

CHAPTER XI

"PAROLE D'HONNEUR"

Two days after Lorand's disappearance a travelling coach stopped before Mr. Fromm's house. From the window I recognized coach-horses and coachman: it was ours.

Some one of our party had arrived.

I hastened down into the street, where Father Fromm was already trying very excitedly to turn the leather curtain that was fastened round the coach

No, not "some one!" the whole family was here! All who had remained at home. Mother, grandmother, and the Fromms' Fanny.

Actually mother had come: poor mother!

We had to lift her from the carriage: she was utterly broken down. She seemed ten years older than when I had last seen her.

When she had descended, she leaned upon Fanny on the one side, on the other upon me.

"Only let us go in, into the house!" grandmother urged us on, convinced that poor mother would collapse in the street.

All who had arrived were very quiet: they scarcely answered me, when I greeted them. We led mother up into the room, where we had had our first reception.

Mother Fromm and grandmother Fromm were not knitting stockings on this occasion; it seemed they were prepared for this appearance. They too received my parents very quietly and solemnly: as if everyone were convinced that the first word addressed by anyone to this broken-down, propped up figure would immediately reduce it to ashes, as the story goes about some

figures they have found in old tombs. And yet she had come on this long, long journey. She had not waited for the weather to grow warmer. She had started in the teeth of a raw, freezing spring wind, when she heard that Lorand was gone.

Oh, is there any plummet to sound the depths of a mother's love?

Poor mother did try so hard to appear strong. It was so evident, that she was struggling to combat with her nervous attacks, just in the very moment which awoke every memory before her mind.

"Quietly, my daughter—quietly," said grandmother. "You know what you promised: you promised to be strong. You know there is need of strength. Don't give yourself over. Sit down."

Mother sat down near the table where they led her, then let her head fall on her two arms, and, as she had promised not to weep—she did not weep.

It was piteous to see her sorrowful figure as, in this strange house, she was leaning over the table with her face buried in her hands in mute despair; determined, however, not to cry, for so she had promised.

Everyone kept at a distance from her: great sorrow commands great respect. Only one person ventured to remain close to her, one of whom I had not even taken notice as yet,—Fanny.

When she had taken off her travelling cloak I found she was dressed entirely in blue. Once that had been my mother's favorite color; father too had been exceedingly fond of it. She stood at mother's side and whispered something into her ear, at which mother raised her head and, like one who returns from the other world, sighed deeply, seemed to come to herself, and said with a peaceful smile, turning to the host and hostess:

"Pardon me, I was exceedingly abstracted." Merely to hear her speak agonized me greatly. Then she turned to Fanny, embraced her, kissed her forehead twice, and said to the Fromms,

"You will agree, will you not, to Fanny's staying a

little longer with me? She is already like a child of my own."

I was no longer jealous of Fanny. I saw how happy she made mother, if she could embrace her.

Fanny again whispered something in mother's ear, at which mother rose, and seemed quite herself again: she approached Mrs. Fromm resolutely, with no faltering steps, and grasping both her hands, said, "I thank you," and once again repeated whisperingly, "I thank you."

All this I regarded speechlessly from a corner. I feared my mother's gaze inexpressibly.

Then grandmother interrupted,

"We have no time to lose, my daughter. If you are capable of coming at once, come."

Mother nodded assent with her head, and gazed continually upon Fanny.

"Meanwhile Fanny remains here," added grandmother. "But Desiderius comes with us."

At these words mother looked at me, as if it had only just occurred to her that I too was here, still it was Fanny's fair curls only that she continued stroking.

Father Fromm hurriedly sent Henrik for a cab. Not a soul asked us where we were going. Everyone wondered, where, and why? What purpose? But, only I knew what would be the end of to-day's journey.

I did not distress myself about it. I waited merely until my turn should come. I knew nothing could happen without me.

The cab was there, and the Fromms led mother down the steps. They set her down first of all, and, when we were all seated, Father Fromm called to the cabman:

"To the house of Bálnokházy!"

