

CHAPTER V

THE WILD CREATURE'S HAUNT

IN those days the Tisza regulations did not exist—that plain around Lankadomb where now turnips are hoed with four-bladed machines was at that time still covered by an impenetrable marsh, that came right up to Topándy's garden, from which it was separated by a broad ditch. This ditch wound in a meandering, narrow course to the great waste of rushes, and in dry summer gave the appearance of a rivulet conveying the water of the marsh down to the Tisza. When the heavy rains came, naturally the stream flowed back along the same route.

The whole marsh covered some ten or twelve square miles. Here after a heavy frost, they used to cut reeds, and on the occasion of great hunting matches* they would drive up masses of foxes and wolves; and all the huntsmen of the neighborhood might lie in wait in its expanse for fowl from morn till eve, and if they pleased, might roam at will in a canoe and destroy the swarms of winged inhabitants of the fen: no one would interrupt them.

Some ancestor of Topándy had given the peasantry permission to cut peat in the bog, but the present proprietor had discontinued this industry, because it completely defiled the place: the ditches caused by the old diggings became swampy morasses, so that neither man nor beast could pass among them without danger.

* A hunting match in which the vassals of the landlord form a ring of great extent and advancing and narrowing the circle by degrees, drive the animals together towards a place where they can be conveniently shot. (Walter Scott.)

The Wild Creature's Haunt 105

Anyone with good eyes could still descry from the castle tower that enormous hay-rick which they had filled up ten or twelve years before in the middle of the marsh; it was just in the height of summer and they had mown the hillocks in the marsh; then followed a mild winter, and neither man nor sleigh could reach it. The hay was lost, it was not worth the trouble of getting; so they had left it there, and it was already brown, its top moss-covered and overgrown with weeds.

Topándy would often say to his hunting comrades, who, looking through a telescope, remarked the hay-rick in the marsh:

"Someone must be living in that rick; often of an evening have I seen smoke coming from it. It might be an excellent place for a dwelling. Rain cannot penetrate it, in winter it keeps out the cold, in summer the heat. I would live in it myself."

They often tried to reach it while out hunting; but every attempt was a failure; the ground about the rick was so clogged with turfy peat that to approach it by boat was impossible, and one who trusted himself on foot came so near being engulfed that his companions could scarcely haul him out of the bog with a rope. Finally they acquiesced in the idea that here within distinct view of the castle, some wild creature, born of man, had made his dwelling among the wolves and other wild beasts; a creature whom it would be a pity to disturb, as he never interfered with anybody.

The most enterprising hunter, therefore, even in broad daylight avoided the neighborhood of the suspicious hay-rick; who then would be so audacious as to dare to seek it out by night when the circled moon foretelling rain, was flooding the marsh-land with a silvery, misty radiance, adding a new terror to the face of the landscape; when the exhalations of the marsh were sluggishly spreading a vaporous heaviness over the lowland; while the eerie habitants of the bog (whose time of sleep is by day, their active life at night) the millions of frogs and other creatures were

reëchoing their cries, announcing the whereabouts of the slimy pools, where foul gases are lord and master; when the he-wolf was howling to his comrades; and when, all at once, some mysterious-faced cloud drew out before the moon, and whispered to her something that made all nature tremble, so that for one moment all was silent, a death-like silence, more terrible than all the night voices speaking at once;—at such a time whose steps were those that sounded in the depths of the morass?

A horseman was making his way by the moonlight, in solitude.

His steed struggled along up to the hocks in the swamp which showed no paths at all; the tracks were immediately sucked up by the mud:—nothing lay before to show the way, save the broken reed. No sign remained that anyone had ever passed there before.

The sagacious mare carefully noted the marks from time to time, instinctively scenting the route, that tracks trodden by wild beasts should not lead her astray; cleverly she picked out with her sharp eyes the places where the ground was still firm; at times she would leap from one clod of peat to another. The space between these spots might be overgrown by green grass, with yellow flowers dotted here and there, but the sagacious animal knew, felt, perhaps had even experienced, that the depth there was deceptive; it was one of those peat-diggings, filled in by mud and overgrown by the green of water-moss; he who stepped thereon would be swallowed up in an instant. Then she trotted on picking her way among the dangerous places.

And the rider?

He was asleep.

