of thorns.

This old gentleman was Benjamin Hétfalusy.

In front of those two windows which look out upon the garden, and which are now walled up, a solitary vine had been planted, whose branches, crowded with fruit, climbed up to the very roof of the house. Now it lies all wildered on the ground, and its immature berries twine themselves round the nearest bushes.

Those windows were once thickly curtained. The yellow silk curtains inundated with a sickly light a room where everything was so still, so sad.

There was an invalid in the house, little Neddy, the son of Benjamin Hétfalusy's daughter, the son of that once so haughty gentlewoman, Leonora Hétfalusy.

This poor lady had been visited by many a terrible calamity. After a youth passed amidst feverish excitements, she had married Squire Széphalmi, and there had been two children of this marriage, a son and a daughter. Edward and Emma were their names. The children were constantly bickering with each other, but

this after all is only what happens every day with brothers and sisters.

One day the little girl disappeared, nobody knew what had become of her. They searched for her in the woods and in the fields, and in the pond close by; they explored the whole country side, their little pet daughter was nowhere to be found.

From that very day Neddy fell sick. He lost his fresh ruddy colour. He could neither eat nor sleep. They laid him on his bed, a fever tormented him. At night he would wander in his speech, and at such times he would constantly be calling for his little sister Emma; he would cry out and weep, and his features would stiffen and his eyes would almost start out of his head till he looked like one possessed.

The doctors said that it was epilepsy. They treated him in every possible way. It was all of no avail. He grew worse from day to day, and his father and mother stood and wept by his bed morning after morning.

It was one of those evenings when the wind rages outside and dashes rain mingled with hail against the window-panes. The child was crying and moaning in his bed, out of doors the dogs were howling, the wind was whistling, and the freely-swinging pump-handle creaked and groaned like a shrieking ghost.

"Ah!" wailed the sick child in his sleep, half rising up. "Emma! Let in little Emma! Don't you hear how she is crying outside—she cannot get through the door ... she is shivering, she is afraid of the dark ... go out and look...!"

"There is nobody outside, my darling, nobody, my poor sick little son."

"There is, there is. I hear someone scratching at the door, fumbling at the latch; she is stroking the dogs; don't you hear how she is moaning, dear, dear mother, don't you hear it?"

"Go to sleep, my sick darling, nobody is coming here, the whole house is locked up."

"She is dead, she is dead," whined the little boy in his delirium. "Wicked men killed her when she went into the woods to pluck flowers. They tied a stone to her feet and sank her in the yellow pond. Oh! oh! why don't you make haste? She will be drowned directly. Oh! oh! how bloody her forehead is!"

In the corner of the room was the father on his knees praying. The mother with tearful eyes kept on spreading the bed-clothes over the sick child, and the grey-headed grandfather stared stupidly in front of him.

"Hark! Don't you hear little Emma weeping there again? She has not been properly buried beneath the ground, she wants to come out. Hush! hush! Don't go, don't go, then perhaps she will stop crying."

Outside the tempest was shaking the trees.

"Oh, oh! There's a knocking at the door! They have come for me. They want to kill me. They are bringing little Emma. Oh, do not let them in! Tell them that I am not here! Lock the door!—--Father, father, don't leave me."

It was hideous to see the expression of despair on the round childish face all covered with sweat. They are wont to paint little children in the shape of angels. If it should ever occur to a painter to paint a four-year-old child as a devil, as a fallen accursed spirit, it might be such a face as his was.

"Oh, God, have mercy upon him, and take him to Thee," sobbed the grandfather, hiding his face on the table. He could not endure to look upon the superhuman torments of the child, while the weak, helpless father cried in the bitterness of his heart, "it is my only son, my dearest, fairest hope."

The child made as if it would fly or hide itself. It leaped up in its bed incessantly, and saw hideous shapes around it and raved

about them, and writhed and struggled like one attacked by a serpent.

"Come, my daughter, come, my son!" sobbed old Benjamin, going down upon his knees. "Kneel beside me, let us pray for him; if our sins are ripe for punishment, let the punishment fall upon our heads, not upon the child's."

And the three elders knelt down beside the bed, and held each other by the hand and wept, and called upon God, and prayed *Him* to heal the child.

At that moment three violent blows from a clenched fist were heard upon the door. The dogs ran howling to the other end of the courtyard, and a shrill piping voice uttered the words:

"Death! death!"

The old grandfather leaped up from his knees like one beside himself with rage. Cursing aloud, he snatched his gun from the wall, rushed into the courtyard and looked about for whomsoever had uttered that cry that he might shoot the wretch down like a dog.

Perchance if that cry had come from Heaven he would have fired up at Heaven itself!

What! to cry out "Death" to the Amen of those who were praying for life!

And again that ear-piercing voice cried: "Death, death!"—it sounded like the whoop of a screech-owl.

The "death-bird," as they called her, was standing there in front of the trellised gate with her eyes fixed on the windows, her face was as pale as the face of a corpse, and her white hair was fluttering in the tempestuous night.

"It is thine own death thou hast prophesied, thou crazy witch, thou!" thundered old Benjamin, and he fired his gun at her at ten paces.

The "death-bird" stared at him without moving a muscle. Old Benjamin, in a sort of stupor, let the weapon fall out of his hand; it never occurred to him that he had extracted the bullet himself beforehand lest in a moment of distraction he might blow his own brains out.

"What dost thou want, Benjamin?" asked the old woman in a calm mocking voice. "Death comes not from thee, but to thee. Nobody can kill me. Death has passed me by, he does not think of me, he does not trouble himself about me, he has turned me into a living spirit. I am old and ugly, Death cares not for such as I. He too has a liking for youth and beauty, for pretty young women like thy daughter, for strong gallant young fellows like thy son-in-law, for tender, rosy chicks like thy grandchildren, and for fat ripe corn like thyself, saddled with more sins than the hairs of thy head. Benjamin Hétfalusy, I have looked upon thee as a young man, when thou didst chicane me out of my house, and tear from my hands the dry crusts I lived upon. And thou hast grown fat upon it too. But the bread that is wet with the tears of orphans cries to Heaven for vengeance, the blessing of God rests not upon it. Thou art old and thou wilt die. Thou shalt leave none behind thee, thou shalt bury all whom thou didst ever love. But I shall remain alive to see thy grave. I shall survive thee that I may see everything that once belonged to thee lie desolate. And this fine house of thine shall remain empty—these trees shall fade away and wither one by one—strangers shall divide thy lands among them. And now go home, for thou shalt not dwell there long. When thou liest outside I will come and visit thee yonder!"

The "death-bird" drew herself up straight at these words, she seemed as big again as her usual old shrunken self, and pointed towards the churchyard with her crutch.

The dogs howled dismally behind the house and durst not come forward.

The old woman collapsed once more. Close to the trellis gate stood a large heap of planks. She reached out and tapped them with her

crutch. "Good timber here for ever so many nice coffins!" she mumbled to herself, and tripped away coughing and wheezing, and leaning heavily on her crutch.

Benjamin Hétfalusy lay senseless in his own courtyard, and when he came to himself he was unable to utter a word. He had had a stroke, and his tongue was tied.

Early next morning, while the whole house was still asleep, Mrs. Széphalmi, all alone, stealthily and unobserved, quitted the house and made her way across the park to old Magdolna's hut.

This great lady, despite an outward show of culture, believed in and made use of all sorts of charms and quackeries, and it was not the first time, so credulous was she, that she had turned to the old woman for counsel. She had made her tell her her fortune by means of cards, predict the future, brew potions for her which would make her husband faithful, teach her spells which would cause flies and other vermin to vanish, to concoct balsamic cakes to keep the skin white—in fact, she hung upon every word the old crone uttered.

Magdolna kept her waiting for a long time in the yard before she opened the door. She said, by way of excuse, that she had been praying, then she shut the door behind them.

The great lady sat down on a straw-covered chair and began to weep. The old woman crouched down upon a stool and cleansed some mushrooms which she held in her lap.

"Dame Magdolna, can you not help my son?" sobbed Mrs. Széphalmi.

"No."

"I will give all I have to whomsoever can cure him. Oh! if you could only see how much he suffers, nobody ever suffered so much before."

"I know it, and he will suffer still more."

"The doctors cannot cure him."

"No healing herb that ever grew in the field can heal him; it would be all one even if you bathed him in balm."

"He will die?"

"'Twould be good for his soul if he did die."

"What, is there then anything worse than death?"

"Yes, damnation!"

"You are raving. A child who four years ago was an angel in Heaven, a child only four years of age—damned!"

"It has sinned enough to suffice for a long life, enough to merit damnation."

"Then for such a sin there is no name among men."

"There is a name for it, terrible and accursed—the murder of a sister."

"Merciful God!—I will not hearken to you."

"Why do you ask me, then? I have told nobody. Go home, my lady, you cannot buy the mercy of God for money."

"And yet there must be something in it. He is repeatedly mentioning his sister's name. And—oh! what a look he has at such times!"

"I know it. His groaning can be heard outside in the street. If a poor man's child wailed like that they would pitch it down a well."

"Speak! How and where did it take place?"

"The children were playing outside, close to the pond, I was on the opposite side plucking healing plants. Suddenly the two children caught sight of a pretty flower on a high rock. They both hastened to the spot to pluck it. The girl was the quicker, and got there first, and when she had plucked the flower the lad began to quarrel with her, and as they struggled the little girl fell off the rock, her head

struck against the hard root of a tree, and she remained motionless on the spot. All pale and frightened little Cain stood beside her, and gazed stupidly at the blood flowing from his sister's forehead. He saw that he had killed his sister, and in vain he begged and prayed her to awake again, in vain he pulled her about. Then he began to cry like one who is desperate, and ran towards the lake. I saw him gazing into the water, and he gazed into it for a long time, perhaps he thought of drowning himself. He shrank back from the face that stared at him from the surface of the water, his own distorted face. Slowly he crept back again, his face was as white as death, and his lips were blue. He gazed around him in every direction to see if anybody was looking. Then he suddenly put his arms round the lifeless body, and with a strength incredible in one so young he dragged it to a ditch which was thickly overgrown with bushes, and covered it over with leaves and branches. There was still some life in the little girl, for when the lad began stamping down the heaped-up leaves with his feet, she groaned aloud and said: 'Oh, Neddy, Neddy, don't bury me. Emma won't cry. Emma won't tell mamma!'"

"Oh! my poor little girl!"

"On hearing these words the boy took to his heels—he ran and ran till he fell down senseless in the wood. There some swine-herds found him as they were gathering beech-mast, and since then he has been plagued by a burning fever-fit."

"It is like a frightful nightmare."

"I tell you the truth, and such a thing is only what your family deserves—a murderer of his sister only four years old! Sins like yours are enough to hasten on the end of the world."

"And where, then, is the poor tiny little body of my innocent child?"

"I sought for it next day, but I could not find it. On the very day of the evil deed I durst not go there, for I was afraid they might think I killed her. Here and there among the bushes were fragments of a

little pink frock. I also came across a tiny red slipper with a golden butterfly on it, and some gay ribbons which must have tied up her hair. I have often heard the wolves howl at night in that very place. They can tell perhaps where she is."

"Would that my son might die also!" cried the mother in the anguish of her despair.

"He would die even if you did *not* wish it. An old man might live perhaps with such a mental cancer, but it will destroy a child. Ah! there is no remedy against the worms that gnaw away at the soul."

"Will he be tormented for long?"

"If you do not wish to see his torments, stand by his bed when nobody else is by, cross yourself thrice, and repeat the words which his dying sister said to him: 'Don't bury me, Neddy! Little Emma won't cry!'—and then he will die."

"How his father will weep! It is his favourite child—he loved him better than the little girl."

"How his grandfather will weep! For he loved them both, and they were both his pets."

CHAPTER IV.

A DIVINE VISITATION.

The whole region was pitch black, half the night was over, there was no sign of life anywhere.

But slumber was no dweller in *that* darkness, the terrible voice of God drove it far away from the eyes of men—Heaven was thundering as if it would have smashed this nebulous star of ours here below into fragments. Who could sleep at such a time?

One thunderbolt followed hard upon another. Whenever the crashing uproar ceased for an instant one could hear the ringing of bells, which the superstitious peasantry set a-going to charm away the terrifying tempest.

At such times every soul of man prays silently in its quiet place of rest. Not a single light is burning in any of the windows, the awakened sleeper lies with fast-closed eyes beneath his coverlet, all his sins rise up before him, all his sins and their punishment—death!

In one house, and one house only, nobody has gone to rest. Every living thing there is wakeful, from the master of the house to the watch-dog. It is the squire's house. All its windows are lit up and all its doors are locked.

In the room looking out upon the garden, the mother is alone with the sick child.

The child is delirious, he is gabbling terrible things, his features wear a different expression every instant.

And his mother understands every word of that mortal fever-born nightmare; she guesses at every thought which underlies all those varying expressions of countenance, the sight of whose horrible contortions are enough to make even the heart of a strong man break down.

How she must suffer!

He who takes poison dies a terrible death, his veins burst asunder one by one; his nerves and muscles strain and crack, his very marrow seems to be on fire. But, oh! what is all that compared to the death of a poisoned soul! A remedy may be found perhaps for bodily venom, but there is no remedy against spiritual venom. The grave may close upon the former, but never upon the latter. Both here and hereafter recollection and reprobation wait upon it.

God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children even to the fourth generation. They graft the evil qualities of their blood upon their sons; one generation passes on its wickedness to the next; man is vitiated when he is born; he sins as soon as he is conscious of his existence and he dies accursed.

The sweat streamed from the child's temples; for the last three days he has had the mark of death upon him.

The doctors say he may live, but if he lives he will be weak-witted.

What a future for a four-year-old child! A burden to the world, a burden to himself, to live on for years after the mind is dead! To be an idiot for ever! It would be good for him if he could be made away with, surely.

Will God take him? Or is it the Divine Will that he should live on as an example of a living curse, as a witness of the Almighty's chastising arm?

Does he bear so much suffering by way of ransom for the sins of his father, his mother, and his grandfather?—or must the years of punishment be as many as the years of sin?

Who will be merciful enough to put an end to his sufferings?

His mother sits silent and watchful at the head of the bed.

No, she cannot do it!

After all she is his mother. The roots of that young flower are still but half detached from the soil of her heart. Death would be a

benefit to him. Perchance it might be easier to forget him if he were under the sod. But man who does not endow with life, must not distribute death. Man must wait till the last of his allotted days has come.

And yet only a few words would bring it to pass.

The "death-bird" has whispered the magic spell, and Death will obey the summons.

Yet she lacks the courage to summon him at a time when the very foundations of the earth are trembling at the voice of Heaven's thunder!

Poor woman!

It is a marvel that she also is not mad. She cannot even weep now though her bosom heaves tumultuously—it were not good for a man to know her secret thoughts at this moment.

"They are calling me, they are calling me," stammers the child.... "Men without heads ... they are running after me ... the black dog is scratching up the ground ... the hand of the dead body is sticking out.... Poor Emma!"

The poor lady, all trembling, rose from her seat, very softly lest she should make a noise, she gets up, she cannot blow out the night lamp on the table, her breath is too feeble for that, she puts it out by casting it out of the room.

Then she approaches the window in the darkness to see whether the curtains are closely drawn, or whether anyone can look into the room from the outside. What a flashing past there was of fiery eyes amid the darkness of the night—Hah! What a blinding flash that was!—And then black darkness again.—No, nobody could see her—nobody—.

Can she make up her mind?

She goes slowly back to the bed. The lad is moaning fearfully. He is babbling dreadful words and his throat rattles painfully. "How

blue...? her mouth ... how bloody ... her forehead ... poor little Emma."

The lady bends down over the bed. The ghost of a pale little face comes into sight now and then as the lightning flashes quiver past the windows.

Can she make up her mind?

"Poor little Emma," wails the lad.

This last pathetic wail was too much for her. The unhappy woman crossed herself three times and, in a dry, half-suffocated voice exclaimed: "Don't bury me, Neddy, little Emma won't cry!"

The lad uttered a cry like the scream of a wild bird when it is shot through the heart—then he drew a long deep sigh and was quite still.

"Oh!" cried the desperate mother, as if suddenly throwing off the oppressive influence of some magic trance, "help, help!" and like a mad creature she rushed towards the bell-rope which hung beside the hearth.

She seized the golden tassel, the bell rang out like a ghostly chime, when suddenly a fearful crash was heard, a thunderbolt came down the chimney, zig-zagging through the room like a fiery serpent, fusing the metal of the bell in its passage and flashing down the bell-rope to the golden tassel with a blinding glare, finally vanishing with a dull crackling sound.

The whole family rushed at once to the scene of this fearful crash.

With ghastly, frightened faces they came rushing in one by one, huddled up in sheets and counterpanes or whatever else came first to hand, like so many spectres in white mourning.

In the room lay two corpses, the mother and the child.

Bitter lamentations resounded through the house.

The father and the grandfather came hurrying along.

Howling and screaming like some wild beast never seen before, the father flung himself upon his dead, turning frantically from the mother to the child, and from the child to the mother, kissing and squeezing them constantly. And then he pressed them to his bosom and literally howled like one beyond the reach of the mercy of God.

But the grandfather groped his way along in silence, looking in his white nightdress and his dishevelled silvery locks like some spectral thing.

He could not speak. His palsied tongue could not utter a single cry for the relief of his agony. He knelt down in front of the dead bodies and raised his eyes aloft. Oh! how he strove to give expression to his grief, to utter one word, if only one, which might pierce Heaven itself. But he could not. He was dumb, his mouth moved as if it would speak, but his tongue was tied.

Oh! how much this family must have sinned, to suffer so much.

CHAPTER V.

THE UNBELOVED SON.

The day dawned slowly and, as it seemed, with great difficulty. The morning was cold and cloudy as is often the case after a tempestuous night.

There was a great bustling about in the house of mourning. A bier and a coffin had to be made, and the dead clothed in their funeral finery. The old squire wished the funeral to be a splendid one.

The courtyard had been swept clean. Every household tool and implement of labour had been removed out of the way. They were preparing to keep one of those days of sad and solemn observance which must befall every household at some time or other.

At such times the street door is kept wide open. Let the country folks come in and look upon the dead, let them learn from the sight that Death is the judge of the gentry as well as of the serfs; let them see how the rich can be splendid even after death, how they embellish their coffins, how they fasten them with golden nails, how they embroider their palls with patterns of roses and gold filagree, how they spread the bed of death itself with the finest white watered silk and perfume it with the most fragrant balm.

Yet that fragrant balm cannot stifle the smell of the charnel house. Here, too, men must hold their handkerchiefs to their mouths as they do before the corpses of the poor.

For Death is a just judge.

A ragged man passes through the door. He is soaked through and through with mud and dirt, it was clear that no roof had covered his head during last night's tempest. His feet peeped from out of his boots, his damp hair seemed glued to his temples, his eyes were sunken, his cheeks were mere bone, his lips were blue and hollow.

He entered the courtyard falteringly like one who would steal something but does not know how to set about it, and there he stood at the entrance of the hall, leaning against the lintel, with eyes cast down upon the ground.

The dogs approached him, sniffed at his clothes all round, and began to growl at him.

Only one dog, an old boar-hound, would not be satisfied with sniffing impatiently among the others, but rushed upon the stranger, placed its two front paws upon him, licked his limp hand, and began joyously barking at him.

At this the major-domo, a sunburnt old man with a white moustache drew near, gave the speechless stranger a large piece of bread, and bade him go about his business.

"In God's name take yourself off," said he, "don't stand here in the way of everybody that comes out or goes in."

The new-comer did not move, but kept on looking straight in front of him, his chin and his lips trembled as if he were keeping back by force a torrent of tears.

The major-domo did not notice this, but the old dog kept leaping up at the stranger's hand, and yelped and yapped so persistently that it was plain he wanted to say something.

"Come, stir your stumps and look sharp about it, my good fellow, and don't set all our dogs barking for nothing," said the major-domo, and with that he seized the vagabond's hand and turned him round.

And now he saw his face for the first time.

The tears streamed from the eyes of the ragged man, sobbing and weeping he turned to the wall and hid his face.

The old servant stood there dumbfounded. At first he would not believe his eyes, then at last he clapped his hands together and exclaimed: "Why, if it is not young Master Imré himself. Good

Heaven!" and deeply agitated he approached the young man and began to soothe him, finally falling upon his neck and weeping along with him.

"Nobody recognises me," sobbed the youth, whose left hand was bleeding badly. He had hurt himself somewhat severely when he leaped over the fence of the headsman's house.

"Oh, why have you come home just at this time?" lamented the old servant, "if only it had been any other day in the whole year but this; this house is a sad dwelling-place just now, there are two corpses in it."

"Who has died then?"

"Mistress Leonora and little Ned. How they are all weeping within there."

"I shall be the third."

The servant was silent. Perhaps he thought to himself: "Nobody will weep for you."

"I have deserted from my regiment a third time."

"Oh dear, oh dear! And why have you come home again?"

"I wanted to speak to my father once for all."

"From henceforth your father will speak to nobody but the Lord God."

"I don't ask him to be kind to me. I want to tell him that Death is very near him, and he must try to avoid it."

"Methinks the poor old man would rather seek out death than fly from it; but you may be seen and recognised here, young master, and taken away—and then..."

"They will hang me up, eh? Don't be afraid. The pistol with which I shot the captain is loaded, one shot will be sufficient to save me from the gallows-tree—show me where my father is."

"Go, then! Where the mourning is loudest there will you find him."

The youth went in the direction indicated and entered the room.

The room was wholly darkened, the mirrors and pictures were draped in black; in the midst of it stood two coffins, within which lay two pallid shapes like wax figures.

It was impossible to recognise them.

On a candelabra beside the coffins burnt four large wax candles, and a gilded crucifix had been placed on a little table right opposite.

Kneeling at the foot of the dead was a white-haired man. He glanced now at the one now at the other of the departed, and from time to time would press his clenched hands to his lips and moan softly like one in a troubled sleep.

It was a heart-breaking sight—this old white-haired man crushed beneath the hand of God, moaning like some wild beast dedicated to death, but unable to utter a word or shed a tear.

When God visits His people with affliction He also gives them tears that they may weep out their sorrow, and power of speech that they may talk of their griefs and so find relief, but even these things were denied to this old man. There he knelt, scourged by the wrath of God, humbled to the very earth, like a withered branch which stiffens into dry lifelessness without complaint.

The young man, groping his way along, with his soul benumbed with sorrow, approached the old man, and gently, noiselessly knelt down by his side.

The old man regarded him stupidly, and for some time seemed to be wondering who it was. He could not speak, for, though still alive, Death had already mastered his tongue, and his son fancied he did not recognise him. Perchance it was impossible to recognise that haggard distorted face, that ragged garb, those dishevelled locks.

"I am your son whom you drove away, and who will soon be your dead son too," he exclaimed, with deep emotion, trying to seize the old man's hand that he might kiss it.

But the old man drew back his hand with horror. One could see loathing in the expression of his face, just as if the Devil had extended his hand to him in the moment of his most sacred sorrow.

"I deserve your disgust, your repudiation. I sinned grievously against you. You have grown grey betimes because of me. But all this shall be atoned for by a death, my death. You never loved me, you drove me away from your house as you would never have driven a dog, you let me perish in want and wretchedness; from my childish years upwards I have never had a good word from you, had it been otherwise things might have been very different. Those whom you loved God took away from you, those you did not love you drove away yourself, and now you are alone in the world."

The old man signified to him in dumb show that he was to say no more.

"I have not come hither to ask anything of you, so short will be the remaining period of my life that I shall want no provision for the way. I only want to reveal to you a horrible diabolical plot which threatens your grey head, your family, and perhaps your very house. My father, in ten minutes' time I shall have ceased to live, and no more words of mine will ever trouble your soul again, do not repulse me in the very hour of my death!"

The old man slowly rose from his knees, surveyed his tatterdemalion son from head to foot with infinite contempt, and his lips moved and quivered as if they would have said something, but not a word fell from them.

The son did not know that his father had had a stroke and could not speak.

"Have you not one word for me?—bad or good, a curse or a blessing? Only a single word, father! before you see me die!" and he dragged himself on his knees to the feet of the old man, who supported himself tremulously against the altar that had been placed opposite the two coffins, his hair seemed to rise, his eyes started from his head. Then he seized the heavy gilded crucifix and slowly raised it aloft in his right hand as if he would have stricken to the earth with it his own son who knelt there embracing his knees.

During this painful scene the door opened, the clash of the butt ends of muskets brought sharply to the ground was heard, and a corporal and three soldiers appeared on the scene.

Imré looked round at this noise. For an instant his face turned deadly pale; behind the backs of the soldiers he perceived the grinning face of his evil angel, the headsman's 'prentice. He felt that he was lost.

He glanced around him. Whither should he flee for refuge? Close beside him were two corpses with cold unsympathetic faces—and there was also a third, a living face, still colder, still more unsympathetic than the faces of the dead, living and yet not loving, the face of his own father who still stood there with the large heavy crucifix in his uplifted fist.

The corporal approached the youth and seized him by the collar. What did it matter to him that the culprit was standing beside two corpses covered with a funeral pall? what did he care about the painfulness of the scene? Naturally he only saw before him a deserter, a deserter whom it was his duty to arrest.

At this the youth grew absolutely desperate, and at the same time the instinct of self-preservation arose within him. In one magical moment there flashed through his mind all the horrors which the future had in store for him—the cold dungeon wall, the narrow barred windows, the heavy rattling chain, the court-martial, the reading of the sentence, the pillory, the gaping crowd, the white shirt worn by the condemned, the man of death, the executioner,

with a Prayer Book in one hand and a cord in the other, the ignominious death, the black carrion crows——

"Ah!" he roared in despair, and with the iron strength of frenzy he tore himself loose from the grasp of the corporal who fell prone into the fireplace with a fearful crash.

"Whoever touches me is a dead man!" screamed Imré, with a voice full of fury and defiance, and tearing open his vest he drew forth with one hand a dagger and with the other a large hussar pistol. The broken-winged young eagle had turned upon its pursuers, hacking at them with its wounded beak and flapping its still uninjured pinion in their faces.

The soldiers began to fall back before the infuriated youth, who, with bloodshot eyes and foaming mouth, followed hard upon them, and either from fear or compassion opened a way before him.

Then the white-headed old man seized from behind the youth's murderous uplifted arms, and held him back.

When the young man felt the touch of those cold tremulous hands upon his arm, he let fall the weapons from both his own hands, his arms fell down benumbed by his side, his whole body collapsed; nerveless and swooning he sank in a heap upon the ground. The soldiers lifted him upon their shoulders, removed him from the room, put fetters upon his hands and feet, and carried him off.

The old man looked coldly after them. When they had gone, he again knelt down close to the two coffins, his white locks falling about his face, raised his clasped hands to his tremulous but impotent lips, and kept gazing, gazing fixedly first at one of his dear departed and then at the other.

Not a tear, not a single tear fell from his eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO FAMOUS PÆDAGOGUES.

The first of these famous pædagogues was the cantor, worthy Mr. Michael Kordé.

The second was the rector, Thomas Bodza.

Apart from the fact that he had an extraordinary liking for wine and never could quite distinguish the forenoon from the afternoon, Mr. Michael Kordé was a man of refinement to the very tips of his toes.

In his time he had worn out a great many stout hazel switches, it being the custom of his establishment to make each pupil provide his own rod. This was no doubt an extra item in the curriculum, but, on the other hand, there was something to show for it; all those who passed through his hands when they subsequently fell into the clutches of the Law could endure as many as five-and-twenty strokes from the hardest bludgeon without so much as wincing. They had been case hardened by their previous education.

The schoolhouse was the *vis-à-vis* of Mr. Kordé's own private dwelling. It had never once been whitewashed since it was first built; but, on the other hand, it was richly adorned outside with the Christian names and the nicknames of all the urchins who had ever been inside its walls, names to which later generations of scholars had taken good care to add such distinguishing epithets as ass, swine, &c., &c. Those, moreover, who possessed a taste for art did not omit to paint on the wall, with red chalk, hussars, two-legged heads with six noses and one eye, large meerschaum pipes, &c., &c. Here and there, too, the remains of big black ink blots and red splodges, like hideous bunches of cherries, pointed to past combats in which inkpots had been hurled and fists used freely; these pictorial devices, however, were but fragmentary, as the various generations of students had from time to time dug

large bits of mortar out of the walls with their nails to serve as sand for blotting their themes.

Inside the schoolroom the shapeless battered benches were also carved all over with names and emblems. The window panes had for the most part been broken to bits, and the gaps stuffed with closely written MS. torn out of old exercise books. Layers of dust met the eye everywhere, and there was a perfect network of dangling spiders' webs in all the corners.

Such, in all its beauty, was the academical emporium where Mr. Michael Kordé for thirty years had been in the habit of regularly dispensing science and slaps—with what result we shall see later on.

Worthy Mr. Kordé used regularly to return to his own honourable dwelling from the pot-house just when the night-watchmen were going home to sleep and the cocks were crowing in the morn, and at such times he would bellow forth ditties the whole way at the top of his voice to the accompaniment of the howling of all the watch-dogs in the village.

The object of this singing bout was to warn the honest tutor's better half that her lord was approaching, and give her time to open the street door for him.

On safely reaching home he would first of all knock his wife about a bit and break to pieces any odd articles which might stray into his hands, whereupon, after a little miscellaneous cursing and swearing, he would fling himself down upon the floor, light his pipe, fall asleep and snore like a wild hog.

Heaven only knows how it was that he did not burn his house over his head every day.

The following morning when the children assembled in the schoolhouse and began to kick up a most fearful din, the noble pædagogue would scramble to his feet, shake the straw out of his hair, smooth out his moustache, and gaze with a cannibalistic

expression out of the attic window, not recognising for a moment exactly where he was.

After convincing himself by ocular demonstration that the schoolhouse had not taken wings unto itself and flown, but was still in the old place, he would shamble downstairs, stick a couple of canes under his arm, and go forth to teach.

His pupils meanwhile were engaged in frightful hand-to-hand combats with one another. There were scratched faces and bloody noses everywhere, and when the master entered he regularly found all the benches upset and everybody's hands tugging at his neighbour's hair.

The moment the facial portion of Mr. Michael Kordé stumbled against the door, the little rebels instantly disentangled themselves from one another and attempted to reach their proper places, whence the grand inquisitor hooked them out one by one, and thwacked the whole class in turn with his own honourable hand.

This little commotion used generally to chase slumber somewhat from his eyes, and when the lads had left off howling a bit, he would measure out to each of them a big slice of catechism, or a similar amount of Hübner's "Short questions in geography," to be repeated aloud till learnt by heart, whilst he himself adjourned to the pot-house. From this place of refuge he would send a message to the urchins later in the afternoon that they might go home.

Thereupon there was a general rush for the door (just as when a herd of swine reaches home, and every one tried to get through first) to an accompaniment of kicks, cuffs, and the tugging and tearing of clothes.

On Sundays the lads did their best to ferret out where the Lutheran children were playing ball. Then they all consulted together, and set off for the same place with stout sticks in their hands and their pockets crammed full of stones, and a battle royal forthwith would ensue between the youths of the rival creeds. When, then, Monday morning came round again Mr. Kordé conscientiously

administered a dose of birch, previously soaked in salt water, to each one of his pupils who appeared in class with a swollen face or a damaged noddle.

On Sunday, moreover, he twice took them with him to church where, during the sermon, they either caught blue-bottles under the seats, or played at knucklebones, or (but this was only when they were particularly well behaved) lay down on the floor of the pews and slept like Christians.

And when they grew up and became full-blown louts, their actions still testified to the influence of the school in which they had been reared. Whoever was the most skilful farmyard pilferer in the village, whoever was the most thorough-paced loafer in the county, could infallibly be regarded as an ex-pupil of Mr. Kordé's.

Whoever was regularly chucked out of the pot-house every Sunday evening, whoever brought a broken pate home with him the oftenest, whoever spent most of his time in the village jail, would be he, you might be quite sure of it, who had picked up the rudiments of learning at the feet of Mr. Kordé.

Whoever lied and perjured himself most frequently, whoever could swallow most brandy at a gulp, whoever knocked his wife about the oftenest, whoever turned his father and mother out of doors, whoever was most slothful in business, whoever had the filthiest house, whoever was cruel to his horse, whoever sat in the stocks habitually, would be he, you might safely rely upon it, who had learnt the philosophy of life in the school of Mr. Kordé.

Thus for thirty years had he spread the blessings of science in Hétfalu and its environs.

The second instructor of the people was Thomas Bodza, a panslavist incarnate.

He had but little mind yet much learning. He was one of those men who remembered all he read without understanding it, a semi-savant and one of the most dangerous specimens of that dangerous class. Of him, I shall have occasion to speak presently.

One day Mr. Kordé had drunk himself into an unusual state of fuddle.

When I say *unusual*, I mean, that as early as midnight he did not know whether he was boy or girl, and took the starry firmament for a bass-viol.

He had made a little excursion with his friend the magistrate, Mr. Martin Csicseri, to a little tavern in the outlying vineyards to taste the new vintages, and there the two gentlemen got so drunk that they would have found it difficult to explain in what language they were conversing.

Finally they set off homewards, leaning heavily for support on each other's shoulders. His honour, Mr. Csicseri suddenly caught sight of a broad ditch by the roadside. He swore by heaven and earth that it was a nicely quilted bed, and there and then laid himself down in it and fell asleep.

For some time Mr. Kordé kept on pulling and tugging at him to get him out, first by an arm and then by a leg. However, so far from giving his friend any encouragement, Mr. Csicseri only rebuked his wife for putting such a low pillow beneath his head, and then, without pursuing the subject further, went off as sound asleep as a humming top.

So the cantor found himself all alone in a strange world.

In front of him lay the high road, and the village was only three hundred yards further on; but wine is a bad compass in a man's noddle, and never points north in the same direction two minutes together.

He resolved, therefore, to return to the inn among the vineyards. Acting straightway upon this noble resolve, he stumbled along totally unknown paths up hill and down dale; plunged through field after field of Indian corn; pursued his endless way through hemp grounds and fallow lands; scrambled on all fours through hedges and ditches, and finally forced his way through a vast morass in which he wallowed freely. In a sober condition he would

have come to grief twenty times over, but Fate always protects the toper.

Then he strayed into a vast forest; zig-zagged through fens and coppices like an old dog-wolf; tore himself almost to ribbons among the sloe and blackberry bushes, and emerged at last at a ramshackle forest-keeper's hut, the door of which stood wide open.

By this time he bore not the slightest resemblance to man or beast.

In the courtyard a big, shaggy, lazy mastiff was shambling about, who, on perceiving a strange unknown four-legged animal (Mr. Kordé had ceased for a time to belong to the category: man) thus approaching him, sidled up to him with incomparable phlegm, and began sniffing at him all round.

Mr. Kordé forthwith collared the neck of the huge dog and began kissing him all over. "Dear friend, faithful old comrade," he cried, "what a long time it is since last we met! What! don't you recognise your old schoolfellow?"—whereupon the big dog in his extreme bewilderment sat down beside the ex-cantor on his haunches and was so astonished that he forgot to bark.

At this Mr. Kordé was completely overcome. Once more he warmly pressed the head of his so unexpectedly recovered friend to his bosom, and then shambled along with him into the courtyard. He pathetically complained to him on the way that he had been chucked out of his employment and was now a fugitive on the face of the earth, whereupon he fell to weeping bitterly and dried his tears with the mastiff's bushy tail.

The poor dog was so utterly taken aback that it could not recover from its astonishment. Once or twice it showed its white teeth and growled at the stranger, but it did not venture to hurt him. No doubt it thought that this strange animal might perhaps be able to bite better than itself.

Thus the two quadrupeds strolled comfortably together right into the courtyard. The dog stopped before his three-cornered kennel which Mr. Kordé interpreted as an invitation on the part of his

respectful host for him to go in first, and, accepting the offer in the spirit of true courtesy, and with the deepest emotion, he squeezed himself into the narrow dog-kennel, while the dispossessed bow-wow squatted down at the entrance of his house with the utmost astonishment, unable satisfactorily to explain to himself by what right this strange wild beast usurped his ancestral holding.

Mr. Kordé, however, soon began to snore inside there so terrifically that the scared dog ran out into the middle of the courtyard and fell a-barking with all his might and main, as if he had been offered pitch for supper instead of meat.

As to what followed, it is extremely doubtful whether Mr. Kordé saw it all with his own eyes, or whether it was the dream of a drunken brain impressed so vividly on his memory by his imagination that subsequently he fancied it to be true.

The moon had gone down and there was a great commotion in the courtyard surrounding the forester's hut.

A lamp had been lit in the shelter of a shed, and a group of men was standing round it—pale, sinister figures, putting their heads closely together and listening attentively to a lean, lanky man in a cassock, who was reading a letter to them.

The reader was short-sighted, and as he spelt out the letter he put his face so near it as to quite cover his features.

"What the deuce is all this about?" thought Mr. Kordé to himself as he peeped through the crevices of the dog's dwelling-place, "what is my colleague, the myoptic schoolmaster doing here, and why is he burying his nose in that bit of paper?"

"I hasten to inform you," so read the man in the cassock, "that the hostile armies are already on the confines of the kingdom. What the object of the enemy is you know right well. He is coming to ravage the realm, wipe out the landed gentry, and divide their estates among the peasantry. What then shall we do? Our peasants are wrath with us for we have treated them very badly, and you, sir, in particular, have no cause to trust them. When you had your

house built, as you well remember, you made your serfs work three weeks running for nothing. When you were a young man you ruined the domestic happiness of many a married peasant; you appropriated the communal lands to your own uses; you never bestowed a thought upon the parish church; once you gave the priest a good cudgelling; you kept a poor fellow in jail for four or five years and beat and shamefully treated him. When a poor man wanted to build him a house, you never gave him clay to make bricks with, nor rushes for the thatching of his roof. When lots of planks were rotting away in a corner of your courtyard, and two poor young fellows stole just enough of them to make a coffin for their father, you tied the pair of them up tight in the burning sun and beat their naked bodies with thorny sticks; one of them died a week afterwards of sun-stroke. On one occasion you injured the thigh of a neat-herd on your estate and he is a cripple to this day. When your sheep died of the murrain you hung up their hides to dry—in the schoolhouse. If all these things should now recur to the minds of your tenants, you will have, I fancy, rather a bad time of it. But the rest of us are in the same boat. We never gave a thought to the education of our people. They grew up, they grew old, and all they have ever learnt to know of life is its wretchedness; not one of them therefore has any reason to love us now. What can we do if it comes to an open collision with them? Five hundred thousand gentry against twenty times as many peasants! Why not one of our heads would remain for long in the place where God placed it. We must defend ourselves with the weapons of desperation. It is too late now to try and entice the common folk over to our side, as some of our set want to do who are now distributing no end of wine and corn among their underlings, building sick-houses for them, and putting the priests up to preaching sobriety to them, and the fear of God and due respect for the squire and his family. It is too late now for all that I say. We should only raise suspicions. We must summon Death to our assistance. In order to keep the people down by terror, therefore, we have resolved, in a secret conference, to establish cordons in the various counties and send patrols of soldiers in

every direction to search and examine everybody passing to and fro. In this way we shall prevent the people from going from one village to another in large bodies, in fact we must keep them down in every possible way. I, therefore, send you by the bearer of this letter, on whom I can thoroughly rely, a box of powder which you are to scatter about in the barns, the fields, the pastures where the cattle feed, and especially in the wells from which the herdsmen draw water. The county authorities will take care that where this simple method does not do its work, the parish doctor shall compel the peasants to take this powder by force. At the same time we mean to make a great fuss, and spread the rumour that the plague is spreading from the neighbouring states, and will be mortal to many. You, meanwhile, will enclose a large plot of land on your estates, and make a churchyard of it. You may safely make the peasants a present thereof, as it will be mostly filled by them. Take out, by the way, the tongues of all the church-bells, that the number of the dead may not cause any commotion. You might also have prayers said in the church to avert the calamity, and at the same time scatter the powder broadcast. A separate cemetery must be dug lest the plague spread among the gentry. In this way we shall kill two birds with one stone: in the first place the peasantry will be sensibly diminished, and, taking the whole thing as a Divine visitation, will not have the spirit to rise up; and in the second place, the enemy hearing that the plague has broken out among us will fear to pitch his camp here lest it fare with him as it fared with King Sennacherib, who lost his whole army in a single night, as the Bible testifies.

"Believe me, my dear brother-in-law,

"Always affectionately yours,

"Ambrose Ligeti."

"The letter is addressed to the noble Benjamin Hétfalusy."

"Horrible, horrible!" cried two or three of the men, while the rest remained speechless with amazement.

"Softly, my friends!" said the rector soothingly. "We must do nothing hastily. So much is certain, however: they have designs upon our lives, and would wipe us clean out."

