

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL SUBSTITUTE*

A PLEASANT old custom was then in fashion in our town: the interchange of children,—perhaps it is in fashion still. In our many-tongued fatherland one town is German-speaking, the other Magyar-speaking, and, being brothers, after all to understand each other was a necessity. Germans must learn Magyar and Magyars, German. And peace is restored.

So a method of temporarily exchanging children grew up: German parents wrote to Magyar towns, Magyar parents to German towns, to the respective school directors, to ask if there were any pupils who could be interchanged. In this manner one child was given for another, a kind, gentle, womanly thought!

The child left home, father, mother, brother, only to find another home among strangers: another mother, other brothers and sisters, and his absence did not leave a void at home; child replaced child; and if the adopted mother devoted a world of tenderness to the pilgrim, it was with the idea that her own was being thus treated in the far distance; for a mother's love cannot be bought at a price but only gained by love.

It was an institution that only a woman's thought could found: so different from that frigid system invented by men which founded nunneries, convents, and closed colleges for the benefit of susceptible young

*In former days it was the custom for a Magyar and a German family to interchange children, with a view to their learning the two languages perfectly. So Fanny Fromm is interchanged with Desiderius Aronffy.

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hearts where all memory of family life was permanently wiped out of their minds.

After that unhappy day, which, like the unmovable star, could never go so far into the distance as to be out of sight, grandmother more than once said to us in the presence of mother, that it would not be good for us to remain in this town; we must be sent somewhere else.

Mother long opposed the idea. She did not wish to part from us. Yet the doctors advised the same course. When the spasms seized her, for days we were not allowed to visit her, as it made her condition far worse.

At last she gave her consent, and it was decided that we two should be sent to Pressburg. My brother, who was already too old to be exchanged, went to the home of a Privy Councillor, who was paid for taking him in, and my place was to be taken by a still younger child than myself, by a little German girl, Fanny, the daughter of Henry Fromm, baker. Grandmother was to take us in a carriage—in those days in Hungary we had only heard rumors of steamboats—and to bring the girl substitute back with her.

For a week the whole household sewed, washed, ironed and packed for us; we were supplied with winter and summer clothing: on the last day provisions were prepared for our journey, as if we had intended to make a voyage to the end of the world, and in the evening we took supper in good time, that we might rise early, as we had to start before daybreak. That was my first departure from my home. Many a time since then have I had to say adieu to what was dearest to me; many sorrows, more than I could express, have afflicted me: but that first parting caused me the greatest pain of all, as is proved by the fact that after so long an interval I remember it so well. In the solitude of my own chamber, I bade farewell separately to all those little trifles that surrounded me: God bless the good old clock that hast so oft awakened me. Beautiful raven, whom I taught to speak and to say "Lorand," on whom wilt thou play

thy sportive tricks? Poor old doggy, maybe thou wilt not be living when I return? Forsooth old Susie herself will say to me, "I shall never see you again Master Desi." And till now I always thought I was angry with Susie; but now I remark that it will be hard to leave her.

And my dear mother, the invalid, and grandmother, already so grey-haired!

Thus the bitter strains swept onward along the strings of my soul, from lifeless objects to living, from favorite animals to human acquaintances, and then to those with whom we were bound soul to soul, finally dragging one with them to the presence of the dead and buried. I was sorely troubled by the thought that we were not allowed to enter, even for one moment, that solitary house, round the door of which the ivy was entwining anew. We might have whispered "God be with thee! I have come to see thee!" I must leave the place without being able to say to him a single word of love. And perhaps he would know without words. Perhaps the only joy of that poor soul, who could not lie in a consecrated chamber, who could not find the way to heaven because he had not waited till the guardian angel came for him, was when he saw that his sons love him still.

"Lorand, I cannot sleep, because I have not been able to take my leave of that house beside the stream."

My brother sighed and turned in his bed.

My whole life long I have been a sound sleeper (what child is not?) but never did it seem such a burden to rise as on the morning of our departure. Two days later a strange child would be sleeping in that bed. Once more we met together at breakfast, which we had to eat by candle-light as the day had not yet dawned.

Dear mother often rose from her seat to kiss and embrace Lorand, overwhelmed him with caresses, and made him promise to write much; if anything happened to him, he must write and tell it at once, and must always consider that bad news would afflict two

hearts at home. She only spoke to me to bid me drink my coffee warm, as the morning air would be chilly.