Asleep on horseback, while his steed was going with him through an accursed spot: where to right and left were graves, where below was hell and around him the gloom of night. The horseman was sleeping, his head nodding backwards and forwards, swaying to and fro. Sometimes he started, as those who travel in carriages

are wont to do when the jolting is more pronounced than ordinary, and then settled down again. Though asleep he kept his seat as if he had grown to the saddle. His hands seemed wide awake for all he held the reins in one and a double-barrelled gun in the other.

By the light of the moon his dark face seemed even darker; his long, crisp, curly hair, his hat pressed down over his eyes, his black beard and moustache, his strongly aquiline nose, all proclaimed his gypsy origin. He wore a threadbare blue doublet, braided with cords, which were buttoned here and there at random, and over this was fastened some tattered lambskin covering.

The rider was really fast asleep: surely he must have travelled at such a pace that he had no time, or thought for sleep, and now, strangely enough, he felt at home.

Here, where no one could pursue him, he bowed his head upon his horse's neck.

And the horse seemed to know that his master was sleeping, for he did not shake himself once, even to rid himself of the crowds of biting, sucking insects that preyed upon his skin, knowing that such a motion would wake his master.

As the mare broke through a clump of marsh-willows, in the darkness of the willow forest, little dancing fire-flies came before her in scores, leaping from grass to grass, from tree to tree, dissolving one into the other, then leaping apart and dancing alone; their flames assumed a pale, lustreless brilliance in the darkness, like some fire of mystery or the burning gases of some mouldering corpses.

The mare merely snorted at the sight of these flickering midnight flames; surely she had often met them, in journeys across the marsh, and already knew their caprices: how they lurked about the living animals, how they ran after her if she passed before them, how they fluttered around, how they danced beside her continuously, how they leaped across above her head, how they strove to lead her astray from the right path.

There they were darting around the heads of horse and horseman as if they were burning night-moths;

one lighted upon the horseman's hat, and swayed with it, as he nodded his head.

The steed snorted and breathed hard upon those living lights. But the snorting awakened the rider. He gazed askance at his brilliant demon-companions, one of which was on the brim of his hat; he dug the spurs into the mare's flanks, to make her leap more speedily from among the jeering spirits of the night.

When they came to a turn in the track, the crowd of graveyard mystery-lights parted in twain: most of them joined the rushing air-current, while some careful guardians remained constantly about the rider, now before, now behind him.

Darting from the willows, a cold breeze swept over the plain: before it every mystery-light fled back into the darkness, and still kept up its ghostly dance. Who knows what kind of amusement that was to them?

The horseman was sleeping again. The terrible hay-rick was now so near that one might have gone straight to it, but the steed knew better; instead, she went around the spot in a half-circle, until she reached a little lake that cut off the hay-rick. Here she halted on the water's edge and began to toss her head, with a view to quietly awakening the rider from his sleep.

The latter looked up, dismounted, took saddle and bridle off his horse, and patted her on the back. There-with the steed leaped into the water, which reached to her neck, and swam to the other side.

Why did she not cross over dry ground? Why did she go only through the water? The horseman meanwhile squatted down among the broom, rested his gun upon his knee, made sure that it was cocked and that the powder had not fallen from the pan, and noiselessly crouched down, gazing after the retreating steed, as she reached the opposite bank. Suddenly she drew in her tail, bristled her mane, pricked up her ears. Her eyes flashed fire, her nostrils expanded. Slowly and cautiously she stepped forward, so as to make no noise, bowed her head to the earth, like some scenting hound, and stopped to listen.

On the southern side of the hay-rick,—the side away from the village,—there was a narrow entrance cut into the pile of hay: a plaited door of willow-twigs covered it, and the twigs were plaited together in their turn with sedges to make the color harmonize with that of the rick. This was done so perfectly that no one looking at it, even from a short distance, would have suspected anything. As the steed reached the vicinity of the door, she cautiously gazed upon it: below the willow-door there was an opening, through which something had broken in.

The mare knew already what it was. She scented it. A she-wolf had taken up her abode there in the absence of the usual occupants, she had young ones with her, and was just now giving suck; otherwise she would have noticed the horse's approach; the whining of the whelps could be heard from the outside. The mare seized the door with her teeth, and suddenly wrenched it from its place.

