

DEBTS OF HONOR

CHAPTER I

THE JOURNAL OF DESIDERIUS

At that time I was but ten years old, my brother Lorand sixteen; our dear mother was still young, and father, I well remember, no more than thirty-six. Our grandmother, on my father's side, was also of our party, and at that time was some sixty years of age; she had lovely thick hair, of the pure whiteness of snow. In my childhood I had often thought how dearly the angels must love those who keep their hair so beautiful and white; and used to have the childish belief that one's hair grows white from abundance of joy.

It is true, we never had any sorrow; it seemed as if our whole family had contracted some secret bond of unity, whereby each member thereof bound himself to cause as much joy and as little sorrow as possible to the others.

I never heard any quarrelling in our family. I never saw a passionate face, never an anger that lasted till the morrow, never a look at all reproachful. My mother, grandmother, father, my brother and I, lived like those who understand each other's thoughts, and only strive to excel one another in the expression of their love.

To confess the truth, I loved none of our family so much as I did my brother. Nevertheless I should have been thrown into some little doubt, if some one

had asked me which of them I should choose, if I must part from three of the four and keep only one for myself. But could we only have remained together, without death to separate us or disturb our sweet contentment, until ineffable eternity, in such a case I had chosen for my constant companion only my brother. He was so good to me. For he was terribly strong. I thought there could not be a stronger fellow in the whole town. His school-fellows feared his fists, and never dared to cross his path; yet he did not look so powerful; he was rather slender, with a tender girl-like countenance.

Even now I can hardly stop speaking of him.

As I was saying, our family was very happy. We never suffered from want, living in a fine house with every comfort. Even the very servants had plenty. Torn clothes were always replaced by new ones and as to friends—why the jolly crowds that would make the house fairly ring with merry-making on name-days* and on similar festive occasions proved that there was no lack of them. That every one had a feeling of high esteem for us I could tell by the respectful greetings addressed to us from every direction.

My father was a very serious man; quiet and not talkative. He had a pale face, a long black beard, and thick eyebrows. Sometimes he contracted his eyebrows, and then we might have been afraid of him; but his idea always was, that nobody should fear him; not more than once a year did it happen that he cast an angry look at some one. However, I never saw him in a good humor. On the occasion of our most festive banquets, when our guests were bursting into peals of laughter at sprightly jests, he would sit there at the end of the table as one who heard naught. If dear mother leaned affectionately on his shoulder, or Lorand kissed his face, or if I nestled to his breast and plied him, in

*In Hungary persons celebrate the name-day of the saint after whom they are called with perhaps more ceremony than their birthday.

child-guise, with queries on unanswerable topics, at such a time his beautiful, melancholy eyes would beam with such inexpressible love, such enchanting sweetness would well out from them! But a smile came there never at any time, nor did any one cause him to laugh.

He was not one of those men who, when wine or good humor unloosens their tongue, become loquacious, and tell all that lies hidden in their heart, speak of the past and future, chatter and boast. No, he never used gratuitous words. There was some one else in our family just as serious, our grandmother; she was just as taciturn, just as careful about contracting her thick eyebrows, which were already white at that time; just as careful about uttering words of anger; just as incapable of laughing or even smiling. I often remarked that her eyes were fixed unremittingly on his face; and sometimes I found myself possessed of the childish idea that my father was always so grave in his behavior because he knew that his mother was gazing at him. If afterward their eyes met by chance, it seemed as if they had discovered each other's thoughts—some old, long-buried thoughts, of which they were the guardians; and I often saw how my old grandmother would rise from her everlasting knitting, and come to father as he sat among us thus abstracted, scarce remarking that mother, Lorand, and I were beside him, caressing and pestering him; she would kiss his forehead, and his countenance would seem to change in a moment: he would become more affectionate, and begin to converse with us; thereupon grandmother would kiss him afresh and return to her knitting.

It is only now that I recall all these incidents. At that time I found nothing remarkable in them.

One evening our whole family circle was surprised by the unusually good humor that had come over father. To each one of us he was very tender, very affectionate; entered into a long conversation with Lorand, asked him of his school-work, imparted to him information on subjects of which as yet he had but a faulty knowledge; took me on his knee and smoothed my

head; addressed questions to me in Latin, and praised me for answering them correctly; kissed our dear mother more than once, and after supper was over related merry tales of the old days. When we began to laugh at them, he laughed too. It was such a pleasure to me to have seen my father laugh once. It was such a novel sensation that I almost trembled with joy.

Only our old grandmother remained serious. The brighter father's face became, the more closely did those white eyebrows contract. Not for a single moment did she take her eyes off father's face; and, as often as he looked at her with his merry, smiling countenance, a cold shudder ran through her ancient frame. Nor could she let father's unusual gayety pass without comment.