Grandmother, too, concerned herself entirely with Lorand: they enquired whether he had all he required for the journey, whether he had taken his certificates with him—and a thousand other matters. I was rather surprised than jealous at all this, for as a rule the youngest son gets all the petting.

When our carriage drove up we took our travelling coats and said adieu in turn to the household. Mother, leaning on Lorand's shoulder, came with us to the gate whispering every kind of tender word to him; thrice she embraced and kissed him. And then came my turn.

She embraced me and kissed me on the cheek, then tremblingly whispered in my ear these words:

"My darling boy,—take care of your brother Lorand!" I take care of Lorand? the child of the young man? the weak of the strong? the later born guide the elder. The whole journey long this idea distracted me, and I could not explain it to myself.

Of the impressions of the journey I retain no very clear recollections: I think I slept very much in the carriage. The journey to Pressburg lasted from early morning till late evening; only as twilight came on did a new thought begin to keep me awake, a thought to which as yet I had paid no attention: "What kind of a child could it be, for whom I was now being exchanged? Who was to usurp my place at table, in my bed-room, and in my mother's heart? Was she small or large? beautiful or ugly? obedient or contrary? had she brothers or sisters, to whom I was to be a brother? was she as much afraid of me as I was of her?"

For I was very much afraid of her.

Naturally, I dreaded the thought of the child who was meeting me at the cross-roads with the avowed intention of taking my place as my mother's child, giving me instead her own parents. Were they reigning princes, still the loss would be mine. I confess that I felt a kind of sweet bitterness in the idea

that my substitute might be some dull, malicious creature, whose actions would often cause mother to remember me. But if, on the contrary, she were some quiet, angelic soul, who would soon steal my mother's love from me! In every respect I trembled with fear of that creature who had been born that she might be exchanged for me.

Towards evening grandmother told us that the town which we were going to was visible. I was sitting with my back to the horses, and so I was obliged to turn round in order to see. In the distance I could see the four-columned white skeleton of a building, which was first apparent to the eye.

"What a gigantic charnel-house," I remarked to grandmother.

"It is no charnel-house, my child, but it is the ruin of the citadel of (Pressburg) Pozsony."*

A curious ruin it is. This first impression ever remained in my mind: I regarded it as a charnel-house.

It was quite late when we entered the town, which was very large compared to ours. I had never seen such elegant display in shop-windows before and it astonished me as I noticed that there were paved sidewalks reserved for pedestrians. They must be all fine lords who live in this city.

Mr. Fromm, the baker, to whose house I was to be taken, had informed us that we need not go to an hotel as he had room for all of us, and would gladly welcome us, especially as the expense of the journey was borne by us. We found his residence by following the written address. He owned a fine four-storied house in the Fürsten allee,† with his open shop in front on the sign of which peaceful lions were painted in gold holding rolls and cakes between their teeth.

Mr. Fromm himself was waiting for us outside his shop door, and hastened to open the carriage door him-

* Pozsony. A town in Hungary is called by the Germans Pressburg.

† Princes avenue.

self. He was a round-faced, portly little man, with a short black moustache, black eyebrows, and close-cropped, thick, flour-white hair. The good fellow helped grandmother to alight from the carriage: shook hands with Lorand, and began to speak to them in German: when I alighted, he put his hand on my head with a peculiar smile:

"Iste puer?"

Then he patted me on the cheeks.

"Bonus, bonus."

His addressing me in Latin had two advantages; firstly, as I could not speak German, nor he Magyar, this use of a neutral tongue removed all suspicions of our being deaf and dumb; secondly, it at once inspired me with a genuine respect for the honest fellow, who had dabbled in the sciences, and had, beyond his technical knowledge of his own business, some acquaintance with the language of Cicero. Mr. Fromm made room for grandmother and Lorand to pass before him up a narrow stone staircase, while he kept his hand continuously on my head, as if that were the part of me by which he could best hold me.

"Veni puer. Hic puer secundus, filius meus."

So there was a boy in the house, a new terror for me.

"Est studiosus."

What, that boy! That was good news: we could go to school together.

"Meus filius magnus asinus."

That was a fine acknowledgment from a father.