"Not a doubt of it, else why should they be so friendly towards us? Why should they distribute among us such a lot of food? We have never yet asked an alms from our masters, and hitherto they have snatched the food from our very mouths. If they caress us now it is because they fear us."

"Yes, they would destroy us. The other day they gave me a glass of brandy to drink at the tavern. I saw at once that it was not the usual sort of stuff, and, to make certain, I dipped a bit of bread in it and threw it to a dog, and he would not eat it."

"And why do the parsons preach so much about the scourge of God, the pestilence? Why we have never had a better promise of harvest than now. How do they know when Death will come? Only God can know beforehand whom He will destroy and whom He will keep alive."

"Suspend your judgments, my good friends," resumed the rector, with an affectation of benevolence, "you can see that the hand of God is over us all. He can work great wonders, and it is not impossible that these wonders will come. You can perceive from the signs of Heaven that great changes are about to come on the earth. On Good Friday a bloody rain fell near the hill of Mádi; not long ago a flaming sword was visible in the sky three nights running; everywhere about curious big fungi have shot up from the ground, which turn red or green immediately they are broken. Earth and sky seem to feel that the hand of God is about to press heavily upon us."

("Deuce take this instructor of the people for befooling them so!" thought Mr. Kordé in his dog-kennel.)

"Did you notice, my brothers, how the rats roamed all about the roads in broad daylight a fortnight ago, how they scuttled away

from our landlords' granaries, and set out for another village, and how they stiffened and died in heaps on the way?"

"There you are!" shouted one wiseacre, "the corn in the granary was poisoned!"

("Plague take thee, thou clodpole!" growled the cantor in his hiding-place; "it was the rats that were poisoned, not the corn.")

"And we borrowed of that very corn a fortnight ago to last us till harvest time."

"Then now we'll pay them back with interest!" bellowed one of the rustics, fiercely flourishing a pitchfork.

("I'll swear that's one of my pupils, he is so pugnacious," thought the cantor to himself.)

"And I have already eaten bread made of that very corn, God help me!" cried another; "it is as blue as a toadstool when you break it in two."

("Lout! Tares and other rubbish were mixed up with it, and that made it look blue!")

"And after I had eaten it I felt like to bursting."

("Naturally, for your wife did not bake it sufficiently, and you stuffed it into your greedy jaws while it was still hot.")

"Yes, not a doubt of it, we have all been poisoned, we have eaten of Death."

"My friends, allow me to put in a word," said the benign rector. "You know that I have always desired your welfare; but look now! this mortal danger has appeared in other districts also, possibly it may be a Divine visitation. There are villages in which two or three deaths have occurred in every house, there are other places in which whole families down to the very last poor member thereof have followed one another to the grave. I know of a man who a short time ago had nine sons, now he has nine corpses with him in the house."

"The gentry have killed them also I'll be bound."

"It is so! What would God want with so many dead men?"

"Have patience for a moment, my friends. I don't want to defend the gentry, but I would not condemn anyone unjustly. If there be any truth in this fearful accusation, it will see the light of day sooner or later, and then the arm of God will not be straitened."

"Thanks for nothing, by that time the whole lot of us will be under the sod."

"Produce the fellow who brought this letter!"

Two stalwart rustics thereupon brought forward upon their shoulders a young fellow, bound and pinioned like a trapped wolf, and put him down in the midst of the mob.

"This is the bird who was carrying about the message of death!" cried the rebels, surrounding the poor wretch. And then one pulled his hair, and another tugged at his ears, and a third tweaked his nose, and everyone of them was delighted to have found a fresh object on which to wreak their furious cruelty.

And all the time the fellow ground his teeth together and said nothing.

It was poor Mekipiros. It was his mauled and bruised shape, his half-bestial face that they were torturing and tormenting. There is no sight more terrible than that of a tortured beast that cannot speak.

One of those who had brought him thither was the headsman's apprentice.

This fellow whispered some words in the ear of the rector, and then placed himself behind the back of the fettered monster. His face assumed an expression of cold pitilessness, he bit his lips as if he wanted blood, and screwed up his eyes.

"Harken now, my dear son!" said the rector in a gentle voice; "don't fancy we want to do you any harm, for of course how can you help

what is written in this letter; but if you want to escape scot free, answer truly and without compulsion to the questions that I am about to put to you."

The headsman's 'prentice with twitching features gazed fixedly at the interrogated wretch.

"Who gave you this letter?" asked the rector.

Mekipiros sat there tied with cords so as to be almost bent double with his head between his knees, and did not seem to be aware that he was spoken to.

"Do you hear?" whispered the headsman's apprentice hoarsely, at the same time giving him a vicious pinch.

The monster set up a howl, which lasted only for an instant, then he was silent again, and his face did not change.

"Is it not true now, my dear son, that a gentleman gave you this letter?" asked the rector, giving the question another turn.

Mekipiros made no reply.

"I'll make you speak!" yelled his chief persecutor with gnashing teeth, and seizing his head between his muscular fists he shook it violently backwards and forwards. "I'll bring you to reason!"

The monster kept on howling so long as his hair was being tugged; his eyes vanished completely, his head seemed to have grown broader than it was long; but when they let his head go again he only grinned derisively and said nothing.

"My son, bethink you that we do not want to do you any harm if you confess everything, but, on the other hand, we shall have to chastise you unmercifully, as you well deserve, if you stubbornly remain silent—who gave you this letter?"

"Speak, you wretched dog! What were you told to say? Who gave you this letter?" hissed the headsman's apprentice in his ear.

"You gave it to me!" cried the wretch defiantly.

"Scoundrel!" thundered the other furiously, at the same time giving the prisoner a kick; "so you want to palm it off upon me, eh? Hie, there!—a rope!" The fellow's face was as white as the wall, perhaps with fear, perhaps with anger. The rector also grew pale for a moment.

"Yes, you put it into my hand and told me that I was to——"

"Hold your tongue, you wretched creature! Here we have a peasant cub just as ragged as anyone of us, and yet he takes it upon himself to ruin his own kith and kin; I caught him in the act of sprinkling a white powder in a well, and the water of that well is still bubbling and boiling from the virulence of the poison, and yet, as you see, he has the face to deny it all."

"It was you who put the powder in my pocket."

"Very good, I suppose you'll say next that I put this purse of gold in your pocket also? You are surprised, eh? You had better say you got it from me, we shall all believe you, of course. Naturally I have sacks and sacks of gold under my bed. The executioner pays his 'prentices with gold, of course, of course."

"You accursed villain!" cried an old peasant, "let him have the rope! String him up and let him swing!"

"No, my friends, we must not kill him, we have need of him, he must live because he knows so much."

"Then let him out with it."

"Oh, he will talk presently," said the headsman's 'prentice, and folding his arms he stood right in front of the defenceless wretch. "My lad," said he, "you know, don't you, that I have been the headsman's assistant these six years? You know, don't you, that I am accustomed to torture and kill man and beast in cold blood? You know the sort of smile with which I am wont to reply to the agonised despair of my victim, and the memory of it ought to make your brain freeze in your skull. Very well! Let me tell you

that I am prepared to practice upon you all the refinements of my infernal handiwork if you do not say all I want you to?"

"I know nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I have forgotten all you taught me."

"You lying serpent! Do you mean to say, then, that I taught you anything? You can see, all of you, that this ripe gallows-tree blossom is determined at any cost to saddle me with his sins. I'll refreshen your memory for you," murmured the headsman's assistant, grinding his teeth. "Carry him over yonder under that plank. You must put out the lamp, for perchance anyone who caught sight of his face might feel sorry for him. Lay him on that block. Where is the rope? A bucket of water here in case he faints..."

From that moment the cantor saw nothing for the darkness, but all the more horrible, therefore, were the pictures which his imagination painted for him as it laid hold of the fragments of words and sounds which reached him at intervals from the outhouse.

The cold-blooded murmuring of the headsman's assistant.

The inquisitorial procedure of the rector.

The frantic cursing of the bystanders.

And from time to time a despairing howl uttered by the tortured monster, a howl which set the terrified dog a-barking, and made him scratch up the ground beneath the gate in order to make his escape.

The cantor began to shiver as with ague.

"The horrible beast won't confess," he heard a couple of furious voices say quite close to him.

"Don't howl like that, but answer my questions," hissed the rector, evidently losing patience.

"The wretched creature tires me out," grunted the executioner. "He bites his lips and smiles right in my face when his very bones are cracking."

"Speak the truth, and you shall be free. We will let you go."

"He's still laughing at me."

Then for some time could be heard a great bustle and clatter in the shed out yonder. There were sounds of hasty, yet cold-blooded preparations for completing something which ought to have been finished long before. There was a sound of running to and fro, of panting and puffing and straining.

And all this time the monster kept on laughing defiantly, though now and then he set up an unearthly howl, and then the whole assembly cursed him for an obstinate gallows-bird.

"Red-hot irons here!" yelled at last a voice of malignant fury, and immediately three of the boors set off running towards the stable. A few minutes later the cantor saw them hastening back to the shed, carrying flaming red objects, which scattered a long trail of sparks behind them.

"Will you confess?" sounded from within.

The monster yelled in the most ghastly manner, and then could be heard a savage gurgling sound For a few seconds the people inside the shed were silent, and then they could be heard whispering to each other with mingled surprise and amazement: "If the cub has not bitten his own tongue out!"

The cantor took advantage of the general consternation to crawl forth from his hiding-place in the darkness, slipped out through the hole scratched by the dog beneath the gate, and then set off running like one who runs down a steep mountain-side; he ran with his eyes fast closed, and early next morning he was found

huddled up on the threshold of his own house in a state of collapse.

When he came to himself he sent for some worthy men of his acquaintance whom he could trust, and told them privately what he had seen, frequently hiding his face during his narration, as if to shut out the spectacle of the monster's bloody face.

But his acquaintances, after listening to his tale, only shook their heads, and remarked to one another, what a horrible thing it is when a man is so fond of wine that it takes more than three days to make him get sober again.

It occurred to nobody that there might be some truth in the matter after all. It was not the first time that Mr. Kordé had had visions of copper-nosed owls and other horrors.

"As if a man could believe everything that Mr. Kordé said!"

CHAPTER VII.

A MAN OF IRON.

General Vértessy had for many years been the commandant of a military station in Hungary. After such a long time as that, men get to be acquainted with one another, and the soldier comes to be regarded as quite a member of the family. The townsfolk, too, begin to speak of him as a member of the upper classes; no great entertainment is considered complete without him, and the ordinary civilian exchanges greetings with him as a man and a brother in all places of public resort. The county makes him a magistrate on account of his numerous distinguished services; he receives the freedom of the city for the same reason; and, finally, the only daughter of a most distinguished patrician family, impressed by the gallant soldier's noble qualities, consents to become his wife; and thus the general, as citizen and magistrate, as husband and landlord, becomes rooted by the strongest ties to the soil which it is his duty as a soldier to defend.

His acquaintances in general have the greatest confidence in him; his tenants allude to him gratefully, for he deals mercifully with them; the citizens regard him with respectful astonishment when, on the outbreak of a fire, he orders out his soldiers, and is himself the first to clamber to the top of the burning roof, distributing his commands in the midst of danger as if his life was worth no more than the life of any broken-down, invalided old soldier; the school children rejoice at the sight of him, for he is always sure to be in his place on the occasion of any public examination, to distribute sixpences and shillings to those scholars who give the best answers, and exhort them to hold up their heads and stand upright like good little men! When then, after this, they meet him in the street, the little fellows throw back their heads and stick out their chests so that it does you good to look at them. For the General dearly loves children. Very frequently they break his windows with their tops and balls, but he never scolds them for it, and

always gives them back their playthings. "They are but children, let them play!" says he.

In society, too, he is a most agreeable, amusing man, polite and chivalrous towards ladies, and at public entertainments he distinguishes himself by his neat little speeches, which are always good-natured, very much to the point, and seasoned with attic salt of a piquant but not too pungent quality. He is merciful to the absurdities of his fellow-citizens; it is no business of his to impress them with any affectation of soldierly gravity or stiffness; and if at first sight his stern, clean-shaven face—the regulation countenance of soldiers of those days—keeps a timid stranger somewhat at a distance, he has only to open his mouth, and his beautifully pure Magyar accent and intonation prove to demonstration that, soldier as he is, he has remained a true son of his fatherland—and all hearts open to him at once.

But all this ceases at the gate of the barracks. Within the barrack courtyard there is an end to all friendship, kinsmanship, *camaraderie*, and patronage. He is no longer either a county magistrate or an honorary citizen. He has done with all those qualities which make up a man's social amiability. Here Vértessy is only a soldier, a rigorous, inexorable commandant, who never overlooks a blunder, and never leaves a fault unpunished.

As regards the good school children, you could give them no better encouragement than to say to them: "The General is coming and will pat you on the shoulder!" but there was nothing so terrible to the bad school children as to be threatened with the General if they did not learn their lessons. "You'll be sent to the General, and he will tap you from the shoulder to the heel and make another man of you in double-quick time," people used to say to them.

At any rate, so much is certain: the most stubborn, pig-headed louts, whom no school would keep at any price, when sent, despite the tears and protests of their fond mothers, to the General's establishment, used to return from thence in a couple of years or so as if transformed. They had become orderly, methodical, manly

fellows, courteous, tractable, and as spick and span as if they had just been taken out of a band-box. As to what exactly happened to them during their manipulation in this same military band-box not one of them was ever known to allude in a boastful spirit; but the lay mind had a very strong suspicion that not much time was wasted inside the barracks in fine talking.

Moreover, the General used to have guilty soldiers tied up and well whipped without first stopping to inquire who their fathers might be. With him punishment was meted out with no regard for persons. It was the uniform, not the man who happened to be inside it, that he regarded. When his soldiers were drawn up in line he was quite blind to the fact that this man perhaps was the son of his old crony, or that man was the son of a county magistrate—sergeants, corporals, ensigns, and privates, these were the only distinctions he ever made. And if anybody tried to distinguish himself by appearing on parade in a dirty jacket, he had it well dusted for him there and then in a way the individual concerned was not likely to forget in a hurry.

Nor did the General ever allow anybody, no matter whom, to be exempted from service. The dear little gentlemen-cadets had to pace up and down when on guard, with seven-pound muskets across their shoulders, just like anybody else, though the hearts of their distinguished mammas almost broke at the sight, when they drove over in their fine coaches to see their darlings. Malingerers, again, had a fearful time of it with him. Such young gentlemen never wanted to go to the hospital more than once. Their distinguished mammas would scurry off to the General full of despair, and explain to him with tears in their eyes that this or that young exquisite lay mortally sick in the hospital, would he allow them to take their poor darlings home, or at least let them come to the hospital to nurse the invalids there, or send them nice tempting dishes from home, or tell the family doctor to call? No, nothing of the sort. The General used to receive them buttoned up to the chin, and nothing on earth could move him. The proper place for the fellow was the barrack-hospital, he would say, there he would

receive proper treatment like any other of His Majesty's soldiers; the regimental surgeons had quite sufficient science to cure him. And it regularly happened that after a four or five days' course of a platter of coarse barley pottage, and half an ounce of plain black commissariat bread, the young gentleman was so completely cured of every bodily ailment that he had never the faintest wish ever afterwards to divert himself in the hospital, but preferred instead to attend to his daily duties.

Nor could his officers boast that he showed them any special indulgence. It was really terrible how he contrived to fill up their time all day long: instruction, regimental practice, writing, calculation, technical studies filled up every hour of the day. The smoking-rooms of the cafés and the civic promenades very rarely saw Vértessy's officers gathered together there. The officers had to know everything which the General asked them about, and were often obliged to work out for themselves, with the aid of their mother wit, the details of their extremely laconic instructions. Everyone knew, too, that he could not endure the slightest suspicion of cowardice; if an officer were insulted, he was obliged to fight in defence of his honour, or the regiment was made too hot to hold him. If, on the other hand, the townsmen got to know anything of the details of these duels, he would punish severely all the officers concerned in the affair, for he placed boastfulness on the same level as cowardice. Such severity had this good effect however, that the soldiers tried to live amicably with the townsmen as they knew very well that it would be impossible to keep dark a duel with any of the black-coated gentry, such an event was certain to be an object of common gossip in all four quarters of the town within twenty-four hours.

It was also a recognised fact throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom that the officers of Vértessy's regiment were all well instructed, orderly, serious men, and that this result was due entirely to the initiative of "the iron man," for this was the name most usually and very naturally applied to him.

And his face, figure, and expression, corresponded with the name. He was of a tall, straight, well-knit-together habit of body, with broad shoulders and a well-rounded chest. His head seemed almost too small for his extraordinary developed body, especially as the chestnut-brown hair was clipped quite short. His face was of a deep red, and shaved to the chin, but a pair of small well kept semicircular whiskers helped to give it character. His nose was straight, his mouth small; his eyes were grey and piercing. And everything on this face: nose, mouth, eyes, down to the smallest feature, seemed one and all to be under the most rigorous military discipline, not one of them was suffered to move without the General's command. When once his features are under orders to be coldly severe, the lips may not give expression to joy, the eyes may not be clouded with sorrow, the eyebrows may not contract with rage, or lead anyone to suspect, by so much as a twitch or a jerk, that anything in the world outside has the slightest influence upon the business he may happen to have on hand.

We may add that the General did not acquire this honourable title in times of peace. Formerly, beneath the walls of Dresden, when he was a lieutenant scarcely five-and-twenty years old, he had earned it by holding a position on the battle-field as stubbornly as if he had really been made of cast iron, whereby a totally defeated army corps was saved from the annihilating pursuit of the triumphant foe. Even the enemy's general had inquired on this occasion: "Who is that man of iron who will neither break nor bend?" That, then, was how he had won the epithet "iron."

Subsequently the nickname was applied in jest or flattery; you could take it as spite, fear, or homage, according to the manner in which it was pronounced, naturally always behind the General's back, for it went very hard indeed with the man who ventured to pick a quarrel with him, and still harder, if possible, with anybody who tried to flatter him.

In the ante-chamber of "the iron man" stood an orderly with a big sealed dispatch in his hand, a tall grenadier-sort of warrior, with

two stiffly twisted moustachios, the pointed ends of which projected like a couple of fixed bayonets. A deep scar furrowed each of his red cheeks from end to end, a living testimony to the fact that this warrior was no mere sucking soldier. His chin was planted firmly on his stiff cravat and half hidden by the broad loop of his shako. His jacket was as white as chalk, and his buttons shone as if they were fresh from the shop. On his bosom gleamed gloriously the large copper medal of which the veterans of former days used to be so proud. The warrior was standing motionless behind the door, with the big sealed dispatch in his bosom; not a muscle of him moves, his heels are pressed close together at attention, his eyes now and then glance furtively from side to side, but his neck does not stir the least little bit.

The oblique motion of his eyes, however, is explicable by the fact that a trim little wench, a nursery-maid from some village hard by, with a round radiant face, with her hair trailing down her back in ribboned pigtails, is rummaging about the room as if she had no end of work to do there, casting furtive sheep's eyes from time to time at the upright soldier, and looking as if she would very much like to say to him: "Oh! how frightened I am of you!"

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Soldier?" she says at last; "don't you see that chair there? And here have I been dusting it so nicely for you."

"A pretty thing for an orderly to sit down in the General's ante-chamber," replies the defender of his country. "Short irons would be very soon ready for me, I can tell you."

"Then why are you here at all?"

"That is not for your ears, my little sister."

"You are looking for the General, eh? Well, he is inside that room there along with my lady, his wife—why don't you go in?"

"You've a nice idea of manners, I must say! What! an orderly to make his way into the room of the General's lady!"

"Then give the letter here and I'll take it in for you."

"Now, my little sister, that's quite enough! What! deliver a letter into the hands of anybody but the person to whom it is addressed!"

"Do you know how to write, Mr. Orderly?"

"What a question! Ask me another! Why, if I could write I should have become a sergeant long ago."

"Why don't you take off that shako? It's pretty heavy, ain't it?"

"Now, my little wench, that's quite enough! Right about turn, quick march! They are calling you in the kitchen."

The nursery-maid scuttled off. The veteran was getting quite angry at all these simple questions.

In no very long time, however, the neat little wench came sidling back again. First she poked her head through the kitchen door as if she wanted to find out whether the big soldier there would bite off her nose—which was a little snub, and small enough already.

"Mr. Orderly, the cook has sent you three hearth cakes."

"Good."

"Take them then." This she said, still keeping at a safe distance, and thrusting forward the nice lard-made hearth cakes as if she were offering them to some snappy, snarling watch-dog at the end of a long chain.

"I can't," answered the gallant defender of his country sturdily.

"Ain't you got hands, then?"

"No, not for them. But if you like you can tuck them into my cartridge-box behind there."

"What, in there?" inquired snub-nose amazedly. "But ain't there gunpowder inside?"

"Shove 'em in, they won't hurt it."

"Won't it explode?"

"Not unless a spark from your eyes catches it."

The nursery-maid timidly lifted the brightly-polished lid of the cartridge-box, peeping half up at the soldier to see if he meant to frighten her, and at the same time gazing curiously at the many funny round little things in the cartridge-box, at which she pretended to be desperately afraid.

The gallant soldier was in duty bound not to move his hand, but he so far relaxed as to allow the tips of two of his fingers to crook downwards and give the plump round arm of the wench a good tweak.

"Be off with you, I'm afraid you're a bad man after all, Mr. Soldier!"

"I fancy I am too, otherwise I suppose there would not have been so much of me—little and good you know!"

"Do you know why the cook sent you those cakes?"

"That I may eat them instead of you, I suppose."

"Go along, you naughty man! You do say such naughty things! No, she sent them that you might tell her when the next public whipping will take place."

"Does the cook want to see it then? A nice pastime, I must say. You don't want to see it too, do you?"

"No, not I."

"You ought to see it. It is just the thing for wenches. There are always as many ladies present on such occasions as if it was play-acting."

"Oh, I should like to see it then, the sooner the better. Will there be another soon? That's for the General to decide, isn't it? If I were a General I would order a flogging every morning, and make the band play every evening."

"That would be very nice. Come hither, and I will whisper it."

"Truly?" inquired the wench, half turning her head round. "But don't shout in my ear!"

When she had got near enough to the soldier for him to be able to whisper in her ear, he suddenly planted a smacking kiss on her red cheek.

In her terror the wench gave a bound back to the kitchen door, but there she remained standing, and rubbed her face vigorously with her blue apron.

"Yes, you are indeed a bad man, Mr. Orderly. And still you have not yet told me when the next whipping will be."

"Don't fret, my little sister. The spectacle will be better than you think. There will be a shooting-to-death shortly."

"A shooting-to-death! Oh! that *will* be nice! And who is going to be shot?"

"A soldier, my little sister."

"And you'll have to shoot him, perhaps, eh?"

"It is quite possible, my little sister."

"Oh, Mr. Soldier, that's too bad!"

The snub-nosed wench made haste to quit a room in which stood a man heartless enough to shoot down his living fellow-man, and outside in the kitchen she had a long discussion with the cook about it, and they came to the conclusion that it must be a very fine entertainment to see a man shot right through the head. First there would be the getting up early, for such spectacles generally take place at dawn, and it would never do to sleep away such an opportunity as that, especially as it was just as likely as not that the poor devil would be placed in the pillory first. What could he have been doing? But suppose they were to pardon him? Oh, no! no chance of that, for the General never pardons anybody; even if it were his own son he would not pardon him if he were found guilty, for he was "the iron man."

Meanwhile, inside there, "the iron man" is sitting in his wife's room on a small embroidered armless chair. Opposite to him on a large elevated divan lies his wife, a tiny, elegant, transparent little lady, with a face of alabaster, and wee wee hands which a child of two would not have known what to do with if they had been doled out to her. Her small strawberry-like mouth scarcely seemed to have been made for talking purposes; all the more eloquent, on the other hand, were her large dark-blue eyes, which were saying at that moment that those who can love are very, very happy.

The iron man was sitting in front of her with his elbows planted on his knees and both his hands stretched forwards. Extended on these two hands of his was a skein of thread, which the elegant little woman was winding with great rapidity.

He need only have stretched his arms a wee bit more to burst the whole skein to pieces, but he has learnt to watch very carefully lest the thread gets entangled, and he laughs heartily every time he moves his hands clumsily, at the same time begging pardon and promising to do better in future.

"My darling, I have an old sword—it served me well in the French war—do you think it would be of any use to you?"

The little lady laughed, and how charmingly she could laugh; it sounded like the bells of a glass harmonica striking against each other.

"I understand the allusion. If you can use the owner of the sword for unwinding thread, you might use his sword instead of scissors."

"I mean what I say."

"That doesn't matter a bit, you must wait till the skein is unwound."

"Naturally that is as it should be, of course. Nor would I suffer anybody else to take my place. To hold a skein of thread requires great strength of mind, not every man is up to it. A giddy head

would very soon give way beneath the task. It is a science in itself. Besides, I swore before the parson I would take you 'for better or worse.' You see how I keep my word. Look there now! The thread has tied itself into a knot again. Now, if one of your parlour-maids had been holding it, you would have been angry with her, but as my darling little wife it is not lawful for you to be angry. Do you hear me? It is not lawful for you to be angry with me, I say."

The little lady undid the knot again, and her husband tenderly kissed the little intervening hand as it drew nearer; the little lady affected not to have observed this, but she knew it well enough.

"Look now, my darling! it is you who have taught me to consider myself an extraordinary fine fellow. Formerly, when people used to say: General Vértessy is such and such a man, I only used to hold my tongue and think to myself: Talk away! talk away! *I* happen to know that Vértessy is as timid as a child, there is one thing he is as much in dread of as any schoolgirl, and that is—unravelling a skein of thread. When I was a little chap I twice ran away from home to avoid this very thing. And now my dear little spouse has made it quite clear to me that General Vértessy is *not* afraid of it after all. Honour to whom honour is due! General Vértessy is a brave man."

"Naturally; why the thirteenth labour of Hercules brought him more fame than all the rest—don't you remember how he held the skeins of Madame Omphale?"

"That was the greatest of his heroic exploits, certainly. You ladies cannot imagine what tyranny you practice upon the masculine gender when you constrain them to this terrible servitude. To wear chains is a mere jest, but when you bind a man with a skein of thread, a mere gossamer, in fact, and then tell him he must not break it asunder, that is cruelty indeed! Why don't the English invent a machine for this sort of hard labour? They rack their brains about steamboats, about woman's rights, and the emancipation of the negro; but as to *these* fetters, these..."

"Come, come, attend to your skein!"

And indeed those dangerous fetters, as the General called them, were themselves in great danger, for the General in his ardour had made a slight gesture which had almost ripped them asunder.

"I'll take it away from you if you don't behave yourself properly. Fancy making such lamentations over a little skein-unravelling!"

"Oh, I am not speaking of myself. I am used to all sorts of hardships. I pity more particularly those poor innocent children who come to groan under this unnatural yoke. Just picture to yourself, my dear, one such innocent eight or nine years old, a little lad whose blood bubbles over like champagne, who sees the sun shining through the windows, who hears the boisterous mirth of his comrades outside as they play at ball, and would give anything to run away himself and romp and wrestle and turn somersaults; fancy such a one obliged to remain shut up in a room, fettered by a string of thread or cotton, and made to move his hands up and down just as if he were some stupid machine; fancy him fidgeting first on one leg and then on another, and waiting, waiting for the end of the interminable skein! I wonder they don't become utter blockheads beneath the strain. I wonder their teachers don't forbid it. If I had a child he should not be allowed to hold a skein. No son of mine, I tell you, should ever become a mere skein-unwinding machine..."

And it seemed somehow more than a jest, for the gallant soldier now suddenly forgot all about the skein entrusted to him, and with tender emotion pressed his blushing little wife to his bosom.

The little lady with infinite patience slowly disentangled the chaotic labyrinth of threads again, and then exclaimed with a deep sigh:

"Life and death lie between..."

They both knew the meaning of the allusion.

Then the uninterrupted labour proceeded again. The iron man was now completely silent, but one could observe from the unconsciously radiant expression of his face that his mind was

occupied by some very pleasing thought, and in the delightful contemplation thereof he had no longer any idea that he was holding a skein of thread.

Presently, however, he said:

"Let us begin another!"

He must certainly have found it a very agreeable pastime to say that.

It was this time a skein of silk that the little lady wanted to have unwound. This was a still higher symbol of tenderness. Not in vain does the folksong sing of the captive of love being bound with silken chains.

"But, my dear, when I was a little boy, and had to hold skeins, my sisters, by way of compensation, used to tell me tales."

"With all my heart."

"Fire away, then: once upon a time...!"

"Once upon a time there was a girl who always wanted to die."

"Ah! I scarcely bargained for that."

"She was constantly pale, and took it for a compliment when people said to her that she was as white as death."

"She must have eaten lots of raw coffee and chalk, I'll be bound."

"Don't interrupt, I want to tell a tale, not circulate scandal."

"I am all attention."

"Sometimes she carried her bizarre ideas so far as to appear at dances in a white dress trimmed with black, and with a myrtle wreath on her head, just as the dead are wont to be arrayed for the tomb. By way of a breast-pin she used to wear a small skeleton's head carved out of mother-o'-pearl, and she boasted that her gloves had been taken out of the coffin of a deceased friend."

"Shall I be very unfeeling if I allow myself to smile?"

"Pray do nothing of the kind, or you'll be very sorry in a moment."

"Ah, ha! I know a man who fell in love with this girl."

"All the more reason to be serious."

"And subsequently that man got the better of his passion altogether."

"Do not be too sure."

"Too sure! Why, I have been studying the whole case these four years."

"As defendant?"

"Defendant, indeed! I wanted to make that girl my wife. Oh! you were quite a little thing then, a wee wee little lass, scarcely so big as my finger. You were learning to dance in those days and had not yet appeared upon the scene."

"And you deserted that girl on the eve of the wedding!"

"I had reasons for doing so, of which nobody, I fancy, is aware."

"They said at the time that you found out that Benjamin Hétfalusy, the girl's father, was over head and ears in debt, and that you withdrew for that reason."

"I did not take the trouble to contradict the rumour, it was so like General Vértessy to marry for money."

"And the Hétfalusy family became of course your bitterest enemies ever afterwards?"

"They have insulted, but they cannot wound me."

"And you forgave them for it?"

"I never troubled my head about them."

"Say that you forgive them."

"I don't want to flatter myself. I simply forgot them."

"Very well, now let us go on with our story. This poor family has had many heavy visitations of late."

Vértessy's face grew very grave.

"My dear, I am afraid your skein of silk will break asunder on my arms if you go on with such stories. Don't speak to me of the calamities of the Hétfalusy family. I am not at all interested in the happiness of these people, and if they are wretched I don't want to hear anything about it. They seem to have always been bent upon tempting Fate, so that it is not surprising if Fate at last has turned upon them. But I don't want to know anything about it. I am not good enough to grieve with them in their misfortunes, and I am not bad enough to rejoice in their misery. Leave the subject alone, my dear Cornelia."

Cornelia put down the little ball of silk, relieved her husband's arms of the skein, and then sitting beside him on a little stool, kept on stroking him with her tiny hands until she had quite smoothed out all the angry wrinkles on his face, and he had brightened up again and declared, like a good little boy, that he was not a bit put out and would listen to the story again.

"Poor Leonora! her married life was very unhappy."

"But she got what she wanted."

"It seems to me that you know more of my story than I do myself."

"I only know the happy part of it. Was not her husband her youthful ideal?"

"You amaze me. Whenever we used to meet subsequently, she was always full of lamentations, and described herself as very unhappy. To my mind she only took Széphalmi out of bravado, because you deserted her."

"My dear, after that I must whisper in your ear something which only one other soul in the world but myself knows anything about. I am sure *you* will not say anything about it, because you are good, and that other person will be silent because she is afraid to speak.

That pale lady who was so fond of thinking of death, who went to a ball in a myrtle wreath and a white dress with a black fringe, used to have assignations in the dilapidated hut of an old village granny with a youth who was no other than Széphalmi, her present husband. The affair was kept so secret that nobody knew anything about it. The old hag, why I know not, confided the secret to me on the very day when I arrived at Hétfalu Castle in readiness for the wedding. It was as I have said. My pale moonbeam, when everybody was asleep in the castle, used to put on a peasant girl's garb, wrap her head in a flowered kerchief, and glide all alone, along the garden paths, to the old woman's hut at the end of the village, where the youth, disguised as a shepherd, was waiting for her. Oh! this intimacy was of long standing. I heard them talking to each other. In my first mad paroxysm of rage, I was for rushing out and killing the pair of them on the spot; but gradually I recovered my senses, and I asked myself whether it was not more shameful for me, a soldier, to have pried upon a woman than for that woman to have deceived me. Besides, what was there to be done if she loved another? She ought not, of course, to have promised me her hand—a hand without a heart *must* bring dishonour with it. I said nothing to anybody. I went back to the castle, and the next day I had an interview with the girl's father, and made pecuniary demands upon him, which, in view of the shattered state of his finances, I knew it was impossible for him to comply with. We split upon that very point. There was no marriage. The guests separated. The world laughed. I was cried down as a money-grubber, and for a long time I was in such bad odour, that I'll wager anything that if I had sued for the hand of any respectable girl her relations would have shown me the door in double-quick time. My darling little Cornelia certainly displayed great strength of mind to accept a man who was notorious for having jilted his bride."

"And you had to endure a whole heap of persecutions in consequence."

"Yes, a great many. The Hétfalusys had powerful kinsfolk who did their utmost to make life intolerable to me. A nephew of Benjamin's, who was an officer in the guards, insulted me publicly in the street. The most damaging insinuations were made against me in high places. All my measures were openly and freely criticized. They sought to embroil me with the county authorities. I was persecuted by high and low. I defended myself and held my tongue. I fought duels, I had an answer for everyone. I suffered in silence—but I never betrayed that lady's secret. Keep what I have told you in the depths of your heart, my darling, as I have done hitherto."

Cornelia kissed her husband's high open forehead.

"Yet poor Leonora had her punishment too," said she; "he whom she longed after so much when once she possessed him made her wretched. Széphalmi was unfaithful to her."

"My dear Cornelia, you cannot have love without respect. Széphalmi only married his wife because her desperation drove him to do so. I have often heard people say that Leonora used to dance at parties as if she wished to kill herself, and would drink quantities of iced water when she was in a most heated condition. It was no longer a pretence with her. What scenes took place at home between her mother and herself it was no business of mine to pry into; but this I know right well that the girl one day went straight to Széphalmi and threatened him there and then with something terrible if he did not marry her. I will not tell you, Leonora's former friend, the nature of this threat; it would revolt your pure mind too much, for a heart like yours could form no idea of it; but it is certain that it was fear rather than love which induced Széphalmi to lead her to the altar. I know, however, that the marriage was not unblessed; they have two children."

"They had."

"What! are they dead then?"

"A terrible destiny seems to oppress the whole family. The little girl, her father's darling, disappeared one day without leaving a trace behind her, and the other child was struck dead by lightning while the mother was watching by its sick bed; the mother was killed at the same time."

The General was deeply affected by these words. The heart of the iron man trembled.

"Merciful God...!"

"Old Hétfalusy had a stroke when the dreadful tidings reached him."

"No, *no*! He did *not* deserve so much suffering. Fate has been more rigorous towards him than he deserved."

"And as if this were not enough—you knew Hétfalusy's son who became a soldier?"

"I knew him. He was a hot-blooded youth, warfare might have made a good soldier of him."

"Well, he quarrelled with his captain in Poland and fired a pistol at him."

"A misfortune, a great misfortune," said the General, pressing his fists so tightly together that if there had been anything inside them it would have been crushed to pieces.

"After this deed the youth fled."

"That is worse still," murmured the General, and he pressed his iron fists still more violently together.

"And if I am not mistaken, this is the third time that he has run away."

There were now two beads of sweat on the General's forehead; he would have wiped it dry with his hand, but he could not, for his fists were firmly clenched, and it never occurred to him to open them.

"My dear Cornelia," said he, "if you know where this young man now is, I implore you to tell me nothing about it. You know that I ought not to hear it."

"You very soon will know all about it; the unhappy youth appeared in his father's house on the very day when his sister and her son lay in their coffins."

"Then he has been arrested," cried the General quickly.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because his own father would be the first person to deliver him up."

Cornelia regarded her husband with amazement.

"Is it not so, I say?" he cried passionately, springing from his seat "Hétfalusy has given up his fugitive son, I'll swear he has, even if I had not been told it beforehand."

"So indeed it is," said Cornelia sadly.

"And how came you to know it before it has been officially reported to me?"

"My uncle is a magistrate there, and he told me. He came from thence in his carriage, while the prisoner was being brought along on foot."

"They are bringing him hither—hither to me," groaned the General impatiently and turning pale. "They will hand him over to me, and I shall have to pronounce judgment upon him."

How he feared, how he shuddered at the thought!

"You could not have told me a worse tale," resumed the General, turning to his wife, and supporting her tender little head against his bosom. "That is a sad, a very sad story."

"But the end has yet to come."

"Yes, and the saddest part of it is that the end of it is in my hands."

"And to my mind it could not be in better hands."

"How can you say that? Is not every member of the Hétfalusy family my personal enemy? If I could forget everything else, must I not remember that they have insulted you? Why, this very young windbag actually insulted you, you my wife, at a public assembly, and now Fate has cast him at my feet, him the last scion of the family, and I must be his judge and pronounce sentence of death upon him! The whole world will believe that I have gladly taken advantage of this grievous opportunity of revenging myself in the most bloody, the most exemplary manner upon my enemies! They will fancy that I condemn the son of my bitterest enemy to the gallows because I am thirsting for his blood. And you say it is well that it should be so!"

"I said it and I will stick to it. I am quite confident that you will save him."

"*I* save him?" cried the General, opening wide his blue eyes with amazement; "it is impossible."

"I believe that General Vértessy, that rigorous, inflexible man, whom his admirers and his detractors alike called 'the man of iron,' who has never relaxed the rule of discipline to favour friend or kinsman, will do everything in his power to make an exception for once in his life, and save the son of his enemy from the rigour of the law. Oh! I know this gentleman right well, I am confident that so he will act."

"It is impossible, impossible; if he were my own brother I would not save him in his unfortunate position."

"A brother you could not save, I'll allow; but this youth—oh, yes! I am persuaded that you will not be satisfied till you have devised some method of saving this unfortunate youth."

And in saying this, she knew right well how to read the very depths of the heart and mind of the man of iron.

The General impatiently quitted his wife's room, but the moment he had crossed its threshold, there was not a trace of impatience to be seen on his face.

The orderly was still standing in the ante-chamber and, turning on his heels in the direction of the General, presented to him the sealed dispatch which he had thrust into his bosom.

It was the official report of the arrest of the deserter.

The General made a sign to the soldier that he might depart.

Then the General returned to the room he had quitted, spread out the document in front of him, sat down over it, supported his head in his hands, and for a long, long time struggled with oppressive and wearying thoughts.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POLISH WOMAN.

"Who is at home here?" inquired a strong sonorous voice at the door of the headsman's dwelling, and immediately afterwards a shape huddled up in a grey mantle passed through the kitchen door.

By the hearth were sitting Ivan and the woman of the house, it was a dark tempestuous night outside; it might have been about ten o'clock and every door was closed.

The youth and the woman gazed stupidly at the stranger and said nothing.

"Who is at home here?" repeated he, drawing nearer to the fire, in whose flickering light his smooth handsome young face seemed transparent with its sharply defined eyebrows, soft but masterful lips and courageous eagle eyes which gazed fixedly before them.

The youth and the woman exchanged glances. Instead of answering, Ivan fell to questioning:

"How could anyone possibly enter here?"

"I leaped over the fence," replied the stranger, sitting down beside the fire without the least ceremony. "The door was bolted and barred; twice, thrice did I knock, but nobody opened to me. I was forced to get in somehow."

"How about the dog?" inquired the woman of the house much perplexed.

"I didn't mind him. I know how to talk to dogs. It is a way I have. There's a plaguey bad tempest roaring outside, the rain is falling in torrents. I could not wait outside any longer."

"But what do you want here?" inquired the woman, looking into the face of the stranger with some timidity.

"That is just what I am going to tell you, my dear! But first give me a glass of water, for I am perishing with thirst."

The woman was involuntarily constrained to obey without more ado.

"And you, my friend, spread out my mantle before the fire!" said the stranger turning towards Ivan, and stripping from his neck and shoulders the heavy mantle which was dripping with rain.

The youth and the woman incontinently obeyed his commands as if they were under a spell.

The mantle was removed, the slim, muscular figure of the stranger was clearly visible, it seemed too soft for a man's. His hands as they grasped the beaker seemed white and delicate.

"That is certainly a woman," murmured the headsman's wife to Ivan, staring suspiciously at the stranger from beneath her thick contracted bushy eyebrows. Then approaching him and looking him full in the face she said: "My Dovey! It seems to me that you are in no good way. Whom do you seek?"