From the hollow of the hay-rick a lean, hungry wolf crept out. At first in wonder she raised her eyes, which shone in the green light, astonished at this disturbance of her repose; and she seemed to take counsel within herself, whether this was the continuation of her sweet dreams. The providential joint had come very opportunely to the mother of seven whelps. Two or three of these were still clinging to her hanging udders, and left her only that she might prepare herself for the fight. The old animal merely yawned loudly,—in a man it would be called a laugh,—a yawn that declared her delight in robbery, and with her slatternly tail beat her lean, hollow sides. The mare, seeing that her foe was in no hurry for the combat, came nearer, bowed her head to the earth, and in this manner stepped slowly forward, sniffing at the enemy; when the wolf seemed in the act of springing on her neck she suddenly turned, and dealt a savage kick at the wolf's chin that broke one of its great front teeth. Then the furious wild creature, snarling and hissing, darted upon the steed, which at the second attack

kicked so viciously with both hind legs that the wolf turned a complete somersault in the air; but this only served to make it more furious: gnashing its teeth, its mouth foaming and bloody, it sprang a third time upon the mare, only to receive from the sharp hoof a long wound in its breast; but that was not all: before it could rise from the ground, the mare dealt another blow that crushed one of its fore paws.

The wolf then gave up the battle. Terrified, with broken teeth and feet, it hobbled off from the scene of the encounter, and soon appeared on the roof of the rick. The coward had sought a place of refuge from the victorious foe, whither that foe could not follow it.

The steed galloped round the rick: she wished to deceive her enemy, who merely sat on the roof licking its broken leg, its bruised side, and bloody jaws.

All at once the proud mare halted, with a haughtier look than man is capable of, as who might say: "You are not coming?"

Suddenly she seized one of the whelps in her teeth. They had slunk out of the hollow, whining after their mother. She shook it cruelly in the air, then dashed it to the ground violently so that in a moment its cries ceased.

The mother-wolf hissed with agonized fury on the roof of the rick.

The mare seized another one of the whelps and shook it in the air.

As she grasped the third by the neck, the mother, mad with rage, leaped down upon her from the pile and, with the energy of despair, made so fierce an assault that her claws reached the steed's neck; but her crushed leg could take no hold, and she fell in a heap at the mare's feet; the triumphant foe then trampled to death first the old mother, then all the whelps. At last, proudly whinnying, she galloped in frisky triumph around the rick, and then quickly swam back to the place where she had left her master.

"Well, Farao, is there anything the matter?" said the horseman, embracing his horse's head.

The horse replied to the question with a familiar neigh, and rubbed her nose against her master's hip.

The horseman thereupon tied saddle and bridle together into one bundle, and leaped upon his steed's back, who then, without harness of any kind, readily swam with him to the place she had already visited, and halted before the opening in the rick. The master dismounted. The steed, thus freed, rolled on the grass, neighing and whinnying, then leaped up, shook herself, and with great delight grazed in the rich swampy pasture.

The gypsy was not surprised to see the bloody signs of the late struggle. He had many a time discovered dead wolves in the track of his grazing horse.

"This will serve splendidly for a skin-cloak, as the old one is torn."

Then something occurred to him.

"This was a female: so the male must be here somewhere—I know where. The rick was surrounded by wolf-ditches in double rows, so made that the inner ditch corresponded to the space left between the two outer ones: the whole crafty work of defence was covered over with thin brush and reeds, which had been overgrown by process of time by moss, so that even a man might have been deceived by their appearance. Here was the reason why the steed had not approached the rick in a straight line. This was a fortified place, and the only entrance to the stronghold was that lake which lay before it: that was the gate. The she-wolf, too, had undoubtedly come across the water, but the male had not been so prudent and had entrapped himself in one of the ditches.

The gypsy at once noticed that one ditch had been broken in, and, as he gazed down into the depths, two blazing blood-red eyes told him that what he was looking for was there.

"Well, you are in a fine position, old fellow: in the morning I shall come for you: and I'll ask for your skin, if you'll give it to me. If you give, you give; if you don't give, I take. That is the order of things in the world. I have none, you have: I want it, you don't.

One of us must die for the other's sake: that one must be you."