"Nescit pensum nunquam scit."

Then he discontinued to speak of the young student, and pantomimically described something, from which I gathered that "meus filius," on this occasion was condemned to starve, until he had learnt his lessons, and was confined to his room.

This was no pleasant idea to me.

Well, and what about "mea filia?"

I had never seen a house that was like Mr. Fromm's inside. Our home was only one-storied, with wide

rooms, and broad corridors, a courtyard and a garden: here we had to enter first by a narrow hall: then to ascend a winding stair, that would not admit two abreast. Then followed a rapid succession of small and large doors, so that when we came out upon the balconied corridor, and I gazed down into the deep, narrow courtyard, I could not at all imagine how I had reached that point, and still less how I could ever find my way out. "Father" Fromm led us directly from the corridor into the reception room, where two candles were burning (two in our honor), and the table laid for "gouter." It seemed they had expected us earlier. Two women were seated at the window, Mrs. Fromm and her mother. Mrs. Fromm was a tall slender person; she had grey curls (I don't know why I should not call them "Schneckles," for that is their name) in front, large blue eyes, a sharp German nose, a prominent chin and a wart below her mouth.

The "Gross-mamma" was the exact counterpart of Mrs. Fromm, only about thirty years older, a little more slender, and sharper in feature: she had also grey "Schneckles"—though I did not know until ten years later that they were not her own:—she too had that wart, though in her case it was on the chin.

In a little low chair was sitting that certain personage with whom they wished to exchange me.

Fanny was my junior by a year:—she resembled neither father nor mother, with the exception that the family wart, in the form of a little brown freckle, was imprinted in the middle of her left cheek. During the whole time that elapsed before our arrival here I had been filled with prejudices against her, prejudices which the sight of her made only more alarming. She had an ever-smiling, pink and white face, mischievous blue eyes, and a curious snub-nose; when she smiled, little dimples formed in her cheeks and her mouth was ever ready to laugh. When she did laugh, her double row of white teeth sparkled; in a word she was as ugly as the devil.

All three were busy knitting as we entered. When the door opened, they all put down their knitting. I kissed the hands of both the elder ladies, who embraced me in return, but my attention was entirely devoted to the little lively witch, who did not wait a moment, but ran to meet grandmother, threw herself upon her neck, and kissed her passionately; then, bowing and curtseying before us, kissed Lorand twice, actually gazing the while into his eyes.

A cold chill seized me. If this little snub-nosed devil dared to go so far as to kiss me, I did not know what would become of me in my terror.

Yet I could not avoid this dilemma in any way. The terrible little witch, having done with the others, rushed upon me, embraced me, and kissed me so passionately that I was quite ashamed; then twining her arm in mine, dragged me to the little arm-chair from which she had just risen, and compelled me to sit down, though we could scarcely find room in it for us both. Then she told many things to me in that unknown tongue, the only result of which was to persuade me that my poor good mother would have a noisy baggage to take the place of her quiet, obedient little son; I felt sure her days would be embittered by that restless tongue. Her mouth did not stop for one moment, yet I must confess that she had a voice like a bell.

That was again a family peculiarity. Mother Fromm was endowed with an inexhaustible store of that treasure called eloquence: and a sharp, strong voice, too, which forbade the interruption of any one else, with a flow like that of the purling stream. The grand-mamma had an equally generous gift, only she had no longer any voice: only every second word was audible, like one of those barrel-organs, in which an occasional note, instead of sounding, merely blows.

Our business was to listen quietly.

For my part, that was all the easier, as I could not suspect what was the subject of this flow of barbarian words; all I understood was that, when the ladies spoke

to me, they addressed me as "Istok,"* a jest which I found quite out of place, not knowing that it was the German for "Why don't you eat?" For you must know the coffee was brought immediately, with very fine little cakes, prepared especially for us under the personal supervision of Father Fromm.

Even that little snub-nosed demon said "Issdoch," seized a cake, dipped it in my coffee, and forcibly crammed it into my mouth, when I did not wish to understand her words.

But I was not at all hungry. All kinds of things were brought onto the table, but I did not want anything. Father Fromm kept calling out continually in student guise "Comedi! Comedi!" a remark which called forth indignant remonstrances from mamma and grossmamma; how could he call his own dear "Kugelhuff" † a "comedy!!"