"The master," replied the stranger curtly, resting his elbows on the hearth.

"Possibly you may suppose this house to be an inn because it lies at the extreme end of the town?"

"I think nothing of the sort, my pretty mistress. I know that here dwells Master Zudár, the worthy ferry-master."

"Ferry-master?"

"Yes, ferry-master! Does he not transport men from this world to the next?"

"How come you to know the master?"

"I have never seen him, yet I know him well for all that. It is not possible to speak to him now because he is a-praying. He prays regularly for a whole hour at a time, and then it is not well then to

disturb him. That is why you two are crouching in the kitchen here. You, my pretty mistress, are Master Zudár's wife, and this young man is his 'prentice. I know you very well also."

"But who are you yourself then? Speak! What do you want?" asked the woman much puzzled.

"I shall tell that to the master himself, inside there, when he has quite finished his devotions. It is his habit every night, before he lies down, to fire off his gun, then I will approach him. Meanwhile sit down beside me! Look ye, this bench can very well hold the pair of us, let us have a little talk together."

The stranger thereupon doffed his little round furred cap and his long black trussed-up locks fell in curling ringlets about his shoulders.

"'Tis a woman, a woman indeed!" whispered Ivan and the dame of the house to each other.

The latter now approached the enigmatical shape a little more boldly, and sitting down beside him, opened a conversation with him.

"What, pray, is your business with my husband?"

"Come, come, my dear creature! You have no right to put such questions to me. You ought rather to ask me whether I am hungry and would like some supper. You would not have to ask me that twice I can assure you."

The woman, at this hint, arose sullenly and took from a wainscot cupboard a plate of hearth cakes which she set before the stranger.

"I suppose, sir, you don't mind eating off the headsman's platter?" said she.

"Stuff! What if I am of the same profession!"

"Oh, of course! I can see that from those soft white little hands of yours which are not such as the hands of a man ought to be."

But the words were scarce out of her mouth when the virago uttered a loud scream, for the little white paws she had just tapped suddenly pressed her huge fleshy palm so vigorously that every bone in it cracked.

"Satan take him!—'tis a man, not a doubt of it!" whispered the woman to Ivan. "He has a hand like an iron vice."

The stranger had an excellent appetite. There was absolutely nothing at the bottom of the platter when he had finished eating.

"Pardon!" cried he at last, "perhaps I ought not to have gobbled up everything. Perchance this was set aside for someone who does not happen to be at home just now."

"Oh, don't be uneasy on that score, we have all had our suppers."

"But this is not the whole family I suppose? Have you no children?"

"Yes," replied the woman, and as she spoke she durst not lift her eyes to the stranger's face. "I have a daughter."

"Really your own child?"

The woman looked hesitatingly at the stranger, twice she attempted to speak and twice the words seemed to stick in her throat.

"Yes, my own child," she said at last.

"And have you no other 'prentice but this one, Dame Zudár?"

"No, why should I?"

"And are you two able to carry on the business?—for I suppose there are all sorts of things to be done?"

"Good heart alive! The less you say about the headsman's trade the better."

"But why should I not talk about it? It is a regular profession, is it not, like any other? And just as respectable too, eh? Nay, it is more

profitable than most trades, because there is less of competition in it. Now, as for me, I have a perfect passion for it. Why, the only reason why I am here is to come to some arrangement with Master Zudár. I want to buy of him, my pretty dame, the business which you loathe so much."

The headsman's wife regarded the stranger with eyes full of doubt and astonishment.

"You are a very young man for the business," said she suspiciously.

"Oh, as for that, my dear, pray don't imagine that I am going to put up with all the disagreeables of the profession for the fun of the thing. I mean to have lots of help I can tell you. I shall live in town and frequent the best taverns and coffee houses. I shall live like a gentleman and nobody will know who I am. I shall only appear on the scene officially when an execution worthy of my skill awaits me—a nice beheading or something of that sort, you know. Oh! I shall have a fine time of it I can tell you."

Dame Zudár felt a shudder run all down her back. She durst not look again at the stranger.

"It is a pity you have not more than one 'prentice now. It looks as if you had very much neglected the business. I am annoyed at that. It will be difficult to give it a fresh start. Had you not more than one apprentice a little time ago?"

"Yes, there used to be another," stammered Dame Zudár involuntarily.

"Then why did you pack him off?" inquired the unknown, picking from the fire with his delicate index-finger a burning ember, tossing it lightly on to his soft palm, and thence chucking it adroitly into the bowl of his little pipe.

The woman and Ivan exchanged a look as if deliberating together what answer they should give, and then the woman hastily replied:

"He went away of his own accord; the business is a pretty one, but he got disgusted with it."

"Oh—ho! what a rum 'un the fellow must have been. And has he a better time of it now?"

"I don't know," replied the virago defiantly. "It is not my business to find out what has become of my discharged apprentices. He got sick of this trade and took to another—that is the whole thing."

"You are quite right, my pretty dame, not everyone is fit for this business. A man must have a natural liking for it. I, for instance, would never take as an apprentice a man who had not spent some time in a dungeon, or cooled his heels in jail two or three times running in five or six years, for all the others are for ever wishing themselves back in polite society, and want to live in town. And then, too, they are always sighing and groaning and trying to make out that they are too good for the business. I don't like such people myself. Those who are likely to excel in this business show their teeth betimes. Those children who put out the eyes of birds, nail bats to barn doors, and love to shoot at little dogs, those are the sort of fellows from which apt pupils can be trained."

"That is quite true. Why you, yourself, must be the son of a headsman, or else you would not know all the conditions of the trade so well."

"You've hit it, that is just what I am. My father was an executioner and my grandfather before him, the business has steadily descended from father to son."

"Where do you live then?"

"In Poland. Rochow is where my father dwells. You must have guessed already from my accent that I was a Pole."

"Yes, and from your face too."

"My brother and I divided our heritage between us. He got the Rochow business and paid me out in cash that I might set up for myself elsewhere. I heard that the executioner of Hétfalu was

getting sick of his office, for of course he is not growing younger, is he? Come, now! you silly little thing, you must not be angry with me for saying that! You know very well that your husband *is* an old man, and there are lots of old men who have pretty young wives. There is no great harm in that. I only asked you whether he *was* old, because in that case he would be more likely to seek for repose."

"Yes, young sir, my husband loathes the business with all his soul."

"But there's a great deal of fun in it too, if only you look at it properly. I have often gone to Lemberg togged up like a swell, with a fine jewelled pin in my scarf, a gold chain and a little whalebone stick in my hand. I have turned the heads of two or three fine ladies and insinuated myself into the best society—and what a joke it was when they found out who I really was. How pale they all went, and how their hair stood on end. Ha, ha, ha!"

"But didn't they make you pay for it afterwards?"

"Well, once I was called out by a young cadet. Officers of higher rank thought it beneath their dignity to fight with me, the utmost they did was to pitch me out of the window. The lad who challenged me was a Hungarian, and I promised to appear at the rendezvous. I am afraid, however, that he waited for me a very long time. I like to shed blood, but only when I run no risk myself."

All three laughed heartily at this witticism.

"But listen to the sequel of my story. My father has an amiable whim of his own—he always prefers to have deserters from the army as his assistants. He is well aware that men of that kidney have practically renounced the world. Now who do you think rushed into his house one evening all ragged and travel-stained? Why the very soldier-youngster who had wanted to fight a duel with me! To avenge his sweetheart he had shot his captain and had to make a bolt of it."

The woman and Ivan involuntarily looked at each other with terror.

"You may imagine how I laughed the poor youth out of countenance when I recognised him. Every time I met him I used to say to him: 'Well, what do you say to our fighting our duel now?' He could not stand such heckling long. On the third day he skedaddled, and I don't know what became of the poor fellow. I have little doubt, however, that since then he has been shot dead."

"If they have not done it yet it won't be very long before they do," observed Ivan.

"Hush!"—hissed the woman with a warning gesture.

The unknown did not seem, however, to have noticed this little piece of by-play.

At that moment the report of a gun was heard from the headsman's window. At night he used regularly to discharge his firearms and load them again immediately afterwards. He was afraid that someone might have got at them in the course of the day and either extracted the bullets or damped the powder. He did not feel himself safe in his own house, and always locked the door of his room before he lay down to sleep.

"Now you will be able to have a talk with him if you like," said the virago. "The girl will come down presently, as usual, to fetch him his water for the night, you can let her know that you are here and want to speak to him."

Shortly afterwards the door opened and, with a lighted taper in one hand and a ewer in the other, the moon-pale little maid entered the room. She came very quietly, as if afraid of making the slightest noise. Her beautiful blonde locks had been unloosed, for it was bedtime, and strayed freely over her smooth snow-white shoulders, her tiny bare feet seemed to kiss rather than touch the ground.

The stranger gazed at the gentle creature with rapt delight. She did not appear to notice him in the semi-darkness, as she glided past him through the vestibule on her way to the well.

"Is that your own child, my fair dame?" asked the unknown, flashing his eagle eyes full upon the woman.

"Yes, my own child!"

"How fair she is, and how pale!"

The woman laughed.

"While I am so brown and ruddy, eh?"

And again she laughed aloud.

The face of the unknown blushed deeply. One could have sworn it was a woman. It was the blush of shame that covered his face.

In a few moments the child returned with the filled ewer in her hands.

"Come hither, my little girl!" said the stranger, in a tender, affectionate voice.

The child started violently.

"Don't be alarmed!" growled the virago. "Don't you hear that this gentleman wants to speak to you? Are you afraid he will bite your nose off?"

And with these words she seized the child's hand roughly and pushed her towards the stranger.

The stranger softly patted the child's little head.

"Don't be afraid of me, my little girl! You have no reason to fear me. What is your name?"

"Betsey!" replied the virago.

"Ah, why Betsey? Such a coarse, common name for such a tender child! I would call her Elise, that is far prettier. Besides, the two names mean one and the same thing."

"Nay, nay, you will spoil the child, sir. As if she was not spoilt enough by her father already. Peasant folks call their daughters

Betsey or Polly; Elise and Lisetta are the names of gentlefolks' children. You must not listen to such nonsense, child; but go and tell your father that there is a gentleman here from Poland who wants to speak to him immediately before he lies down."

The child timidly withdrew her little hand from the stranger's, who seemed very disinclined to let it go, and hastened to her father's room.

The stranger thereupon tidied up his clothing, smoothed back his hair on both sides of his forehead, thereby giving to his features a gentle amiable expression, and softly tapped at the headsman's door.

"Come in!" resounded a deep melancholy voice from within.

The unknown youth entered and carefully closed the door behind him.

The moment he was well within the room, the smile of frivolous braggadocio he had lately assumed entirely disappeared from his face; the defiantly thrown back head bent meekly down; a look of devout inspiration was visible on the thin lips and in the veiled eyes; the whole figure of the man seemed to have grown smaller, the shoulders contracted, the breast receded; he had now the air of a gracious and benignant missionary.

And a benignant missionary indeed it was who now stood face to face with the headsman.

The herculean figure of the headsman arose slowly and tremulously, and while his hand with furtive anxiety sought the hand of the little girl, he asked the stranger in a scarcely audible voice what he required of him. Perchance the latter did not catch what he said, he spoke so low.

"Peace and blessing be upon this house!" said the unknown in a voice full of tender unction.

"Amen, amen!" the headsman hastened to reply.

"Heaven's blessing descend upon thy heart, my son!" said the youth to the old man raising his hand in blessing.

"He is a pastor, a priest," said the headsman to himself, "he has all the appearance of it."

Peter Zudár stooped down towards the youth's hand and kissed it. He durst not touch it with his own hand but with his lips only.

"A priest in *my* house, forsooth! My child! take the gentleman by the hand and lead him to the arm-chair, make him sit down! Thy hands are clean, they may touch him. Oh! a man of God in *my* house! I never dared to hope so much."

"I come from afar," said the unknown youth, sitting down in the arm-chair provided for him, while the old executioner stood before him bare-headed, with his large muscular arms folded across his bosom. The little girl wound her hands round his arm and stood beside him.

"I come from afar, I say. I do not belong to your nation, though I understand your language well enough to be able to converse in it intelligibly. In olden times the Apostles of our Holy Faith received direct from Heaven the gift of tongues, we, their unworthy successors, must, with great labour and weariness, acquire the languages of those to whom we have to preach the Gospel. I am the member of an English religious society whose mission it is to seek out those who are suffering, in whatever rank of life they may be, and endeavour to administer to them, so far as we are able, those divine consolations which God so freely distributes to the broken-hearted. We have our special missionaries for every section of humanity, and we send them forth continually to minister to their sufferings, and bring them peace and healing. Some of us are sent to the palaces of the mighty, others to the hovels of the poor. For everyone on earth has his own particular sorrow, and everyone finds his own sorrow very hard to bear. Some of us have chosen the dungeons and jails as our spheres of consolation, others prefer to comfort the secret woes of family life, others again visit the needy masses of the work-people. To me has been assigned the

task of ministering to those terrors of evil doers, the public executioners."

At these words the youth looked steadily at the face of the man, who was standing there before him, with downcast eyes and quivering lips.

"For the last nine years I have been going about in this strange world of mine," continued the youth. "I have learnt something of the deepest wounds and of the sublimest woe. All the suffering in this department of sorrow is very much alike. Some can hide their wounds better than others—that is the sole difference. There are amongst these headsmen cold impenetrable natures, hearts closed against the world, whom it is very difficult to get at. And then again there are devil-may-care, extravagant, passionate dispositions who fancy they can find oblivion in wine, excitement, and other external delights. And then, too, there are defiant, haughty souls, who mock and jeer at those things which ordinary people are afraid of—but at the bottom of all their hearts it is the same worm that is ever gnaw-gnawing. Some of them die young, others grow grey, and have a late old age before them. And it is the selfsame worm which kills the one and will not let the other die. I have known among them men who, drink as they would, could never get drunk. I have known others who loathed the sight of wine and yet have been haunted by phantoms in broad daylight. The evil was always one and the same. Yes, and the mercy of God is always one and the same likewise."

"God's mercy is indeed over all!" stammered the headsman.

"And if this endless mercy did not cover the earth what could defend all living beings from judgment? If the Lord were one day to proclaim: 'Let Justice prevail in the world instead of Mercy!' must not we all be instantly consumed by the divine vengeance? The Lord does not look at the outward appearance of men but at their hearts. He judges him who charitably distributes alms at the church door to make up for the secret sins that he has carefully concealed at the bottom of his heart, and raises once more the

broken-hearted sinner who has fallen beneath the stress of temptation."

The headsman slowly sank down upon his knees before the chair of the unknown, and rested his folded arms against it.

"What are we after all? Impotent tools in the hands of all creative Power. Greater in the eyes of God is humble weakness than haughty strength; dearer to Him is the repentant sinner than the man who boasts of his virtues. All that is power is His gift, and His gift must needs return to Him again. Strength will turn to dust, merit will become but as an empty sound, God's mercy alone will endure for ever. Heaven is always open to him who seeks it."

The youth tenderly stroked the old man's hands whilst he tried, tremulously, to draw them away.

"Oh, sir, touch not my hands!"

The youth seized one of the executioner's hands by force and drew it towards him, looking as he did so, now at the old man's hand and now at his face. Then with his delicate index-finger he pointed at the headsman's forehead.

"I see here a whole network of wrinkles," said he, "and this cross of ill-omen here betokens the anguish of a heavy heart. Thy hand trembles in mine because it feels upon it spots of innocent blood."

"True, true!" groaned the strong man, hiding his face in his hands.

"Thou hast executed a death sentence upon a man whose innocence shortly afterwards became as clear as noonday."

"So it is. You can read right into my heart. It is even as you say."

"This thought haunts thy mind continually and the mark of it is on thy forehead."

And at that moment could be plainly seen on the old man's forehead the deep cruciform mark of the intersecting furrows.

The youth laid his fresh cold hand on the man's forehead.

"Who can tell why the Lord hath ordered it so? Who can tell whether the blindly executed convict did not deserve his punishment after all? Who knows whether he was not worse at heart than he who actually committed the bloody deed? What if he wished his father's death, and therefore was guiltier than he who carried out that wish? A wise monarch in the East once hung up twelve robbers by the roadside, and placed watchers there at night to guard the bodies. While the watchers slept, the comrades of the robbers cut down the body of their leader and made off with it. The awakened watchers, full of the fear of punishment, hung up a wayfaring peasant in the place of the missing body. An innocent man!—And behold when they searched the baggage of the peasant's mule they found the bloody limbs of a freshly murdered traveller! 'Twas the judgment of God. But suppose that the youth whom thou didst execute was really innocent? Who shall dare to say, even then, that Heaven distributes death by way of punishment? What if it were sent as a favour, as a reward?—Once, in the olden times, a God-fearing couple prayed Heaven to bestow its greatest reward upon their twin sons for their filial piety, and next morning they were found dead.—Who knows from what calamity Heaven may have saved him by dealing him that blow? Might he not have grown base and vile had he been spared? Might he not have been plunged in misery and ruin? Might he not have become a murderer or a suicide? Might he not ultimately have come to die on the selfsame scaffold, aye, and deserved it too? Only He is able to answer all these questions before Whom the future lies clear and open. We can only see through a glass darkly; we do not even know when we ought to laugh or when we ought to weep."

The youth removed his hand from the old man's forehead, and, lo! that ugly wrinkle had been smoothed away, and the headsman could raise aloft eyes full of comfort, and folding his hands across his huge heaving breast, he began to stammer softly:

"Our Father...!"

When he had pronounced the "Amen!" the unknown youth raised him tenderly from his knees, and the pale little girl embraced the old man's arm and leaned her head against it.

"Hast thou not always had about thee here Heaven's messenger of mercy?" said the youth, pointing to the fair child. "Has not Heaven sent her to thee without any effort or foreknowledge on thy part, so that even to this day thou canst not tell from whence she came?"

The man tapped his bosom:

"Sir," said he, "read into my heart. You know everything."

The stranger thereupon turned to the little girl and addressed her in a gentle tone which instantly inspired confidence.

"My good little child, go downstairs and tell them to put my horse, which I have left standing outside the gate, under cover, lest it be drenched by the storm."

"I myself will lead it to the stable and give it food and water."

"Thank you, my little girl."

Little Elise sought for something in the wardrobe, and, concealing it in her apron, went out.

The stranger looked after her till she had closed the door behind her. A solemn silence then prevailed in the room, the youth looked at the old man in silence as if he expected him to speak.

In a short time Peter Zudár approached the door and opened it—in the kitchen all was now dark.

"They are asleep now," he muttered, partly speaking to himself, partly addressing his words to the stranger. "The woman has gone to rest, the lad is with the horses, the child will remain in the kitchen, she has something to do there I know. This, my good sir, is the time for us to talk. Outside there is nought but storm and darkness, I cannot let you go further on your way while it is like this."

It was only after much persuasion that the old man consented to sit down beside the youth and began to speak.

"I am an old man, sir, my hoary hair speaks the truth. I have gone through a great deal. My father also was an executioner, and my grandfather before him. I inherited 'the business' so to speak. In my younger years I was wild and frivolous. I loved racket, wine, and boisterous mirth. A sort of heavy indescribable load oppressed my heart continually, a sort of blinding darkness enveloped me which I would gladly have chased away had I only known how. This heavy mental oppression, this black weariness tortured me more and more, according as my sad reminiscences multiplied with my advancing years, and I drank more and more wine, and plunged all the more recklessly into vile debauchery in order that I might not hear all round me those faint sighs and moans which troubled and terrified me most when there was not a sound in my room, and I was all alone. My acquaintances used to laugh at me because I sat all alone drinking silently till far into the night, just as they used to laugh at me afterwards for sitting by myself and singing hymns."

The fellow sighed deeply and was silent for a time, as if he were trying to gather up again the threads of his scattering thoughts.

"You may perhaps have noticed a woman outside there. That is my wife. I married because I fancied that I should thereby find rest for my soul. I imagined how happy I should be if I were to have a child. I should then have something to knit me to life, to the world again. No, I said to myself, he shall not inherit the curse of my abhorred existence. I will choose for him a career in which he will be happy, honoured, and respected. I will provide him with a comfortable maintenance and have him educated far from me and my house. I will make a worthy, honest, sensible man of him. For two years I comforted myself with such visions and was happy. My mind shook off its horrors and became bright and cheerful. And then—then I began drinking heavily again. Evil memories commenced assailing me worse than ever, and my fair hopes

abandoned me—for life and death, sir, are both lodged in a woman's heart, and some find the one and some the other. Once more I was visited by that midnight sighing, by that speechless moaning, by those voices that terrified my solitude and pursued me sleeping and waking, and I began to drink and run riot again once more."

The man hid his drooping head in his hands. Even now those dreadful memories weighed him down when he thought upon them.

"Suddenly I began to be deaf. A continuous humming sounded in my ears which kept me in a perpetual whirl. I did not understand a single word unless I looked at the lips of the speaker. I never noticed anyone coming into my room until I suddenly caught sight of him. Oh! deafness is indeed a horrible torture. The deaf man is far more completely shut off from the world than the blind. At first I hid my wretchedness lest they should make sport of me. Nobody is merciful to the deaf. Whenever two people talked to each other in my presence I fancied they were plotting against me. I feared to go to sleep lest I should be murdered without hearing my door burst open. And then, too, in the night, in the darkness, in my lonely deafness, I had an ear all the keener for those sighs and moans which nobody could hear but myself. And in vain I drank, in vain I sang riotously. After every bumper of wine it seemed to me as if I was plunged more and more deeply into a roaring bottomless sea, and at last I could not even hear my own howling. Then my soul died away within me, I cast myself despairingly on my bed, and then for the first time in my life it occurred to me to pray. The only thing I could think of to say was: 'My God! my God!' as I wrung my hands, and the tears ran down my cheeks."

And at these words tears stood once more in the headsman's eyes.

"That night I slept quietly, nothing disturbed me. Thus I slumbered for many hours like one dead, and was only awakened at last by a feeling of moisture all over my face. I had been lying face downwards, and a rush of blood had come through my nose and

mouth and wetted my couch. I arose, douched my face in a large tub of water, and felt that my head was very much relieved. I no longer heard that roaring sound as of a deep sea rolling over me; there was no more whispering and moaning around me; but, instead of that, I heard through the deep stillness of the night the crying of a child. The crying of a child in my own house! I fancied it was but a dream-voice—for was I not deaf?—and that instead of a pursuing, the voice of an enticing spectre was now sounding in my ear. But again the crying of a child penetrated to me from the room where my wife usually slept. What could it be? I walked thither, and lo! I could hear the soft pattering of my own footsteps. I must walk more softly, thought I. And I did walk more softly, and then I also heard distinctly the light cracking of the boards beneath my feet. And through it all the weeping of that child sounded continuously. The door was only closed by a bolt. I slipped it softly aside so that not a sound should be heard. Softly I opened the door. And behold! on the table in the middle of the room was a tiny babe. The night-lamp flung a flickering flame across its face, it could not have been more than a couple of months old. It was wrapped up in fine swaddling clothes, a tiny embroidered chemise covered its little body, and its wee round head was covered by a deep cap trimmed with pearls, from underneath which welled forth tiny little ringlets like fine gold thread. Just like those little painted angels of whom you only see the heads peeping out of the sky."

The unknown smiled so sympathetically at the childish simile of the old headsman.

Then Peter Zudár's face again grew clouded, he drew his chair closer to his guest's and thus continued:

"My wife was not in the room. Her bed was empty and I could see through the door, which she had left open behind her, that a large fire was flickering in the kitchen. My wife was busy with something at the hearth and with her was her mother, a sly, wicked old woman, whom all the people hereabouts look upon as

a witch. What were they doing there so late at night I asked myself? The younger woman was holding a pan over the fire and the elder was casting into it all sorts of herbs. There was nothing to be afraid of, and yet they were speaking to each other in whispers and peering timorously around. I know not how the thought occurred to me, but I suddenly thrust into my bosom the little suckling lying on the table and carried it off into my own room. There I laid it down upon my bed and put into its hands again its plaything of little bells which it had dropped, whereupon it ceased to cry. Then I returned to watch and see what the two women would do next. The contents of the pan were already frizzling. Now and then it boiled over into the fire and the flames shot up all round it. Then the old woman would skim it carefully with a spoon. And all the time they were muttering together:

"'Are you sure nobody is awake?'

"'No, everyone is asleep.'

"'How about the old Knacker?'

"'He is drunk by this time and so deaf besides that he could not even hear the blast of a trumpet.'

"At last they finished what they were about, poured the mess into a large dish, and the pair of them came back again into the room. And there was I standing in the midst of it! It had the effect upon them of a thunderbolt. The old woman let fall the dish and the young one rushed at me like a maniac:

"'You deaf hog, you! what have you done with the child?'

"'Don't bawl so loudly, my good woman,' I said. 'I can hear you just as well if you speak softly.'

"'What have you done with the child?'

"'Don't be uneasy about it, it is in a safe place.'

"'You old fool, you; you will bring the whole lot of us to ruin. Do you know what you are doing?'

"'I know this much, that however you may have got hold of the child it shall not fall into *your* hands again. I will take it and care for it myself, and whoever dares to come into my room after it shall have good cause to remember that I am the public executioner!'

"And with that I went into my room and locked it behind me. The women cursed aloud and hammered at my door, and the old witch threatened to undo me in all sorts of ways; but I quietly and comfortably got out my milk-warming machine and heated a mash of breadcrumbs and milk over my spirit lamp. When it was ready I took the little child upon my lap and fed it nicely myself. Then I made a cradle for it out of my coverlet, which I slung upon a beam, and rocked it to sleep, and when I looked at it in the morning it was still slumbering."

After saying these words the headsman took out of a little cabinet a small bundle, carefully wrapped up in paper, and, unwinding it gradually from its manifold wrappings, set out its contents before the stranger.

In the parcel was a dainty little child's smock, a pair of socks, and a baby's cap trimmed with pearls. Everyone of these items was marked with a red "E."

"I keep these things as souvenirs," he continued. "This crisp little smock, this baby's bonnet embroidered with rosebuds and forget-me-nots, are more precious to me than all the treasures of life, for to them I owe the soothing moments which poured balm into my soul. It was by the side of this child, sir, that I learnt to pray. Something whispered to me that this child was sent to me from Heaven. And so it must have been. Nobody under heaven loves me save she, and I love nobody, nothing else in the world. I have never tried to find out who the child might be, nay, rather I have trembled lest she might one day be discovered and demanded back from me. But all these years nobody has inquired after her. I fancy she must have had a bad mother whom they told she was dead, and she was glad to hear it. Perhaps she even

wished it to be killed. Ah! sir, there are those born outside the headsman's house who ought to end their lives on the headsman's threshold. Never for one hour's time have I quitted that child. I taught her to walk, to talk, I prepared all her food for her, and now she prepares mine for me. I have eaten no cooked food which her hand has not made ready. While she was still but a wee thing I watched by her bed while she slept, now she watches over me while I sleep. When I go a journey she comes with me, I never leave her behind. Only one thing troubles me when I think of her: What will become of her when I die? what will become of her when she grows up?"

The youth tenderly pressed the old man's hand, and said to him with a voice betraying some emotion:

"Don't be uneasy! Thou hast been a good father to the child, if thou shouldst die I will find a good mother for her. Make a note of this name and address: 'Maria Kamienszka, Lemberg.' Whenever thou dost write to the above address on this subject thou shalt receive an answer with full information. Nay, perhaps thou mayest hear sooner from that quarter than thou desirest."

The old man kissed the youth's hand and stammered some unintelligible words of blessing.

At that moment the door opened, and little Elise came in with two glasses of wine-soup on a platter from the kitchen.

She placed the fragrant steaming drink on the table, spread beneath it a snow-white diaper, and with her sweet gracious voice invited the stranger to partake thereof, as it would warm and comfort him.

The stranger gently stroked her sweet pretty face, kissed her fair head, and touching glasses with his host, emptied his own at one manly gulp.

"And right good it is, my little hostess! It has made quite a man of me."

The old man needed far more pressing. The little girl had to taste it first to put him in the humour for it. It was quite clear that this adopted father ran a great risk of being spoiled.

Peter Zudár's face was now quite bright and cheerful.

"Ah, sir!" said he to the stranger, "I have never felt before as I feel now. My heart feels as light as if no load had ever lain upon it. I feel myself a man. How long will you remain with me? I hope it will be for a long time."

"It cannot be, my worthy fellow, my vocation summons me elsewhere. By the way, hast thou any apprentices or assistants who require spiritual consolations?"

Peter Zudár's face grew dark at these words.

"I have only one 'prentice," said he at last, "and, sir, waste not any words of the Lord upon him—one must not cast bread before dogs."

"Hast thou no other?"

"Not long ago this 'prentice of mine brought a stranger to my house. Early next morning, before I could see him, he escaped through the loft and over the fence, why or whither I know not to this day. This was not the first case of the kind."

"Then my mission to this house is ended," said the stranger, sighing involuntarily. "Accept from me this little Prayer Book as a souvenir; as often as thou dost read it thou wilt find consolation. On its cover is the name of that lady whom thou must not forget."

The old man pressed the little book to his lips and concealed it in his coffer.

"And I, what shall I give, what can I give to you, my spiritual benefactor, and, after God, my regenerator, as a token of my gratitude; what can I give you, I say?"

The stranger hastily replied:

"If I might be so bold as to ask for something, give me the half of thy treasures, the little embroidered baby's cap."

For a moment the headsman was overpowered with astonishment, then he quickly undid once more the little bundle of clothes, drew forth, the pearl-trimmed cap, regarded it steadily, and a tear fell from his eye as he did so, then he kissed it, and handed it to the stranger without a word.

"If thou dost find it so hard to part with it I will not take it."

"Nay, it will be well disposed of," whispered the old man, and he pressed it into the hand of the youth, who thrust the little relic into his bosom.

"And now God be with thee, and go and lie down, for it is late. As for me, I have a long journey to make ."

The headsman would have gone with him to help him to saddle his horse, but the stranger restrained him.

"I will arouse thy lad," said he, "I have a word for his ear."

"But the watch-dogs are vicious."

"They will do me no harm."

The stranger would not be persuaded. On reaching the kitchen he wrapped himself in his mantle, and after inquiring whereabouts near the stables the 'prentice usually slept, took a lighted lamp in his hand and went forth into the courtyard.

The mastiffs when they beheld him slunk away, growling timidly and uneasily, and only began to bark with all their throats when they found themselves safely behind the house. Those strange eyes had the effect of a spell on man and beast. Meanwhile the headsman could be heard singing within his room the hymn:

"Ere slumber fall upon mine eyes."

The youth hastened towards the night-quarters of the headsman's 'prentice. On the way thither he encountered the young woman. He pinched her ear and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Get along with you, you naughty boy!" said she.

And then the virago sauntered back into the kitchen, leaving her guest to go where he liked.

His quest was an easy one now. He had only to proceed in the direction from whence the woman had come. Ivan feigned to be asleep.

"Hie! my little brother! up! up!" cried the stranger, and tugged at the fellow's hair till he opened his eyes in terror.

"Well! what's the row? what do you want with me?"

"What do I want? I'll very soon let you know, you rascal, get up, I say!"

Ivan made no very great haste to obey.

The stranger wasted no more words upon him but began buffeting him right and left, till his head waggled on his shoulders.

Full of fury Ivan started up from his couch and fell upon his tormentor; but the latter, with serpentine agility, clutched the fellow's throat tightly with his right hand and pressed his head against the wall, while with his left he held a large pistol in front of his nose.

"You dare to move, you rogue, that's all, and I'll spread you out over the wall like a painted picture."

The lad was awed by the unexpected strength of that fist and the threatening proximity of the pistol.

"But, sir, what in heaven's name have I done?" he babbled. "Who are you, and what do you want of me?"

"Who am I, eh? I am a police-sergeant, you rascal. I am pursuing a deserter, whom you have concealed. Come, speak, what have you done with him?"

Ivan had already begun to recover himself a little.

"I'll tell you the truth, I will indeed, only let me go. It is true that I enticed a deserter hither, but it was not to conceal him."

"You did not bring him hither to conceal him, eh? You lie, you dog. Another falsehood, and I'll tie you to my horse's tail and drag you all the way to Dukla. What did you do with him?"

"I'll tell you everything, Mr. Sergeant, I am a man of my word. It is true that I enticed a young gentleman here, at one time I was his lackey. Later on we became soldiers together. I was subsequently discharged because I was growing blind. I am speaking the truth, I was blind then. The young man had confidence in me, and one day, when he saw me in the street at Dukla, he implored me to hide him."

"What were you doing in Galicia?"

"My master sent me to buy horses, but I could not get any fit for us. I am speaking the truth, I assure you I am."

"Do you know why that man deserted?"

"Yes, he shot his captain because of a woman."

"Did you hear the woman's name?"

"I heard it, but I have forgotten it."

"You lie. You know it now. Come, out with it!"

"I'll say it then—Oh! my throat!—the Countess Kamienszka."

"Did you hear it from him?"

"No, it is my own idea, for he wrote her a letter while about to fly and sent me to the post with it, that is what put them on his track, I should think."

"That is none of your business, where is the man now? Don't lie! I shall know if you do, and in that case I will make an end of you at once."

"He is safe enough now, Mr. Officer, I assure you. He escaped before daybreak, but I denounced him, and he was arrested at the house of his own father."

The stranger dashed the fellow's head furiously against the wall, then flung him on the floor and kicked him.

"You denounced him, eh? Oh! you detestable dog!"

"But what is the matter, sir? Why do you strike me again? Surely I did right? I had him arrested, and they locked him up. He is in the pillory already, I daresay. What harm have I done?"

The stranger made an effort to master his passion, and, controlling his rage, answered coldly,

"What harm have you done, you fool! Haven't you made me take all my trouble in vain, and done me out of the promised reward to those who ferret out and hand over deserters. You dare to meddle with my affairs again, that's all!"

Gnashing his teeth, he kept his pistol grasped firmly in his hand; he would very much have liked to have beaten the fellow's shaggy poll about with the butt end of it.

"Go and saddle my horse this instant!"

Ivan was only too delighted to get clear of the narrow little room where he was so close to this dangerous visitor's muscular fists, and went to saddle the horse. While so employed, he could not help reflecting that the nag was just a trifle too good to be bestridden by a secret police-agent.

The stranger did not wait till he was ready, but hurried after him. Then he quickly mounted his horse, and presented something to Ivan.

"Here, take that!"

The fellow dodged his head, thinking he was about to get another buffet. Then the stranger flung a thaler at his feet.

"Take that, you dog, for your trouble. And now open the gate!"

The horse splashed the 'prentice's eyes and mouth full of mud as the stranger galloped away.

At the sound of the rapidly retreating hoofs the headsman thought to himself: "That was Heaven's own gracious messenger." The headsman's young wife, however, sighed: "Ah! that *was* a gay gentleman." But the 'prentice growled furiously: "It was old Nick himself."

And with that he picked up the thaler, wiped the mud off it, put it in his pocket, and then turned furiously upon the watch-dog and kicked out one of its teeth.

"Take that for not barking!" cried he.

The whole house of Hétfalu was still in mourning. The doctor from town looked in every day. There were two invalids to be seen to. Young Széphalmi was able indeed to go about, but he was like a worm-eaten plant, there seemed to be but little life within him. Old Hétfalusy, on the other hand, had altogether succumbed to his woe, he had taken to his bed, and was frequently tormented by epileptic fits.

The doctor, worthy Mr. Laurence Sarkantyús, regularly every day deposited his round-headed bamboo cane in the doorway, rubbed his short-cropped grey hair all over with his pocket handkerchief for a minute or two, felt the respective pulses, wrote out prescriptions for unguents and syrups; ordered baths, blisters, clysters, and cold douches—and all to no purpose, as both patients seemed to dwindle away more and more day by day. The only really doubtful point seemed to be, which of the two would bury the other?

One day, when Dr. Sarkantyús was superintending the preparation of a hot bath, a light chaise drove into the courtyard of

the castle, from which our unknown friend descended, dressed in a stylish black frock coat, and shod with elegant calfskin shoes. His long hair was combed back and smoothed down behind his ears on both sides, and he had an eyeglass cocked knowingly in one eye. Altogether he looked very different from what he was when we last saw him. His characteristic *sang froid*, that peculiar rigidity of the lips, that faint furrow in the middle of the forehead between the eyebrows, and the gravity of the somewhat languid face, made the metamorphosis complete. A savant, a scholar of practical experience, a cosmopolitan physician stands before us.

He inquired for Mr. Széphalmi. The servants at once announced his arrival, and presently a broken-down, prematurely aged man appeared, with sunken cheeks, pale withered lips, and staring eyes starting from their sockets, and with but the ghost of their former brilliance and expressiveness.

After the first greetings the stranger handed him a letter. Széphalmi broke it open and read it with an apology for so doing, and all the time his hands trembled.

The letter was from his friend, Ambrose Ligety, who informed him that the bearer of the letter was a famous physician, who had just come from France, and cured maladies by means of magnetism. Would he allow this doctor to make experiments upon the old squire? He had reason to believe that such experiments would not be thrown away.

Széphalmi sighed deeply, and conducted the stranger into the parlour where he beckoned him to take a seat. As yet they had not exchanged a single word professionally.

Then Széphalmi went into an adjoining chamber, where he encountered Dr. Sarkantyús, and showed him the letter.

Dr. Sarkantyús thereupon told him that his honour, Judge Ligety, was a big donkey, that the French doctor was a still bigger one, but that the old gentleman would be the biggest one of all if he allowed

himself to be meddled with. Let them try it, however, by all means, if they choose, he added.

Nevertheless, he could not help going out to have a look at this miraculous *Scarabœus* that professed to be able to cure men with the tips of its antennæ.

The young man greeted him with refined courtesy, and the Doctor anxious to show him that he understood French, addressed him in what he supposed to be that language, a smattering of which he had picked up as far back as the time of the Emperor Napoleon I.

"Vooz-ate oon medesen, monshoo?"

"Oui, monsieur, mon collègue."

"The Devil is your collègue, I am not!—Vooe-ate oon magnetizoor, monshoo?"

"Oui mon cher bonhomme."

"Zate—oon—sharlatanery, monshoo!"

"Comme toute la médecine, monsieur."

Dr. Sarkantyús put both hands behind his back, measured the young man first from head to foot, and then from foot to head, scratched his own head violently, and retreated precipitately.

And now Széphalmi rejoined the stranger, and begged him to come in and see the invalid.

In the adjoining chamber where old Hétfalusy was lying, the curtains were drawn and the floor was covered with carpets, so that no light and no noise should disturb the sufferer.

On the lofty bed lay a motionless figure, with closed eyes and hands folded across his breast, a motionless, helpless bit of earth, worse off indeed than other bits of earth, because it had the consciousness of existence.

The stranger approached the bed, seized one of the cold bony hands, tested the pulse and laid his hand on the invalid's forehead.

It might have been a corpse that lay there. The eyes did not open, the blood scarce seemed to flow through the veins, the respiration was hardly perceptible.

"He lies like that all day long," said Széphalmi to the stranger.

The youth took his rings from his hands, asked for a glass of water, and drew the tips of his fingers first round the rim of the glass and then along the eyeballs and the temples of the old man in a downward direction.

Széphalmi stood beside him with a dubious expression. The young man at once observed it.

"You, sir, are also a sufferer," said he; "my method can cure you also."

Széphalmi smiled bitterly—galvanised corpses may smile in the same way.

"The balm that is to cure me does not exist," said he.

"My method does not depend on material substances. You shall see. In an hour's time you shall have actual experience of my treatment. Your cases are very much alike."

"How so?"

"They are due to the same cause. The hidden seat of the evil in both your cases is the mind, both of you are suffering from terrible bereavements, you have lost your wife and two children, the old man his daughter and two grandchildren."

The sick old man drew a long and deep sigh at these words, but his eyes still remained closed. Széphalmi sat down on a chair beside him, hid his face in his hands, and fell a weeping.

The young unknown continued to draw his fingers softly round the rim of the glass, producing a ghostly sort of low wailing sound.

"The water will become magnetic before long," said he, "and then we shall see."

"Yet," pursued he, "there is an even more evil malady than the sorrow of bereavement, and that is—remorse. You are both troubled by the bitter memories of an irrevocable past. You did not always love your children, your grandchildren, as you do now that they are both dead—and this is the greatest affliction of all."

At these words the sick Hétfalusy opened his eyes and gazed at the speaker in astonishment.

Széphalmi stammered sorrowfully:

"Oh, sir! why do you torture us with these words? They make the poor old man's heart bleed."