He knew well that we must go there now. During the whole journey there we did not exchange a single word: what could those two have said to me?

When we stopped before Bálnokházy's residence, it seemed to me, my mother was endowed with a quite youthful strength; she went before us, her face burning, her step elastic, her head carried on high.

I don't know whether it was our good fortune, or whether my parents' arrival had been announced previously, but the P. C. was at home, when we came to look for him.

I was curious to see with what countenance he would receive us.

I knew already much about him, that I ought never to have known.

As we stepped into his room, he came to meet us, with more courtesy than pleasure apparent on his countenance. Some kind of displeasure strove to display itself thereon, but it was just as if he had studied the expression for hours in the mirror; it seemed to be an artificial, affected, calculated dispeasure.

Mother straightway hastened to him, and taking both his hands, impetuously introduced the conversation with these words:

"Where is my son Lorand?"

My right honorable uncle shrugged his shoulders, and with gracious mien answered this mother's passionate outburst:

"My dear lady cousin, it is I who ought to urge that question; for it is my duty to prosecute your son. And if I answer that I do not know where he is, I think thereby I shall display the most kinsmanlike feeling."

"Why prosecute my son?" said mother, tremblingly. "Is it possible to eternally ruin anyone for a mere schoolboy escapade?"

"Not one but many 'schoolboy escapades' justify me in my action: it is not merely in my official capacity that I am bound to prosecute him."

As he said this, Bálnokházy fixed his eyes sharply upon me: I did not wince before him. I knew I had the right and the power to withstand his gaze. Soon my turn would come.

"What?" asked mother. "What reason could you have to prosecute him?"

Bálnokházy shrugged his shoulders more than ever, bitterly smiling.

"I scarcely know, in truth, how to tell you this story,

if you don't know already. I thought you were acquainted with all the facts. He who told you the news of the young man's disappearance, wrote to you also the reasons for it."

"Yes," said mother, "I know all. The misfortune is great: but there is no ignominy."

"Indeed?" interrupted Bálnokházy, drawing his shoulders derisively together: "I did not know that such conduct was not considered ignominious in the provinces. Indeed I did not. A young man, a law student, a mere stripling, shows his gratitude for the fatherly thoughtfulness of a man of position,—who had received him into his house as a kinsman, treating him as one of the family,—by seducing and eloping with his wife, and helping her to break open his money-chest, and steal his jewelry, disappearing with the shameless woman beyond the confines of the country. Oh, really, I did not know that they did not consider that a crime deserving of prosecution!"

Poor mother was shattered at this double accusation, as if she had been twice struck by thunder-bolts, and deadly pale clutched at grandmother's hand. The latter had herself in this moment grown as white as her grizzled hair. She took up the conversation in mother's place, for mother was no longer capable of speaking.

"What do you say? Lorand a seducer of women?"

"To my sorrow, he is. He has eloped with my wife."

"And thief?"

"A harsh word, but I can give him no other name."

"For God's sake, gently, sir!"

"Well, you can see that hitherto I have behaved very quietly. I have not even made a noise about my loss: yet, besides the destruction of my honor, I have other losses.

"This faithless deed has robbed me and my daughter of 5,000 florins.* If the matter only touched me, I

* Above £415—\$2,000.

would disdain to notice it: but that sum was the savings of my little daughter."

"Sir, that sum shall be repaid you," said grandmother, "but I beg you not to say another word on the subject before this lady. You can see you are killing her with it."

As she was speaking, Bálnokházy gazed intently at me, and in his gaze were many questions, all of which I could very well have answered.

"I am surprised," he said at last, "that these revelations are entirely new to you. I thought that the same person who had acquainted you with Lorand's disappearance, had unfolded to you therewith all those critical circumstances, which caused his disappearance, seeing that I related all myself to that person."

Now mother and grandmother too turned their gaze upon me.

Grandmother addressed me: "You did not write a word about all this to us."

"No."

"Nor did you mention a word about it here when we arrived."

"Yet I told it all myself to my nephew."

"Why don't you answer?" queried my grandmother impetuously.