Fanny in sooth required no coaxing. At first sight anyone could see that she was the spoiled child of the family, to whom everything was allowed. She tried everything, took a double portion of everything and only after taking what she required did she ask "darf ich?" ‡—and I understood immediately from the tone of her voice and the nodding of her head, that she meant to ask "if she might."

Then instead of finishing her share she had the audacity to place her leavings on my plate, an action which called forth rebuke enough from Grossmamma. I did not understand what she said, but I strongly suspected that she abused her for wishing to accustom the "new child" to eating a great deal. Generally speaking, I had brought from home the suspicion that, when two people were speaking German before me, they were surely hatching some secret plot against me, the end of which would be, either that I would not get

* "Issdoch," the German for "but eat." (Why don't you eat?) While Istok is a nickname for Stephan in Magyar.

† A cake eaten everywhere in Hungary.

‡ i. e., darf ich, "may I?"

something, or would not be taken somewhere, where I wished to go.

I would not have tasted anything the little snub-nose gave me, if only for the reason that it was she who had given it. How could she dare to touch my plate with those dirty little hands of hers, that were just like cats-paws?

Then she gave everything I would not accept to the little kitten; however, the end of it all was, that she again turned to me, and asked me to play with the kitten.

Incomprehensible audacity! To ask me, who was already a school-student, to play with a tiny kitten.

"Shoo!" I said to the malicious creature; a remark which, notwithstanding the fact that it seemed to belong to some strange-tongued nationality, the animal understood, for it immediately leaped down off the table and ran away. This caused the little snub-nose to get angry with me, and she took her sensitive revenge upon me, by going across to my grandmother, whom she tenderly caressed, kissing her hand, and then nestled to her bosom, turning her back on me; once or twice she looked back at me, and if at the moment my eye was on her, sulkily flung back her head; as if that was any great misfortune to me.

Little imp! She actually occupied my place beside my grandmother—and before my eyes too.

Well, and why did I gaze at her, if I was so very angry with her? I will tell you truly; it was only that I might see to what extremes she would carry her audacity. I would far rather have been occupied in the fruitless task of attempting to discover something intelligent in a conversation that was being carried on before me in a strange tongue: an effort that is common to all men who have a grain of human curiosity flowing in their veins, and that, as is well-known, always remains unsuccessful.

Still one combination of mine did succeed. That name "Henrik" often struck my ear. Father Fromm was called Henrik, but he himself uttered the name:

that therefore could not be other than his son. My grandmother spoke of him in pitiful tones, whereas Father Fromm assumed a look of inexorable severity, when he gave information on this subject; and as he spoke I gathered frequently the words "prosodia,"—"pensum"—"labor"—"vocabularium"—and many other terms common to dog-Latin: among which words like "secunda"—"tertia"—"carcer" served as a sufficiently trustworthy compass to direct me to the following conclusion: My friend Henrik might not put in an appearance to-day at supper, because he did not know his lessons, and was to remain imprisoned in the house until he could improve his standing by learning to repeat, in the language of a people long since dead, the names of a host of eatables.

Poor Henrik!

I never had any patience with the idea of anyone's starving, and moreover starving by way of punishment. I could understand anyone being done to death at once: but the idea of condemning anyone in cold blood to starve, to wrestle with his own body, to strive with his own heart and stomach, I always regarded as cruelty. I deemed that if I took one of those little cakes, which that audacious girl had piled up before me so forcibly, and put it in my pocket, it would not be wasted.

I waited cautiously until nobody was looking my way, and then slipped the cake into my pocket without accident.

Without accident? I only remarked it, when that little snub-nose laughed to herself. Just at that moment she had squinted towards me. But she immediately closed her mouth with her hand, giggling between her fingers, the while her malicious, deceitful eyes smiled into mine. What would she think? Perhaps that I am too great a coward to eat at table, and too insatiable to be satisfied with what I received. Oh! how ashamed I was before her! I would have been capable of any sacrifice to secure her secrecy, perhaps

even of kissing her, if she would not tell anyone. . . . I was so frightened.

My fright was only increased by the grandmother, who first looked at the cake-dish, and then looked at each plate on the table in turn, subsequently resetting her gaze upon that cake-dish; then she gazed up to the ceiling, as if making some calculation, which she followed up by considerable shaking of her head.