"I see. Already he begins to revive. The medicine is a violent one, no doubt, but for that very reason all the more efficacious. Suffering supervenes, and in suffering lies the very crisis of the malady. But a few more drops of this water. So! The reaction will be still more violent presently, as you shall see. The sick man will groan and have convulsions. Cold drops of sweat will exude from his temples. After that, however, he will grow calmer, and the cure will be complete if God help us."

The youth continued to magnetise the water.

"The sick man's greatest pain proceeds from the recollection of those years when first you made the acquaintance of his recently deceased daughter."

"What do you know, sir, of those years?" stammered Széphalmi, much surprised.

"As much as a doctor ought to know whose business it is to cure the hearts of his patients. He strongly opposed the marriage of the girl with you. He was wrong in so doing. True affection when excluded from the right road seeks out secret paths for itself. You discovered for yourselves some such secret path."

"Sir!"

"Hush! The patient is groaning. The cure is operating. These secret relations had consequences which could not be hidden. Your wife became a mother before she was yet your wife. Pardon me, sir, but it is as a doctor that I address you."

"How do you come to know all this?" faltered Széphalmi, in a scarcely audible voice. "And when it was kept so secret too!" he thought to himself. The same instant the old man made a violent effort to rise from his bed and compel the speaker to be silent.

"It is having a strong effect, a very strong effect," said the youth, feeling the sick man's pulse. "His pulse is beating ten strikes more a minute than it did just now. Squire Hétfalusy," he resumed, "on hearing these evil tidings flew into a violent temper; he was always a very passionate man. He told his daughter that if she did not kill her child, he himself would kill the pair of them. He would have married her to someone else, to a rich man of high rank. This unlucky accident must be kept secret. The girl was very miserable. Her brother stood forth in her defence, and took her part against his own father, and his father cursed him in consequence, expelled him from the house, and forbade him ever to show his face there again. And the uninvited guest, the little suckling who had no right to be born, also atoned for its fault; they said that it was dead. Oh, how the sick man is pressing my hand with his cramped fingers! This method of treatment is working wonders."

Széphalmi sank back into the depths of his arm-chair and shivered as if with an ague fit.

"The rich man, however, abandoned the bride on the very day of the wedding, and in that same year the elder Hétfalusy suddenly grew grey. You see, sir, I am well informed. A doctor ought to know every little detail relating to a case if he is to cure the patient. The father was now ready to let his daughter marry her former lover, but you were no longer inclined for such a marriage. One day, however, the girl went to you of her own accord, with the face of a lunatic, and threatened..."

"Hush, sir! for Heaven's sake!"

"Ah! how much more rapidly his blood is circulating. His muscles are twitching, his lips are convulsed, his arteries begin to throb—the girl threatened to reveal the fact that she had killed her child and so mount the scaffold, unless you made her your wife."

The sick man began to throw about his arms, and cold drops of sweat, like transparent pearls, welled forth from his forehead. Széphalmi arose and walked about the room wringing his hands.

"Who told you that?" he asked the stranger, suddenly planting himself right in front of him.

"Softly, sir, you are disturbing me. The patient is about to take a favourable turn, look how he is sweating. His sufferings are violent, and I am glad to see them, it shows that his vital energy is returning. Repose is a symptom of death, pain is a sign of life. Let us go on with our magnetising. These long passes from the temples to the shoulders work wonders. The whole soul of the sick man now clings to the thought that just because he himself cast forth his first grandchild, which he hated, therefore God took from him the other two which he loved. Notice, sir! that heaving bosom, those fiery red eyes, those swelling lips—all of them are in their way the interpreters of that one thought. God has punished him and you, the father and the grandfather; He has removed from you the blessing which you rejected of your own accord, and now you stand by yourselves in the world, so lonely, so comfortless, joined to each other by nothing but the recollection of a terrible loss."

Széphalmi buried his head among the pillows of the speechless invalid and sobbed bitterly.

Then the youth arose and took the old man's hand in his hand, gazed steadily into his burning eyes with his eyes, and with a voice of exaltation thus addressed the unhappy wretch, who seemed to be bearing in his bosom all the torments of Hell:

"Suppose someone were to come here to you now and say, 'Behold! that outcast child, whom you wished to think of as dead, nay, or

murdered! whose birth you cursed, and whose death you prayed for, I now give her back to you!'—how would you feel?"

The sick man there and then drew the youth's hand up to his lips, and with an effort raised himself up in his bed. His lips were wide open, his tongue babbled something unintelligible, while Széphalmi regarded him with amazement, and tugged away at his own hair like one possessed.

The youth put his hand into his bosom and drew forth the little baby's cap embroidered with rosebuds and forget-me-nots, and held it up before the two men.

"What if someone were to restore to you the darling wearer of that little cap? What if I were to tell you that a single consolation still remained to you, an angel sent from Heaven in whom you could learn to rejoice once more? What if I were to tell you that she had grown up as gentle and as beautiful as those angels who are permitted to minister to the earth?"

At these words the father knelt down at the stranger's feet and kissed his hands in a transport of joy, while old Hétfalusy, in a sort of paroxysm threw himself off the bed, made a snatch at the little pearl-embroidered cap, and exclaimed in a piercing voice:

"Elise!"

The remedy had indeed been efficacious. The old man was actually sitting up and had recovered the use of his tongue.

The broken-down old man, who had been in a state of collapse, now violently seized the youth's arm with his still tremulous hand, and groped his way along it till he was able to touch the little cap with his lips.

"Elise, Elise, wore that! How beautiful she was!" he cried.

"Where is she?" sobbed Széphalmi, hiding his face in his hands.

"Now she is indeed beautiful. She is in safe hands too. She has found a loving father who guards her as the apple of his eye. And

she is wise as well as beautiful. Her glorious eyes are as blue as the expanse of heaven, and radiant with innocence and goodness. Her lips are as small as wild strawberries, and when she smiles her pretty little face is full of dimples."

"Yes, yes, she promised to be like that!" stammered Széphalmi, pressing the stranger's hand to his heart.

But old Hétfalusy was sitting up in bed and insisted upon getting up.

"I am going. I am going for her. Lead me to her. I will fetch her."

"Softly, softly, sir. Lie down again! Remember that I am a doctor, and I have still to cure you. You must continue to lie in bed for some time, and cannot yet see your grandchild. The girl is with folks who love her. Her adopted father is all love, you have been all hatred. You must first be cured of that evil sickness."

"Of what sickness? I am no longer sick. I am quite cured."

"Of hatred. You have a cast-off son who perhaps at this very moment is standing on the threshold of destruction. You have no thought for him. You have still some hard stones in your heart. Those stones must first of all be pulverized and dissolved. Now if this son of yours were standing here, and you were to stretch out your arms to him and say, 'My child!' then you would be cured, then you might very well say, 'I am no longer sick.'"

"And shall I not see my child till then?" wailed Széphalmi.

"Sir, you are very exacting."

"Ask of me what you will, I place all my property at your disposal. If you will not bring my child hither, at least take me where I may see her. You need not tell her I am her father, I only want to exchange a word or two with her. Whatever price you may put on such a service I shall not consider it too great."

"Sir, I am no impostor who wants to make money out of you. The only recompense I claim for restoring to you your lost child is that

you welcome back the youth who was driven from this home. I have odd desires sometimes, but I stick to them."

The young man shrugged his shoulders, refolded the little pearl-trimmed cap, thrust it into his bosom again, and coldly replied:

"And if we cannot save this young man?"

"Then I shall keep my secret and you will never know where the girl is."

Old Hétfalusy sighed deeply.

"Bring me pen and paper," said he to his son-in-law.

The latter looked at him as if he did not understand.

The old man insisted impatiently.

"Place the table here and give me writing-materials, I say."

When he had got what he wanted he beckoned to the stranger.

"Listen, sir, to what I write," said he. Then he arose from his bed, took up the pen, and wrote with a trembling hand the following letter:

"To General Vértessy,

"Sir,—By a divine miracle I have recovered within the last hour my power of speech, and the use of my fingers. The very first word I am able to speak and to write I address to you who have such good cause to hate me, and that word is—mercy! I ask of you mercy towards that son of mine to whom I myself have never shown mercy. I ask for mercy from you who in your judicial capacity have never shown mercy to anyone. You know full well that all the faults of this child of mine are due entirely to me. You know that my cruelty has made life a wilderness to him and filled him with cynical bitterness—he who was always so tender-hearted that even an angry look was pain to him. Behold, sir! the one man who could venture to insult you with impunity now lies in the dust before

you, and begs for your compassion. And in order that such compassion may not appear as rust on your iron character, show this letter to the world and say: 'My mortal enemy has wept before me in the dust in order that I might condescend to stoop down and raise him up.' Your humbled, eternally faithful servant,

"Benjamin Hétfalusy."

"Would you look at this letter, sir?" asked the old man, turning towards the stranger—and there were tears in his eyes.

"I thank you," faltered the stranger, and he himself hastened to fold up the letter and seal it.

"Széphalmi will deliver it."

"Nay, sir, I will see to that myself."

"*You* will? But who, then, are you?"

"That I will tell you—perhaps—some day."

The old man took the youth's hand in both his, and pressing them warmly, said in a voice that trembled with emotion:

"God help you!"

At that moment Dr. Sarkantyús peeped in at the door, and was amazed to see the old man talking and writing the address on a letter with his own right hand, while his whole countenance was warm with feeling. This magnetic cure was truly marvellous.

He approached the youth and, bowing respectfully, remarked,

"Mossoo! vooz ate oon anshantoor!"

"Possibly, but why should we not speak Hungarian?" replied the other smiling.

"Then you are not French?" asked the dumfounded doctor.

"Why should I be? It does not follow because a person may have just come from France that therefore he is a Frenchman, does it?"

"All the better pleased, I am sure, my dear colleague!"—and then it suddenly occurred to him that only a short time ago he had said to him in Hungarian: "The Devil may be your colleague, I'm not!"

"All you have to do now is to give the patient tonics; that won't interfere with my cure. I shall come back again in a few days, and by that time I hope he will be quite strong. Till then, let us trust in God!"

The young unknown then hastened to his carriage, Széphalmi accompanying him the whole way.

Everyone who had recently seen the old man apparently on the verge of the grave, and now beheld him completely changed, going about with a lively irritable temper and rosy cheeks, were amazed at this wonder-doctor who could perform cures by the mere touch of his finger-tips.

"He must be a magician!" said they.

The unknown next presented himself at the residence of General Vértessy.

They told him this was not the official hour for being received; at such times the General was wont to be with his wife. He replied:

"So much the better; what I have to tell him will be better told in the presence of his wife."

The General was informed of this odd wish, and took to the idea so kindly that he ordered the young man to be instantly admitted.

And, in a few moments, a handsome, courtly youth stood before him, who greeted the General frankly and the General's wife ceremoniously. In his hands he carried a small forage-cap with a border of thin gold thread round it, and his whole style and bearing testified to the fact that, somewhere or other, he had been brought up as a soldier.

"I beg your pardon, General, for disturbing you so unconscionably, and robbing you of your most precious moments, but the business

on which I have come admits of no delay. My name is Count Kamienszky, I come from Poland, and I bring a petition in favour of young Hétfalusy, who deserted in the belief that he had shot his captain."

The General's face grew suddenly cold. He had become a cast-iron statue, just as he was wont to be when on parade.

"From whom is your petition?"

"From the very officer for whom his bullet was intended. That bullet did not strike home, but stuck fast in his laced jacket; yet it was well aimed too at thirty paces, just in the middle of the heart."

"And what does the officer want?"

"Pardon for the deserter. He admits that he was in the wrong. He insulted a woman—I speak with absolute certainty, for I am that woman's relation—and he would now make good his fault by imploring pardon for the man who stood forth to wipe out that insult."

"To implore pardon is not enough. What can he say in the man's defence?"

"He certifies that the youth was a pattern of soldierly honour, valour, and discipline, that his comrades idolized him, his superiors liked him, and they now unanimously unite in this petition for his pardon. I have brought letters with me to prove all that I say; be so good as to peruse them!"

The General took the letters and read them through. He discovered more than one old comrade, more than one dear friend among the names written there. The young man had spoken the truth. But what was the use of it all. The claims of duty only became the more urgent.

"Sir," said the General coldly, folding up the letters again and placing them on the table, "I gather from your manner and bearing that you were brought up as a soldier."

"You are right, General. I passed the years of my childhood at a military institution, and a little time ago I was a soldier myself."

"In that case you must have some notion of the absolute necessity of the strictest discipline so long as the soldier is under arms."

"I am well aware of it, and it was not that which made me abandon a military career. If he whom I am now addressing were to say to me, 'I stand here as a judge,' I should simply withdraw, knowing that my cause was lost. But, sir, I am now addressing the man that is in you, a man with a heart, a being blessed with human feeling, 'tis to him that I would speak."

And the large black eyes of the stranger had such a heart-searching expression in them that the General turned away from him.

Then, as if still in search of hope and confidence, the youth glanced in the direction of the General's wife, and her bright eyes gave him in return such a look of encouragement, as if to bid him not to fear, for they two were certainly at one in the matter.

But now the General turned sharply round upon the stranger again.

"Do you know what I am commonly called, whether from fear, or fun, or respect, I will not say, that is all one to me, but do you know what they commonly call me?"

"Yes, they call you 'the man of iron,' yet even iron melts in a smelting-furnace."

"Do you fancy there in such a smelting-furnace in the world?"

"I hope so. I have got one more letter for you. I ought to have given it to you first of all, but I have kept it till last. The handwriting will be familiar to you. Take it and read it through."

The General was dumfounded when he recognised the handwriting in which the address was written. The hand which had penned those lines had been somewhat tremulous, that was

plain from the irregularity of the script, but he recognised it perfectly all the same.

As he regarded it he grew a shade paler.

He opened the letter, and his eyes remained riveted on the very first line as if he were too astonished to proceed any further.

"Read on, General, I beg. Read it out aloud," murmured the youth; "we shall see whether the iron will melt or not."

The General stared stiffly for a time at the young man, then he read the letter through in silence, finally refolding it and thrusting it into his breast-pocket.

Then he turned to the window, and remained for a long time in a brown study.

Suddenly he turned once more towards the youth and said:

"Sir, devise some means whereby I may save this man. Find, I say, some way or mode of salvation compatible with soldierly honour, and I will pursue it."

The youth, surprised, overcome, rushed towards the General, seized his muscular hand, and would certainly have kissed it had not the General drawn it back.

Vértessy was very near losing his composure.

"Stay here!" said he. "There you have," pointing at Cornelia, "a confederate who would also take the stronghold by assault. Deliberate together, and devise some expedient. I leave you to yourselves."

And with that he quitted the room, leaving the young man alone with his wife.

And when he had gone, when the door had closed to behind him, the figure of the strange youth lost its soldierly bearing, and his limbs with a painful spasm subsided into that picturesque pose in which artists generally represent Niobe, or the Daughters of Sion

mourning by the willows of Babylon. Every trace of energy and vigour vanished from his face, his eyelids closed over his tearful eyes, and his lips parted with an expression of the deepest emotion. Once more he raised his languishing head to show his strength of mind, but the effort was useless. In the presence of a woman such affectation was no longer possible, and when his eyes met those of Cornelia, he suddenly burst into tears, fell sobbing on his knees before her, seized her hand, pressed it convulsively to his breast, and trembling and gasping, said to her in a voice full of agony:

"Oh, madame, by the tender mercies of God, I implore you to help me and not forsake me."

Cornelia regarded him with wondering eyes, her shrewd intellect had already deciphered the enigma, but her eyes still looked doubtful.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The stranger covered his blushing face with both hands and sobbed forth:

"A woman, an unhappy woman, who loves, who is beside herself, who is ready to die for him she loves."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLAGUE.

There is a mighty Potentate among us here below, the secrets of whose existence are still unknown to our wise men, although they have a lot to tell us about her power; a Potentate whom they have not yet taught us to fear, or else everybody would not still be turning to her full of hope.

This Potentate is not Hell, but the Earth.

Yes, the good, the blessed, the peaceful Earth. She is not violent like the other elements, fire, water, and air. She calmly allows herself to be trampled underfoot; lets us make great wounds in her; lets us load her broad back with cities and towns; crush her bones by driving deep mining-shafts into her—and for all that she allows us who plague her so, to live and multiply in the midst of her dust.

Has anyone ever inquired of her: Oh, my sovereign mistress! thou good and blessed Earth! art thou pleased with the deeds we do upon thee? Can it please thee, perchance, to see us root up thy beauteous fresh woods from off thee, leaving thy tormented body all naked in the blaze of the Sun? Can it please thee to see us constrain thy flowing rivers within narrow basins, dry up thy lakes and leave thee athirst? Can it please thee to see us tear open thy body, break it up into little fragments, and compel these fragments to produce meat and drink for us? Can it please thee to see us drench thy flowery meads with blood and hide away the bones of our dead in thy bosom? Can it please thee that we live upon thee here, and bless and curse thee that thou mayest nourish us, and rack our brains as to how we may best multiply our species in those portions of the earth where men are still but few?

Nevertheless, the Earth patiently endures all this ill-treatment. Only now and then does she tremble with a fleeting horror, and

then the palaces heaped upon her totter to their very foundations. Yet are there any among us who understand the hint?

And then for centuries afterwards she gives not a single sign of life. She puts up with her naughty children as every good mother does. She overlooks and hides away their faults and endures in their stead the visitations of Heaven. She is never angry with them, she never punishes them. She cherishes and nourishes them, and expects no gratitude in return. She only pines and pines, she only frets within herself, she only grieves and is anxious about the fate of her children, her selfish, heartless children: grief and anguish, the nastiness and the wickedness of man slowly undermine her strength and suddenly the Earth sickens.

Oh! how man falls down and perishes when the earth is sick!—like the parasitical aphis-grub from the jaundiced leaves!

New sorts of death for which there is no name appear in the midst of the terrified peoples, and a breath of air carries off the bravest and the strongest. In vain they shut themselves up within stone walls, anoint their bodies with salutary balms, and hold their very breath. Death invisible stalks through the fast-closed doors and seeks out them that fear him. No vitiated air, no contagion is necessary; men have but to hear the name of this strange death and they tremble and die.

This is no mere mortal malady, the Earth, the Earth herself is sick.

And how comical too this terror is!

I remember those times. I was only a child then, I fancy, and the general terror affected me but little; nay, the novelty of the situation rather diverted me. We were not allowed to go to school, we had a vacation for an indefinite period at which I was much delighted I must confess. Our towns were separated from each other by military cordons, and all strangers passing to and fro were rigorously examined. My good father, whose gentle, serious face is one of my most pleasant memories, buckled on his silver-hilted sword and went off himself to mount guard

somewhere. I had greater confidence in that sword than in the whole English navy. My blessed, thoughtful, mother hung round each of our necks little bags with large bits of camphor in them, in the beneficial effects of which we believed absolutely, and strictly forbade us to eat melons and peaches. And we were good dutiful children and strictly obeyed her commands. And yet in that very year, just as if Nature had resolved to be satirical at our expense, our gardens and orchards overflowed with an abundance of magnificent fruit. And there we allowed them all to rot. We had a doctor in those days, a fine old fellow, who, when the danger was at its height, went fearlessly from house to house. He had white hair, rosy cheeks, and a slim, erect figure, and was always cracking jokes with us. He used to say: "No funk, no risk of Death!" and would pick up the beautiful golden melons before our eyes and eat them with the best appetite in the world, and he took no harm from them, for he feared no danger. You had only to live regularly and trust in God, he used to say. He would laugh when we asked him: "Is it true that the air is full of tiny scarce visible insects, the inhaling of which brings about the disease?" "If you believe in these insects you had better keep your mouths shut lest they fly into them while you are talking," he would say. And subsequently when we heard the drowsy monotonous tolling of the bells and the funeral dirges sung day after day, morning and evening, beneath our windows, and saw orphans following in the track of the lumbering corpse-carts; when they told us that everyone in the neighbouring houses had died off in two days, and we saw all the windows of the house opposite fast-closed, and not a soul looking through them; at such a time it was good to fold one's hands in prayer and reflect that we were still all together, and that not one of us had been taken away, but God had preserved us from all calamity. Our hope was weak, for there was no foundation for it to build upon, but our faith was strong and all-sufficing.

Such is the sole impression I have retained of that memorable year.

Ah! elsewhere that same year was not content with embroidering its mourning robe with mere tears, it used blood also, and taught the land a twofold lesson at a heavy cost.

The circular letters issued by the county authorities flew from village to village, informing the local sages of the approaching peril of which even the well-formed knew no more than they had known ten years before, no more than they actually know now.

The local sages, that is to say the justices and the schoolmasters, were directed to explain to the ignorant people the contents of these circular letters.

Explain indeed! Men whose own knowledge was of the most elementary description, men who looked for supernatural causes in the most natural phenomena, were to explain what was still a profound mystery to the collective wisdom of the world!

Mr. Kordé, whom we remember as one of the two schoolmasters of Hétfalu, accordingly, by dint of bellowing, gathered all his subjects around him. It was the day before breaking up for the holidays, and drawing from his pocket the folded and corded vellum document, he gave them to understand that he was going to explain it to them. They, in their turn, were to explain it when they got home to their dear parents.

"Blockheads!" this was his usual mode of addressing his *jeunesse dorée*—"blockheads! you see here before you the letter patent of His Honour, the magistrate, signifying that all the schools are to be shut up, and the whole village is to be on the alert, inasmuch as a terrible disease, called the 'morbus,' is about to enter the kingdom. When the morbus lays hold of anybody the individual in question has not even time to look over his shoulder, but falls down dead on the spot. Down he drops, and there he stays.

"The morbus begins in this way. The gall overflows into the vital essences, and becomes gall-fever or cholera, consequently take care you don't aggravate me.

"Moreover, the morbus in question is to be found inside this year's melons, apricots, and all sorts of fruit; so every man jack of you who doesn't want to be a dead 'un mustn't go guzzling berries and such like."

Here a couple of Scythians from the northern counties began squabbling loudly on the back benches.

"Hie, there, you blockhead! Mike Turlyik, I know it is you—what was I talking about?"

"You was saying that—that—that—no more apricots were to be sneaked from his reverence's garden."

"Come out here, my son, wilt thou? I've a word to say in thine ear!"

And he leathered the unfortunate Mike soundly. Yet the lad after all had reasoned not illogically, for he had started from the assumption that the prohibition in question had been inserted in the letter patent for the express purpose of scaring the people away from the priest's orchard, his reverence being the only man in the village who cultivated fruit-trees.

"And now let us return to the matter in hand. Listen now, you addlepates!

"Bathing, too, is very dangerous just now, and, in fact, every sort of washing with cold water, for thereby the vital essence within a man is easily upset. On the other hand, brandy-drinking is very wholesome, for thereby the volume of spiritual essence in man is at any rate increased. Work on an empty stomach is also dangerous, as also are too much reflection and brain-racking. On the other hand the eating of roast meat and as little walking about in the sun as possible are very profitable."

This passage delighted the addlepates immensely.

"Inasmuch, however, as it is quite possible that a man from a neighbouring village might easily convey to us in his jacket or knapsack this morbus, which, by the way, is as catching as sheep-ticks; therefore it is ordered that nobody is to quit his own

village, either by cart or on foot, and no stranger is to be admitted from without. Should anyone require, however, to pass through the district, he must first of all be locked securely in a cowshed beyond the limits of the village, and there his clothes must be well smoked ('fumigated' they call it), and he himself well doused in a ducking-tub, and if he has any coin about him it must be rubbed with ashes, which life-imperilling occupation will be duly attended to by the local gipsies."

After a pause, Mr. Kordé resumed his learned instructions as follows:

"If, nevertheless, anyone, despite these wise regulations, *should* catch the morbus, there is only one antidote, the name whereof is Vismuthum. Vismuthum, vismuthi, neuter gender, second declension. In Hungarian viszmuta, in Slovak vismuthium, in English bismuth."

At this point the worthy preceptor was overcome by a violent fit of coughing, for he was now bound by his directions to explain the properties of this mysterious substance whose name he himself had just that moment learnt for the first time from his letter patent.

"Well, now! listen all of you, for I shall examine you presently upon all that I have been telling you. Vismuthum is a powder, or rather a fluid, or perhaps 'twere better to say a powder of a—a quite indefinable colour. It is prepared in all sorts of ways, and has no particular odour, and in substance much resembles piskotum.2 Everyone who partakes of it instantly becomes quite well again. First of all it is to be taken in a coffee spoon (his reverence will supply the spoon gratis), and then, if that has no effect, in a tablespoon. If that also has no effect, then two tablespoons must be taken, and so on in increasing doses, until the morbus leaves the patient altogether. It is to be had in the apothecary's shop at Kassa, so whoever does not go and get some has only himself to blame if he dies. Poor men will receive it gratis from Dr. Sarkantyús, and those who won't take it willingly will have it crammed down their throats by force, and it will be also sprinkled in all the wells of

drinking water that the people may get some of it that way. It will therefore be much better to make the acquaintance of vismuthum in a friendly manner, than go to the devil one way or other for not taking it."

2 Antimony.

The young people appreciated this last witticism and roared with laughter.

One of Mr. Kordé's cubs took the liberty, however, of stretching out two fingers, which signified that he had a question to ask.

"Well, Slipik, out with it!"

"Mr. Rector, is the stuff sweetish like?"

"Asine! have I not told you what it was? You have not been attending; hold out your paw!"

The urchin got a smart rap on the palm of his hand with the ruler.

"And now the other!"

And so both hands smarted instead of his ears.

"And now, Guszti Klimpa, stand out and repeat to these blockheads what I have been saying."

Guszti Klimpa was the head boy, because his father rented the village pot-house, and he himself wore the best jacket of them all, so he was the master's favourite. The urchin hastily pocketed the pen-knife with which he had hitherto been carving his bench, blushed deeply in his embarrassment, and his eyes almost started from his head in his endeavours to find an answer to the question put to him.

"Well, my son, come, what did I say now?"

The lad took a plunge at random.

"Nixnus is a fluid which becomes a powder, which, can be made from anything, and very much resembles a piskota."3

3 Biscuit.

"*Bene, prœstanter, eminentissime.* Only not *piskota* but *piskotum;*4 not feminine, you know, but neuter gender, second declension."

4 Antimony.

So Guszti Klimpa returned to his seat very well satisfied with himself.

"Moreover, this I must add—and mind you tell it to your parents when you get home—that nothing is so good in these dangerous times as to drink one glass of brandy in the early morning on an empty stomach, another in the afternoon, a third on lying down, and as many times more as one feels any foreign substance in the stomach. That is the best remedy of all. And, Guszti Klimpa! mind you don't forget to inform your dear father that your schoolmaster, the rector, is very much afraid of the morbus, and that my spirit flask is still with you."

Guszti Klimpa's face assumed a pious expression at this reminder, and shoving beneath his hymn-book the shaft of his quill pen out of which he was manufacturing a pocket pistol, he promised to deliver the message at home.

"And now let us sing a hymn and say a prayer. And after that there will be no more school till the morbus has departed."

Great was the joy of the promising youths at these words. Guszti Klimpa fired off his improvised pistol underneath the bench, and the pellet hit Mr. Kordé full on the nose, whereupon he well trounced Jóska Slipik, though he knew very well that he was not the culprit.

Whilst the wrongfully flogged urchin was still howling, the others began singing the hymn. So long as the low notes predominated Mr. Kordé's voice was alone audible, but at the crescendoes the youthful believers had it all their own way, and shrieked till the windows rattled, the rector beating time the while by lightly

tapping the heads of the Faithful with his ruler whenever they departed from the impracticable melody.

After that, Guszti Klimpa grappled with a prayer, and recited the morning devotions instead of the evening devotions by mistake, a lapse of which the rector, however, took no notice. The Amen was no sooner uttered than the youngsters, with a wild yell, made a solid rush for the door, bearing in mind Mr. Kordé's laudable habit on such occasions of lambing it into the hindermost by way of protesting against the general uproar. When the whole class was fairly out in the street again, its delight at being released from school for some time to come was too much for it, and in the exuberance of its high spirits it fell tooth and nail upon the Lutheran lads who were playing at ball in front of their own church, broke a couple of their heads, scribbled: "Vivat vacatio" on the walls of every house they came to, slammed to every gate they passed, and roused every dog in the village to fury pitch—thus giving the whole world to understand that the rector, Mr. Michael Kordé, had given his promising pupils an extraordinary holiday, because the morbus was coming, and it was not good for people to congregate together at such times.

And now the village ancients and the women were trooping home from church.

Every face was dominated by an expression of dumb terror.

In the church the priest also had read aloud the letter from the county authorities, adding a short discourse of his own to the effect that a calm confidence in the providence of God and a clear Christian conscience were worth far more than all the medicaments, cordons, and bismuth powder in the world.

"We are all, however, in the hands of God," he said, "and if we live well we shall die well. A righteous man need never fear Death."

The old hag, "the death-bird," was crouching there on the church steps with a bundle of healing herbs in her lap, and her crutch under her armpits, and with her chin resting on her knee. She kept

counting all who came out of the church: "One! two! three!" Every time she came to three she began all over again—every third person was superfluous.

And now all had gone, only she remained behind, she and shaggy Hanák, the bellringer.

After the departure of the people a little white dog came running along, and, as often happens, peeped into the church.

"Clear out of that!" cried the sexton, flinging the large church door key after him.

The aged sybil lifted a skinny finger and shook it menacingly at the sexton.

"Hanák! shaggy Hanák! Why dost thou drive away the dog? I tell thee, and I tell thee the truth, that it were better for thee, aye! and for others also, if they could be as such dogs instead of the two-legged beasts they really are, for ere long we shall be in a world where not the voice of thy bell, but the howling of dogs will accompany the dead to their last resting-place. Therefore trouble not thyself about the dogs, Hanák, shaggy Hanák."

The bellringer durst not reply. He closed the church door softly, got out of the woman's way, and while he hastened off, it seemed to him as if his head was dizzy from some cause or other, and his feet were tottering beneath him.

When he handed the church door key over to the priest, his reverence gave him to understand that by order of the authorities the church bells were not to be tolled for the dead during the outbreak of the plague to avoid alarming the people.

As he went home that evening shaggy Hanák's head waggled from side to side, as if every hair upon it was a heavy debt. As he went along he heard all the dogs howling. Well, henceforth *they* would have to follow the dead to their graves.

After that Hanák had not the heart to go home, but sought comfort in the pot-house, where the village sages were already sitting in council together and discussing the problems of the Future.

CHAPTER X.

A LEADER OF THE PEOPLE.

The other rector, Mr. Thomas Bodza, had read a lot of things in the course of his life.

He had read the history of Themistocles who, with a handful of Greeks, converted millions of Persians into rubbish heaps; he had read of the exploits of the valiant Marahas, who, when one of their warriors flung his sandal into the air and uttered thrice the word: "Marha, Marha, Marha!" swept the Roman legions from the face of Pannonia; he had learnt from the Spanish historian all about Ferdinand VII., who chased the Moors from the Alhambra where they had held sway for hundreds of years; he had read of the Scythian Bertezena, who, starting in life as a simple smith had delivered his race from the grinding yoke of the Geougs;—and finally he had not only read but learnt by heart all the great works of our savants in which it is demonstrated with the most exact scholarship and the most inflexible logic, that the Greeks, the Marahas, the Spaniards, the Scythians, and, in fact, all the most famous nations of the earth have originated from a single powerful race which numbers among its chiefest branches, such noble nations as the Russians, the Poles, the Bohemians, and the Croats, &c., inasmuch as the languages of all these various nations are so crammed with original Slavonic words, that if these words were suddenly demanded back from them by their rightful owners, any sort of verbal intercourse amongst the nations in question would be henceforth impossible.

All this Thomas Bodza had read and crammed into his head. Once he had even written a dissertation in which, with astonishing profundity and ingenuity, he had demonstrated the striking resemblance and the identical significance of the Greek ov and the Slavonic *tiszi*, which dissertation was received with general applause in the local mutual improvement society where he recited it.

In his library were to be found all those learned tomes which do our dear native land the honour of only noticing her in order to disparage her, attributing *inter alia* a Slavonic origin to all our chief towns, and forcing upon us the crushing conviction that we Hungarians cannot even call a single water-course our own, inasmuch as all our rivers rise in other countries—certainly a most depressing, poverty-stricken state of things, especially as regards our cattle dealers and boatmen, who, of course, can do so little without water.

After long-continued scientific investigations, materially assisted by a vigorous imagination, Thomas Bodza had constructed a map of his own, in which the various countries appeared in a shape diverging essentially from that which they actually occupy, and indeed only the figure of the virgin Europa, and the outlines of the unchangeable water-courses made one suspect that it was a representation of the old world at all. Not only did the boundaries of the realm suffer strange permutations, but the classical termination "grad,"5 unusual and unnatural as it seemed to all but the initiated, was tacked on pretty frequently to the names of purely Hungarian towns both small and great; and there was also noticeable this slight and fanciful deviation from the strict truth, to wit, that whereas cities of unappropriatable Asiatic origin like Debreczen, Kecskemet, Nagy-Köros, and others, appeared degraded into insignificant villages by being marked with tiny points, every little twopenny-halfpenny Slavonic village in the Carpathians was magnified into a cathedral city, or starred to represent a formidable fortress.

5 The Slavonic word for "town," thus Constantinople is Tsargrad.

The worthy pædagogue used to sit brooding over this map for hours. He would draw his boundaries with a pair of compasses, construct imaginary roads from town to town, and reconstruct a fortress from the imposing ruins in the bed of the River Waag. Nay, he even ventured upon the audacious experiment of cutting through the mountain chain separating the River Hernád from the

River Poprád, and uniting these two rivers (in a state of nature they flow in diametrically opposite directions) into one broad continuous water-course, thus bringing together all the various branches of that scattered family of kindred nations which dwells between the White Sea and the Black.

In those days very little was known among us of railways beyond the rumour (the newspapers mentioned it as a sort of curiosity) that a certain Englishman, called William Griffiths, wanted to make a wheel-track of iron. Thomas Bodza's idea therefore of a continuous European waterway almost deserved to be called sublime.

Such exaltation is innocent enough in itself. It is found, more or less, in every race, and is especially vigorous wherever an impoverished, orphaned stock is aware of the existence of a powerful, dominating, gigantic kinsman beyond a mountain range.6 Unfortunately, however, this exaltation did not remain an empty poetical dream in the bosom of our village pædagogue.

6 *E.g.*, The Slovaks in north Hungary, who know that Russia lies beyond the Carpathians.

Even as a student his heart was full of a bitter hatred of everything Hungarian. He went to school at Pressburg, that peculiar town where the traders are German, the gentry Hungarian, and the poor Slavonic. The traders pick holes in the gentry and the poor folks hate them both. He saw the heady young squires of the *Alföld*7 idle away their time at school in unedifying contrast to the diligent sober conduct of himself and his friends, and yet the masters treated them with the greatest distinction. Some of them scarcely attended the lectures at all, and yet they sat on the front benches. They were able to have private lessons, and thus easily outstripped the poor scholars who had to slave night and day to keep pace with them. They marched about in fine clothes and got their poorer fellow-students to copy out their exercises for them. At the public examinations they declaimed Hungarian verses with such emphasis, with such a fire of enthusiasm, that even that portion of

the audience which did not understand a word of their fulminating periods cheered them vociferously, whereas he, Thomas Bodza, recited the affected, pedestrian, poetic effusions of the Slavonic School of self-improvement without the slightest effect. Even in the rude arena of material strength the Asiatic race showed a determination to be paramount. The youths of the *Alföld* were the better wrestlers, more skilful in gymnastic exercises, and in all serious encounters asserted themselves with more self-confidence and greater enthusiasm; they boasted ostentatiously of their nationality, and scornfully looked down upon his.

7 The great Hungarian plain.

And then, too, during the sessions of the Diet, when the haughty Hungarian gentry flocked to the capital from every quarter of the realm with extraordinary pomp and splendour, a new and clamorous life filled all the streets, and the brilliant visitors monopolized every yard of free space. It frequently happened, in the evenings, that a dozen or so of high-spirited *jurati* would join hand to hand, occupy the whole road, and squeeze against the wall any shabby-coated alienist who happened to come in their way. The poor devil might be carrying home his meagre *jusculum*8 under his mantle in a coarse unvarnished pot, with a piece of brown bread stuck into it, revolving in his mind the whole time the story of another poor scholar in days gone by who, once upon a time, used, in the same way, to carry home his humble mess of pottage in just such another coarse earthenware pot, and who, nevertheless, came to be one of the princes, one of the great men of Hungary, with a great big coat of arms, and castles to dwell in. He forgot, however, to reflect that he, with whom he compared his own fate, was gifted at the outset with intellect and virile courage, qualities with which he himself had only been very modestly equipped by nature; their common misery in early life was the sole point of resemblance between them.

8 Pottage.

These first bitter impressions never left his mind. He registered the disfavour of fortune and the fruits of his own limited capacity among the grievances of the oppressed nationality to which he belonged. Years of want, his little dilapidated dwelling—granted him in his capacity of village teacher but shoved away into an obscure corner of Hétfalu—his meagre barley-bread, his sordid frock-coat—all these things aggravated the anguish of his soul.

His occasional intercourse with the lord of the manor, the arrogant and pretentious Hétfalusy, was not calculated to reconcile him with his destiny. Hétfalusy regarded as a profitless loafer every man who did not seek his bread with spade and hoe, unless, of course, he happened to be a gentleman by birth. He applied this theory to the schoolmaster race especially, whom he conceived to have been invented for the express purpose of eternally hounding on the common folks against their lawful masters, the gentry. As if the world could not go on comfortably without the peasant learning his letters! What he heard in church was quite enough for him surely! On one occasion, when mention was made in his presence of a village shepherd who had forged a bank-note, he observed that if the fellow had not learnt to write he would never have gone astray. The national school teachers, he said, were the natural attorneys of the agricultural population as against the landlords. And Hétfalusy gave practical expression to his belief whenever he had the chance. The corn he was bound to supply to the schoolmaster was always measured out to him from the bottom of the sieve; he seized the courtyard of the school for his threshers, so that during school-time not a word of the lessons could be heard for the racket; he never repaired the building set apart for the cultivation of the muses, but looked on while the schoolmaster himself patched up the holes in his wall with balls of clay borrowed from his own garden, and re-thatched the dilapidated rush-roof with his own hand. Frequently he would rate the schoolmaster in the public thoroughfare, in the presence of the gaping rustics, on the flimsiest pretext, and bully him as if he were the lowest of his menials.

Thomas Bodza totted up all these outrages on the back of his map, and whenever he was immersed in that odd production, his eyes always fastened themselves on three red crosses which he had marked over the little town which indicated Hétfalu; and at all such times he would heave a deep sigh, as if he found this long waiting for the day of retribution almost too much for his patience.

For that a day of retribution would arrive sooner or later was his strong belief.

Frequently, on popular festivals, you might notice on his index-finger a rude iron ring (the handiwork of a blacksmith rather than of a jeweller, from the look of it), the seal of which was engraved with the three letters: U. S. S. On such occasions, anyone observing him closely could have remarked that he carried his head higher than usual, and whenever he was asked what these initial letters signified, he would simply shrug his shoulders and say that he had got the ring from a comrade in his student days, and really did not know *what* the letters meant.

During vacation time he would regularly undertake long journeys on foot into distant parts of the land, traversing no end of mountains and valleys, and always returning home more surlily disposed towards the lord of the manor than ever, at the same time dropping mysterious hints in the presence of his confidants, and talking darkly of old expectations being realised, of extraordinary forthcoming events, and of important changes in the general order of things here below.

Nowadays people will scarcely believe that there are men whose whole course of life is determined by such baseless and centrifugal ideas. Such a species of human ambition is certainly a great rarity. It resembles that cryptogram which goes by the name of "star-ashes," whose tremulous spray-like masses only appear in rare seasons and odd places after the warm summer rains. No ordinary soil is good enough for them.

At any rate, Mr. Thomas Bodza would have acted more wisely if he had endeavoured to inoculate the minds of the faithful

committed to his charge with a little reading, a little writing, and some slight knowledge of geography, ethnology, natural history, and fruit cultivation, instead of assembling round him all the loafers of the district in the pot-house, the meeting-house, at the hut of the forest rangers, or in some underground cellar outside the village, and there putting into their heads ideas which, interpreted by their ignorant fanaticism, could only be productive of infinite mischief.

He had in all the villages round about personal acquaintances, whom he was wont to visit successively in the course of every year, and whose fantastic aspirations he constantly did his best to keep alive.

And at last the opportunity had presented itself for beginning his great work.

Being a very well-read man himself, he had been the first to learn from the newspapers of the approach of that dangerous contagious sickness, the antidotes against which were still unknown.

Suddenly a mysterious rumour began to spread through the villages that a powerful foreign nation was about to invade the kingdom for the purpose of reconquering for the descendants of the Quadi and the Marahanas the Pannonian provinces that they had held centuries before.