"How good-humored you are to-day, my son!"

"To-morrow I shall take the children to the country," he answered; "the prospect of that has always been a source of great joy to me."

We were to go to the country! The words had a pleasant sound for us also. We ran to father, to kiss him for his kindness; how happy he had made us by this promise! His face showed that he knew it well.

"Now you must go to bed early, so as not to oversleep in the morning; the carriage will be here at day-break."

To go to bed is only too easy, but to fall asleep is difficult when one is still a child, and has received a promise of being taken to the country. We had a beautiful and pleasant country property, not far from town; my brother was as fond as I was of being there. Mother and grandmother never came with us. Why, we knew not; they said they did not like the country. We were indeed surprised at this. Not to like the country—to wander in the fields, on flowery meadows; to breathe the precious perfumed air; to gather round one the beautiful, sagacious, and useful domestic animals? Can there be any one in the world who does not love that? Child, I know there is none.

My brother was all excitement for the chase. How

he would enter forest and reeds! what beautiful green-necked wild duck he would shoot. How many multi-colored birds' eggs he would bring home to me.

"I will go with you, too," I said.

"No; some ill might befall you. You can remain at home in the garden to angle in the brook, and catch tiny little fishes."

"And we shall cook them for dinner." What a splendid idea! Long, long we remained awake; first Lorand, then I, was struck by some idea which had to be mentioned; and so each prevented the other from sleeping. Oh! how great the gladness that awaited us on the morrow!

Late in the night a noise as of fire arms awoke me. It is true that I always dreamed of guns. I had seen Lorand at the chase, and feared he would shoot himself.

"What have you shot, Lorand?" I asked half asleep.

"Remain quite still," said my brother, who was lying in the bed near me, and had risen at the noise. "I shall see what has happened outside." With these words he went out.

Several rooms divided our bedroom from that of our parents. I heard no sound except the opening of doors here and there.

Soon Lorand returned. He told me merely to sleep on peacefully—a high wind had risen and had slammed to a window that had remained open; the glass was all broken into fragments; that had caused the great noise.

And therewith he proceeded to dress.

"Why are you dressing?"

"Well, the broken window must be mended with something to prevent the draught coming in; it is in mother's bedroom. You can sleep on peacefully."

Then he placed his hand on my head, and that hand was like ice.

"Is it cold outside, Lorand?"

"No."

"Then why does your hand tremble so?"

"True; it is very cold. Sleep on, little Desi."

As he went out he left an intermediate door open for a moment; and in that moment the sound of mother's laughter reached my ears. That well-known ringing sweet voice, that indicates those *naïve* women who among their children are themselves the greatest children.

What could cause mother to laugh so loudly at this late hour of the night? Because the window was broken? At that time I did not yet know that there is a horrible affliction which attacks women with agonies of hell, and amidst these heart-rending agonies forces them to laugh incessantly.

I comforted myself with what my brother had said, and forcibly buried my head in my pillow that I might compel myself to fall asleep.

It was already late in the morning when I awoke again. This time also my brother had awakened me. He was already quite dressed.

My first thought was of our visit to the country.

"Is the carriage already here? Why did you not wake me earlier? Why, you are actually dressed!"

I also immediately hastened to get up, and began to dress; my brother helped me, and answered not a word to my constant childish prattling. He was very serious, and often gazed in directions where there was nothing to be seen.

"Some one has annoyed you, Lorand?"

My brother did not reply, only drew me to his side and combed my hair. He gazed at me incessantly with a sad expression.

"Has some evil befallen you, Lorand?"

No sign, even of the head, of assent or denial; he merely tied my neckerchief quietly into a bow.

We disputed over the coat I should wear; I wished to put on a blue one. Lorand, on the contrary, wished me to wear a dark green one.

I resisted him.

"Why, we are going to the country! There the blue doublet will be just the thing. Why don't you give it to me? Because you have none like it!"

Lorand said nothing; he merely looked at me with those great reproachful eyes of his. It was enough for me. I allowed him to dress me in the dark green coat. And yet I would continually grumble about it.

"Why, you are dressing me as if we were to go to an examination or to a funeral."

At these words Lorand suddenly pressed me to him, folding me in his embrace, then knelt down before me and began to weep, and sob so that his tears bedewed my hair.

"Lorand, what is the matter?" I asked in terror; but he could not speak for weeping. "Don't weep, Lorand. Did I annoy you? Don't be angry."

Long did he weep, all the time holding me in his arms. Then suddenly he heaved a deep and terrifying sigh, and in a low voice stammered in my ear:

"Father—is—dead."