Then it occurred to him to remove the skin of the she-wolf at once, for, if he left it to cool, the work would be more difficult. He stretched the fur on poles and left it to dry in the moonlight; the carcass he dragged to the end of the rick and buried it there; then he made a fire of rushes, took his seven days' old bread and rancid bacon from his greasy wallet and ate. As the darting flames threw a flickering light upon his face, he looked no more peaceful than that wild creature, whose hollow he had usurped.

It was just a sagacious, courageous, wily, resolute—*animal* face.

"Either you eat me, or I eat you." That was its meaning. "You have, I have not; I want, you don't:—if you give, you give; if you don't, I take."

At every bite with his brilliant white teeth into the bread and bacon, you could see it in his face; his gnashing teeth, and ravenous eyes declared it.

That bacon, and bread, had surely cost something, if not money.

Money? How could the gypsy purchase for money? Why, when he took that bright dollar from his knapsack, people would ask him where he got it. Should he show one of those red-eyed bank-notes, they would at once arrest, imprison him: whom had he murdered to obtain them?

Yet he has dollars and bank-notes in plenty. He gathers them from his leathern purse with his hands, and scatters them around him on the grass.

Bright silver and gold coins glitter around him in the firelight. He gazes at the curious notes of the imperial banks, and fears within himself that he cannot make out the worth of any of them. Then he sweeps them all together in one heap, along with snail shells and rush-seeds. After a while the man enters the hollow interior of the rick, and draws from the hay a large, sooty copper vessel, partly moldy with the mold of money. He pours the new pile in with two full

hands. Then he raises the cauldron to see how much heavier it has become.

Is he satisfied with his work?

He buries his treasure once more in the depths of the rick; he himself knows not how much there might be. Then he attacks anew the hard, stale bread, the rancid bacon, and devours it to the last morsel. Perhaps some ready-prepared banquet awaited him on the morrow. Or perhaps he is accustomed to feasting only every third day. At last he stretches himself out on the grass, and calls to Farao.

"Come here, graze about my head, let me hear you crunch the grass."

And quickly he fell asleep beside her, as it were one whose brain was of the quietest and his conscience the most peaceful.

CHAPTER VI

"FRUITS PREMATURELY RIPE"

At first I was invited to my P. C. uncle's every Sunday to dinner: later I went without invitation. As soon as I was let out of school, I hastened thither. I persuaded myself that I went to visit my brother. I found an excuse, too, in the idea that I must make progress in art, and that it was in any case an excellent use of time, and a very good "entrée" to art, if I played waltzes and quadrilles of an afternoon from five to eight on the violin to Melanie's accompaniment on the piano, while the rest of the company danced to our music.

For the Bálnokházys had company every day. Such a change of faces that I could scarcely remember who and what they all were. Gay young men and ladies they were, who loved to enjoy themselves: every day there was a dance there.

Sometimes others would change places with Melanie at the piano: a piece of good fortune for me, for she was able to then have a dance—with me.

I have never seen any one dance more beautifully than she; she fluttered above the floor, and could make the waltz more agreeable than any one else before or after her. That was my favorite dance. I was exclusively by her side at such times, and we could not gaze except into each other's eyes. I did not like the quadrille so well: in that one is always taking the hands of different persons, and changing partners; and what interest had I in those other lady-dancers?

And I thought Melanie, too, rejoiced at the same thing that pleased me.

And, if by chance—a very rare event—the P. C. had no company, we still had our dance. There were al-

Fruits Prematurely Ripe

ways two gentlemen and two lady dancers in the house party; the beautiful wife of the P. C. and Fraülein Matild, the governess: Lorand and Pepi* Gyáli.

Pepi was the son of a court agent at Vienna, and his father was a very good friend of Bálnokházy; his mother had once been ballet-dancer at the Vienna opera—a fact I only learned later.

Pepi was a handsome young fellow "en miniature;" he was a member of the same class as Lorand, a law student in the first year, yet he was no taller than I. Every feature of his face was fine and tender, his mouth, small, like that of a girl, yet never in all my life have I met one capable of such backbiting as was he with his pretty mouth.

How I envied that little mortal his gift for conversation, his profound knowledge, his easy gestures, his freedom of manners, that familiarity with which he could treat women! His beauty was plastic!

I felt within myself that such ought a man to be in life, if he would be happy.

The only thing I did not like in him was that he was always paying compliments to Melanie: he might have desisted from that. He surely must have remarked on what terms I was with her.