The country folk could see for themselves the soldiery hastening on its way through the land to the frontiers; every carter, tramp, and traveller, brought news of the military cordons which were drawn far and wide, from town to town, and required every person passing to and fro to show his passport, a very unusual institution in those days.

The wiser and better informed persons quieted the whisperers by explaining that these measures were not adopted against any foreign foe, but were simply taken to prevent the spread of the terrible pestilence which was already raging beyond the limits of the kingdom.

And then a still more terrible rumour began to raise aloft its dragon-like head.

It was generally said, muttered, whispered, and at last proclaimed aloud, that it was no pestilence the people had to fear, but that the gentry themselves who had resolved to exterminate the common-folks!

They had determined to exterminate them in an execrable horrible way—by poison! They were casting into the barns, the wells, and the vats of the pot-house a deadly poison of swift operation-*that* was the way in which they meant to destroy the people.

The doctors, apothecaries, and innkeepers had all been corrupted; everyone with short cropped hair; everyone who wore a cloth coat was to be regarded as an enemy; nobody was to be trusted!

Who spread this terrible rumour?—spread it first of all in secret, in mysterious whispers from house to house, but presently proclaimed it in the public thoroughfares with a loud voice and amidst the clash of arms? Ah! who can say? So much only is certain that the tissues of this network of calumny spread far and wide. It is possible to make human weakness, ignorance, and rustic stupidity believe almost anything. The severity of the gentry in the past had, no doubt, contributed something to this end; but certainly not much, for, as a matter of fact, the common people raged most furiously against those of the gentry who had done them most good; it was their benefactors they treated the most savagely. And then, too, the usual vices of every community, the love of loot, the thirst for vengeance, blind fury, anger of heart, low greed, were so many additional predisposing causes of the horrors that followed.

Yet a red thread ran all through this woof of sorrow and mourning; "blind destiny," upon whom man so cheerfully casts the burden of his sins, had but little to do with it at all.

It was after vespers, and Thomas Bodza was taking a walk across the fields. This was his usual promenade. Sometimes he went as

far as the boundaries of the neighbouring village with a little book under his arm which he perused with philosophic tranquility.

It was the works of Horace, all of whose verses he knew by heart; for, inasmuch as it had once been very wisely observed in his presence by some distinguished scholar that no other human lute-strummer had ever sung so beautifully and so grandly as Horace, it thenceforth became a point of honour with Mr. Bodza to read nothing else; so he never troubled his head about any other poet or poets, whatever language they wrote in. He made an exception in favour of himself indeed, for he also had his moments of inspiration, but even his poems were not *quite* as good as those of Horace.

And now also he was reading over again those lines he already knew so well. He had sat down to rest beneath a large poplar tree on a big round stone that had often served him as a seat before, and he had just come to the verses, beginning with the beautiful words:

"Nunc est bibendum! Nunc pede libero,
Pulsando tellus...."

when the sound of approaching footsteps disturbed his tranquil enjoyment.

"I have been awaiting you, Ivan," said the master, thrusting his little book beneath his arm again, but not before he had carefully turned down the leaf at the place where he had stopped reading, lest he should forget where he had left off.

"I could only get off late. The old man would not let me go till vespers."

"Ivan, the long expected signal has at last been given."

"How so?" inquired the fellow, amazed.

"It has been announced in every church, in every school; it has been nailed in printed form on every wall, on every post. The county itself has given the signal. That about which the people

were still in doubt, that which it refused to believe, it believes now, for it has been officially proclaimed. Death is approaching, and woe to him who fears it. I fear it not. Do you?"

The fellow shuddered, yet he replied,

"Not I."

"The plague will break out suddenly in various places, and wherever there are dead bodies, there the living will fly to arms, and seek out those on whom they would wreak their vengeance."

Ivan's face turned a pale green, but he stifled his inward terror. It was indeed a terrible time that was coming.

"In the town there is a great commotion, but that does not amount to much. I know the Hétfalu folks. They are cowards and only half ours so far. There are many strangers, many traitors among them. Even when their fury is at the highest point, a gentleman with silver buttons has only to come among them with honied words, or a heyduke has only to appear among them with a stick, or, at the most, a couple of gamekeepers with loaded muskets, and they scatter and fly in all directions like startled game. It is useless; they are a race of cowards. They are a mongrel set after all. Yet here must be our starting point. We must compel the folks here to tackle to the business—a petty village cannot take the initiative without some stimulus from without."

Ivan listened to the master's words admiringly; he began to have the strong conviction that Bodza possessed the qualifications of a great general.

"We must bring in the folks from some neighbouring village just to stir them up. The people of the Tribo district are best suited for that I should think. Many of them are shepherds and herdsmen; men who lie in the fields, who can be brought together in the night time, without anyone observing it. There is a distillery in the village too, and he who says that poison is concocted there does not lie in the least. In general, every village should choose its leaders from some other village, so that the local gentry may not

recognise the strange faces. Some men are easily put out if people, when they begin to supplicate, call them by their name."

Ivan nodded his head approvingly at these sage suggestions. Bodza will certainly deserve a plume of feathers in his cap, thought he.

"You will go at night to all the shepherds, one after the other, and bring them together in front of the lonely inn near the main-road. I will not tell you what you are to do, you must be guided by your own common-sense. You must not all remain on the high road however, some of you must march towards the village."

"The best hiding-place will be the headsman's dwelling."

"Will not the Zudár woman betray us?"

"Not till she has burnt down the castle of Hétfalusy, at any rate."

"Does she hate them then as much as her mother, the old crone?"

"As much! far more. The old crone is all talk."

"I have often heard her say that Hétfalusy seized her property, but one can't go by what she says. She says that one wing of the castle is built upon her land."

"It was like this. Dame Anna's husband was a poor gentleman who had a little plot of land in the neighbourhood of the castle, which was the occasion of an eternal squabble between him and the lord of the manor. One day, Hétfalusy—you know how overbearing these great gentlemen are!—suddenly fell upon this poor gentleman as he was walking on this little plot of land of his and gave him a sound drubbing. The result was a great lawsuit. Hétfalusy questioned Dudoky's gentility, and the latter could not make good his claim to be regarded as an *armiger*. He lost his case in the local court, and the suit dragged on for years. The heavy law costs soon swallowed up all the appellant's means, till at last his little property was put up to auction to defray his expenses. Hétfalusy acquired it for a mere song, and even while the suit was proceeding, he revenged himself on his adversary by building a

new wing to his house on the very plot of land the ownership of which was still a matter of dispute. Then Dudoky had an apoplectic stroke which carried him off. His orphan daughter took service for a time in town. Thence she got into a house of no very extraordinary reputation where somebody suddenly found her and offered her his hand in marriage. The wretched woman agreed and accepted him. And who, you will ask, was the luckless creature who sought out a wife in such a place? *She* only discovered it on the wedding-day. It was the headsman of Hétfalusy. Thus Barbara Dudoky became the headsman's bride. If old Dame Anna became mad, her daughter was partly the cause of it. This also they put down to the account of the Hétfalusies. Since then Dame Anna has frequently sought opportunities for revenging herself on the Hétfalusy family—'the snail-brood,' as Barbara is wont to call them. The old night-owl loves to torment the souls of those who anger her; she loves to fill the inner rooms of the splendid Hétfalusy castle with tears and groaning; she loves to see her haughty enemy grow grey beneath his load of sin and sorrow; she rejoices at the spectacle of his shame and remorse and agony of mind, for the old hag knows how to concoct the sort of venom that corrodes the heart. Now Barbara is not like that. Whenever that woman speaks of the Hétfalusies, her downy lips swell out, her cheeks flush, her black eyes cast forth sparks like a crackling fire, and if at such times she has a knife in her hands, it is not well to approach her. She longs to taste the blood of her enemy, and smack her lips over it; she longs to see his haughty castle in a blaze. I have often heard her say so, and then add, 'After that they may kill me if they like, I don't care.' Oh! that is indeed a terrible woman, you ought to see her."

"A veritable Libussa!" cried Thomas rapturously. "If we win, a great destiny awaits her. Are you in love with her?"

"Perhaps it is more correct to say she loves me. I am very comfortable with her, anyway. The old man does not mind a bit."

"He must be got out of the way."

"We'll take care of that."

"All the exits from the place must be seized after nightfall, and a band of our bravest lads must make a dash for the town hall. Take care that no close-cropped head9 escapes from the place, even if he be dressed as a peasant. The rest shall be my care."

9 No gentleman.

"All right, master."

"Then we must have Mekipiros ready in front of the forester's hut."

"Why that, master? The fellow is dumb and foolish. You know that he bit out his tongue under torture."

"So much the better. He cannot talk. He must have brandy, and lots of it."

"When he drinks brandy he becomes like a wild beast. He can bite and scratch now, but when he is drunk you can make him worry people like a dog."

"That is just what we want. There may be things to be done which a man would willingly keep out of and yet have done all the same. Do you take me?"

"Yes, perfectly, you are worthy of all admiration, master. We can let loose this wild beast in cases where we don't want our own hands to be soiled. When he has lots of brandy he would shoot his own father if you put a gun in his hands. And if anything goes wrong we can lay all the blame on him."

The master regarded his pupil with a look of solemn reproach.

"And you are capable," said he, "capable of saying in cold blood, 'if anything goes wrong'? Ivan, you are not a true believer. Ivan, you are a worthless fellow."

The youth was greatly taken aback at these words, and made a feeble attempt to defend himself.

"Ivan, you are a worthless fellow, I say. I regret that I chose you out to take part in this great work."

Ivan grew angry.

"What! you chose me! Why, it was I who chose you! Am I not the head of the conspiracy?"

"And am I not its soul?"

"What! with those weak pipe-stem arms of yours! Look at my arms! Look!" said Ivan, turning up his shirt sleeves and exposing his fleshy arms. "I could do more with one of my arms than you could with your whole body."

"And yet you are a coward if you ask, shall we succeed?"

"I'll show what I am when I am on the spot," said Ivan, sticking out his brawny chest and boastfully thumping it with his clenched fist; at that moment he wore the expression of a savage proud of his bones and sinews.

"Till then, however, let there be peace between us," said Bodza, extending his dry and skinny hand towards Ivan in token of reconciliation, and Ivan squeezed the hand with all his might, not so much to convince the master of the firmness of his friendship as to give him some idea of the expressive vigour of his grip.

Bodza did not move a muscle of his face during this violent tension; but, all at once, Ivan began writhing, his features contracted with pain, and he placed one hand on his stomach.

"Well, what is the matter?" inquired Bodza.

The fellow doubled up with pain.

"I have a sudden stitch, in the side."

"What! is that all? and you make so much fuss over it! I didn't flinch just now, when you nearly crushed my fingers, did I?"

"But this is horrible—such spasms."

"Perchance, Ivan, you too have been poisoned."

"Oh, don't joke like that," said the fellow with a pale and agitated face.

"Why you know the whole thing to be a fable."

Ivan gave a great sigh with an air of relief.

"It has gone now. I felt so odd. It is a fable, of course. But what a peculiar pain it was!"

"Drive the idea out of your head and swallow some comforting cordial. And now go and look after our confidants."

Ivan was still a little pale, and it seemed to him as if the master's face also was of an odd yellow colour.

"How yellow the sky is!" said he, looking up, "not a speck of blue anywhere. And what a long black cloud is rising up from the horizon—just like a large black bird."

"Gape not at the sky, Ivan, but make haste and have everything ready against the night."

"You can look right into the sun, there's not a bit of light in it when it goes down," murmured he—and his head felt strangely dizzy.

"What have you got to do with the sky, or the sun, or the clouds?" inquired the master sarcastically.

"Nothing, I suppose, nor with what is beyond them either. Good night, my master," he cried after a pause, and turned truculently away.

"A happy and peaceful good night!" said the other with an ironical smile.

"Pleasant dreams."

"And a joyful awakening."

And with that they parted. The master returned towards the village, reading the immortal verses of Horace all the way along.

But Ivan hastened towards the lonely forest hut, looking up from time to time at the yellow sky, the faded sun, and the long black cloud, and then glancing around him horror-stricken, to perceive that he cast no shadow either before or behind.

That sombre yellow light, how odd it was!—and then, too, that brown, copper-coloured cloud, which was gradually covering the whole earth, and enveloping the whole horizon with its broad sluggish wings like some huge bat-like monster of the Nether World! And the little black letters in the master's open book seemed to be dancing together in long dizzying rows, and this is what he read:

"... Pallida Mors
Aequo pede pulsat
Pauperum tabernas
Regumnque turres..."

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST SPARK.

Maria Kamienszka talked for the whole of a long hour with the General's wife.

She told her all she knew of that unhappy family, whose fate was bound up with the General's by such tragic memories.

She had learnt to know the disowned and rejected son as a gallant young officer in Galicia, and the relations which had sprung up between them were the tenderest imaginable.

The calamity which compelled the youth to fly had profoundly affected but not overwhelmed her, for Maria, with that virile determination which has so frequently distinguished the Polish women, had followed up the track of the vanished youth step by step, and when, at last, she had discovered him, she had devoted all the ingenuity of a loving heart to the desperate task of saving him.

The enthusiastic words of the girl had electrified Cornelia Vértessy; indeed, she, the gentler, calmer of the two, was quite carried away by Maria's courage, energy, readiness of resource and impulsive enthusiasm, so that she considered the most fantastic projects which the Polish lady elaborated on the spur of the moment with the rapidity of cloud formation, as perfectly natural and feasible.

They agreed between them that old Hétfalusy and his son-in-law should be brought together to the General's, that Cornelia, at the same time, should present to them the child who was believed to have perished, Maria undertaking to get it from its adopted father. They argued that the scene which would ensue, when the father and grandfather recognised the child they so ardently longed to see could not fail to touch the heart of the General, who at the same instant, when the grandfather recovered his grandchild, would complete the old man's joy by presenting him with his son also.

The dear conspirators had calculated all contingencies, and the whole thing seemed to them as feasible as it was romantic, and therefore bound to succeed ... but they forgot that Fate was, after all, mine host, and that the reckoning was in mine host's own hands and not in theirs.

Nevertheless, Maria, dressed in her masculine attire, which best suited her present purpose, mounted her nag again, and hastened off towards Hétfalu. On her way she posted a letter in which she instructed old Hétfalusy to get into his carriage and hasten to town as soon as possible, she herself meant to go straight to the headsman's dwelling.

It was already late when she turned into the main-road. The sun had already sunk, and there was in the sky that red glare, so trying to the eyes, which envelops every object in a yellow light and obliterates every shadow. In the western sky blood-red rays, like the spokes of a wheel, cut up the oddly-coloured sky into segments; while in the opposite, eastern firmament, solar rays of a similar description rose brown and lofty, like the horns of the crown of an avenging angel.

There was a sombre air of homelessness about the whole region. Not a bird was flying in the air, no cattle were grazing in the fields, even the merry chirp of the crickets was no longer to be heard in the wayside ditches. The road itself was overgrown with grass on both sides, scarce leaving room for a little winding ribbon of a track in the centre, and even there the ruts, which the last luckless cart had left behind it, were hidden by weeds. It was weeks since anybody had passed that way, for every village was afraid of the village next to it, every man avoided his neighbour, and feared to look upon his face.

The lanes and byeways had been quite abandoned, they were only distinguishable by the luxuriant crop of weeds which covered them—weeds more rampant and of darker colour than were to be found elsewhere. The whole land looked just as it used to look in the olden times after a Tartar invasion.

The horse trotted along all alone, before and behind him there was no trace either of man or beast, the rider looked round about her with a melancholy eye.

Here and there on both sides of the road crooked trees were tottering to their fall. They had been stripped bare by the devastating army of caterpillars, and instead of their beautiful green leaves they were clothed with the rags of dusty spider-webs; further away the fruitless orchards looked as if they had been burnt with fire, and, stretching to the horizon, as far as the eye could reach, the arid corn-fields had the appearance of being covered with nothing but scrappy stubble.

The atmosphere was oppressive and lay like a stifling weight on the breast of man; and if, now and then, a faint breath of air flitted languidly over the country, it was as burning hot as if it had just come out of the mouth of a blast-furnace, and only increased the exhausting sensation of oppression.

Then slowly, very slowly, it began to grow dark. There was a long black stripe all along the edge of the sky, which gradually bulged out into a sort of black veil, and as the infrequent stars twinkled forth in the pallid sky, this dark veil blotted them out one by one; it was just as if some mighty spirit-hand had drawn a crape curtain across a funeral vault bright with glittering lamps.

It was already midnight when Maria Kamienszka perceived the first roadside *csárda*10 which, according to her calculations, lay midway between the county-town and Hétfala. In the midnight gloom and silence it was easier to distinguish distant sounds than to clearly recognise near objects.

10 Inn.

It seemed to Maria as if she heard a medley of despairing yells and savage maledictions, and dimly discernible masses of men were moving up and down all round the house.

Instinctively she felt for the pistols in her saddle bow—there they were in their proper place.

In a few moments she was close up to the house and perceived clearly at last, with a tremor of horror, the spectacle that had long been engaging her attention.

Some hundreds of peasants, the dregs of the agricultural population, were swarming in and out of the *csárda* door, savagely singing and shouting. Two large casks had been planted in front of the house, their bottoms had been stoved in, and those of the mob who had got near enough were ladling out the brandy they contained in their hats. Some of these gentlemen could only keep their legs at all by leaning upon the object nearest to them. A white-bearded Jew had been tied to the leg of a chair placed between the two casks. The drunken mob was bestowing most of its attention upon him, and pulling out his beard hair by hair as they cross-examined him. The tortured victim was howling horribly, but would give his tormentors no answer, only from time to time he implored them to spare his innocent daughter. A childish shape, evidently a woman's, was lying across the threshold, and everyone going in and out of the door gave it a kick as he passed through. Fortunately she felt nothing more now.

Maria, full of indignation, spurred her horse right into the midst of the mob that was tormenting the old innkeeper, and exclaimed in a voice of virile assurance:

"What are you all doing here?"

The mob only first perceived the horse when it was right amongst them.

A young lout with a stumpy nose, which had evidently been broken some time or other, a bare breast, and a shock of ragged hair covering his face, answered the question.

"We are paying off a poisoner, young sir, if you must know."

"What poisoner do you mean?" inquired Maria, who had not the remotest idea what the fellow was driving at.

"What!" cried the stripling defiantly, "do you mean to say you don't know? Why, haven't the gentry got the Jews to put poison in the brandy! Why, everyone knows that."

Maria was so dumfounded that she had not a word to say in reply.

"Look! how he pretends to know nothing about it. But we are up to them. They may weave their plans as artfully as they like, we've got eyes in our heads all the same. All is betrayed. Come, thou Jew! confess that there is poison in that cask!"

And yet they all went on drinking out of the barrel as if they had made up their minds to discover what poison really tasted like.

The lout of a spokesman now filled his hat with brandy up to the brim, and held it out towards Maria.

"Come, young sir," said he, "if you don't believe that there's poison in it, just taste for yourself and see."

Maria, full of loathing, pushed aside the dirty hat-full of nauseous fluid.

"You see! he won't drink it! he knows there is poison in it."

"Pull him off his horse!" cried a voice from the midst of the crowd.

"We ought to hang him up where the Hétfalusy squires are going to be hung!" roared the others.

The dirty lout, who had offered her brandy, quickly seized the horse's bridle, and several of the mob stretched out their hands towards Maria.

These savage menaces acted like a stimulant upon the Polish lady, she recovered her presence of mind instantly. She brought down the round knob of her riding-whip like lightning on the head of the fellow who was trying to hold her horse back, and he fell like a log prone to the ground. Then giving her good steed the spur she leaped clear of the encircling mob. A bludgeon came whizzing after her just above her head, and the belated sweeping strokes of a couple of scythes just missed her. One or two agile young ruffians

even set off after her, and as two large waggons lay right across her path a little further on, they made sure of overtaking her there. But the lady, with a single bound, leaped over the obstacle, whereupon her pursuers remained behind, but as she turned her back upon them they sent after her a horrible yell of laughter. "That's right, go on!" she heard them cry, "you are going to a good place, where you'll be well looked after—ha, ha, ha!"

Maria had only proceeded a few hundred paces when she was thunderstruck to perceive that her horse was beginning to limp. More than once it stumbled heavily, and suddenly it went dead lame.

The good steed, when it leaped the obstruction, must assuredly have sprained its front leg.

Presently it could scarce put one foot before the other, and Maria was obliged to tighten the reins continually to relieve the poor beast and prevent it from stumbling as much as possible. It was as well that her pursuers had abandoned the chase, for she could scarce have hoped to escape from them now.

But what sort of disorderly mob could this be? Maria, now growing thoroughly alarmed, began to ask herself; a mob which had the audacity to indulge in such excesses in the midst of a civilised, constitutional state, in despite of all law and order? She had not the remotest idea that it was a widespread rebellion of the most horrible description.

Meanwhile, that black curtain had been drawn right across the sky, the whole region was in pitch-black darkness, one star after another had been blotted out, the horse hung its head and frequently whinnied. Maria felt that she could no longer remain safely in her saddle, fearing as she did that the horse might at any moment fall head foremost. So she dismounted, and letting the reins hang over her arm, led the horse along beside her.

It was hard to discern the grass-grown path in the darkness, and Maria immediately directed her footsteps towards a bright light in

front of her a long way off, which seemed to proceed from the windows of some wayside house.

As she drew nearer to this house it seemed to her as if masses of men were flitting backwards and forwards, and the din of many voices struck upon her ear.

And now it suddenly dawned upon her why her pursuers had laughed so loudly when they saw her take refuge in this direction, here also the road was barred.

For an instant she stopped short. Feminine weakness for a moment took possession of her heart, and a shudder ran suddenly through her whole body; it was one of those instinctive feelings of panic which we cannot explain to ourselves. Where can I take refuge? she thought. Shall I forsake the road and venture amidst the strange woods beyond? Then she bethought her on what errand she had come, and she trembled no longer, but drew forth her pistols from her holsters, looked well to their priming, placed one under her arm, took the other in her hand, and tying the horse to a tree by the roadside (for, indeed, of what further use was he now?), resolutely directed her steps towards the noisy mob.

It was now so dark that it would have been easy to have avoided them altogether by making a short circuit, but that sort of perilous curiosity which often urges men to thrust themselves into the very situations from which they instinctively shrink, would not now permit her to turn from her purpose of penetrating those howling masses there and then.

Only when she was already in the midst of them did they become aware of her.

"Stop!" resounded on every side of her, and the point of a scythe pressed against the breast of the intruder.

In the moment of danger Maria recovered in an instant all her presence of mind.

"Give me room! two paces at the least!" she cried with a clarion-like voice. "A step nearer and I shoot! What do you want here?"

At the sight of the pistol the sordid mob drew back. If she had wished to proceed the path now lay clear and unobstructed before her.

But now she had changed her mind. This nocturnal spectacle had put it into her head that here was some evil plot afoot against the Hétfalusy family. She must find out what it was, and if possible defeat it. So she repeated her question:

"What are you doing here?"

At that moment the door of the wayside house opened, and out came Thomas Bodza with a lamp in his hand.

"Who is talking here?" he asked, peering all around him into the darkness.

Some timorous peasant lads behind the door pointed out to him the new arrival, at the same time calling his attention to the fact that the stranger had a pistol in his hand, and it was therefore not advisable to go near him.

The master, however, boldly advanced towards Maria, and held the lamp high above his head the better to read the intruder's face.

"What a fine head that young squire has," growled shaggy Hanák behind his back, "it would look very well on the point of my scythe."

"Hush!" said the master. "I want to speak to him! Who are you, sir, and what do you want?"

"That is what I don't mean to tell to the first blockhead I meet. First of all I should like to know who you are. If you are robbers I shall defend myself against you to the best of my ability; if you are fools I shall try to enlighten you; if you are brave and honest men I will shake hands with you."

The last idea only occurred to Maria when she caught sight of Bodza's face. She had encountered such enthusiasts before now, and had had opportunities of studying them.

Bodza's eyes sparkled.

"We are neither robbers, nor fools, but brave men in very deed, who are battling for one great brotherhood, from the icy sea to the warm sea."11

11 *I.e.*, From the White Sea to the Black Sea; he meant the Slavs.

Maria at once stuck her pistol into her breast-pocket and confidentially extended her hand to the master.

"Then I greet thee, my brother, I have just come from Russia."

Thomas Bodza squinted suspiciously at Maria, and holding the iron ring on his little finger right in front of her eyes, inquired:

"Dost thou then know the meaning of these three letters: U. S. S.?"

Maria answered with a smile:

"*Ud slovenske stridnosce.*"12

12 "Member of the Slavonic League;" the language is Slovak.

Then the master did indeed press the hand offered to him.

"Come inside!" said he, himself escorting the stranger, whilst the peasants, obsequiously raising their caps, made a way for them right up to the door.

The master dismissed everyone from the room, and when they two were alone asked excitedly in Russian:

"You come from Russia, you say? From what part of Russia?"

"From the eternal city where stand the golden gates of the Kremlin," answered Maria, also in the Russian tongue.

All Bodza's doubts instantly disappeared.

"What news in the Empire since the death of Romulus?"

Maria knew very well whom was meant by Romulus. It was none other than Muraviev, who was to be the builder of the walls of the new Rome, which was ere long to be the Lord of the whole earth.

Maria was no proselyte of this extravagant confederacy, but, living, as she did, nearer to the main source of it all, she was better able, with the assistance of current rumours and her own lively imagination, to amuse Thomas Bodza with more fables than he could have told her.

"Romulus is not dead, Romulus is still alive," whispered she to the interrogator mysteriously.

"How so?" asked Bodza, much surprised; "where is he then?"

"He has disappeared—like Romulus. The Gods have taken him!"—and Maria smiled enigmatically, as if she could reveal a great deal more if she only chose.

Bodza seized her hand violently.

"And in his own time he will appear again, eh?"

The only answer Maria gave was to press his hand significantly.

"Then it is true that they have not beheaded him?" continued the master excitedly, "and one of his good spiritual brethren sacrificed himself in his stead?"

"It was my own brother," said Maria, covering her eyes with her hands. Then she suddenly placed her hand on the master's shoulder. "Weep not for him!" she cried. "Look! *I* do not weep, and yet he was my brother. Romulus still lives and demands sacrifice and obedience from us all."

The master pressed Maria's hand still more warmly.

"What is thy name, my beloved brother?"

"My name is Fabius Cunctator!" said Maria, well aware of the weakness of these visionaries for classical names.

"*My* name is Numa Pompilius," said Bodza, tossing back his head with proud self-consciousness. "Numa Pompilius, ever true to the good cause, fervent in action, lucid in counsel, pitiless in execution, and fearless in peril."

And again they pressed each other's hands in a fiery masonic grip, and all the while Maria was thinking: how I long to seize the dry skinny throat of this fervent, pitiless, and fearless man while he is spouting his finest, and throttle him on the spot.

"So you have raised the standard of revolt, eh?" inquired Maria of the valiant Numa Pompilius, "who gave you the signal?"

"Heaven and Earth," replied the master. "Heaven which sends death down upon the people, and Earth which opens her mouth to receive their dead bodies. Never was there a better opportunity than now. The terrible destroying angel is going from house to house, and striding from village to village, bringing with him wherever he goes sorrow and terror. Men perceive that life is cheap and that it can't last long. Desperation has severed every bond between masters and servants, creditors and debtors, superiors and inferiors. It needs but one spark to ignite the whole mass. That spark has already been kindled."

"How?"

"A blind rumour has begun to circulate among the masses to the effect that the gentry are about to poison their peasants *en masse*."

Maria looked at the master in amazement.

"But is there anyone who believes such a thing?"

"The tales of wayfarers first spread the rumour, the thoughtless speech of a drunken apothecary's assistant established it, intercepted letters written by the gentry to one another served as confirmatory testimony."

"And the gentry actually wrote to each other that they were about to poison the peasants?"

"No, but those who read out these letters to the people, took care to find therein things that had never been written down."

In her horror and disgust Maria had been on the point of betraying herself.

"Oh! I see. You read out forged letters to the illiterate people. A very judicious expedient, I must say. Village folks can be got to believe anything. But how about the townsfolk?"

"Oh! in the towns there is even more fear than in the country, and more terrifying rumours too. But one loud cry and the walls of Jericho will fall down—fall down where nobody expected it."

An idea suddenly flashed like lightning through Maria's brain.

"Have our brethren who dwell on the banks of the Drave13 and among the mountains of Chernagora14 been informed of this movement?" she asked.

13 The Croats and Serbs.

14 The Montenegrins.

The master, somewhat confused, replied that they had not.

"Then all our fine preparations will lead to nothing," rejoined Maria, with self-assumed despondency. "While you are awake in one place they are asleep in another; in one spot the flames are bursting forth, in another they are being extinguished. Why, they ought to have flashed forth everywhere at once. Have you issued proclamations?"

"No," replied Bodza shamefacedly.

"Then, Numa Pompilius, you know not what you are about," cried Maria. "Why, that was the first, the one absolutely indispensable thing to be done. You should have sent proclamations in every direction, you should have kept the local leaders fully informed of what was going on, you should have concentrated the whole force of the movement, you should have thoroughly systematized the whole concern. Ah! Numa, I see you are but a neophyte after all.

Why did you begin without inviting the aid of the Poles? This is just the sort of thing a Pole would understand! Have you writing materials handy?"

Startled into obsequiousness, Bodza produced ink and paper from some secret receptacle. He was humbly silent now. He felt himself in the presence of a man wiser than himself.

"And now sit down and write!"

Bodza obeyed mechanically. Maria dictated to him what he was to write, while she herself, at the same time, was writing something else on another piece of paper.

"Brethren!

"The long expected hour has at length struck. The flag is unfurled. The gentry want to extirpate us by means of poison, we will extirpate them with fire and sword. The brave shall live, the cowards shall die. Ye, who see your children, your parents tormented and grovelling in the dust, snatch up your arms and avenge them. Fear not the soldiers, they also will be on our side. Let none go who has short-cropped hair. Two deputies must proceed forthwith from every village to Hétfalu, which is to be the centre of our operations, and there await our further instructions. Valour and concord.

"Given at our headquarters near Hétfala."

"Write your name beneath it: 'Numa Pompilius, prætor of Upper Pannonia.'"

Thomas Bodza, with a spasmodic grin, accepted this title of distinction, and added his sprawling signature to the dangerous document.

Then Maria snatched up a pen, and subscribed it with the name: Fabius Cunctator, quæstor of Volhynia.

Then both documents were sealed with the famous signet ring, bearing the three mysterious letters, and also with Maria's family seal.

"And now send one of the documents by a rapid horseman to the Nyitra district, while I hasten with the other towards Slavonia. Meanwhile, you will organize here a standing army. You have already arranged, I suppose, to procure provisions and uniforms?"

Thomas Bodza confessed with a blush that he had *not* taken thought for these things.

"Well, write as soon as possible an open order to the presidents of the Tailor and Cobbler Guilds of Kassa and Rozsnyó, commanding each of them to provide, without fail, within ten days four thousand pairs of boots and just as many dolmans and szürs,15 and send them in carts to Hétfalu, otherwise you will levy upon them a grievous contribution."

15 A szür is a sheepskin mantle such as the peasants wear.

This letter also Thomas Bodza wrote as he had been told. "These Poles have had such lots of practice in such matters," thought he to himself.

"And now despatch one of these open orders by a swift courier to Rozsnyó, and the other I will take charge of. Do not forget to have numerous copies made of these proclamations for instant distribution throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom."

Bodza promised to make his pupils copy out the documents in question early on the following morning.

"And now, my brave Numa, don't forget that our watchword is: 'Valour and Concord!' Of valour we have no lack, but as regards concord I would first of all have you know why they call me Fabius Cunctator. My principle is: judicious procrastination! It was a premature signal, you will remember, which ruined the plots of Romulus II. If only he had waited for another half day, for another six hours, his enterprise would have been a triumphant success.

Only over-hastiness ruined us then. Lest a similar risk should befall us now, I would strongly advise you to postpone the general rising till to-morrow afternoon. To-morrow afternoon all the soldiery will quit Kassa for Eperies, and they will not be relieved for two whole days. You will now understand therefore why I want the rising postponed till to-morrow afternoon."

The master turned very pale.

"Too late now!" said he.

"How so?" exclaimed Maria confounded.

"All my orders have been distributed already."

"Then they must be recalled."

"It's impossible, impossible," cried the master, wringing his hands; and he glanced anxiously, from time to time, through the window, through which a far distant reddish light was beginning to illuminate the room. "They have already fired the house of the headsman."

"What!" cried Maria beside herself.

"That was to be the beginning of it. It is impossible now to hold them back any longer."

"Oh, fools and madmen!" hissed the lady. Her immediate impulse was to rush from the room. At the door, however, she recovered her *sang froid*, and, turning back, clutched Bodza by the arm and whispered in his ear:

"There is now only one remaining way of gaining a complete victory."

"What is that?"

"We must revolt the county-town also. If we succeed we shall have the General as a hostage, if we do not, at least we shall give the soldiers something to do."

Thomas Bodza, with his teeth all chattering, approved of this project. He would, however, have very much liked to know who would undertake this dangerous enterprise.

Never had Maria had to exercise such self-control as now, when, gazing through the window into the night, she watched with the utmost *sang froid* the distant conflagration which was lighting up the room.

For an instant the thought of what was happening there and what might be happening elsewhere flashed through her brain. She saw vividly before her all those midnight horrors, and all the time she had to affect an enthusiastic interest in the affair.

"Numa Pompilius, we must make haste! Have you a good steed handy here? Mine I have left behind on the road, it was no longer of any service to me."

"Be it so, Fabius! It was my first care to seize all the post-horses in order that the authorities should not send forth couriers for assistance. You see that I am provident. Choose the best horse for yourself and hasten whither you would. I entrust this province to you."

Bodza was magnanimous. The department of greatest danger and the glory of conquest he entrusted to another.

"I will hasten," cried Maria, flinging open the door—and for some moments she remained standing on the threshold. "Numa!" she cried at last, "you would let me depart alone?"

"Why not?"

"You are making a mistake. The popular leaders might be suspicious. Suppose they took me for a spy or a traitor? Never put your whole confidence in a single person. Always send forth your emissaries in couples, that one of them may be a check upon the other. That is a general rule. I am surprised that you have not learnt it hitherto."

Thomas Bodza admitted his mistake, but of course Fabius had had so much more experience in these matters. An escort he must have certainly.

Maria, on the other hand, required an escort in order to avoid being again detained by the mobs of rustics encamped in front of the *csárda*.

"Bring hither two good horses!" cried Bodza to the boor mounting guard in the corridor, and with that the pair of them stepped forth amidst the peasant host.

The peasants were scattered about in groups. Here and there some of them were engaged in sharpening their scythes. Others were standing round excited stump-orators, or making a frightful uproar over a few pence which they had found upon some poor Jewish tramp and would not divide fairly.

"My friends!" cried Maria, stepping into the midst of them, and speaking in a friendly confident tone, "can I find among you half a dozen stouthearted dare-devils who are ready, if necessary, to go through fire and water?"

The gaping rioters did not respond very willingly at first, but when Thomas Bodza assured them that they now saw before them one of the most powerful leaders of the movement, ten or twenty of them forced their way to the front, boasting loudly that they were prepared to face any danger.

"Remember this is no joke, my sons," continued Maria. "Are you ready to adventure yourselves with me in the county-town, read the proclamation in the streets, stir up the people there, provide yourselves with weapons and powder, and seize all the bigwigs at one stroke like a pack of wolves in a spinney?"

This little speech somewhat abated the ardour of the more clamorous heroes, yet two or three youths, well soaked with brandy, still persisted in beating their breasts with their fists, and declared that they were men enough for anything.

Maria selected from among them shaggy Hanák. The fellow had a face as broad as it was long, one half of which was covered with hair, the other with bristles; it was impossible not to take to him at once.

"You shall come with me. Mount on the other horse."

Shaggy Hanák did not wait for a second invitation. He managed somehow to scramble on to the horse's back, and could not help smiling with joy at the thought that at last he had a good steed beneath him.

Maria leaped lightly on to the second horse. It was a somewhat lean and bony beast of great powers of endurance.

"To-morrow about this time you shall hear of us," she said, addressing herself to Bodza. "Till then avoid every decisive step. Whomsoever you may capture keep a strict watch upon them, and see that no harm befall them. Do you take me? It is possible that the captives may attempt to put an end to their own lives. But we shall require them all on account of their confessions. Therefore take care of their lives. We must judge each one of them separately. Numa! take care to be ubiquitous. Valour and vigilance!"

Then, after pressing Thomas Bodza's hand once more, Maria put spurs to her horse and galloped briskly along the high road. As for the horse of her comrade it had to be almost dragged out of the courtyard, as it showed a disposition to force its rider to return to the stable. Only with the utmost difficulty did Hanák succeed in overtaking Maria, pursued by the yells of encouragement and exultation of the mob he had left behind him.

Maria pounded along the highway, glancing aside from time to time in the direction of the burning house, the conflagration of which lit up the overcast sky, tinging the clouds with an angry purple. The wind drove the lurid smoke hither and thither. There was as steady a glare as if a whole village was in flames. As they sped further and further away the flames lit up the road and the wayside trees, and the towering masses of clouds ever less and

less. At last all that was to be seen was a large blood-red star rising from the plain, a mere point of light far, far away. Then even that vanished. Soon afterwards day began to dawn. The cinder-grey sky reduced the nightly glare to ashes, and a dark grey column of smoke, standing out against the pale yellow horizon, was the only sign left of the conflagration.

On approaching the next *csárda*, Maria allowed Hanák to draw nearer to her; her escort had to explain to the mob of peasants drinking in front of the door on what errand they were speeding. He did so in his usual boisterous bombastic fashion.

"We are going to town," bawled he. "We are going to read the proclamation and collar the soldiers and the bigwigs, and bring back with us guns and gunpowder, and lots of money. This is the courier."

Hoarsely bellowed "Eljens!" greeted this magnanimous resolution. A guffawing scytheman, moreover, pressed with his horny palm the hand of Maria, for whom shaggy Hanák, in the fervour of his enthusiasm, could find no more important title than that of "courier."

As the day slowly began to dawn, the sobering breath of the fresh morning breeze blew full in the faces of the horsemen, and the towers of the county-town stood out plainly before them in the distance. And now Maria began to observe that her companion was lagging behind her at a considerable distance. More than once she had to shout back to him:

"My brother! don't drop behind so!"

"My horse is tired out," stammered Hanák, and he kept on mopping up the sweat from his towzled poll.

"Give him the spur, then!"

"I would if I had 'em."

"Then ride in front of me, and I'll whip him up from behind."

And so they went along pretty well for some time, but when the towers and steeples of the county-town drew very much nearer, shaggy Hanák began to complain that his saddle was nearly falling off.

"Dismount, then, and fix it tighter!"

The fellow dismounted accordingly, but he was fumbling about with it such a long time that Maria, growing impatient, herself leaped to the ground and tightened his saddle-girths.

"And now up you get and off again!"

Shaggy Hanák stuck all five fingers into his hairy poll and scratched his head all round beneath his cap, then suddenly, with an artful grin, he turned his face towards Maria.

"Hark ye! Are we really going into the town?"

"Of course we are."

"And you really intend to read out the proclamation, to seize the General, take away the guns, and capture the barrack?"

"Yes, and much more besides, when the business has been fairly begun."

Shaggy Hanák began to scratch his head still harder, and seemed to have a thousand and one things to put to rights in the horse's trappings. At last he came out with the following proposition:

"Listen, comrade! Don't you think it would be better if, when you went into the town, I remained outside and read the proclamation to all the people coming to market?"

"You can read then?"

"Read! A pretty sort of sexton I should be if I couldn't read!"

"Very well. I rather like your idea;" whereupon Maria drew from her side-pocket a couple of cigars wrapped up in part of an odd number of the Leutschau county newspaper, and gave the sheet to her valiant comrade, who glanced over it with the air of a

connoisseur, and, after declaring aloud that he quite grasped its meaning, folded it neatly up, and stuck it in the braiding of his cap.

"I'll read it in my best style," said he, "and will come to your assistance at the head of a fresh band of them."

Maria approved of his design, and, whipping up her horse, galloped towards the town at such a rate that shaggy Hanák felt constrained to pray Heaven that his comrade might not break his neck before he got there.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE MIDST OF THE FIRE.

Zudár was to-night more anxious than at other times. He had put up the iron shutters in front of his windows immediately after dusk, and had gone to bed much earlier than usual.

The evening prayer of the little girl soothed him for a while. "Amen! Amen!" he kept repeating after her, laying stress upon the word—and then something began agitating him again strangely.

"An evil foreboding, an evil foreboding," he kept on murmuring; "some great calamity is about to befall me."

"You have caught cold, my good father," said the little girl soothingly, stroking the old man's forehead with her tiny hand; "your hand is trembling, your head is burning..."