I was one of those children who could not weep; who learn that only with manhood. At such a time when I should have wept, I only felt as if some worm were gnawing into my heart, as if some languor had seized me, which deprived me of all feeling expressed by the five senses—my brother wept for me. Finally, he kissed me and begged me to recover myself. But I was not beside myself. I saw and heard everything. I was like a log of wood, incapable of any movement.

It was unfortunate that I was not gifted with the power of showing how I suffered.

But my mind could not fathom the depths of that thought. Our father was dead!

Yesterday evening he was still talking with us; embracing and kissing us; he had promised to take us to the country, and to-day he was not: he was dead. Quite incomprehensible! In my childhood I had often racked my brains with the question, "What is there beyond the world?" Void. Well, and what surrounds that void? Many times this distracting thought drove me almost to madness. Now this same maddening dilemma seized upon me. How could it be that my father was dead?

"Let us go to mother!" was my next thought.

"We shall go soon after her. She has already departed."

"Whither?"

"To the country."

"But, why?"

"Because she is ill."

"Then why did she laugh so in the night?"

"Because she is ill."

This was still more incomprehensible to my poor intellect.

A thought then occurred to me. My face became suddenly brighter.

"Lorand, of course you are joking; you are fooling me. You merely wished to alarm me. We are all going away to the country to enjoy ourselves! and you only wished to take the drowsiness from my eyes when you told me father was dead."

At these words Lorand clasped his hands, and, with motionless, agonized face, groaned out:

"Desi, don't torture me; don't torture me with your smiling face."

This caused me to be still more alarmed. I began to tremble, seized one of his arms, and implored him not to be angry. Of course, I believed what he said.

He could see that I believed, for all my limbs were trembling.

"Let us go to him, Lorand."

My brother merely gazed at me as if he were horrified at what I had said.

"To father?"

"Yes. What if I speak to him, and he awakes?"

At this suggestion Lorand's two eyes became like fire. It seems as if he were forcibly holding back the rush of a great flood of tears. Then between his teeth he murmured:

"He will never awake again."

"Yet I would like to kiss him."

"His hand?"

"His hand and his face."

"You may kiss only his hand," said my brother firmly.

"Why?"

"Because I say so," was his stern reply. The unaccustomed ring of his voice was quite alarming. I told him I would obey him; only let him take me to father.

"Well, come along. Give me your hand."

Then taking my hand, he led me through two rooms.* In the third, grandmother met us.

I saw no change in her countenance; only her thick white eyebrows were deeply contracted.

Lorand went to her and softly whispered something to her which I did not hear; but I saw plainly that he indicated me with his eyes. Grandmother quietly indicated her consent or refusal with her head; then she came to me, took my head in her two hands, and looked long into my face, moving her head gently. Then she murmured softly:

"Just the way *he* looked as a child."

"Then she threw herself face foremost upon the floor, sobbing bitterly.

Lorand seized my hand and drew me with him into the fourth room.

There lay the coffin. It was still open; only the winding-sheet covered the whole.

Even to-day I have no power to describe the coffin in which I saw my father. Many know what that is; and no one would wish to learn from me.* Only an old serving-maid was in the chamber; no one else was watching. My brother pressed my head to his bosom. And so we stood there a long time.

Suddenly my brother told me to kiss my father's hand, and then we must go. I obeyed him; he raised the edge of the winding-sheet; I saw two wax-like hands put together; two hands in which I could not have recognized those strong muscular hands, upon the shapely fingers of which in my younger days I

*In Hungary the houses are built so that one room always leads into the other; the whole house can often be traversed without the necessity of going into a corridor or passage.

had so often played with the wonderful signet-rings, drawing them off one after the other.

I kissed both hands. It was such a pleasure! Then I looked at my brother with agonized pleading. I longed so to kiss the face. He understood my look and drew me away.

"Come with me. Don't let us remain longer." And that was such terrible agony to me! My brother told me to wait in my room, and not to move from it until he had ordered the carriage which was to take us away.

"Whither?" I asked.

"Away to the country. Remain here and don't go anywhere else." And to keep me secure he locked the door upon me.

Then I fell a-thinking. Why should we go to the country now that our father was lying dead? Why must I remain meanwhile in that room? Why do none of our acquaintances come to see us? Why do those who go about the house whisper so quietly? Why do they not toll the bell when so great a one lies dead in the house?

All this distracted my brain entirely. To nothing could I give myself an answer, and no one came to me from whom I could have demanded the truth.

Once, not long after (to me it seemed an age, though, if the truth be known, it was probably only a half-hour or so), I heard the old serving-maid, who had been watching in yonder chamber, tripping past the corridor window. Evidently some one else had taken her place.