His custom was, in the quadrille, when the solo-dancing gentlemen returned to their lady partners, to anticipate me and dance the turn with Melanie. He considered it a very good joke, and I scowled at him several times. But once, when he wished to do the same, I seized his arm, and pushed him away; I was only a grammar-school boy, and he was a first-year law student; still I did push him away.

With this heroic deed of mine not only myself but my cousin Melanie also was contented. That evening we danced right up till nine o'clock. I always with Melanie, and Lorand with her mother.

When the company dispersed, we went down to Lo-

* A nickname for Joseph.

rand's room on the ground floor, Pepi accompanying us.

I thought he was going to pick a quarrel with me, and vowed inwardly I would thrash him.

But instead he merely laughed at me.

"Only imagine," he said, throwing himself on Lorand's bed, "this boy is jealous of me."

My brother laughed too.

It was truly ridiculous: one boy jealous of another.

Yes, I was surely jealous, but chivalrous too. I think I had read in some novel that it was the custom to reply in some such manner to like ridicule:

"Sir, I forbid you to take that lady's name in vain."

They laughed all the more.

"Why, he is a delightful fellow, this Desi," said Pepi. "See, Lorand, he will cause you a deal of trouble. If he learns to smoke, he will be quite an Othello."

This insinuation hit me on a sensitive spot. I had never yet tasted that ambrosia, which was to make me a full-grown man; for as every one knows, it is the pipe-stem which is the dividing line between boyhood and manhood; he who could take that in his mouth was a man. I had already often been teased about that.

I must vindicate myself.

On my brother's table stood the tobacco-box full of Turkish tobacco, so by way of reply I went and filled a church warden, lit and began to smoke it.

"Now, my child, that will be too strong," sneered Pepi, "take it away from him, Lorand. Look how pale he is getting: remove it from him at once."

But I continued smoking: the smoke burned and bit the skin of my tongue; still I held the stem between my teeth, until the tobacco was burned out.

That was my first and last pipe.

"At any rate, drink a glass of water," Lorand said.

"No thank you."

"Well, go home, for it will soon be dark."

"I am not afraid in the streets."

Yet I felt like one who is a little tipsy.

"Have you any appetite?" inquired Pepi scornfully.

"Just enough to eat a gingerbread-hussar like you."

Lorand laughed uncontrollably at this remark of mine.

"Gingerbread-hussar! you have got it from him, Pepi."

I was quite flushed with pride at being able to make Lorand laugh.

But Pepi, on the contrary, became quite serious.

"Ho, ho, old fellow," (when he spoke seriously to me he always addressed me "old fellow," and on other occasions as "my child"). "Never be afraid of me; now Lorand might have reason to be: we both want what is ready; we do not court your little girl, but her mother. If the old wiggled councillor is not jealous of us, don't you be so."

I expected Lorand to smite that fair mouth for this despicable calumny.

Instead of which he merely said, half muttering:

"Don't; before the child . . ."

Pepi did not allow himself to be called to order.

"It is true, my dear Desi: and I can tell you that you will have a far more grateful part to play around Melanie, if she marries someone else."

Then indeed I went home. This cynicism was something quite new to my mind. Not only my stomach, but my whole soul turned sick. How could I measure the bitterness of the idea that Lorand was paying court to a married woman? Such a thing was not to be seen in the circle in which we had been brought up. Such a case had been mentioned in our town, perhaps, as the scandal of the century, but only in whispers that the innocent might not hear: neither the man nor the woman could have shown their faces in our street. Surely no one would have spoken another word to them.

And Lorand had been so confused when Pepi uttered this foul thing to his face before me. He did not deny it, nor was he angry.

I arrived at home in an agony of shame. The street-door was already closed: so I had to pass in by the shop

door. I wished to open it softly that the bell should not betray my coming, but Father Fromm was waiting for me. He was extremely angry: he stopped my way.

"Discipulus negligens! Do you know 'quote hora?' Decem. Every day to wander out of doors till after nine, hoc non pergit.—Scio, scio, what you wish to say. You were at the P. C.'s. That is 'unum et idem' for me. The other 'asinus' has been learning his lessons ever since midday, so much has he to do, while you have not even so much as glanced at them; do you wish to be a greater 'asinus' than he? Now I say 'semel propter semper,' 'finis' to the carnival! Don't go any more a-dancing; for if you stay out once more, 'ego tibi umsicabo.' Now 'pergus, dixi.'"