"I am all shivering inside," said the old man; "a sort of deadly coldness seems to come from within me. Don't you hear a noise in the courtyard?"

"There is nothing, my father. Only the horses are stamping in the stable."

"But don't you hear talking, whispering beneath the windows, just as if someone was digging at the wall below?"

"The dog is settling down for the night; 'tis he who is scratching down below there. Go to rest, my good father!"

"I will lie down, but I shall not be able to sleep. Put my musket at the head of my bed."

Elise took the gun down from the wall, examined it carefully to make sure that it was in perfect order, and then leaned it against the bed.

Then they both lay down.

Zudár kept conversing for a long time with Elise in the darkness, and assuring her that he should never go to sleep—nevertheless, suddenly, there was a deep silence, followed presently by a deep, thunderous snore, only interrupted from time to time by cries of terror, as if the sleeper were tormented by evil dreams, and at such times he would fling himself violently against the sides of the bed.

The child did not sleep. Resting on her elbows she lay there listening and gazing steadily into the vision-haunted darkness.

Presently it seemed to her also as if a large concourse of people was moving backwards and forwards along the wall outside, and a great deal of whispering appeared to come from the kitchen.

Suddenly she heard a soft knocking at the door, and the voice of Dame Zudár inquired:

"I say, Betsey! is your father asleep?"

"Yes," stammered the little girl.

"Some people have come hither from Kassa, they don't understand German, come out and speak to them!"

The little maid hastily put on her clothes and, opening the fast-locked door, went out into the kitchen.

Peter Zudár was continually tormented by evil dreams. Danger to Elise was the ever-recurring subject of his nightmares. Now he saw her wandering among rocks overhanging dizzy abysses, and would have stretched out his hand to lay hold of her and draw her back, but his hand could not reach her. Now a fierce wolf was pursuing the child, and he would have run after it with a gun, but his legs refused their service, or he forgot where the gun was, or it refused to go off.

Suddenly a shrill scream sounded in his ear.

"Father!"

Up he jumped. That cry had pierced through his heart, through every fibre of his body. It was Elise who was calling.

"Elise! Elise, my child! are you asleep? Were you calling just now?" he inquired softly.

Receiving no answer he turned towards the child's bed, which lay at the foot of his own, and sought for her little head on the pillow with his hand.

She was not there.

The same instant he heard the key of his room-door turning in the lock outside.

With one bound he was at the door. Not a word did he say, but he shook the door till it trembled on its hinges.

At that moment he heard hasty footsteps quitting the kitchen and the hall, and once more imagined he could distinguish Elise's stifled moans.

Redoubled fury lent gigantic strength to his Sampsonian frame. The door burst into two pieces beneath the pressure of his hands, and the upper portion containing the lock remained in his clenched fist.

He roared aloud for the first time as he rushed into the kitchen. It was no human voice, no intelligible sound, but the roar of a savage lion whose den has been broken into, and who scents the flesh of the huntsman.

And in response to this savage roar there arose from the courtyard the mocking yell of hundreds and hundreds of human voices, intermingled with laughter, curses, and threats.

For a moment he remained there dumfounded. What could it be? Surely not a band of robbers in collusion with his wife?

"Look out!" cried the shrill voice of Dame Zudár rising above the din outside, "the old carrion has a loaded musket, and would shoot at you if there were a thousand of you."

But Zudár did not even require the help of a loaded musket, he would have rushed out among them with his bare fists, but the

kitchen door was barred and bolted, and barricaded with all sort of heavy obstacles.

Panting hard, Zudár rushed back into his room, sought out a heavy axe, and rushed back to the kitchen door. At the first vigorous strokes the joints of the door began to crack.

"Quick! throw the bundles of faggots in front of the door!" shrieked the savage virago outside, "and set it alight at once! Don't you see the door is giving way?"

The courtyard was crowded with a mob of louts, armed with scythes and pitchforks, among whom stood Dame Zudár, with dishevelled hair and flaming eyes, like the very Fury of Revolt.

The peasant host quickly got together a heap of faggots, and carrying them to the door, literally buried it beneath them.

"And now a match! Let him burn in his own den!"

It was Zudár's own wife who thus exclaimed.

The boor who tried to kindle the fire was such a long time about it, owing to the damp tinder, that Dame Zudár impatiently snatched the flint and steel out of his hands, struck away at it till she had ignited the tinder, then thrust it with her own hand in the midst of the straw surrounding the faggots, fanned it with her apron till it burst into a vivid flame, and then ran across the courtyard to the other side of the faggot heap to set it alight there also. Her wild and tangled tresses fluttered in the tempest.

"My father, oh! my good father!" wailed a scarce audible voice from the bottom of the reed-covered waggon to which the headsman's horses had been attached.

The dry bunches of twigs and fire-wood suddenly began spluttering and crackling, and burst into a flame. The windows of the house were also crammed full with straw and sticks, and each heap of combustibles was ignited one by one. Soon something very like a big bonfire was blazing merrily all round the house.

The man imprisoned within there thundered away at the door with all his might, and at each terrible blow the besiegers laughed derisively.

"Bravo, fire away! Frizzle away in your own den, old Bruin!"

The thuds against the door had ceased; the flames were already leaping above the roof of the house; the whole building was burning with a steady glare, casting forth showers of sparks upwards towards the sky. And long, long after that, when the flames were towering upwards in each other's embrace above the ruins of the house, it seemed to many as if they heard, arising from the deepest depths of this furnace of blazing embers, the half-smothered sound of a deep sonorous voice intoning the vesper hymn. Perchance it was only imagination, only a delusion of the senses. Nobody *could* be singing there now, except it were the *soul* of the headsman. In a short half-hour the roof collapsed between the four walls, burying in a burning tomb all that lay beneath it, and millions of sparks rose straight up into the air.

"So there we have settled your account for you!" cried Dame Zudár, as the hellish glare of the fire lit up her passion-distorted face. "And now comes the turn of the castle!"

"Oh, my father! my poor father!" wailed the child, who lay fast bound at the bottom of the cart beneath a covering of rushes.

The furious virago gazed at her with gnashing teeth.

"Your father indeed! Your *real* father's turn will come later, my chicken. And now, my lads, let's be up and doing elsewhere!"

And, with that, she leaped upon the car, seized the reins in her hands and whipped up the horses, and before and behind her tore the savage, bloodthirsty mob with torches and pitchforks. There she stood in the midst of them with dishevelled, storm-tossed tresses like the Genius of War and Devastation rapt along on frantic steeds, with coiling snakes for hair, a terrible escort of evil beasts and semi-bestial men, and ruin and malediction before and behind her.

Zudár, as soon as he had guessed the hellish design of his enemies, hastily abandoned all attempts to stave in the door, and rushed to the rear-most room of the house with the intention of escaping into the garden through the window.

But what was his horror when he perceived that here also the windows were covered with a fence of dry reeds and faggots, through which the hissing flames were already beginning to wriggle like fiery serpents—clouds of smoke were already coming through the shattered windows.

Back again he hastened into the front room, the windows of which were guarded by iron shutters, which stopped the intrusion of the flames. Outside resounded the furious howling of the rioters, and all round about him too was to be heard the soft hissing fizz of the burning reeds and the licking of the flames, and the loud crackling of the dry beams—all around him and above his head also.

The iron shutters over the windows were gradually becoming red-hot, and, like transparent panes of glass, admitted the rays of the fiery sea beyond them, spreading a horrible scarlet glare through the room which coloured every object, every shadow, blood-red.

The imprisoned wretch kept running frantically up and down the room like a wild beast caught in a trap, striking the walls with his fist and hacking at the beams with his axe.

In vain, in vain, slash away as you will, neither on the right hand nor on the left, neither from above nor from below, is there any way of deliverance!

At last, in his despair, he began to sing the hymn:

"On Sion's Hill the Lord is God...!"

and collapsed upon his knees in the midst of the room.

And lo! the Lord answered the man who cried out to Him in his dire extremity. The boards resounding beneath him suddenly gave him a bright idea of deliverance. Above and around there was no

place of safety, but might there not be a refuge below—down in the cellar?

The entrance into the cellar was from the outside by an iron door; but if the vault beneath the room where he was, the ceiling of which had resounded so loudly beneath his footsteps, if this vault were broken open, it would be possible to get down into it that way.

Ah! how nice and cool it would be down there. The atmosphere of the room was now burning hot. Terror and exertion had bathed every limb of the headsman with sweat; the glare of the iron windows was merging into a dazzling white, and radiated a heat that burnt the eye that looked upon it. There was no time to be lost.

Zudár hastily broke up the floor with his axe, it would not be difficult for him to find the key-stone of the cellar beneath it.

Nevertheless, he had to be careful lest he should stave in the whole vault, and thus open a way therein after himself for the fire. He must cautiously pick out the mortar from the interstices with a knife, and lift up the bricks one by one.

And, now and then, in the midst of his work, he would stop and listen.

And then he would hear on every side of him a hubbub of wild voices, hissing, shrieking, savage dance-music, and bloodthirsty harangues.

Or was it, after all, but the many-voiced gabble of the flames above his head?

And on he went—digging, digging, digging.

The first layer of bricks over the vault was followed by a second. This cellar vault had been very strongly built, it was well lined with a double row of bricks. And he had to pick out each brick of the second layer as carefully as he had done with the first.

Meanwhile, in the roof above him, a rafter here and there was gaping open, and fiery monsters, with blood-red eyes, were peeping down at him and puffing clouds of blue smoke through the interstices. Thousands and thousands of voices were bickering and chattering with each other, the voices of the fire-spirit's little ones quarrelling with each other over every little bit of rafter till their old mother, the evil flame, burst roaring through a huge tough beam and frightened them into silence. And, all the time, something was humming and crooning like a witch hushing little children to sleep; and in the midst of the charred and smouldering embers a buzzing and a fizzing was going on continually, like the noise made by an imprisoned bee; and the pent-up blast howled dismally down the chimney: Hoo! hoo! hoo!

"They are dancing and singing outside there!" murmured the headsman to himself.

And now the second layer of bricks was also pierced, and up through the rift, like a blast of wind, rushed the cold air of the cellar. Peter Zudár bent low over the gap and filled his lungs with a good draught of the life-giving air. He regularly intoxicated himself with it.

The gap was just big enough to enable him to squeeze through it.

First, however, with perilous curiosity, he cast a look round the room he was about to leave. The principal girder of the ceiling was bent in the middle from the intense heat, smoke was pouring into the room through every crack and crevice, and filled it already to the height of a man's stature; it was slowly descending in regular layers, lower and lower, like a gradually falling cloud.

Little fluttering fiery threads were darting hither and thither, in the grey cloud, like tiny flashing birds. The fiery spectre, peeping through the rent in the roof, was already laughing a thunderous "ha! ha! ha!" Peter Zudár laughed back at it.

"If thou dost laugh, I can laugh too, so the pair of us may laugh together!"

Already he had crept half through the opening, whence he observed how the beams were curving above his head, how they were bursting and charring.

All at once he recollected something.

Hastily he scrambled out of the hole again. To walk upright in that room was impossible, for the clouds of smoke were now only three feet from the ground. He crept along the floor on all fours to his oaken chest, opened it, and drew forth therefrom a little Prayer Book and a couple of ribbons, which he thrust into his bosom.

Then he also drew forth a long leather bag which was fastened at each end by a clasp. These clasps he opened, one by one, with the utmost composure. Inside lay the *pallos*,16 that bright, two-edged implement which flashes at the command of the criminal law, the weapon of Justice.

16 The sword of the public executioner.

When Peter Zudár felt it in his hand, his gigantic figure suddenly arose bolt upright, and there he stood amidst the smoke, amidst the flames, like an avenging demon, slashing about him with his sparkling blade as if he would say to the smoke and the flames, "Fear me! I am the headsman!"

At that moment a thundering crash resounded behind him. His gun, which had been leaning up against the wall, suddenly exploded by reason of the intense heat, and the bullets penetrated the wall.

The shock recalled Zudár, whom a sort of frenzy had seized for a moment, to his senses, and quickly crouching down upon the floor, he tore a cushion from the bed and dragging it after him, crept towards the gaping hole in the floor. The cushion he flung down before him and then leaped carefully after it.

The cool air of the cellar gradually restored him to himself again; the oppression of the fierce heat no longer tortured his brain, the semi-darkness was so grateful to his eyes, already half-blinded by

the flames, a semi-darkness but faintly illuminated by the gleam of the fiery-world above shining through the gap.

Then it occurred to him that this very gap was now superfluous.

In the stands of the cellar were several casks, large and small, either empty or full of beer and wine.

He rolled one of the empty casks below the hole in the ceiling, and turned it upside down. Then he stove in the top of a beer-cask and dipped into it the cushion, allowing the beer to well soak through it. Then he mounted on the top of the empty cask and thrust the saturated cushion into the hole above.

It was now quite dark in the cellar, but Peter Zudár knew his way about there all the same. He was well aware of the exact locality of the best cask of beer, and lost no time in staving in the top of it, found a pitcher in a niche close at hand, filled it with fresh beer, sat him down by the side of the barrel, and took a monstrously long pull at his pitcher. After that he moistened well his head and face, and then he replenished his pitcher and took another long draught.

Above his head there the roof now fell in with a loud roar and a crash, and the whole tribe of flames laughed and roared in their joy at having done their work so well.

"We have roasted his goose for him, anyhow!" cried Dame Zudár outside, and her band of rogues and scoundrels laughed and bounded for joy.

But down in his underground asylum the old headsman sang from the depths of a fervent heart:

"To thee, O Lord! on Sion's Hill,
All praise and glory be."

And he drew his fingers along the double edge of the sword—right well had it been sharpened, nowhere was there the trace of a notch, nowhere.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LEATHER-BELL.

We Magyars are very liberal in the distribution of nicknames, in this respect, indeed, our fancy outruns that of the Princes of the Orient, and the titles we bestow are even more appropriate than theirs.

In Hétfalu "Leather-bell" was the nickname of a peculiar man, whose real name had quite slipped out of everybody's memory. This derisive epithet was given to him by the housewives to whom he used to convey all the local gossip, to wit: who it was who died to-day, where he was going to be buried, whose turn it was to work for the castle this day or that, who was doing the rector's cooking for him, &c., &c., &c. This was the name he went by throughout the parish when he went about telling everybody in which house there was going to be a birth, a marriage, or a funeral; who was in need of the last sacraments, or how much wine the squire gave for the use of the Lord's Table. This was the title by which he was greeted at the castle, where he religiously presented himself to inform the good folks there where serviceable domestics could be got, or where anything was to be sold, or what were the current prices of corn and poultry. He himself was half the servant of the gentry, and half the servant of the community; nay, he belonged somewhat to the village priest also, and indeed to any good fellow who had a glass of beer to offer him. He was perpetually scurrying from house to house, from the local magistrate's residence to the market-place, from the market-place to the castle, from the castle to the parsonage, from the parsonage to the miller's, the pot-house, and the tavern, thence into the fields, and thence again into the courtyards. He would pick up something here and something there, something he might, perhaps, have heard at the church porch or up in the belfry; or something would catch his ear as he was dawdling among the waggons on a market-day, and he would immediately run and repeat it at the

miller's. By the time he had reached the pot-house he would hear his own invention, already well amplified and nicely embellished, circulating from mouth to mouth as an absolute fact. Whereupon he would dash off with this enlarged edition of it to the castle, stopping, however, to tell it to every living soul he met on the way with all the variations which struck him as most appropriate on the spur of the moment, so that he really well-earned the epithet of "Leather-bell," inasmuch as he was performing all the functions of a bell, and, nevertheless was covered with a coat of skin or leather.17

17 The Hungarian word "bör" means both skin and leather.

On this particular momentous evening, the Leather-bell, all hurry-scurry, rushed into the porch of the castle, where the old lord of the manor was nursing his invalided limbs in an ample easy chair, having so disposed himself as to be able to command a view of the western sky, still lit up by the faint hues of sunset.

Once upon a time the Leather-bell must have been a tall man, but excessive salutations had so bent his back, and an incessant to-ing and fro-ing had given his head such a forward inclination, that whoever beheld him now for the first time must needs have suspected him of an intention to run straight under the table incontinently. He was the very image of obsequiousness, and he presented his back to the world as though he would say: "Smite away at it whoever has a mind to."

Old Hétfalusy liked to see the man. He had leave to come and go whenever he chose. He was free to relate serious matters with a smiling face, and amusing incidents in a whining voice, especially as the points of all the jokes generally turned against himself.

"I kiss your honour's hand," said the Leather-bell, depositing his hat and stick in the doorway. "I kiss your hand (and kiss it he did there and then). How frightfully hot it is outside, and oh! what a lot of dust. Those boors are always routing it up with their ox-waggons. They *make* all the dust, I do believe. My throat is full of it, and it lies heavy on my chest. Oh no! I humbly thank your

honour! Don't put yourself about! I'll not have a drink. Yes, I really mean it. I didn't say I was thirsty on that account. Wine does not suit my constitution at this time of day. Besides, to tell you the truth, I have had some already. For how else could I endure this terrible heat and this horrible dust. It weighed so upon my chest that I was obliged to look in at Samsi's tavern for an instant. Oh no! I assure you I did not go there on that account. I only wanted to have a word or two with my good friend the magistrate. He was not there, it is true, but instead of him I found the sworn jurors, Spletyko and Hamza, and a couple of peasants, who thereupon seized and offered me some brandy to drink. Your honour will graciously understand that I don't like brandy very much, my constitution won't stand it, and then it was only the afternoon, and it is not wholesome to drink so early. So, says I, thank you, but I won't take any, whereupon every man jack of them fell fiercely upon me. 'Oh, ho!' they cried, 'so you too have already been primed what to drink and what not to drink, eh? So they have told you that the brandy has been poisoned, eh?'

"'What do you mean?' I cried.

"'The brandy is poisoned.'

"'Who has poisoned it?'

"'Who but the bigwigs themselves.'

"'Fire and flames! here goes!' I shouted in my horror, and forthwith, just to show my indignation, I seized and emptied every glass I could get hold of one after the other.

"'Poison, eh!' says I, 'poison! how can it be poison if I drink it? I'm as alive as ever I was, ain't I?'

"'Well,' says that squinting blockhead Hamza, 'if there's no poison in that cask there is in the other, so draw us some out of that, Samsi!'

"But Samsi durst not leave the room, he made out that an ague was shaking him, so his wife went instead of him down into the cellar

in the presence of the two sworn jurors, and brought a sample for tasting out of every cask. I assure your honour it was very hard upon me, for brandy does not suit me at all, yet, out of gratitude to your honour, I drank all this new stuff likewise. It is a marvel to me that I didn't grovel on the ground and root up the earth with my nose, so much did I drink.

"'Well,' cried I, 'should I not be dead by this time if there was really poison in it?'

"All that squinting Hamza could say in reply was:

"'Well, if there's none in to-day there will be some in to-morrow.'

"'Very well,' says I, 'I will come to-morrow also, and the day after to-morrow likewise; and, in fact, every day, and I'll taste every one of your drinks, one after the other, and show you that I'm none the worse.'

"Those were my very words. And I'll do it too, your honour, that I will, although it will be very hard upon me, for I can't abide spirits. But I won't allow your honour's noble family, to whom I owe so much, to be maligned by any pack of boors in the world."

Old Hétfalusy let the Leather-bell rattle on, perhaps he did not even listen to him. He paid as little attention to the tongue of the Leather-bell as he did to the clapper of the bell that hung in the church tower, perhaps less. For, indeed, in the solemn sonorous ding-dong, ding-dong of the church bell, those who have ears to hear, and still preserve memories of the past, may recognise the voices of the dead telling them all manner of mysterious things.

The brilliant exposition of the Leather-bell was interrupted by the arrival of Dr. Sarkantyús, who drove into the courtyard in a wretched chaise, dragged along by a couple of rustic nags, and immediately hastened up to the Squire.

The Leather-bell hastened forthwith to the chaise in order to take out the doctor's things, and as it was his ambition to load himself with as many boxes and packages as he could seize upon before

the arrival of the domestic heydukes, he managed in his excess of zeal to drop three of the parcels on to the ground, one of which immediately burst asunder, and a stream of whitish powder poured forth upon the marble floor.

The doctor turned upon him furiously.

"Am I not always telling you not to load yourself so much? You see the result, all my bismuth powder wasted."

"I'll soon pick it all up again," said the Leather-bell submissively, and going down on his hambones he began sweeping into the palm of his hand what had been spilt and putting it back with the rest.

At this the doctor was ready to thrash him on the spot.

"What! mix what is all full of dust with what is still pure—go to the devil!"

"I humbly crave your pardon, doctor, but wouldn't it do for the cattle?" asked the mischief-maker with an obsequious smile.

"Cattle indeed! Does the fellow suppose I carry about drugs for pigs and oxen."

"I mean there's so much of it."

"None too much for such cattle as you, but now what has been spilt must be swept away."

And the doctor snatched the damaged box from the fellow's hands, and hastened into the house with it.

The Leather-bell remained kneeling on the ground, staring amazedly with foolish, wide-open eyes at the spilt powder. Then he moistened the tip of his index-finger in his mouth, and dipping it gingerly in the powder, transferred a tiny morsel thereof to the tip of his tongue, and instantly fell expectorating in every direction. At last he frantically scraped a good bit of it together, drew his handkerchief from his breast-pocket, shovelled a portion of the suspicious substance into it, looking round cautiously all the

time in case anyone should see him, then shuffled out of the hall, departed from the courtyard by way of the garden, and, once free of the house, set off running rapidly towards the inn on the outskirts of the village, as if the most fleet-footed of horrors were behind him, his head, as usual, being a good yard or so in advance of his feet.

When he entered the tavern it never once struck him how very calm and peaceful it happened to be there at that particular moment. Mr. Martin Csicseri, the village justice, was sitting at the head of the table, and before him on the table lay his long hazel stick.

"I wish you a very good evening, my dear Mr. Justice and good Mr. Comrade, if I may make so free. 'Tis a good job you are here. And where may Hamza and Spletyko be?"

The village justice regarded him angrily.

"They are in a very good place where they will do no mischief—the stocks."

"Really? Well, they will certainly be well looked after there. All the same it is a great shame they are not here just now." Then, lowering his voice mysteriously, he added: "Well, my honoured comrade, I myself can now say that it is all up with us."

"How is it all up with us?" inquired Martin Csicseri, leaning both elbows heavily on the table.

"Oh, it's all up with us in every way, all up, all up!" wailed the Leather-bell, rapidly pacing up and down the room, and pressing his head betwixt his hands. "It is all up with the whole village."

"Will you tell me how it is all up with us, you old woman, you. Are you aware that this stick has an end to it, and I am very much inclined to give it some work to do on your back this instant?"

The fellow made as if he would simply answer the justice's question, yet all the while he kept glancing about him timidly, till five or six inquisitive rustics had also gathered around him, only

then did he exclaim in a strident whisper: "The poison has already arrived!"

"You're a fool!" cried the justice, starting back as he spoke.

"I am not. I have seen and tasted it, and I have brought some of it with me. The doctor himself admitted that the county authorities had sent a large trunk of poison hither, and were going to make us drink it. The box was in my hand. I lifted it down from the carriage. Divine Providence so ordered that it fell from my hands, and a whitish powder poured out of it. The whole box was full of that powder. The doctor was horribly frightened, and swore at me like anything for my clumsiness. I *saw* him, I tell you, he grew quite yellow. I merely asked whether this medicine might not be for the cattle, but he savagely snatched it from my hand, and said he would make our heads ache with it."

"Is that true?" asked a terrified boor on the other side of the table.

"As true as I'm alive. The doctor immediately ordered the domestics to sweep the spilt powder away lest one of the animals should taste it and perish instantly; but I managed to scrape together a little of it first, and here it is in the corner of my handkerchief."

And the Leather-bell undid his handkerchief and poured the powder out upon the table.

The boors, with the fearful inquisitiveness of professed connoisseurs, carefully regarded the strange awe-inspiring powder from every side—so this was the murderous instrument of extirpation.

Some of them had heard, somewhere or other, that it was usual to make preliminary experiments with such poisons on the brute-beasts. One of them accordingly smeared a piece of bread with the powder, and offered it to a large shepherd's dog extended at his ease beneath the table. The dog sniffed at the morsel but would not touch it.

"Poison! poison!" cried those who stood around full of horror.

"Didn't I say so!" cried the Leather-bell, with a radiant face; but his joyful triumph was very speedily embittered, for when he least expected such a distinction, he became sensible that the long hazel cudgel of the village justice was unmercifully belabouring his back and shoulders.

"You good-for-nothing, lying wind-bag you, how dare you calumniate your own landlord? You hound of the whole village, you! that barks at every man behind his back, and licks his hand when he faces you. You dare to come hither with such idle stories at a time when there's already far too much discord among the people! You good-for-nothing vagabond! What! I suppose you want the peasant folks to beat the landlords to death, burn their castles to the ground, and rob them of everything? Coward and rebel as you are, the gallows-tree is far too good for you. I tell you what it is. I'll put you in irons and send you to the county jail, and there you may sit till your turn comes to stand before the judges. You incendiary, you!"

The Leather-bell was thoroughly scared, he began to hedge.

"Alas! my dear sweet Mr. Justice, and my good friend, don't be angry! God bless me! Why should I wish our landlord beaten to death? God preserve us from anything so dreadful."

"Who are you aiming at then?"

"I? Nobody at all. Not for all the world would I injure anyone. Oh, dear no! I only opened my mouth in order that every poor mother's son of us might look out for himself and guard himself, that's all."

"Guard himself!—from what?"

"From danger."

"And who told you there was any danger here? Don't you know that the doctor has a long way to go, and many people to cure, and must therefore carry a great many drugs along with him? And

you, you senseless ass! dropped one of his medicine boxes, spilt the contents, and instantly jumped at the conclusion that it was poison! Poison! your grandmother! It is true, no doubt, that if a man in health takes medicine he will have stomach-ache for his pains, but if he be sick the same medicine will cure him. Every fool knows that. Drugs are not good to eat."

A couple of the more sensible peasants murmured approvingly behind him. The Leather-bell stood confounded before the magistrate, and made a sort of downward movement with his hat as if he would have liked to scatter to the winds the little bit of powder still lying on the table.

"And now tell me, you seditious idiot, what might not have happened if these honest men here had not had their wits about them? What if they had believed the horrible accusation spread by you and a few more vagabond busybodies of the same kidney? What if in their mad terror they had fallen foul of your young landlord, who has done you so much good, and shot him dead before your eyes? What if they had dragged his father, the old squire, out of bed in his nightshirt, and burnt him to death? What would you have done then, you good-for-nothing? I suppose you would have sharpened the knife that cut their throats?"

The knees of the Leather-bell smote together; he stammered piteously that he had had no idea that such horrible things would follow from what he said, that he had, in fact, not been thinking at all of what he was saying.

"Well, you will have plenty of time to think it over when you are sitting in the county jail."

The Leather-bell begged and prayed that he might not be sent there, rather shove him in the stocks alongside Hamza. He admitted that he deserved it; but if they liked to give him twenty or thirty blows with a stick instead, he would take it kindly of them. He had meant no harm, and he would never spread any more such rumours.

Meanwhile, no one had remarked that the tap-room had gradually been filling with silent, savage-looking forms, one of whom, while listening attentively to the conversation, began sweeping the suspicious-looking powder into the palm of his hand.

Mr. Martin Csicseri was so far moved by the piteous lamentations of the Leather-bell as to promise not to cast him into irons and send him to the county jail as a fomenter of sedition.

"But you shall, at any rate, sit in the stocks till morning, my friend!" added he. "Hie, you sworn jurymen, come forward and convey him thither."

"Nay, not that man!" cried a voice from the crowd, and the magistrate beheld Thomas Bodza advancing towards him—by the side of the long table.

"Whom then?" cried he.

"Whom but yourself!" exclaimed Numa Pompilius, accompanying his words with the gesture of a Roman Senator.

For the moment it occurred to the magistrate that the worthy rector who was not, as a rule, addicted to strong drink, had actually, for once, taken more of the noble juice of the grape than was quite good for him, so he simply laughed at him. All the more astonished, therefore, was he when, at a sign from the master, two strange men rushed upon him and seized his hands fast.

He had never seen their faces before, they were men who did not belong to the village.

"What's the meaning of this, eh?" he thundered, giving one of them a rattling box on the ear and knocking the other down. It was of no use. Ten at least instantly threw themselves upon him, seized his hands and feet, threw him to the ground and bound him fast. One or two of his acquaintances tried to defend him but were thrust aside.

So long as the tussle lasted, Thomas Bodza stood upon the table with the pose of a capitoline statue, whence he exclaimed in a dictatorial voice:

"It is now for me to command."

The pinioned magistrate continued to curse and swear, and threaten the rioters till they shoved a gag into his mouth. As for the Leather-bell, he hid himself behind the fireplace partly to avoid blows, partly from a fear that this business would have unpleasant consequences, and he might be called upon to give evidence. He wanted neither to hear nor see anything more.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SENTENCE OF DEATH.

The candles were burning on the table though it was broad daylight, the bells were tolling though nobody was sick, the coffin had also been made ready though nobody was dead.

The hard sentence had been pronounced over the poor sinner, he must die. The law demanded his head. If his dear father and mother and all his brothers and sisters were to plead for him all day long they could not wash away the strict letter of the law with their tears.

All those who sat by the long table, the captains, lieutenants, and common soldiers, all of them wished, longed, to avoid uttering the fatal word. The General himself covered his face with his hands as he uttered the words:

"With God there is mercy!"

In his hand he held a little staff, a little white staff. From time to time he glances at it, it is still whole, still smooth and unbroken.

The old sergeant-major approaches him, his shako on his head, his storm-belt strapped down over his shoulder, one hand by his side, the other touching the band of his shako.

"Mercy, General, for the poor condemned prisoner!"

"With God only there is mercy."

Again the sergeant-major raises the tip of his palm to the cord of his shako and makes his petition.

"Mercy, General, for the poor condemned criminal!"

A third time he utters his appeal.

"With God only there is mercy," is the General's reply.

The little white staff falls to the ground broken in two. The condemned man gives a sigh of relief, thanks the gentlemen present for the trouble they have taken, the good sergeant-major for interceding on his behalf, and the rigorous judge for pronouncing over him the sentence of the law.

Then they take him away to the house of mourning, give him a white uniform to put on, and set meat and drink before him that he may eat and drink for the last time.

That day the iron man was afraid to go to his own quarters.

Suppose Cornelia were to ask him what sentence he had pronounced upon the son of his enemy?

He durst not go home, he was actually afraid.

He was still brooding there when the gaoler came to tell him that the condemned man wished to say a few words to the General privately.

Vértessy hastened to him at once.

"You defended yourself badly," said he reproachfully on entering, "you made it impossible for us to pronounce any other sentence."

"I know that, I wished it so," replied the youth with a bright, calm countenance. "That is all over now, General; it was a soldier's duty to condemn me. In three days' time I am to die. Take it as if I was very sick, and the doctors had told you beforehand that I had only three more days to live."

"I will send the sentence to His Majesty."

"It would be useless. Why, even you can advance nothing in my defence, and I have myself nothing to allege in mitigation of my sentence."

"But I know everything. Others have come forward to defend you, and if you had not cut the ground from under my feet by your defiant answers before the court-martial, I might have devised some means of saving you."

"I am surprised that anyone should have defended me. I know of none who might bear me in mind."

"Indeed yes. First of all there was my wife."

"Ah! General, such knowledge will make my death the easier."

"Then there was the man you fired at in your stupid jealousy."

"Then he did not die after all?" exclaimed the youth joyfully. "It does me good to hear that."

"That's all one so far as you are concerned. You have in any case committed a capital offence."

"But my heart is the easier, nevertheless. A load has been removed from it. I thank you. What you have said will shorten my last moments."

"Your third advocate was your father."

"What?" stammered the youth with trembling lips—"my father, did you say?—my own father?"

"Your own dear father. He wrote to me with those trembling hands of his, those hands which have barely recovered from a paralytic stroke. He wrote to me himself—do you realise what that means?"

"He wrote on my account!" whispered the condemned man, clasping his manacled hands together and closing his heavy eyelashes over his moist eyes.

"Your fourth advocate was Count Kamienszki, whose sister you will doubtless remember."

The youth looked up in astonishment.

"I have no recollection of such a person. *She* had no brother."

Vértessy shrugged his shoulders.

"He himself told me so, he was with me here to-day."

A struggle with a torturing suspicion seemed to be going on in the young soldier's troubled mind; presently, however, he turned to the General with a radiant countenance and said to him with a smile:

"All these things, General, will alleviate my chastisement and I thank you for telling them to me. I regret that my misfortune will cause others to shed tears which I did not expect, which I do not desire; still, they will greatly ease my affliction. I am sure that you too, at the bottom of your heart, forgive me and my poor family—you do forgive us, General, do you not? Will you not even go further and protect that poor old man who has now got nobody to stand by him?—will you not be his protector if any danger, yes, any great danger should threaten him?"

The General pressed the young man's extended hand—the chains rattled on the hand that he held in his.

"And now, General, may I speak to you of a very serious matter? Would you be so good as to hear me out?"

"Say on."

"And you will not take what I am about to tell you as the mere ravings of a disordered brain? Many men's brains grow disordered at the approach of death I know; you will not imagine that I am simply delirious, will you? You will believe that I am well and with all my wits, sound both in heart and mind, will you not?"

The General nodded.

"First of all I would beg you not to postpone my execution for the usual three days. Let it take place sooner. I do not ask this for my own sake. I am as good as dead already, my time has run."

"Why do you make this request?"

"I will tell you presently. Then I would beg you not to conduct me outside the town; the execution could take place just as well inside the courtyard of the barracks."

"Very well, I will promise you that."

"And, finally, announce the execution for the afternoon and have it carried out in the morning, early, at break of day, before anyone is awake."

"What are your reasons for so extraordinary a request?"

"I will tell you, General. You know right well what terrifying rumours have been circulating through the land in consequence of the extraordinary, unprecedented epidemic now raging there. I had an opportunity of discovering, involuntarily, the designs of sundry malevolent persons who looked upon this terrible time as an excellent occasion for carrying out their nefarious designs. The dregs of the population have been roused to action, and only await the signal to pour their ignorant, brutal herds all over the kingdom. This is no idle tale I am telling you, General. I have heard their seditious mutterings, I have read their letters, I have seen the lists of the names of those who are to fall the first victims. My father's name stands at the very top of the list. His peasants have always hated him as much as they have loved me. One of the leaders of these secret conspirators was formerly a fellow-soldier with me, since then he has been compelled to quit the service. I accidentally met him in Galicia, where he was pursuing his secret plans. He promised to hide me away, and, immediately afterwards, went and denounced me. It is part of his infernal plan, when I am led outside the town and a large crowd of people have come together to see the execution, to incite the mob to riot, overpower the little band of soldiers guarding me, release me, proclaim me far and wide as a hero, and use my name as the means of provoking a general rising. You can see, General, with what horror I so much as mention this affair, you can see that I have neither dreamt nor imagined it, but shudder at it, and for that very reason would hasten on my exit from this world."

The General really did believe that the youth was not quite in his right mind.

The young man perceived the cold smile on the General's face, and convulsively grasping his hand with his own manacled hands, exclaimed despairingly:

"General! they would murder my father, they would destroy my house, my nation!"

"Who forsooth?" inquired the General with an expression of unutterable contempt. "These skulking loafers, eh? I will not presume to deny that they may, perhaps, intend to do what you say, such ideas may and do occur at times to some blockhead or other. But I do not believe that the time will ever come for the realisation of such projects. But if anybody should attempt to move in the matter, I solemnly assure you that at the very first outcry he will be a dead man!"

And he tapped his sword with proud self-consciousness.

At that moment an adjutant hastily entered the room and announced that there were suspicious gatherings of the people in the market-place and the streets of the town. They were exclaiming loudly against the gentry and the soldiers, and were goading one another on with incendiary speeches. It had been found necessary to bar the gates of the town hall against them, and the windows of an apothecary's shop had already been smashed. Apparently they meant to give most of their attention to the barracks and the town hall.

The General had no sooner hastened out of the corridor than he already heard in the adjacent streets, that vague hubbub whose chaotic voice sounds so terrifying in the ears of the faint-hearted, who know not whether it is an alarm of fire or a hue and cry after a murderer.

On the present occasion, however, there was both fire and murder in the sound—it was a riot.

In a distant part of the town some over-zealous guardians of public order had set ringing the alarm-bells, whose strident semi-tones rose above the low hideous murmur of the mob.

The General hastened into the courtyard. The soldiers were already standing there under arms.

There was scarcely more than two hundred men there, the rest were a long way off, forming part of the far-stretching military cordon.

This, however, was quite enough for Vértessy's purpose.

What had he to fear? It was impossible to conceive that the honest scythe and saddle makers of the town, the peaceful citizens who had only to do with planes and awls and shuttles, would dare to attack him forcibly and compel him to retire before them.

Swiftly, but with the utmost *sang froid*, he made his preparations.

Half a battalion took up a position outside the gate guarding every approach, the rest remained within the courtyard.

The rifles of the soldiers outside the gate remained unloaded.

At three rolls of a drum the remaining column also marched out into the street.

A single word of command would suffice for subsequent tactics.

It was also considered necessary to close the gates of the neighbouring house, and two sentries were posted outside it with loaded muskets.

All this was done in the most perfect order, there was no hurry, no bustle.

In that house opposite dwelt the General's wife; one could reach it from the barracks across a garden.

Vértessy had just completed his preparations when Cornelia's maid came hastening up to him and whispered something in his ear.

For a moment a smile of delight flashed across the General's face, which immediately afterwards, however, formed into still darker folds than before.

Hastily transferring the command to his first lieutenant, he hastened to his dwelling, promising to be back in a moment.

It must indeed have been a matter of importance to have constrained Vértessy to quit the post becoming a soldier at such a moment.

He hastened as fast as he could go to his wife's bedchamber.

The curtains had been let down, in the semi-obscure alcove lay a pale woman, seemingly a corpse which, nevertheless, was suffering the torments of life.

Domestics were gathered round the bed, at a table sat the doctor writing something.

Vértessy had already unfastened his sword outside so as to avoid making a clatter. He now rushed to Cornelia's side, seized her trembling, sweat-covered hand, and, pressing it to his lips, inquired:

"How do you feel?"

"On the threshold of death," answered the lady, and with her other arm she drew down her husband's head towards her that she might kiss it. Her whole face was as white as marble, and the cold sweat stood out upon her forehead like pearly beads.

"The coming hour has secrets of its own, Vértessy," lisped the lady, pressing Vértessy's hand in her own, "whether it be good or evil, joy or death."

Vértessy's eyes interrogated the doctor as if he hoped for some comforting reassurance from him.

The doctor beckoned him aside.

"She is suffering tortures," he whispered, "but she would hide it from you."

"She may hide it in her voice, but I can tell it is so from her breathing. Is the danger great?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Pretty much as usual. She is very nervous, and besides that, there is something on her mind."

"What can it be?"

"It would be as well, General, if you ascertained. At such a time peace of mind is a matter of life or death, and fear or any feeling of anxiety might have a bad effect upon—a new life."

At the words "a new life" that involuntary gleam of joy flashed across Vértessy's lips once more. He went back to his wife and knelt down on her tapestried cushion.

"Cornelia, how are you?"

"In God's hands," whispered the lady, raising her glorious eyes. "God chastises and is merciful as it seemeth Him good."

Her convulsive pressure showed Vértessy what she must be suffering.

"There is mercy with God," faintly murmured the lady once more.

Vértessy felt his heart tremble at these words. An hour before he also had said: "With God there is mercy," and that to a man who had promised himself a long life.

The lady turned towards him with a languid look, pressed both her husband's hands to her breast, and looking long and painfully into his eyes, she asked:

"Will God be merciful to me?"

"To thee, my angel?—yes!—oh yes!" stammered the General.

"And have you also been merciful to him who begged you for mercy?"

Vértessy could not meet that look, he could find no words to answer that question.

"Vértessy! One death demands another, judgment is requited with judgment. I am standing on the edge of the grave, do not let me die."

"What am I doing, what can I do?" said her husband with a faltering voice.

"You see," replied his wife, winding her arm round his like a tender creeping plant round a sturdy oak, "if you slay, I must die also. What the condemned man in the neighbouring house suffers that I also must endure—his terror, his despair, his death-struggle. Oh! my husband, have pity upon me. Be merciful now to him who has offended, that I also may find mercy with God!"

Vértessy's mind was much disturbed. And now the doctor approached him and solemnly observed:

"General, I fancy it would not be the first instance of a capitally condemned felon being pardoned on the plea of such a sufferer."

Vértessy regarded him abstractedly as if to beg him to proceed.