Who could not understand that dumb speech? She had counted the cakes; calculated how many each had devoured; how many had been put on the dish, had added and subtracted, with the result that one cake was missing: what had become of it? An inquisition would follow: the cake would be looked for, and found in my pocket, and then no water could ever wash away my shame.

Every moment I expected that little demoniacal curiosity to point to me with that never-resting hand of hers, and proclaim: "there in the new child's pocket is the cake."

She was already by my side, and I saw that father, mother and Grandmother Fromm turned to me all with inquiring looks, and addressed some terrible "interpellatio" to me, which I did not understand, but could suspect, what it was. And Lorand and grandmother did not come to my aid to explain what it all meant.

Instead of which snub-nose swept up to me and, repeating the same question, explained it by pantomimic gestures; laying one hand upon the other, then placing her head upon them, gently closed her eyes.

Oh, she was asking, if I were sleepy? It was remarkable, how this insufferable creature could make me understand everything.

Never did that question come more opportunely. I breathed more freely. Besides, I made up my mind never to call her "snub-nose devil" any more.

Grandmother allowed me to go: little Fanny was to show me to my room: I was to sleep with Henrik:

I said good-night to all in turn, and so distracted was I that I kissed even Fanny's hand. And the little bundle of malice did not prevent me, she merely laughed at me for it.

This girl had surely been born merely to annoy me.

She took a candle in her hand and told me to follow her: she would lead the way.

I obeyed her.

We had not quite reached the head of the corridor when the draught blew out the candle.

We were in complete darkness, for there was no lamp burning here of an evening on the staircase, only a red glimmer, reflected probably from the bakery-chimney, lit up the darkness, and even that disappeared as we left the corridor.

Fanny laughed when the candle went out, and tried for a time to blow the spark into a flame: not succeeding, she put down the candle-stick, and leaning upon my arm assured me that she could show me the way in this manner too.

Then, without waiting for a remark from me, she took me with her into the pitchy darkness. At first she spoke, to encourage me, and then began to sing, perhaps to make me understand better; and felt with her hands for the doors, and with her feet for the steps of the staircase. Meanwhile I continually reflected: "this terrible malicious trifler is plotting to lead me into some flour-bin, shut the door upon me, and leave me there till the morning: or to let me step in the darkness into some flue, where I shall fall up to my neck into the rising dough;—for of that everything is full."

Poor, kind, good Fanny! I was so angry with you, I hated you so when I first saw you! . . . And now, as we grow old . . .

I should never have believed that anyone could lead me in such subterranean darkness through that winding labyrinth, where even in broad daylight I often entirely lost my whereabouts. I only wondered that this extraordinarily audacious girl could refrain from

pulling my hair as she led me through that darkness, her arm in mine, though she had such a painful opportunity of doing so. Yes, I quite expected her to do so.

Finally we reached a door, before which there was no need of a lamp to assure a man of the room he was seeking. Through the door burst that most sorrowful of all human sounds, the sound of a child audibly wrestling with some unintelligible verse, twenty, fifty, a thousand times repeated anew, and anew, without becoming intelligible, while the verse had not yet taken its place in the child's head. Through the boards sounded afar a spiral Latin phrase.

"His atacem, panacem, phylacem, coracem que facemque." Then again:

"His acatem, panacem, phylacem, coracem que facemque."

And again the same.

Fanny placed her ear against the door and seized my hand as a hint to be quiet. Then she laughed aloud. How can anyone find an amusing subject in a poor hard-brained "studiosus," who cannot grasp that rule, inevitable in every career in life, that the second syllable of dropax, antrax, climax "et caethra graeca" in the first case is long, in the second short—a rule extremely useful to a man later in life when he gets into some big scrape?

But Fanny found it extremely ridiculous. Then she opened the door and nodded to me to follow her.

It was a small room under the staircase. Within were two beds, placed face to face; on one I recognized my own pillows which I had brought with me, so that must be my sleeping place. Beside the window was a writing-table on which was burning a single candle, its wick so badly trimmed as to prove that he who should have trimmed it had been so deeply engaged in work that he had not remarked whether darkness or light surrounded him.

Weeping, his head buried in his hands, my friend Henrik was sitting at that table; as the door opened he raised his head from the book over which he was