Old Márton during this well-deserved drubbing kept moving the scalp of his head back and forth in assent, and then came after me with a candle, to light me along the corridor to the door of my room, singing behind me these jesting verses:

"Hab i ti nid gsagt
Komm um halbe Acht?
Und du Kummst mir jetzt um halbe naini
Jetzt ist de Vater z'haus, kannst nimmer aini."*

And after me he called out "Prosit, Sir Lieutenant-Governor." I had no desire to be angry with him. I felt too sad to quarrel with any one.

Henrik was indeed slaving away at the table, and the candle, burnt to the end, proved that he had been at it a long time.

"Welcome, Desi," he said good humoredly. "You come late; a terrible amount of 'labor' awaits you tomorrow. I have finished mine: you will be behind with yours, so I have written the exercises in your place. Look and see if it is good."

I was humbled.

*"Did I not tell thee, 'come at half-past seven?' and thou comest now at half-past eight? Now the father is at home, thou canst no more come in."

That heavy-headed boy, on whom I had been wont to look down from such a height, whose work I had prepared in play, work which he would have broken his head over, had now in my place finished the work I had neglected. What had become of me?

"I waited for you with a little pleasant surprise," said Henrik, taking from his drawer something which he held in his hand before me. "Now guess what it is."

"I don't care what it is."

I was in a bad humor, I longed to lay my head on the bed.

"Of course you care. Fanny has written a letter from her new home. She has written to you in Magyar, about your dear mother."

These words roused me from my lethargy.

"Show me: give it me to read."

"You see, you are delighted after all."

I tore the letter from him.

First Fanny wrote to her parents in German, on the last page in Magyar to me. She had already made such progress.

She wrote that they often spoke of me at home; I was a bad boy not to write mother a letter: she was very ill and it was her sole delight to be able to speak of me. As often as her parents or brother wrote to Fanny, she would add a few lines after opening the letter, in my name, then take it to my mother and read it to her, as if I had written. How delighted she was! She did not know my German writing, so she readily believed it was I who had written. But I must be a good boy and write myself, for some day mother and grandmother would discover the deceit and would be angry.

My heart was almost bursting.

I pored over the letter I had read, and sobbed bitterly as I had never before done in my life.

My dear only mother! thou saint, thou martyr! who sufferest, weepst, and anguishest so much for my

sake, while I mix in a society where they mock women, and mothers! Canst thou forgive me?

When I had cried myself out, my face was covered with tears. Henrik raised me from my seat upon the floor.

"Give me this letter," I panted; and I kissed him for giving it to me.

Many great historical documents have been torn up since then, but that letter is still in my possession.

"Now I cannot go to bed. I will stay up until morning and finish the work I have neglected. I thank you for what you have written in my stead, but I cannot accept it. I shall do it myself. I shall do everything in which I am behindhand."

"Good, Desi, my boy, but you see our candle has burned down; and grandmother is already asleep, so I cannot ask her for one. Still, if you do wish to sit up, go down to the bakehouse, they are working all night, as to-morrow is Saturday: take your ink, paper, and books with you. There you can write and learn your lessons."

I did so. I descended to the court, washed my head beside the fountain, then took my books and writing material and descended to the bakehouse, begging Márton to allow me to work there by lamp-light. Márton irritated me the whole night with his satire, the assistants jostled me, and drove me from my place; they sang the "Kneading-trough" air, and many other street-songs: and amid all these abominations I studied till morning; what is more, I finished all my work.

That night, I know, was one of the turning-points in my life.

Two days later came Sunday: I met Pepi in the street.

"Well, old fellow: are you not coming to-day to see little Melanie? There will be a great dance-rehearsal."

"I cannot: I have too much to do."

Pepi laughed loudly. "Very well, old fellow."

His laughter did not affect me in the least.

"But when you have learned all there is to learn will you come again?"

"No. For then I shall write a letter to my mother."

Some good spirit must have whispered to this fellow not to laugh at these words, for he could not have anticipated the box on the ears I would have given him, because he could not for an instant forget that I was a grammar-school boy, and he a first-year law student.