"I knew of a similar case when I was in service at the fortress of Comorn, when a youth, who had thrice deserted the ranks, was pardoned in consequence of a similar petition."

"And do you believe that it would do good?"

"My dear sir, when the exaltation of the nerves has reached such a degree as this, the imagination is omnipotent, good news may give life, bad news death. A soothing thought in such cases is worth all the drugs in the world."

Vértessy kissed the forehead of his pale, suffering well-beloved, and cried with a manly emphasis, which instantly inspired self-confidence:

"I will save him!"

The lady raised her trembling hands and her pale features to Heaven, her eyes slowly closed, and a smile of joy passed over her white face.

Outside resounded the threefold roll of the drums.

The General arose, hastened to the door, tied on his sword, and rushed towards the barracks.

The noise, the hubbub, was now quite close at hand, and he fell a-thinking how he could best, with fair words, persuade these turbulent citizens to go back to their homes and begin weaving linen and stitching boots again, though he longed all the time to storm forth amongst them and like a tempest scatter them in every direction.

CHAPTER XV.

OIL UPON THE WATERS.

The whole of the broad street was entirely covered with caps.

It was impossible to see anything but caps. Here and there a scythe or a pitchfork projected from the midst of the throng, but the larger portion of the mob was unarmed, unless slender canes, of which there were a great number, be accounted weapons.

Here and there in the midst of the surging crowd might be distinguished sundry honest citizens still in plain clothes indeed, but carrying along with them bayonetted muskets, thereby inspiring the rabble with peculiar valour, the common people always imagining in such cases that the national guard with its bayonets is quite equal to the military.

"Halt!" a voice rung out in front of the crowding mass.

At the sound of that voice the hubbub for an instant grew still. The mob stopped short.

"Load your muskets!"

The soldiers, like a single, many-handed machine, instantly brought down their weapons to their sides with a clash, and the clatter of the loading-sticks in the barrels of the muskets was distinctly audible. Then there was another clatter, and every musket was instantly pointed.

The rioters began to look at one another, and those in front envied the position of those in the rear, who could freely use their lungs without the slightest risk.

And now the General rode along in front of the noisy mob and shouted to them in a hard, stern voice:

"What do you want? What is the matter with you? Why are you obstructing the street?"

The fellows kept elbowing each other forward, and, at last, one of them exclaimed:

"Here is Master Matthias! Let Master Matthias speak!"

"Bravo, Master Matthias!"

And suddenly from the midst of the mob arose the form of a citizen in a leather apron, with a shako on his head, and a musket with a bayonet attached thereto in his hand. He was passed along over the heads of the crowd, from shoulder to shoulder, and finally planted on his feet right in front of the General. This was Master Matthias.

Even if his hands, the knuckles whereof were unwashably embalmed with pitch, had not of themselves betrayed the fact, the awl hanging beside his leather apron, and evidently left there by accident, would have declared that the individual in question belonged to that estimable section of the community whose business in life it is to provide humanity with corns. His moustache was twisted with seven-and-seventy ringlets, and he had the habit every time he opened his mouth of violently shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders by way of making his words the more emphatic.

Master Matthias was a famous orator of the market-place, a toast-master of the city guilds, a finished wedding-feast chairman, and a recognised champion swine-slayer, he was consequently renowned throughout the town.

Nor was he the least afraid of the town, or the county either, or even of the General himself, as he now intended to show him.

So there he stood manfully in front of Vértessy, twirling his crooked moustache from end to end, and banging his musket on the ground as violently as if he meant to smash its butt end to pieces. Then he cleared his throat, and in a hoarsely strident voice gave expression to the following sentiments:

"My Lord General, whereas it has happened, so to speak, that our human masses in this comitavus18 have attained to extraordinary dimensions, and inasmuch as the honourable imposteratus19 has decided in consequence thereof that this is not a right state of things at all, far from it, and right they are too, say I, for the members of the city guilds have far too many qualifications; but, on the other hand, they are quite wrong, inasmuch as our journeymen are in countlessly small number therein, therefore we have resolved that as everyone is talking about it, so it must be, and not otherwise. For great is the desire of the enemy to make an impulse in this kingdom. Moreover, as for the avoidance and confirmation thereof, the plenipotentiaries have furthermore resolved that the 'pothecaries are concocting a certain miasma, by which decree we men are to be kept within salutary boundaries. Such finally being the case, and the people having cognisance thereof, the secular inhabitants of the neighbouring districts and sequestrations have arisen, and want to know what it is all about and wherefore. I myself am not able to say a word there anent, inasmuch as I wish not to apprehend it; but so much I can say for certain, that one of my journeymen on his way to the fair had his feet twisted double with cramp, and I know what I know. If, therefore, my Lord General so wishes it, and considers it seasonable that men for the common good of the kingdom should make a revolution, therefore we most humbly and respectfully petition for the same. And we are not fools either."

18 *I.e.*, "Comitatus" county.

19 *I.e.*, "Compossessoratus," a local committee of landed proprietors for assessing taxation, &c.

During this brilliant and particularly lucid harangue, the bolder masses of the mob had pushed right forward, and it seemed highly probable that within the next few moments the arguments of the great popular orator would be emphasized by fist-law. Vértessy, on the other hand, quite apart from general feelings of humanity and patriotism, had still stronger reason for avoiding tumult and

bloodshed. At that very moment his sick wife lay at the threshold of death. A mere volley, a single hour of street-fighting, might perhaps be the death of her.

In this agonising situation a horseman was seen approaching from the opposite side of the road. Only with the utmost difficulty could he force his way through the densely packed mob. Indeed, they would not have stirred a stump had he not kept on waving in his hand a piece of paper, and shouting incessantly that this was a proclamation addressed to the people, and he wanted to speak with their leader.

"Who is the worthy leader of these patriots?" he exclaimed.

Vértessy recognised in the horseman that mysterious Pole whom the condemned man could not recollect, and by this time he was a trifle suspicious of the fellow himself. After all, he began to think, there might be some coherency in the words of the prisoner, though only an hour ago he had looked upon them as the mere ravings of a lunatic.

"Where is the leader of the people?" cried Kamienszka, urging on the sweating horse towards the nearest open space.

Master Matthias proudly pointed to the warm swelling bosom which lay beneath his leather apron, by way of indicating that he was the man.

With an air of pathetic dignity Kamienszka handed to the worthy patriot the proclamation of Numa Pompilius, in which that worthy confided to the tailors, cobblers, and bakers of the city the honourable task of making, stitching, and baking some thousands of boots, hose, and rolls for headquarters to be delivered immediately.

"What are you doing?" cried the General in French. "At the very first movement I shall scatter these men."

"I am pouring oil upon the waters," replied the young horseman in the same language. "Within an hour every man of them will go home."

Master Matthias seized the document with both hands, pressed his musket betwixt his knees, and read the proclamation attentively from beginning to end.

The impression it made upon him could be imagined from the conduct of his moustache, which gradually lost its martial fierceness, and at last hung meekly down.

"Six thousand pairs of boots—whew!"

Meantime, a skinny fellow-citizen, buttoned up to the chin, kept on stretching his scraggy neck a monstrous distance across the heads of three rows of other burghers standing in front of him, with his eyes glued all the time upon the distant document in Master Matthias' hands. This was Master Csihos, known by the token over his shop as a member of the honourable guild of tailors.

"There it is!—read it for yourself!" cried Master Matthias.

The long arm stretched all the way across three rows of fellow-citizens standing in front of it, and a little group of tailors having put their heads together around the master-tailor, he read out the proclamation in a loud voice.

"Three thousand pairs of trousers!"

The head of the guild of bakers had not heard all that had been said, but the words "bread" and "rolls" had tickled his ears uncomfortably.

The fatal proclamation had in a few moments made the round of the assembly, gradually disappearing among the back rows of the mob. And, wherever it passed, it left behind it long faces and gaping, speechless mouths; the tumult subsided into a low murmur and an uneasy whispering. Master Matthias, Master Csihos, and the chief of the Guild of Bakers held counsel together

cheek by jowl. Those in the rear began to edge away along the wall as if it was no concern of theirs.

At last Master Matthias leaned his musket against the back of a friend, took off his cap, smoothed out his moustache, and approached the General with a very dubious expression of countenance, at the same time violently scratching the back of his neck.

"Your pardon, my Lord General!" cried he, "possibly your honour did not quite understand me. Although I never said that things were this or that; neither did I mean the other thing, whether more or less. Nevertheless, and be this as it may, and without prejudice, I am well aware, as also are all my friends, that it is not for us to sit in judgment on the county tribunals or on you, my Lord General—very much, the other way in fact; and if impudent disturbers of the public peace are carrying on their games amongst us, such are to be regarded as the dregs of humanity, and we on the contrary see ourselves obliged to turn to the worshipful county magistrates and to your honour that ye may deign to have these evil-minded rioters who approach our peaceful towns with firearms and pitchforks kept far away therefrom, whereunto we also and the trainbands of this town volunteer our services, giving it to be and understood that, at my Lord General's command, we shall be found ready to pour out our life-blood in defence of our country, our town, our county, and our prince. To the gallows say I, with all who demand of us six thousand pairs of boots! Your poor humble servant!"

Vértessy could not forbear from quietly smiling at this discreet coat-turning rhetoric. With his drawn sword he motioned to his soldiers to lower their weapons, and return to the barracks, simply leaving the usual sentries at their posts.

The noisy assembly then gave one long cheer for the General, and after threatening every sort of distant object with their sticks and clenched fists, tumultously dispersed.

Kamienszka, after the odd dispersal of the rioters, trotted alongside the General into the courtyard of the barracks, where they both dismounted and hastened into the waiting room. Each of them had something urgent to say to the other which could not be expressed in public.

"Sir," the General hastened to say, he was determined to have the first word—"whoever you are, you have rendered me a very important service which I hope to be able to repay."

"I come from the midst of danger, General," replied the heroic lady very quickly, like one anxious to economize his moments and count his words; "a dangerous rebellion has broken out in the midst of the county, and by mere accident I have got the leading strings of it in my hands. For a moment, however, I ran the risk of being strung up myself. The visitation of this strange epidemic has afforded a band of desperate fanatics with the opportunity of accomplishing a long-cherished design. Here is the proclamation which in a few days will fly over the whole realm."

The General read through the document handed to him with the utmost astonishment.

"Love of loot, revenge, popular stupidity, will be powerful allies in such a frantic enterprise, which, if it but gain the upper hand, will, in a few weeks, change the whole appearance of the map of Europe. At present the flame is but a tiny one. It has only burst forth in a few villages. To-night they are going to attack the Castle of Hétfalu. That will be the beginning of it."

The General's face quivered. So the words of the condemned man had been true!

"There they will murder both master and servants. Murdered they must be in order that the participators in the outbreak may find retreat impossible. This will be the beginning of a desperate struggle."

The General rang a bell. He whispered a few words in the ear of the adjutant who answered the summons, and then sat down and

began writing very rapidly, at the same time beckoning to Kamienszka to go on.

"General, at present the conflagration may be stamped out by a single effort. A bold hand, which does not shrink from a bad burn, may cover up the mouth of the volcano if instant action be taken. But not a day, not an hour, not a moment, should be lost. The thing must be done at once. In a day, an hour, a moment, things might happen which could never be made good again."

A rattle of chains was audible at the door, two sentries were bringing in the prisoner, behind them came the provost-martial.

The General, who never ceased writing, thus addressed him:

"Young man! have those chains taken off your hands, ask my adjutant for a sword, and gird it on!"

Young Hétfalusy opened his eyes wide with astonishment. He allowed them to take the chains off his hands, and gird a sword to his side, and did not at once observe that a couple of yards away from him stood a strange youth, who found it very hard not to burst into tears, and fall upon his neck at the sight of him, so miserable did he look.

The General had at last finished his correspondence, and gave his whole attention to young Hétfalusy.

"Now listen patiently to all that I am going to say. Take these letters, choose the best horse from my stables, and hasten to the leaders of the military cordons one after the other. Each one of them will place at the disposal of the captain accompanying you one half of his effective strength. As soon as you have gathered together half a battalion, hasten with them to Hétfalu, as to the rest that will be provided for by written instructions. Your own heart will tell you what you ought to do. You are going to rescue and defend your family. There the hand of God will be over you. If it please Him to carry your sentence into execution His will be done, if you return alive the past shall be forgotten."

The youth did not know what to answer, his voice died away in his throat. All he could do was to sink down in silence by the General's side, press his hand to his lips, and shed tears.

"Get up, get up, and be off! You have not to thank me for this. You must thank God and this worthy gentleman who has dared so much for your sake."

Only then did the youth cast a glance upon Kamienszka, and it seemed to him as if he dimly saw, conjured up before him, through the misty veil of his tears, the vision of a form from other days.

The Polish lady hastened up to him, pressed his hand, and whispered in his ear:

"Not a word now! We shall have plenty of time presently."

"Then you *do* know each other?" said Vértessy. "What could the youth be dreaming of to deny his friend a little while ago?"

And with that he gave the heroine's hand a vigorous grip, for he had every reason to still call her a man.

"Sir," said he, "I fancy I am not making you a bad offer if I ask you to come and have a hasty breakfast with me and your young friend, and then choose one of my horses and buckle on one of my swords. You are not the man I take you for if you do not feel inclined to follow your comrade and share his danger."

Hétfalusy, with an expression of alarm, would have interrupted him; but the girl thrust him aside, and her flashing eyes seemed to impose silence upon him.

"Thank you, General," she manfully replied. "I anticipated that offer, and I accept it. As for our breakfast we can have that in our saddles. We have no time to stay."

"You are right," said Vértessy, squeezing the soft downy hand whose steel-like muscles did not betray the woman, "you must hasten. This mad rebellion must be overthrown as rapidly as it has

arisen. Should the movement extend to other parts of the county you will not find me unprepared."

Meanwhile the steeds were led out below the gate. The attendant captain rushed out, half dressed, bringing a sword with him for Kamienszka, which she hastily buckled on like a man.

The General escorted them down to the horses, and the three cavaliers swung themselves into their saddles. Vértessy pressed once more the heroine's hand, and said to her with soldierly frankness:

"Mr. Kamienszki, I have a great regard for you!"

"Not Kamienszki but Kamienszka!" murmured the lady softly, and with that she spurred her horse and galloped after her comrades.

And now for the first time a light dawned in Vértessy's mind, and he understood it all.

"A marvellous woman!" he muttered, gazing after her till the distance hid her from his eyes.

The streets were quite quiet, nobody was about, the General's own heart was afflicted by the stillness. A beneficent calm, so often the reaction from extreme excitement, came over him.

And now he had time to hasten back to the peaceful house opposite.

His heart beat so violently with joyful anticipation, the pulses of his hands and temples throbbed so tumultuously as he strode through the quiet rooms.

In the ante-chamber he encountered the doctor, who advanced towards him with a smile and stretched out his hand.

"You have a joyful house now," said he.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Vértessy, stammering with delight; he knew very well, all the time, what the doctor meant.

"A wee, wee cherub has arrived," whispered the doctor—"and 'tis a boy cherub too," he added with a still broader smile.

The next moment Vértessy was kneeling down before his wife, and pressing her hands hundreds and hundreds of times to his burning lips.

And the wife, with a sweet and blissful smile, looked down upon her husband like one of those whom the prayers of their beloved have called back from the world beyond the grave.

"With God there is mercy!" was all that she could say.

CHAPTER XVI.

'TIS WELL THAT THE NIGHT IS BLACK.

At the Castle of Hétfalu everyone was quietly sleeping. None had any thought of that black spectre which is the enemy of all living creatures, which constrains the huge watch-dog to dig up graves with his hind feet, which bids the night owl utter her dismal notes on the housetop alongside of the creaking weather-cock, which sends into the vestibules and corridors its living visiting-cards in the shape of those large, black, night-moths with pale skull-like effigies painted on their backs as upon tombs, beneath whose feet the furniture creaks and crackles, which makes that tiny invisible beetle hidden between the boards of the beds begin tick-tick-ticking like a fairy watch, eleven times in succession, by way of showing that the witching hour of night is close at hand.

Oh! there is such a great unanimity among these dumb creatures of the night and darkness.

The wind blew gloomy-looking clouds before it across the sky, clouds which hastened away from that district; which jostled one another as they scudded along, some high, some low, and kept on changing their shapes as if they feared lest something might catch them there. Some of them had blood-red linings from the flames of distant conflagrations, and these flew rapidly along, trying to force their way through in advance of the rest; but these others sped along still faster, lest they, too, should be enkindled.

And in the darkness disorderly masses of men might have been dimly seen assembling in the roads and stealthily proceeding towards the castle. In the tap-room of the *csárda* evil counsellors are discussing the destruction of all the dwellers in the castle.

Three separate opinions are fighting for the supremacy. Numa Pompilius is in favour of an open, heroic attack, as became the *epigoni* of the valiant Sarmatians; with battering-rams, ballistas,

and other classical instruments of warfare, he would have fought breast to breast, eye to eye with the foe.

Ivan, on the other hand, is more practical. He knows his own people better, and anticipates much greater success from an insidious surprise in which the warriors shall stealthily crawl over walls and through windows upon the unguarded and unsuspecting garrison, and massacre them in their dreams.

The wife of the headsman sits on the table opposite the two commanders-in-chief with a mocking smile upon her lips, and her huge muscular arms crossed over her bosom. From time to time she utters a scornful laugh and grunts disapprovingly.

"Do what you like," she said at last, "neither of you knows anything about it. The buffalo-catcher would proceed cautiously and the cripple would run like a 'bull' at the gate."

"And what would you do, I should like to know," snarled Ivan.

"I know something, and I know how to keep it to myself. When you two have made a mess of it, then I shall come forward."

The commanders began to be jealous of her influence. The first success always wins the heart of the mob, they must make sure of that anyhow.

"Call in the Leather-bell," cried Ivan to the doorkeepers.

The old fellow was shoved in.

"The castle watch-dogs know you, don't they?" he was asked.

"Know me? of course they do," replied the worthy man. "Why, I brought up Tiszá and Farkas myself. I give them bread every day. Why, they sniff my pockets even now whenever I go along there."

"They know you still better, you knacker you, I'll be bound," said Dame Zudár to Ivan derisively.

Ivan caught up a knife from the table and would have stuck the woman with it had not Thomas Bodza stayed his hand. He did not like these squabbles at all.

"This is not the time for wrangling," said he.

Only very reluctantly did Ivan allow himself to be pacified and induced to continue the conversation.

"Here in this handkerchief are some pieces of meat, do you think you can get the dogs to take them with soft words?"

"Why not? I have only to call them by name, and they will come to the doors of their kennels and eat it out of my very hands."

"Then look sharp and set about it."

The Leather-bell was such a good fellow that he was never able to resist the slightest command. He accepted the commission, although he knew very well that the dogs would be poisoned. He consoled himself with the reflection, however, that nobody had told him so beforehand.

"But look here, gentlemen, you don't want to do his honour, the squire, any harm?" he inquired of Ivan, with a foolishly smiling face.

"No, old 'un, no."

"Nor the young squire either?"

"No, nor him either, not for all the world."

"Nor the heyduke? He is my godson, you know."

"No, nor him either, old 'un, but do look sharp."

"You only want to find out whether there is poison in the castle or not, don't you?"

"Yes, yes. Devil take the fellow! Be off, or I'll knock some of your teeth down your throat."

And the poor Leather-bell scuttled off.

"And now bring Mekipiros hither!"

They dragged the poor half-idiotic creature into the room. His thick, bristly hair hung right over his eyes. He was grinning and evidently in a good humour. But he could speak no longer, of course, since he had lost his tongue; whatever they said to him he could only reply: "Hamamama!"

This with him was the expression of happiness and contentment, both question and answer.

"Mekipiros! come hither and drink," cried Ivan, holding to his mouth a straw-covered pitcher full of spirit, which he to whom it was offered did not remove from his lips till it was quite empty. Then he returned it to Ivan with a joyful "Hamamama!"

"Look now, blockhead! You can climb up a rope anywhere, can't you?"

"Hamamamama!"

"All right, I'm not deaf! You can scale the roof of a house by means of a rope then?"

The hideous monster rubbed his hands with joy at the proposal.

"And then you will drag me up after you by means of the same rope, do you understand?"

The dwarfish abortion rushed with a howl of joy at Ivan, caught the fellow round the knee, raised him high in the air, and leapt up and down with him, by way of showing that he was as light as a bag of feathers, till Ivan, by dint of shouting and pummelling, contrived to free himself from the creature's grasp.

"The fellow has the strength of an ox," said he to Thomas Bodza, seizing the thick-set creature by the hair, and lugging him hither and thither, which appeared to infinitely delight the speechless monster. Whenever he succeeded in getting hold of one of Ivan's hands he covered it with kisses, whereupon the other, with an air

of disgust, kept rubbing them on the tails of his coat, as if he could not wipe them sufficiently.

"He will do very well as food for their guns," whispered Ivan. "If the people in the castle hear a noise, and guess our subterfuge, they will shoot Mekipiros, for we will send him on in front. Why, even with a couple of bullets in his body the fellow will be able to scramble up the wall. He's like a toad."

Meanwhile the Leather-bell returned and announced that the dogs had gobbled up all the meat thrown to them.

"Oh, they made no bones about it," cried he.

"Then we can go," said Ivan, thrusting a rusty military pistol into his breast-pocket.

Dame Zudár hastened towards her matted waggon and leaped upon the box-seat. For a moment a long, sharp knife flashed betwixt her hands, and she peered at it closely to make sure that its edge was all right, immediately afterwards it vanished again nobody knew whither. Then she laid hold of her whip and lashed up the horses.

The road they followed passed by the hut of the Death-Bird. The old witch was huddled up in her doorway, and began counting those who passed, marking them off one by one, with her crutch: "One, two, three—One, two, three."

She never went beyond three, therefore every third was a marked man.

When her daughter passed by with the rector and Ivan she laughed aloud.

"Ha, ha, ha! A splendid company truly! A schoolmaster, a headsman's apprentice, and a nice young bride! Whither are you going such a dark night? A splendidly dark night! Just the night for thieves and murderers; just the night for those intent on rapine and burning! On you go! On you go! Worry the great gentry, root out your landlords, and after that fall yourselves into the hands of

the headsman! The less people there are in the world the nicer it will be."

None of the rioters durst molest her though she stood right in their way, and spoke so that everyone could hear her. They all took care to give her a wide berth.

Thomas Bodza distributed his people along the road, and occupied every exit from the castle. One detachment he hid behind a haystack, with another he seized the beehives, and with a third the distillery. The servants who lived outside he overcame after a short resistance, and then bound them tightly and locked them up.

Inside the castle nobody was yet aware of what was going on outside. Not a single servant slept there. The young squire, in his terror of the epidemic, would not suffer one of them to sleep in the castle, the only people inside there besides himself were old Hétfalusy and the doctor.

Ivan then chose out six of the bravest of his followers, amongst them the watchman in whose sylvan hut they had held their secret meetings, Hamza, the sexton, and Mekipiros, whose mouth they had to gag, to prevent him from uttering his eternal "Hamamama!"

Poor Mekipiros! A little while ago he was able to pray, now he could not utter an intelligible word!

It was not difficult to get into the courtyard. The Leather-bell opened the gate for them. Inside the dogs were lying near the well stiff and stark, nothing had betrayed the venture.

And now Ivan produced a long strong rope, and tied on to it a lot of pack-thread, at the end of which a heavy piece of lead was fastened. Round the roof of the castle ran a metal gutter, which terminated at the corners in old-fashioned dolphins. On to one of such dolphins Ivan threw the pack-thread noose, and seizing hold of the re-descending lead plummet, hoisted up the rope likewise. It was really a capital idea. Mekipiros was to clamber up the rope, he knew the trick of it. He was to be the *anima vilis* by means of whom

they were to find out whether the folks in the castle were asleep or not.

When he got to the top he was to pull up Ivan after him, and then the united strength of the pair of them would do the same by the others. They would then creep into the castle through the attics and open the doors, which were locked on the inside, to admit their comrades.

Nothing could have been more circumspectly conceived.

When the rope was firmly fastened to the top of the gutter Ivan hurried up Mekipiros and shoved the free end of the rope into his hand.

The little monster did not trust himself to shout but expressed his satisfaction in a lowly murmured "Hamamamama!"

The next moment he was clambering up the rope like a strange sort of huge spider, climbing rapidly higher and higher with agile hands and feet, occasionally he even helped himself along with his teeth. In a few moments he was sitting on the back of the copper dolphin, delighted to have found a steed in a monster similar to himself, and from thence he shouted: "Hu, hu, hu!" like an owl.

"Will you shut up!" called Ivan, in a voice of suppressed fury. "The beast will betray us! Haul up, can't you?"

Ivan clutched hold of the rope with both hands.

Mekipiros with vigorous tugs hoisted him upwards, hauling up the rope with his short arms as easily as if there were no weight attached to it.

"How I wish he would let him fall," murmured Dame Zudár to herself.

Thomas Bodza had much the same sort of wish in his own heart. Each of them had his or her particular reasons for wishing Ivan's plan to fail.

But Mekipiros did not let him drop. He hoisted him up right on to the roof and helped him to climb up on to the metal gutter.

Ivan scarce felt his feet once more, however, when, instead of expressing his gratitude, he expended his pent-up rage on his companion.

"You mad bullock, you, why did you roar out just now, eh?" he whispered in the ear of Mekipiros, and he viciously tugged at the stunted monster's bristly hair with one hand, at the same time holding his other hand before his mouth to prevent him from screaming out.

At that same instant Mekipiros turned upon Ivan with flashing eyes, seized him round the thighs and holding him fast embraced, hauled him along the roof. For a second the pair of them tottered on the very edge of the gutter, but then Ivan clutched the metal cornice and held on to it convulsively with both hands.

"Hamama, hamama, hamama!" howled the enraged monster. Like a heavy load of sin, he hung on to the legs of his prey, squeezing his knees together in an iron embrace, worrying his enemy's calves with his teeth, kicking and cuffing him, and striving to hurl him into the abyss below.

Ivan was fairly mad with terror.

"Help!" he roared, in a voice capable of arousing the Seven Sleepers, "help! He is killing me!"

"I knew what would be the end of it!" cried Dame Zudár, gnashing her teeth. "The poltroon is betraying us himself. Let him perish if he does not know how to live."

"Scoundrel!" Bodza shouted to him. "What! cannot you die speechless like a Julius Cæsar? And when the common cause demands that you should keep silence too! Fie upon you, I say!"

Ivan, in his desperation, writhed over the gulf beneath him, and forgetting everything but the horrible death awaiting him, bellowed hoarsely to those standing below:

"Help, for the love of Christ. Men, I say! do not let me perish! I am falling! I am dying. Woe is me! Spread straw underneath, can't you? Hold a carpet below me! Mercy, mercy! Let me go, Mekipiros! I beseech you, for God's sake, let me go!"

But it was no part of Mekipiros' plan to plunge down to the ground all by himself. For the last hour or so he had been joyfully awaiting this sweet moment, for this he had laughed, for this he had frisked about so uproariously. He was unable to conceal his delight. If only he could be alone with his tormentor at that giddy height, suddenly seize him, and hurl him down with himself from the roof, fly for a few seconds through the air, and then lie stretched upon the earth in a smashed and broken mass, so that it would be impossible to distinguish the one from the other—ah! then how happy he would be!

And—better than that even—his victim had clutched hold of something in the very act of falling, and so the delicious moment was indefinitely prolonged! He heard how his prey roared for help, saw how he writhed convulsively in the desperate hope of saving himself, how half out of his mind he even begged him, Mekipiros! for life: "Mekipiros, dear good Mekipiros, let me go, and plunge down alone!"

"Hamamama! hamamama!" gurgled the monster with a grim cruel voice, and he kicked the wall with his feet to make Ivan let go the quicker, and buried his scanty teeth in the fleshy legs of his victim, and worried him like a dog.

"Mercy, mercy! Help! I can hold out no longer!" gasped Ivan, his sinews beginning to stretch beneath the pressure of the double load. No help was possible. Those standing below cursed him for rousing the castle with his shouts. The narrow edge of the gutter was gradually slipping through his nerveless fingers. And now one hand relaxed its hold, and only by a last convulsive effort did he manage to hold on for a few seconds by the other.

"Hamamama!" screeched the monster, and then a yell, as of the lost, resounded from height to depth, and a huge round, black,

writhing, coil came bounding rapidly to the ground, and there, the next instant, lay a mangled mass of flesh, in which perhaps at one time two souls had dwelt.

"And now let us see what the next can do," growled Dame Zudár, leaning nonchalantly back in her waggon, and crossing her arms over her breast like an impatient singer at a concert who waits for his turn in the programme to come while his colleagues are boring the public to death with their dismal performances.

At Ivan's first howl two lights had become visible in the two corner chambers of the castle, and presently both of these lights were observed hastening to the central hall only, a few moments later, to be extinguished. Then the iron shutters were banged down with a crash, only one square piece in the middle still remained raised.

The besieged were on their guard.

Now, Numa Pompilius, you have a fine field before you for the race of glory. Advance! put your ladders to the walls, hurl your beams against the foe, sling your stones against the roof, begin the struggle, and inspire the combatants with martial fury! Let shouts and yells and curses supply the place of thundering artillery! The enemy is aroused and expectant!

"Forward, ye heroes! The hour of the red dawn of our day of triumph is at hand. Victory to the valiant!"

The excited mob heard not a word of this classical appeal, its ears were too full of its own howlings, as it pressed into the courtyard.

Then from that window square, which had remained uncovered by the shutter, a shot resounded, at whose sharp report the hideous hubbub suddenly grew dumb, and during the lull a strong manly voice addressed the rioters:

"That was only a blank shot. If you do not instantly leave the courtyard we will fire among you with bullets."

"Let us depart hence, my noble patriots, let us depart!" stammered the Leather-bell. "It is Squire Széphalmi who commands it. It is not

well to play games with him. He has a lot of six-barrelled firearms inside with three bullets in each barrel. A mischief may befall some of us else. We have wives and children at home. Let us go home, my dear fellow patriots. Early to-morrow morning we will send a deputation."

The greater part of the mob shared this good opinion, and began to show their respect for firearms by clearing out of the courtyard.

But Numa Pompilius, full of the fury of despair, barred the way against his retreating host.

"Miserable, cowardly deserters! What! a single blank shot is sufficient to turn you back! Holus-bolus, 'sicut examen apum,' ye decamp at the word of a single foe! Fie, fie upon you, ye dregs, ye sweepings of humanity!"

The bellicose commander spat in his disgust at the fugitives again and again, and overwhelmed them with all sorts of choice epithets. Finally he snatched up an axe, and declared that if nobody else stirred he would go and batter down the door of the castle single-handed.

But the Leather-bell threw his arms round the body of the enthusiastic hero lest he should hazard his life in so perilous an enterprise. Nay, he would not even let him enter the courtyard, but went so far as to seize the axe he held in his hand regardless of the kicks and cuffs he received during the struggle.

Dame Zudár laughed scornfully at this tragicomical scene.

"Why don't some other of you fellows hold him back too?" she cried. "He likes nothing better than not to be let go. Don't you see what a business he makes of it to rid himself of that feeble old man, whom he could throw to the ground with half a hand if he had a mind to. Get out of my way, will you? Men are out of place in a joke of this sort. My mother was a witch and I'm one also. Do you know that I can open every door before you with a single word. All you have got to do is to sharpen your knives."

And with that she opened the wicker covering of her waggon, which hitherto had been kept tightly closed, and as easily, as if she only held a down cushion in her hand, she hauled forth little Elise.

The child's hands were tied in front of her, and her head was completely enveloped in a thick woollen wrapper so that she could neither see nor cry out.

Dame Zudár removed the wrapper from the little girl's head, and ordered her to stand upright.

Then she produced a half burnt wax taper, the relic of some past funeral, lit it, and placed it between the child's fettered fingers.

"The woman is not quite right," growled shaggy-headed Hanák. "She lights a candle so that they may be better able to fire among us."

"Have no fear, shaggy pate. They will not fire at you. Go and huddle behind the doorpost if you like. *I* mean to go alone into the courtyard, and will draw the snake out of its hole with my bare hand."

The besiegers did not need much persuasion to hide themselves. When Dame Zudár passed through the gate with the child, everyone, not excepting Thomas Bodza, hastened to make himself scarce.

The child she sent on in front with the lighted taper sticking between its fettered fingers. She followed close behind. She had no fear of bullets now.

When they came in front of the open square in the shutter, she made the child stop, and bade it kneel down.

Then with a loud resounding voice she shouted up at the windows:

"Old Hétfalusy, are you there? Young Széphalmi, are you there?"

There was no answer.

"It is of no use denying yourselves. I am here to carry on my process against you. It is the old, old suit in which my father lost his life and my mother her reason. I have also brought along with me a tribunal which cannot be corrupted. *I* am now the stronger party."

"Take yourself off!" a hoarse, broken voice suddenly cried from the window; it very much resembled old Hétfalusy's.

"Oh, I'm to take myself off, eh!" cried the virago defiantly. "Am I not standing then on my own ground? Is not this corner of the house whose windows I am now rattling, built on the plot of ground belonging to my forefathers? Is not this ground my own? Are not these very stones, these very blades of grass on which I now trample, mine, mine, mine?"

"It may very easily be yours for ever, you wretched creature," said another voice, the voice of the younger squire. "If you do not go away, you shall die on the very spot."

The barrel of a gun flashed between the shutters, and the headsman's wife could see that it was pointed straight at her heart.

Quickly she pulled the little girl towards her.

"Aim away, Széphalmi!" she cried. "I have even taken the trouble to bring a light that you may see to aim straight."

And with that she snatched the candle from between the child's fingers, and held it so that it lit up her face.

"Look now! A pretty child, ain't she? Those blue eyes, those soft lips resemble someone you loved very much at one time, don't they? It would be a shame, wouldn't it, to make this tender, slender shape a target for bullets, wouldn't it?"

The barrel of the gun sank slowly down.

"How do you suppose now, Széphalmi," continued the virago, her face radiant with infernal malice, "how do you suppose now that

the headsman's wife managed to get hold of this gentle cherub, who is as much like her as an angel is to a devil?"

"Woman!" hissed someone from within, though whether it was the old man or the young it was impossible to say.

Dame Zudár drew nearer, she now went right up to the window.

"You would like me to speak in a lower key, no doubt? Well, I may do that. You see how close I am standing to you, you could touch my body with the barrel of your musket. But you *won't* touch me, I know, for now it is I who am the destroyer."

And with that she laid her large, broad, muscular palm on the little girl's tender shoulder.

"This child is now eight years old. When she was born her father cursed her, her mother kicked her out, and her nurse confided her to a she-wolf that she might either kill it or bring it up along with her own whelps—which is much about the same thing. It is the foolish old story, the old grey wolf carried off the brat and brought it up; the old headsman nourished the innocent little girl, and defended her against all the wild beasts of the forest. Do I make the fable quite clear to you?"

A stifled moan was the sole reply.

"And then Heaven's lightning descended upon your house, misfortune was a constant visitor upon you, you soon had a pair of corpses under your roof, and there was no end to your affliction. Now I should say that that looked very much like a curse upon you.

"Yes, a curse pursued your family. When you had securely fastened the door behind you, you used to weep and wail like any beggar; yes, and no beggar at your door would have thanked you for the chance of exchanging his lot with yours."

To this there was no reply from behind the window.

The defiant features of the virago were illuminated by the candle which the child now held again in her hand. She seemed to cast a dark shadow upon the very night around her—the darkest of dark shadows.

And now she went right up to the window so that she could actually whisper through it.

"Come, throw down your weapons, ye great and haughty gentlemen, for they are no longer a defence to you. Something very evil is going to happen to-night, for I have not come to you for nothing, I can tell you."

And with that she drew from beneath the kerchief covering her breast the knife sharpened to a keen point, whose edge she had tested so carefully a short time before.

"Do you see my key?" cried she. "This is the key to your hearts, this is the key to the doors of your palaces. This knife will pare down your pride and humble you to the dust beneath my feet. You could shoot me dead as I stand here I know, though that would be no very great master-stroke. But the same instant in which I fell, my mother, the old witch, would stand behind my back and would shout to the infuriated mob with all the force of her lungs, and tell them whose this child is, and then do you know in whose heart this knife would be plunged first of all?"

A sort of painful wail came from below the dark window, like the sounds that are heard in a deserted, dilapidated old fortress where the whole building is ever sighing and moaning, and none can tell whence the noise comes.

During the virago's muttered discourse the bolder spirits among the mob had gradually flitted back again into the courtyard. They perceived that the headsman's wife was not afraid, and this of itself gave them courage. Some of them even drew near to the threshold of the house, where they pricked up their ears and did their best to catch something of what the woman was talking about so mysteriously. It might be worth their while to hear.

Dame Zudár began sharpening the knife against the stone ledge of the castle window.

"I give you three minutes to think it over," she now exclaimed aloud. "If you then say: let there be bloodshed! bloodshed there shall be."

And with that she turned back to the child.

There she stood in front of the castle threshold, with the heavenly resignation of a martyr on her pale, innocent face. She appeared to be quite undisturbed by the dreadful scene before her. The thought that she was now about to die absorbed all her faculties.

"Kneel down!" cried the virago coldly.

The child took her at her word, and knelt down on the lowest of the flight of steps.

"Pray, if you have a mind that way."

The child devoutly raised her eyes to Heaven, and holding the lighted candle in front of her in her tiny hands, began to sing this verse of a hymn:

"The Lord my God, I praise and bless,
For He hath heard my soul's distress,
And hath inclined His ear to me
Who love Him through eternity."

To many it seemed, while the child's quavering voice was intoning the sad melody, as if, either from the midst of the crowd, or from some corner close at hand, a man's voice was accompanying the tone in a subdued voice, dwelling upon the final notes, as they do in church.

Who could it be?

None could say whence the accompanying voice proceeded.

A cold shudder ran down Dame Zudár's back. It was the voice of the headsman!

But what a mad idea! Men no longer come forth unhurt from the midst of the fire, as did the three holy children in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

So she strengthened her heart, marched up to the door, and began thundering upon it with her fists.

"The three minutes for consideration is now up. My old enemy and my young enemy, you must now open the door and come forth."

The crowd waited in hushed suspense for what would come next.

Why did not the people inside fire beneath the sure protection of their stronghold? What spell had this woman cast over them? Had she really the power, then, to break through bolts and bars with a mere word, a mere look?

"One, two, three!"

Still not a sound.

Then the virago, with a haughty look, turned towards the people, and addressed them with a penetrating voice:

"If they won't speak I will. Friends and comrades, these bigwigs here have sworn our ruin. They want to root out the whole lot of us, why, then, should we have mercy on them? Now, however, it is not we who are in their power, but they who are in ours. Their own sins have delivered them into my hands. You know, and the whole world knows, that that stuck-up gentleman yonder, Széphalmi, Esq., once upon a time exposed his firstborn child. He cast it forth in the wilderness, cast it forth among the wild beasts, because he feared the shame of it forsooth!—ha, ha, ha! Has a poor man ever done the like of that? Aye, and it was a poor man who found the child, it was a poor man who had compassion on the little outcast thrown in his way, it was a poor man who brought it up as if it were his own child. And now, if you please, these high and noble gentlemen cast poison into the wells of the poor man that they may destroy him, root and branch."

The mob listened to these murderous words with ever increasing eagerness.

At the same time it did not escape Dame Zudár's attention that a key had been put into the iron door of the castle from the inside, and that it was being turned softly.

So now she fell a-shouting more noisily than ever.

"Before you kneels the foster-daughter of the headsman's wife. Who was that child's mother? who gave her to the headsman's wife? Her mother, I tell you, was a great lady, none other than Benjamin Hétfalusy's daughter, whom the wrath of God smote down together with that little murderer, her infant son. I nourished and brought up that child, and what thanks did I get for it? Only this: that these bigwigs have determined to kill us all by poisoning our meat and drink, that they may thereby bury their shameful secret. But I declare their design aloud, so that every man may know it. This girl is Hétfalusy's grand-daughter. This girl is in our power, and if these fine gentlemen so much as crumple a single hair of any of your heads, I will plunge this knife into the child's heart."

A confused, savage murmur ran through the mob at these grim words, which seemed to intoxicate the hearts of all who heard them with a fiendish cruelty.

And Dame Zudár, listening attentively, heard the key turn in the door a second time.

She was well prepared for what would follow.

She now stepped behind the child, wound its beautiful blonde tresses round her left hand, and with her right grasped the handle of the knife convulsively.

"Oh, God, my God!" cried Elise's bell-like voice.

At that same instant the iron door opened wide, and between its receding wings stood a spectre—a spectre was the only name for it, as it had no resemblance to anything human.

A pale face, like the face of one arisen from the tomb, white dishevelled hair clinging round his temples and hanging over his bloodshot eyes. He had wrapped a long mantle over his white night-dress which fluttered about him like the wings of a bat.