Her face was now as indifferent as it always was. Her eyes were cried out; but I am sure I had seen her weep every day, whether in good or in bad humor; it was all one with her. I addressed her through the window:

"Aunt Susie, come here."

"What do you want, dear little Desi?"

"Susie, tell me truly, why am I not allowed to kiss my father's face?"

The old servant shrugged her shoulders, and with cynical indifference replied:

"Poor little fool. Why, because—because he has no head, poor fellow."

I did not dare to tell my brother on his return what I had heard from old Susie.

I told him it was the cold air, when he asked why I trembled so.

Thereupon he merely put my overcoat on, and said, "Let us go to the carriage."

I asked him if our grandmother was not coming with us. He replied that she would remain behind. We two took our seats in one carriage; a second was waiting before the door.

To me the whole incident seemed as a dream. The rainy, gloomy weather, the houses that flew past us, the people who looked wonderingly out of the windows, the one or two familiar faces that passed us by, and in their astonished gaze upon us forgot to greet us. It was as if each one of them asked himself: "Why has the father of these boys no head?" Then the long poplar-trees at the end of the town, so bent by the wind as if they were bowing their heads under the weight of some heavy thought; and the murmuring waves under the bridge, across which we went, murmuring as if they too were taking counsel over some deep secret, which had so oft been intrusted to them, and which as yet no one had discovered—why was it that some dead people had no heads? Something prompted me so, to turn with this awful question to my brother. I overcame the demon, and did not ask him. Often children, who hold pointed knives before their eyes, or look down from a high bridge into the water, are told, "Beware, or the devil will push you." Such was my feeling in relation to this question. In my hand was the handle, the point was in my heart. I was sitting upon the brim, and gazing down into the whirlpool. Something called upon me to thrust myself into the living reality, to lose my head in it. And yet I was able to restrain myself. During the whole journey neither my brother nor I spoke a word.

When we arrived at our country-house our physician met us, and told us that mother was even worse

than she had been; the sight of us would only aggravate her illness; so it would be good for us to remain in our room.

Our grandmother arrived two hours after us. Her arrival was the signal for a universal whispering among the domestics, as if they would make ready for something extraordinary which the whole world must not know. Then we sat down to dinner quite unexpectedly, far earlier than usual. No one could eat; we only gazed at each course in turn. After dinner my brother in his turn began to hold a whispered conference with grandmother. As far as I could gather from the few words I caught, they were discussing whether he should take his gun with him or not. Lorand wished to take it, but grandmother objected. Finally, however, they agreed that he should take gun and cartridges, but should not load the weapon until he saw a necessity for it.

In the mean while I staggered about from room to room. It seemed as if everybody had considerations of more importance than that of looking after me.

In the afternoon, however, when I saw my brother making him ready for a journey, despair seized hold of me:

"Take me with you."

"Why, you don't even know where I am going."

"I don't mind; I will go anywhere, only take me with you; for I cannot remain all by myself."

"Well, I will ask grandmother."

My brother exchanged a few words with my grandmother, and then came back to me.

"You may come with me. Take your stick and coat."

He slung his gun on his shoulder and took his dog with him.

Once again this thought agonized me afresh: "Father is dead, and we go for an afternoon's shooting, with grandmother's consent as if nothing had happened."

We went down through the gardens, all along the loam-pits; my brother seemed to be choosing a route where we should meet with no one. He kept the dog on the leash to prevent its wandering away. We went a long way, roaming among maize-fields and shrubs, without the idea once occurring to Lorand to take the gun down from his shoulder. He kept his eyes continually on the ground, and would always silence the dog, when the animal scented game.

Meantime we had left the village far behind us. I was already quite tired out, and yet I did not utter a syllable to suggest our returning. I would rather have gone to the end of the world than return home.

It was already twilight when we reached a small poplar wood. Here my brother suggested a little rest. We sat down side by side on the trunk of a felled tree. Lorand offered me some cakes he had brought in his wallet for me. How it pained me that he thought I wanted anything to eat. Then he threw the cake to the hound. The hound picked it up and, disappearing behind the bushes, we heard him scratch on the ground as he buried it. Not even he wanted to eat. Next we watched the sunset. Our village church-tower was already invisible, so far had we wandered, and yet I did not ask whether we should return.

The weather became suddenly gloomy; only after sunset did the clouds open, that the dying sun might radiate the heavens with its storm-burdened red fire. The wind suddenly rose. I remarked to my brother that an ugly wind was blowing, and he answered that it was good for us. How this great wind could be good for us, I was unable to discover.

When later the heavens gradually changed from fire red to purple, from purple to gray, from gray to black, Lorand loaded his gun, and let the hound loose. He took my hand. I must now say not a single word, but remain motionless. In this way we waited long that boisterous night.

I racked my brain to discover the reason why we were there.