It was old Hétfalusy.

In each hand he held a loaded pistol, and as the opening door groaned on its hinges he cried in a hoarse voice:

"Here I am, but whoever dares to lay a hand upon the girl, him will I shoot first and the girl afterwards."

But it was a threat which excited little terror, his hands trembled so and his eyes were scarce able to see what was before them.

Nobody followed him. He passed through the door alone.

The Leather-bell, however, was so terrified lest he should carry out his threat that he threw himself at the old man's feet, and embracing his knees, piteously besought him:

"Master, master, oh, my dear master! don't fire, for God's sake! Lay down your pistols. I assure you that nobody here will hurt you."

"Will ye swear, then, that you will do the child no harm?" gasped old Hétfalusy.

"Put down your weapons!" cried the rioters.

"Swear that you will not harm her in any way, and then I will put them down."

"Very well, we swear!" cried some in the rear of the crowd.

"Let that woman swear too," said Hétfalusy, pointing at Dame Zudár with a shaking hand. None of them did he hold in such horror as her.

The virago smiled and twiddled the knife between her fingers. Craftily lowering her eyes, and casting a side-long glance at the old man, she replied:

"And by whom, then, am I to swear?"

"By the name of God, the living God."

"But what shall I swear?"

"Swear that neither you yourself, nor any of your companions, will do this child any harm, whosoever child she is, and whether what you allege concerning her be true or not."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Would you not save your own grey hairs from being crumpled then?"

"May the Almighty dispose of me as it seemeth Him good."

"Then I will take the oath," cried the virago, and, raising her muscular right arm heavenwards, she cried:

"No harm shall come to the child, so help me, God!"

Then Hétfalusy calmly surrendered his pistols to the Leather-bell, who politely kissed his hand for so doing, and straightway fired the pistols off in the air, so that they might do no harm to anyone.

The same instant the blaspheming mob fell upon the defenceless squire, tore at his grey locks and impotent limbs, and hurled him to the ground.

"Smash him, kill him, the poison-mixer!" resounded from every side, and the bloodthirsty cowards rushed furiously from their hiding-places with cudgels and flails, to the spot where the defenceless old squire was lying.

The worthy Leather-bell had not another word to say, but he cast himself at full length upon the prostrate gentleman, and, tightly embracing his frail figure, defended him with his own body from the first onset of the raging mob.

In vain they pummelled, in vain they kicked him, his self-sacrificing back endured everything, and patiently received the beating intended for his master.

The poor fellow, after all, would really have been a very good man if only he had not been so very simple.

"Clear out, will you!" cried Dame Zudár and Thomas Bodza simultaneously, "we must not kill him. We want to get something out of him, so he must live. Let no one hurt him, then, till he has received his sentence."

At last the two ringleaders succeeded in clearing away the furious mob from the mauled and trampled body of the squire. Then they raised him from the ground, tied his hands together, and fastened him tightly by one lean arm to the trellised gate of the castle. Blood oozed from the old man's limbs beneath the pressure of the rough cord, yet, with not so much as a groan did Benjamin Hétfalusy betray the torture he was suffering.

And thou, oh, man, in thy fiery pit, art thou still singing thy hymns below there, art thou still testing the edge of thy sword with the tips of thy fingers, just as if it were the string of some sad and delicate musical instrument, which can give forth but one voice, and that the voice of a sad, sad song?

The heat of the collapsed dwelling was now penetrating to the cellar below, and the straitened prisoner began to bethink him of some other place of refuge.

Instead of the fierce crackle of the flames which had met his ear hitherto, he now could only hear a monotonous flickering as of expiring embers, and this lasted for a long time, when suddenly a fresh noise attracted his attention.

Not far from his hiding-place something began to sound like the voice of a wind-clapper. At first it went clap! clap! clap! very rapidly, but gradually the strokes grew slower and slower, tapering down at last to single beats at long intervals.

Whoever has attentively watched the doors of a metal furnace, will know at once how that sound arises. When the heat of the fire which has expanded the metal begins to decrease, the expanded fibres of the metal suddenly begin to contract and give forth a snapping sound as of metal strings violently torn asunder.

The iron door of the cellar was, in fact, loudly calling the attention of the master of the house to the fact that the fire had reduced all the brushwood piled round the house into red-hot embers, and it was therefore high time for him to seek another asylum.

Peter Zudár seized a large measure of beer, approached the door, and flung the malt liquid all over it.

Ha! how loudly the glowing metal hissed and spluttered at the contact of the cold fluid, as if laughing with joy at the artful scheme which it and the master together had devised for the latter's deliverance.

The iron door was far too burning hot to be opened with the naked hand, but the blood-red glare visible behind it made it pretty certain that the lead-soldering had long ago melted away, and it therefore only needed a vigorous kick to wrench it off its hinges.

Peter Zudár listened attentively. Not a soul was stirring. There was indeed no reason why anyone should linger any longer in that wretched place.

Impatience spurred him on to action. He began to lift the door from its hinges with the help of a heavy crowbar. It gave way sooner than he had anticipated, and fell at full length on the smoking embers in front of it, bridging over the fiery stream from one bank to the other.

With a single bound Peter Zudár leaped over the door, and sped away from the burning house like a madman.

It was dark, nobody saw him. In his way stood huge thistles, prickly-headed vegetable monsters, and Peter Zudár mowed them all down with his headsman's sword just as if they had been so

many condemned malefactors, or as if he were a frolicsome lad waging fierce war with a wooden sword against the whole evil host of weeds. Anybody who had seen him would have taken him for a lunatic.

He only came to himself when the barking of a dog struck upon his ear; he knew then that he was on the borders of the village, and close to the nearest houses.

Then he began slowly to compose himself, the cool night air was soothing his troubled brain. He now commenced to recollect what had happened to him during the last few hours. The riot, the seizure of the child, the house burnt over his head, the agony he had endured in the cellar—all these things flashed like vivid pictures before his mind again.

But what had become of the child? What did they want to do with her? To kill her perhaps?—these were his first thoughts. Then he began to consider how he might discover her whereabouts and rescue her. Vengeance was the last thing he thought of.

He had no suspicion as to whom the raging mob had risen against. He fancied that the child was the pivot of the whole ghastly affair. He was persuaded all along that they had sought her death, and would murder her, and the idea of such a thing was all the more terrible to him because he did not know the reason why. So much, however, he did know, that his own wife was the person most to be feared.

He was fully sensible that there was no time to lodge a complaint with the magistrate, the priest, or the local court, and await a heavy sentence. This was a peculiar case in which the headsman himself must investigate, condemn, and execute the sentence—and was not the sword of Justice already in his hands?

And as he stood there, leaning against a fence, in a brown study, it seemed to him as if he heard from the midst of the village the very hymn which he had sung so often with his darling before their evening repose:

"The Lord, my God, I praise and bless."

He listened attentively. It was no delusion. They were really the words of the hymn, the child's voice was really singing them.

At first he fancied that his darling was in some other world, and was speaking to him from the Kingdom of Heaven, and he lifted up his voice likewise, and sang back again, his deep sonorous voice sounding like a magnified echo of the bell-like childish voice.

Subsequently, however, it occurred to him that perhaps the child was locked up somewhere, and wanted to let him know where she was by singing the hymn.

Suddenly there arose a hideous shout from the courtyard of the castle, the inarticulate roar of hundreds and hundreds of savage men, whose very throats seemed to thirst for blood.

At that same instant Hétfalusy had surrendered his arms to his assailants.

Peter Zudár lost not another instant in reflection, but turned up his shirt-sleeves, smoothed away his hair from his eyes, and rushed towards the castle.

A long lane separated him from the residential part of the mansion, but not choosing to follow it along its whole length, he waited till he saw the pinnacles of the castle, and then took a short cut over hedge and ditch, dashing along straight before him heedless of everything.

The infuriated mob which, after being cowed by the mere show of resistance, became all the more brutal at the first symptom of surrender, after Hétfalusy had laid down his arms, was able to glut its brutal rage, at will, on the old gentleman who had thus become its victim.

But it was lost labour.

What satisfaction can there be in the torturing of a withered stump which is dumb to all outrage?—it is as fruitless a business as flogging a corpse!

The old squire did not demean himself by a single outcry of pain.

When they wanted him to confess that the gentry had banded together to extirpate the peasantry, he coldly replied:

"That is not true."

Every denial on his part was followed by inhuman tortures. But they were but tormenting a frigid skeleton insensible to pain, who only replied, again and again:

"That is not true!"

The invading mob, after breaking everything in the castle it could lay its hands upon, began searching for young Széphalmi and the doctor.

They must have hidden well, for nowhere could they be found. The mob turned all the rooms upside down, and yet it could not find them.

The old man must certainly know where they were stowed away.

But Hétfalusy would not betray his son-in-law or the doctor.

Amongst his executioners shaggy Hanák particularly distinguished himself by his fiendish ingenuity, but the squire only remarked to him in a gentle voice:

"Do you recollect, Hanák, how last year, you were bedridden, and I supported your whole family? And when your biggest lad was taken by the recruiting sergeant, did I not buy him out? And when the hail destroyed your crops, did I not give you the corn on which you and your whole family lived comfortably during the winter?"

But at this mild reproach, stubbly Hanák only wiped his bloody mouth, and bellowed with bestial pride:

"There's no Hanák here! I'm Hanák no longer. I'm a rebel patriot, that's what I am!"

The poor Leather-bell was quite unable to help his master. He could only implore the rioters to torture him if they liked rather than Hétfalusy. He knew he was the cause of it all because he had talked about the poison. He wished now that he had eaten of the poison and died.

Dame Zudár, meanwhile, had been regarding the sufferings of her mortal foe with devilish enjoyment.

There she stood, her arms folded across her breast, facing her enemy, whose warm blood frequently spurted over her face.

'"Tis no good hurting him that way," she murmured to herself. "A boor howls if you nip him, this sort only holds his tongue just as if he had a soul different from the others...."

"This was the very spot where you made my father bleed," she cried. "Do you recollect Dudoky, eh? There he lay, where you lie now, and you stood beside him, as I now stand beside you, and revelled in it. But my father wept and howled beneath his torments while you only keep silent. I could not bear to look on, I ran away and hid myself in my room, but there also I kept on hearing his shrieks. I heard them through two thick walls. Twenty years have passed since then, and through those twenty years I still hear him. I want to hear you weep too, and not mock your executioners by putting on a stone-cold face like that. Yes, you shall weep, you shall entreat. I will not be happy till I see your eyes full of tears."

Hétfalusy regarded the fury contemptuously, and knitted his lips.

And then he called her a name, a low, degrading name, the worst of all names that a man can call a woman.

With a hiss of rage the virago rushed upon him with the frantic idea of plunging her knife in his heart.

But nay, not so.

Her face was white with fury, her whole frame trembled.

"I became that all through you!" she gasped with husky rage. "But you will not mock me for it much longer. Do you see your grandchild here in my power?"

"You swore you would not hurt her."

"I swore I would not kill her, but I will make her what I was. By Heaven and Earth and all the torments of Hell, I swear I will do it."

"Woman!" stammered Hétfalusy, and his face lost at last its expression of stony endurance.

"Ha-ha!" cried the virago, with a laugh like the howl of a wild beast. "The last scion of the house of Hétfalusy will do credit to a house of ill-fame. Look how lovely she is! Look at her face, her figure, her eyes! As innocent as an angel too! Ah! you are weeping now, are you? But you will have to weep tears of blood, you accursed old wretch, for what I say I mean to do!"

"Woman, if you believe in God——" began the old man, writhing to free himself from his bonds.

"I don't!" the woman yelled back defiantly. "There is no God!"

At that same instant her head leaped so suddenly into the air that her body remained standing upright, three long jets of blood at the

same time shooting up from between her vacant shoulders. Her two hands still fumbled about in the air as if they would have drawn back the uttered blasphemy and defended her against this terrible judgment, and then the whole figure collapsed in the direction of the fallen head, which lay with its face turned heavenwards, and its mouth gaping open, as if longing to speak, whilst the tongue still moved, perchance, asking mercy or pardon from Heaven. Too late, too late! There was no longer any power of utterance there. Once or twice there was a twitching of the eyelids over the stiffening staring eyes, till at last they closed painfully in the dream of death.

And above the condemned sinner towered the form of the avenger of sin—the headsman.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VOICE OF THE LORD.

During the blasphemous speech of the frantic virago nobody had observed that Peter Zudár had reached the courtyard of the castle. In the darkness and prevailing confusion he had been able to creep up to the wretched woman unobserved.

He had heard to the end her furious outburst, her horrible menace. He had seen the convulsions of the stony-hearted squire in the midst of his fetters, he had seen the tender child collapse beneath the touch of the horrible virago, and he had fulfilled his mission.

The people, who in that awful moment had seen his bright sword flash forth like Heaven's lightning, who had seen the monstrously mutilated body of the woman totter in their midst, and spurt blood on all the bystanders, who had seen the awe-inspiring figure of the headsman close to them all, him whom they had fancied dead and buried, him whom their own eyes had seen burnt to ashes—all these people stood for a moment as if turned to stone, as if their souls had left their bodies.

This brief interval of petrified astonishment was sufficient for Peter Zudár to snatch up the sorrowing child with one hand, while with the other he whirled his bloody sword above his head, and opened a way for himself to the gate.

Then, when the rioters saw him escaping, they came to themselves again.

"After him!" cried Hanák, catching hold of his scythe.

"After him!" roared the Leather-bell, grasping a torch, and bounding on in front, and so skilfully did he scatter the sparks in the eyes of the pursuers, that their dazzled eyes could see absolutely nothing. When, at last, he came to a narrow bridge over a stream which they had to cross, he stumbled so suddenly that those coming immediately behind tumbled over him, and the torch

was extinguished in the water. Zudár, meanwhile, had had time to conceal himself and the girl in the bushes on the banks of the stream. Nobody had observed him except the Leather-bell, and as soon as that worthy could gain his legs again he fell a-bellowing with all his might:

"On, on! there he goes! catch him, seize him!"

And off he went at full tilt, as if a high price had been set upon the head of the pursued, and he was determined to win it, whilst Zudár, snug in his hiding-place, listened to the hundreds and hundreds of pattering feet that made the bridge creak over his head, and to the hundreds and hundreds of hoarse voices clamouring for his blood. Presently he heard them all come panting back again, cursing and swearing and consoling one another with the assurance that although they had not caught him now, he would not be able to escape them for long.

"Yes," he thought to himself, "a time is coming when you will find me without having sought me."

And now the pursuing band, full of fresh fury, stormed back to the castle. The Leather-bell cursed them for not following up the trail when they were already hot upon it. He had had, he maintained, the tail of the fugitive's coat in his very hand, but had been obliged to leave go because they had not helped him to hold on, and so the headsman had fled away among the maize-fields.

The sky was now growing grey, the dawn was not far off; but the folks had forgotten to ring in the morning, for the bell-ringers had something better to do.

At Thomas Bodza's command they carried the corpses aside out of the courtyard, the corpses of Ivan, Dame Zudár, and poor Mekipiros. They conveyed them to a large ditch at the back of the house, so that none might see their remains.

The surviving ringleader felt a secret satisfaction when his colleagues had thus perished by his side. He alone remained upon the field, and he flattered himself that Fate was on his side, and by

thus putting the leading threads of the whole movement into his hands, meant to emphasize the fact that *mind* was the true motive-power—his own mind naturally—and therefore it was for him, and him alone, to hold sway.

The mob must be impressed, of course, by some great never-to-be-forgotten scene, which would give a touch of sublimity to its hitherto low and common rioting.

So Thomas Bodza ascended to the highest step of the castle staircase, from whence he declared to the mob that as the champions of justice they had prevailed.

"And now," continued he, "we will pronounce judgment on the poison-mixers according to the good old Greek custom. Let the people take potsherds in their hands. In front of the hall stand two urns. In one is life, in the other death. Let each one of you cast his vote into which urn he pleases. This, my friends, is the ostracism of classical times. You are the archons who shall give judgment, and the whole world will thus see that we exercise according to law and order the authority which we have won with our arms. Sit around me, therefore, oh, citizens, and let the accused be brought forth!"

The gaping mob was delighted with this new diversion.

Hitherto the only occasion on which they had had an opportunity of seeing a court of justice was when they had been led in chains, for some crime or other, before the green table of the district court, where great gentlemen pronounced sentences upon them out of big thick books. And now one of these very great gentlemen was, in his turn, to stand before a tribunal, and the tribunal consisted of nothing but peasants, whose hair had never been clipped, who had never worn linen, who could neither read nor write, and yet who now had the power of passing upon him whatever sentence they chose. So they all applauded Bodza's proposition loudly, whilst he himself, with an air of ineffable importance, sat down on the topmost step of the staircase, and beckoned to his subordinates to lead forth the old squire.

He gave very little trouble, it was not even necessary to fetter him, for the moment he was untied from the doorpost he simply collapsed and remained lying where he had fallen.

Then they put him on an ambulance car, and thus conveyed him before the Areopagus.

One worthy peasant had compassion on the old man lying there in his shirt exposed to the cold morning air, and covered him with his *guba*20 yet this very man voted for his death a few moments later.

20 A shaggy woollen mantle worn by the Hungarian peasants.

Meanwhile, stubbly Hanák had placed behind the old man's back a gipsy brickmaker to keep an eye on him, and touch him up with a whip if he refused to confess.

Thomas Bodza now produced the box of bismuth that had been found in the castle, and, cautiously opening it, placed it in front of the old squire.

"You old sinner," said he, "answer my questions truly. Why did they send you so much poison?"

The old gentleman remained silent.

The gipsy savagely belaboured his dove-white head with the heavy whip.

At the sound of the blows, an angry voice suddenly resounded from behind the master's back.

"Hold hard, hold hard! you blockheads, you brutes, you stupid numbskulls!"

Bodza, in his terror, sprang from his seat, and the astonished multitude beheld Dr. Sarkantyús running hastily towards them along the hall.

The worthy man had been well concealed with young Széphalmi in a blind niche, in the chimney corner, whence he had listened to the whole horrible tragedy; but when it came to accusing someone

of poisoning people with *his* drugs, he could stand it no longer, but kicked open the tapestried door, and rushed out among the rioters.

Young Széphalmi swooned with terror when his hiding-place was discovered, so that they had to drag him out by the feet.

The unexpected joy of laying hands upon a couple of fresh victims whom they had long sought in vain, whetted the appetite of the mob for more blood. They kept pummelling Széphalmi till he came to again, and tied the physician back to back with Hétfalusy.

Throughout the whole tussle Dr. Sarkantyús never ceased blackguarding the rioters for their imbecile suspicion of medical science, and tried to explain to Thomas Bodza how very much in error he was as to the contents of the box.

Only Széphalmi displayed an utter want of dignity. He wept, he implored, he fell on his knees, and promised to confess everything if only they would not hurt him, if only they would not kill him. *He* was not guilty, he said, and he cursed the doctor for bringing all this mischief on the house with his abominable drugs and betraying their hiding-place so madly.

"Mr. Széphalmi," retorted Dr. Sarkantyús, "all my life long I have taken you for a poor creature, and in that belief I shall for ever remain. If you could remain quietly in your hiding-place when they were talking of your only daughter, if you could hold your breath and your ears and tremble in every limb when they were torturing your father-in-law—well, that's your look out. As for me, if only I can unmask a downright lie, I am quite content to look death itself between the eyes immediately after. Ever since you fainted at the prick of a leech, and were not ashamed to burst into tears when I cut out one of your warts, I knew you to be a coward. Yes, a coward you are, and a very poor creature to boot; but whatever else I am, I am not that. Twice have I broken the bone of my own leg because it was improperly set, and I am ready to have my neck broken into the bargain if only I may bear witness to the truth. Those, sir, are my sentiments. And now is there anybody here with whom a man can talk common-sense?"

Bound and helpless as he was, the doctor still seemed to have made some impression on the mob. Thomas Bodza, therefore, hastened to cut him short.

"Then you maintain," he began, "that the gentry have *not* poisoned the peasants?"

"A man must be mad to even ask such a question."

"Then why are so many people now dying all over the kingdom?"

"Because of their sins. They are dying of a terrible plague which is in the air, in the earth, in the very meat and drink which God has given us, in the heat of the day, and in the chill of night—a plague which is no respecter of persons, but slays lord and serf, rich and poor alike; which will visit you, too, if not to-day then to-morrow, which will destroy a tenth part of your households, which will search you out wherever you are, in the forest, in the fields, within your cottages, though you were to slay instantly every gentleman in the county. You will, therefore, do well to untie my hands, and let me distribute amongst you the blessed antidote, by means of which, with God's assistance, we may be able to prevent this terrible calamity."

Thomas Bodza felt something of the paralysis of extreme terror when he saw the impression made by these words upon the mob, which evidently already began to waver. So he hastily threw himself into the attitude of a Roman statue, and exclaimed with a loud voice:

"Doctor! I tell you you are lying. Let nobody touch that white powder, for there is death in it. If you maintain that this powder is not poison, take some yourself!"

This proposal met with universal approbation.

"Yes, yes! let him swallow some of the stuff he has brought if it is not poison."

The doctor did not at all relish the idea of taking his own drugs, but he was careful not to betray his dislike, for he was in a decidedly ticklish position.

"Death comes from above," he calmly observed to the master. "Medicaments are no food for a healthy man, but, all the same, I will willingly take some of that bismuth powder to convince you all of the truth of my statement."

Then Thomas Bodza proceeded to pour a paper full of the stuff down the throat of the pinioned doctor.

The bystanders thronged around and gaped curiously at him, expecting every moment to see him drop down dead.

"Look how green his face is!" said Bodza, working with evil intent on the excited imagination of the mob. "Look how his eyes are staring, and how ghastly pale he is!"

"It is not *my* eyes that are staring, my worthy master, but your own," replied the doctor calmly. "Your face is pale, you are trembling. I tell you death comes from above and not from my powders."

Thomas Bodza felt so dizzy that he had to clutch hold of the arm of shaggy Hanák, who was standing by his side. Quite early that very morning he had felt a sort of numbing paralysis in all his limbs, a sort of griping cramp convulsing his inner parts, and an unspeakable fear had arisen within his soul, but the feeling had passed over, and he had put the thought of it away from him.

And now, again, that panic fear, which has no name, but beneath whose influence the bravest of men become pale, shaking spectres, overcame him, and he felt like one who is sensible of the approach of that one enemy against whom there is no defence.

The physician was the first to detect in the face of his tormentor that terrible phenomenon, *facies Hypocratica*, and when he said to him: "Your face is deathly pale," he as irrecoverably plunged him

into the grave that was gaping open for him, as if he had plunged a knife into his heart.

The horror-stricken rioters gazed at their master who, for some moments, stood gaping at them with a terribly distorted face. There were two coloured rings round his glassy eyes, his cheeks had fallen in, his lips were turning yellow, the whole man seemed to be a hideous personification of mortal dread. Then, suddenly with a loud yell, he rolled down the steps, and collapsing with hideous convulsions at the doctor's feet, yelled in the midst of his racking torments:

"God of mercy, have compassion upon me! ... Doctor, help me! I am dying!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE READY-DUG GRAVES.

Imré Hétfalusy, hastening with all his might, reached at last the officer in command of the cordon, and delivered the General's command. The officer at once placed four-and-twenty soldiers at the disposal of the General's adjutant. More he could not spare, as his assistance might be wanted elsewhere.

Imré lost no more time in going to the next cordon-commander, but marched straight off to Hétfalu with his four-and-twenty warriors.

Only three of them were mounted, the General's adjutant, Kamienszka, and himself, all the rest were on foot. Even with the utmost exertion it would take at least four hours to reach Hétfalu.

During the long journey Maria told Imré everything she knew about his family. Nobody disturbed their conversation, the road was empty and noiseless.

When they reached the first *csárda* that also was silent. The doors and windows had been torn from their places, the road was strewn with the débris of casks, bottles, and flasks. Here and there, amidst the ruins, were little pools of blood in which somebody had stood, leaving a bloody trail behind them....

The little band went further on their way in silence.

Two hours later they perceived in the wayside woods, concealed among the bushes, three figures which rose to their feet on perceiving the soldiers, and one of them came rapidly towards them, and was so out of breath when he reached them that he could not speak a word, and would have fallen if Imré had not supported him against his saddle.

Then Imré recognised the worthy Leather-bell.

"What's the matter, old man?" he inquired compassionately.

"Alas, alas! my young master, a terrible thing has happened. I cannot describe it in words. I'm only glad that we have saved this innocent creature."

"What innocent creature?"

"This child, the squire's grandchild, whom Zudár brought up in secret, and the headsman's wife betrayed. But she has paid for it dearly now. They had condemned the child to death. I hid them here beneath the bridge, and gave them peasant's clothes to put on, and helped them to scurry through the woods."

At these words Kamienszka leaped from her horse, and ran to the child who was quite worn out. Her little feet were all wounded and bloody, it was only by leaning on the arm of Zudár that she was able to walk at all.

The headsman recognised at once the youth who had brought a blessing on his house, although he had now quite another figure. Now he had come to fight. Zudár stooped down and kissed his hand. He said, too, that his own hands were now pure, for he had washed them in blood, the shedding whereof was pleasing to God.

The officer in command had a rough litter made from the branches of trees, on which they placed the exhausted little girl. Four soldiers were then told off to carry it, and then the little band resumed its march. Elise could not have been in a place of greater safety.

Meanwhile, the Leather-bell was giving a full account of the horrors that had taken place around the castle from the evening to the morning. He had left the place just as Széphalmi and the doctor had fallen into the hands of the mob.

Imré was beside himself with horror.

"I must hasten to save my father or die with him," he murmured bitterly.

The officer wanted him to wait so that they might all reach the castle together, but he would not listen. He was quite ready to face

the danger single-handed. But indeed he was not alone. He had beside him his valiant comrade, in love a true woman, in trouble a true man, and she would not be parted from him.

"Courage and hope!" she cried, pressing his hand, and with that the heroic couple spurred their horses along the grass-grown road.

With the fall of Numa Pompilius the last vestige of discipline disappeared from the ranks of the rioters. The loss of their leader, so far from bringing them to reason, only made them desperate. Bodza had died at their very feet after half an hour of the most excruciating torments, and, meanwhile, there mingled with the crowd numbers of wailing women, each of whom already had their dead at home, and spread sorrow and confusion wherever they went. Then everybody lost his head, and was frightened into bestial ferocity. The dying lay about in the road with none to care for them. Fathers no longer owned their sons, brother had no compassion for brother. And the gentry had to pay for all this panic terror.

The people had been brought up in such a way that its first thought on breaking out of its cage was to tear its masters in pieces.

It listened no longer to any word of command, only the latest whim obtained a hearing.

Stubbly Hanák hit upon a hideous idea.

"What are those three bigwigs lounging about here for, eh?" he cried. "Let them go and dig graves, let them dig their own graves!"

And with that he untied their bonds, placed spades and shovels in their hands, and pointed out to them the exact spots in the courtyard of the castle where they were to dig their own graves, and nice, picturesque spots they were too, beneath the shade of wide-spreading chestnut trees.

Old Hétfalusy had no longer the physical strength for such work, and Dr. Sarkantyús declared categorically that anybody who was

fool enough to kill him might do so if he chose, but that he was not such a fool as to dig his own grave, and nobody should make him do it either.

Only Széphalmi took them at their word. On his knees he implored them not to torture him, and he would willingly dig not only his own grave, but the graves of his comrades also.

The rioters thrust a spade into his hand, and, grinning with delight, instructed him how to throw aside the earth out of the furrow, and then they made him lie down in it in order to take his proper measure.

And how boisterously they laughed at the fun of it.

Suddenly there was a sound of pattering hoofs, and two horsemen, with drawn swords in their right hands, galloped into the courtyard.

They came so unexpectedly that only the shrieks of the women wailing at the gate told the frantic mob of their arrival.

"My son!" cried the old squire, painfully raising himself from the ground with a supreme effort.

"My father, my father!" wailed the youth, and with that he cut his way through the thickest of the crowd, distributing vigorous blows, right and left, till he had forced his way up to his father's tortured body, and forgetting everything at that moment, he flung himself from his saddle, fell upon his father's neck, and embraced and sobbed over him.

The brutal mob instantly rushed upon him with a savage yell, when, suddenly, a couple of shots resounded, and two of the assailants fell dead close beside the father and son. It was Maria who had fired these shots, and now, leaping from her steed, she shook Imré violently.

"You must fight for your life now, and leave weeping for another time, my boy!" cried she.

The youth quickly recovered himself and drew his sword, and then the pair of them turned upon the cowardly mob, and, by sheer dint of hard fighting, began driving them out of the doorway of the castle.

In no very long time there were three of them, for the doctor had had his weather-eye open, and, when the general attention was distracted, he snatched up the spade assigned to him, and therewith dealt a lanky lout beside him such a blow at the back of the neck that he immediately fell down and never spoke again.

"Come along with us, Mr. Széphalmi, come along!" cried the doctor, as he joined the combatants, but Széphalmi paid no heed. He fell down on the edge of the freshly-dug grave at the feet of his jailors, and declared, sobbing and moaning, that he would hurt nobody if nobody hurt him. The only answer they gave him was a smashing blow on the head with a large hammer, and he fell back into the grave and expired on the spot.

A vigorous slash with which Imré severed the arm of the most powerful of the peasants, clean off at the elbow, somewhat damped the fighting ardour of the crowd, which drew back to curse and swear at a distance. The respite thus gained was sufficient to enable the little group of gentlemen to reach the door of the castle, and bolt and bar it behind them, after having first of all rescued old Hétfalusy from the hands of his murderers.

Fortunately not one of the rioters remained in the castle, indeed there was nothing else for them to do there. Everything had been eviscerated, torn to atoms, reduced to powder. A large portion of the mob was down in the cellars dead drunk.

Imré Hétfalusy who, all this time, had held his father closely embraced, now deposited him on a torn and ragged hair mattress, and then they both embraced each other again, and neither could speak a word. It was both joy and anguish, it was something which words could not describe.

And now for the defence!

The three of them could not, of course, defend the whole castle against the furious mob whenever it should return. For return it certainly would, and if it could not get through the door, it was at least able to climb through the windows. The best plan, therefore, was to confine the defence to a single room, and the most convenient stronghold was the family library, the door of which was strengthened by iron fastenings.

The sole object of the besieged was to keep the mob at bay till the arrival of the soldiery.

In a few moments the roar of the rioters advancing to the attack was again audible. Stones flew through the windows, and angry fists thundered at the door. Curses and savage threats resounded in the passages. The mob, swarming in the courtyard, were carrying about on their shoulders the dead bodies of the two peasants that had been shot, two or three men with bloody faces were exhibiting their wounds, the widow of one of the fallen held up her weeping children in her arms, and hounded the mob on to vengeance with her frantic bitterness.

The room to be defended had a window looking out upon the courtyard, and a door opening upon the passage. Maria was to be the defender of the window, Imré the defender of the door. The doctor, meanwhile, with the nonchalance becoming his profession, was binding up old Hétfalusy's wounds, tearing off portions of his own shirt to serve as bandages.

The rioters had now occupied the hall, they had crept into the castle through the rearward windows, the walls and arches rang with their triumphant shouting.

"Imré!" said the old squire to his son, "come nearer to me!"

The youth approached his suffering father and knelt down before him.

"It may be God's will," murmured the aged man, "that within an hour both of us may stand before His Judgment Seat. Promise me

that you will never accuse me of being a hard father, that you will never say that I hunted you to death. Promise me that, my son!"

"I have always loved you, and I will love you still," sobbed the youth, kissing the shaking hand.

"Let us not part from each other in tears," continued the old man, "let us rejoice as they rejoice who have found again those whom they fancied they had lost, and now let me bless you as a father may bless his son when he is about to undertake a long journey."

And then he placed his trembling hands on his son's head, while his eyes looked up to Heaven, and his dumb lips murmured an inaudible prayer to the Lord of life and death.

"And now, my son, brace yourself up for your long journey!"

But Maria came rushing towards them.

"To work, my friend! bear a hand! The evil game has begun. Let us but gain half an hour and all our lives will be saved."

"Who is that apparition," whispered old Hétfalusy to his son, "who has twice descended from Heaven to save us?"

Imré looked with some hesitation at Maria, the girl gazed back at him encouragingly.

"Yes, tell him! Why not? I am your wife, the famous Maria Kamienszka, and this is not the first time I have been in the midst of a scrimmage. Courage, my father, your son is now in your embrace, and in half an hour your grand-daughter will be there also. Trust in God and be not faint-hearted!"

"Ah, yes!" whispered the old man, with a transfigured countenance and a voice full of enthusiasm, "this cannot be the hour of my death, no, my God! it cannot, cannot be!"

The youth and the valiant young woman then warmly pressed each other's hands, and hastened back to their posts. It was indeed high time.

The besiegers, after swarming all over the castle, had come at last upon the barred and bolted door, and with the bloodthirsty howl of ravening beasts, had rushed upon it with their iron bars, while another band began wrenching out the iron fastenings of the windows with their sharp *csakanyas*.21

21 Hooked axes.

The besieged had to economize their shots, for they had only four charges left. Their means of defence had to be reserved till the very last instant, they could not afford to simply destroy the first stupid bumpkin who might happen to come in their way.

The fear of death no longer terrified the besiegers. Several times Maria held the barrel of her pistol close to the temples of the peasant who was busy with the iron fastenings of the window, and he did not so much as move his head. Many of the howling mob were so drunk that they no longer knew what fear was. They thrust their hands through the glass to open the window sashes, and Maria sliced away with her sword at the intruding hands, and a few minutes afterwards the same bloody hands would re-appear with stunted fingers. Wounds no longer hurt them.

The time had come when the besieged could count the minutes which they had still to live, the blows given and received were like so much money paid for life, whosoever stock failed first would be utterly ruined.

Maria was able to defend the window longer than Imré could defend the door, one of whose panels was suddenly burst in with a loud crash, opening a breach to the besiegers outside, whose sudden rush to the gap made it impossible for the youth, despite the most frantic efforts, to defend the crazy door much longer.

Maria heard Imré's cry of despair, and, forgetting the same instant her own danger, quitted the window, and sped to the help of her beloved.

For a few moments the besiegers made a frantic effort to force their way through the door, but at length the two swords, swift as

lightning flashes, beat down the brutal preponderance of the mob. The two defenders held their places, held them, at any rate, till the besiegers should stream through the window or shoot them down from behind.

Either of these eventualities might be expected at any moment.

"Keep your shots to the very last," whispered Maria to Imré. "Reserve one of them for the enemy, and the other for me. I must not fall into their hands alive."

Nevertheless, there was an unaccountable tardiness among the besiegers of the window, and the assailants of the door also began thinning down, and everyone noticed with surprise that the deafening din had abated, and a momentary suspension of hostilities had taken place.

"Our rescuers are at hand!" cried Maria, and the same instant they could hear the sound of rolling drums drawing nearer and nearer to the castle.

The rebels had quitted the besieged window and were scampering towards the gate.

The last beat of the drum indicated that the soldiers had arrived in front of the castle.

There were only five-and-twenty, most of them young fellows, mere lads, and opposed to them stood a savage multitude, armed with all sorts of hastily appropriated weapons, and with bloodthirstiness enough for a whole army.

The young officer in command stood at the head of his little company, and when he saw the headless, savage mob surging all around him, he exhorted them, in a bold, manly voice, to return to their homes, respect the laws, and give up their captives and their ringleaders.

Shaggy Hanák took it upon himself to respond to this invitation:

"We will not return to our homes," he shouted, "so long as a single castle in the kingdom is still standing. We will make whatever laws we like. We will give up the captive gentry when they are stone dead, and as for our ringleader you may have him if you can catch him."

To still further emphasize his words, shaggy Hanák whirled his knobby bludgeon above his head, and shied it frantically at the officer, who warded off the blow with his sword, and the same instant a young private transfixed the braggart so vigorously that the end of his bayonet stuck in the ground behind.

This unexpected scene served as a signal for the little band of soldiers, and they there and then fired into the thickest of the crowd.

And with that the whole horrible tragedy came to an end.

A single volley dispersed the whole ragged host. The corpses remained on the ground naturally, but all the rest fled without another word, fled incontinently over pillar and post, rushed straight home, hid themselves away, put on their simplest air, washed the blood from their hands, and held their tongues.

The rescued welcomed their deliverers with open arms. But another quarter of an hour and very sorry remnants of them would have been found at Hétfalu.

Meanwhile, out came Dr. Sarkantyús, and a very great pother he made, insisting that the whole company should instantly hasten back to town, as if they remained there the pale death would speedily overtake them, and it would therefore boot them little to have escaped from the red death. And indeed the plague was raging fearfully in that district, and dying wretches were writhing convulsively in the streets outside. He himself must remain on the spot. He was bound by his official duties to visit the very houses of these persons who, half an hour ago, had combined to torture him, and whose families were now themselves suffering torments in the grip of this unknown disease. Nevertheless, he required the escort

of two armed men, for, as he jocosely observed, "The Deuce is in it when patients would compel the doctor to drink his own drugs."

Hétfalusy had the felicity of embracing his long-lost grandchild before he died. The child accepted him as her grandpapa, but begged that she might have as her dear papa besides, good old Zudár, who had loved her so much.

Hétfalusy nodded his consent, and pressed the coarse palm of the headsman with his own gentlemanly hand. Nobody told the child that she had a perfect right to call Zudár her father, inasmuch as her real father, who had cast her from him, now lay frightfully disfigured in a grave he had dug with his own hand.

Hétfalusy indeed never mentioned the name of his son-in-law again.

Then they laid him in the carriage already prepared for him, and little Elise sat beside him and nursed his head in her lap. Oh, by this time, she was very well used to nursing old people.

Maria and Imré accompanied the carriage on foot all the way to town. Yet, once again, they were forced to fight their way through armed bands of rebels, but after that they reached the town peaceably enough.

The General had given orders that Hétfalusy should be conducted straight to his house as soon as the old man arrived.

Boundless was the joy of the worthy General to welcome in his home as a guest the man who, once upon a time, had been his mortal foe.

Now indeed they could pardon each other everything.

Hétfalusy knew, at last, why the General had abandoned his girl so suddenly, and how could the iron man help forgiving him who had sinned greatly against him it is true, but, at the same time, had suffered so terribly for it.

It was only mental excitement which still kept the life in the old man's shattered body. He survived for another six months. His bodily wounds healed but slowly, and still more slowly the wounds of the spirit. He saw his only son happy in the love of the noblest, the rarest of women; he saw his little grandchild growing up full of beauty, wisdom, and amiability; and it did him good to rejoice in the domestic happiness of his former enemy, and oftentimes he would call Cornelia his darling daughter. And she was worthy of the name.

A beneficent stroke of apoplexy called him home to his dead in the family vault at Hétfalu.

Imré remained no longer in those parts. He settled down on his wife's property with little Elise, and left for ever the place which had such melancholy associations for him.

And Peter Zudár went with them. He pursued no more his grim profession. After that last master-stroke of his, he never grasped the headsman's sword again. He had wielded it for the last time at God's command, he was not going to play the part of death's scytheman any more at the bidding of man.

Close to the Kamienszki estates he rented a little plot of land where he grew flowers and melons, sported with white doves and little rabbits, and sang in the church choir every day. It never occurred to anyone that he had once been——but no matter.

And the three houses at Hétfalu were abandoned to desolation.

The gutted dwelling-house was never re-built. The castle was never re-inhabited, people avoided it as a spectre-stricken dwelling. Its windows were bricked up, its garden became a wilderness of weeds, its steps and staircases fell to pieces. Ruin wrought her work upon it.

The hut, with the moss-covered roof, endured the longest. The old night-owl, who now could scarce use her limbs, would, nevertheless, totter of an evening to the place where stood the vast

family vault of the Hétfalusies, sit down there, opposite to the iron gate, and talk all sorts of nonsense to some imaginary interlocutor.

"Eh! eh! old Hétfalusy! who was right after all? Didn't I say you would be the first to go? What a little room satisfies you now! what a quiet, peaceable man you are now! You have got earth enough at last, yet you were always hungering after more while you were yet alive! You would be at rest now if I would let you alone, eh? Or are you sorry that we cannot go on with our wrangling? Well, well, if I should discover the door by which you made your exit, we will begin it all over again...."

For hours at a stretch she would pour forth these vain mad words, unanswered, unheeded. What had once been dust now lay at rest, what had once been a human spirit now abode in Heaven, there was none to answer her.

The mossy roof grew more and more ruinous, and at last one day the old night-owl had quitted her nest and was gone. Nobody mourned for her. Who takes any count of the birds of the field or the beasts of the forest!

THE END.

EDITION NOTE

The text follows R. Nisbet Bain's historical English translation. Original page references in the contents refer to the printed source.