Mother could not speak: she merely wrung her hands.

"Because I had certain information that this accusation was groundless."

"Oho! you young imp!" exclaimed Bálnokházy in proud, haughty tones.

"From beginning to end groundless," I repeated calmly; although every muscle of mine was trembling from excitement. But you should have seen, how mother and grandmother rushed into my arms: how they grasped one my right, the other my left hand, as drowning men clutch at the rescuer's hands, and how that proud angry man stood before me with flashing eyes. All sobriety had left the three, together they cried to me in voices of impetuosity, of anger, of mad-

ness, of hope, of joy: "speak! tell us what you know."

"I will tell you.—When his lordship acquainted me with these two terrible charges against Lorand, I at once started off to find my brother. Two honorable poor men came in my way to help me find him: two poor workmen, who left their work to help me to save a lost life. The same will be my witness that what I relate is all true and happened just as I tell you: one is Márton Braun, the baker's man, the other Matthias Fleck."

"My wife's coachman," interrupted the P. C.

"Yes. He conducted me to where Lorand was temporarily concealed. He related to me that her ladyship was elsewhere. He had taken her ladyship across the frontier—without Lorand. My brother started at the same time on foot, without money, towards the interior of Hungary: Márton and I accompanied him into the hills, and my pocket money, which he accepted from me, was the only money he had with him, and Márton's walking stick was the only travelling companion that accompanied him further."

I noticed that mother kneeled beside me and kissed me.

That kiss I received for Lorand's sake.

"It is not true!" yelled Bálnokházy; "he disappeared with my wife. I have certain information that this woman passed the frontier with a young smooth-faced man and arrived with him in Vienna. That was Lorand."

"It was not Lorand, but another."

"Who could it have been?"

"Is it possible that you should not know? Well, I can tell you. That smoothed-faced man who accompanied her ladyship to Vienna was the German actor Bleissberg;—and not for the first time."

Ha, ha! I had stabbed him to the heart: right to the middle of the liver, where pride dwells. I had thrust such a dart into him, as he would never be able to draw out. I did not care if he slew me now.

And he looked as if he felt very much like doing it—

but who would have dared touch me and face the wrath of those two women—no—lionesses, standing next to me on either side! They seemed ready to tear anyone to pieces who ventured as much as lay a finger on me.

"Let us go," said mother, pressing my hand. "We have nothing more to do here."—Mother passed out first: they took me in the middle and grandmother, turning back addressed a categorical "adieu" to Bálnokházy, whom we left to himself.

My cousin Melanie was playing that cavatina even now, though now I did not care to stop and listen to it. That piano was a good idea after all; quarrels and disputes in the house were prevented thereby from being heard in the street.

When we were again seated in the cab, mother pressed me passionately to her, and smothered me with kisses.

Oh, how I feared her kisses! She kissed me because she would soon ask questions about Lorand. And I could not answer them.

"You were obedient: you took care of your poor brother: you helped him: my dear child." Thus she kept whispering continually to me.

I dared not be affected.

"Tell me now, where is Lorand?"

I had known she would ask that. In anguish I drew away from her and kept looking around me.

"Where is Lorand?"

Grandmother remarked my anguish.

"Leave him alone," she hinted to mother. "We are not yet in a sufficiently safe place: the driver might hear. Wait until we get home."

So I had time until we arrived home. What would happen there? How could I avoid answering their questions.

Scarcely had we returned to Master Fromm's house, scarce had Fanny brought us into a room which had been prepared for my parents, when my poor mother again fell upon my neck, and with melancholy gladness asked me:

"You know where Lorand is?"

How easy it would have been for me to answer "I know not!" But what should I have gained thereby? Had I done so, I could never have told her what Lorand wrote from a distance, how he greeted and kissed them a thousand times!

"I know, mother dear.

"Tell me quickly, where he is."

"He is in a safe place, mother dear," said I encouragingly, and hastened to tell all I might relate.

"Lorand is in his native land in a safe place, where he has nothing to fear: with a relation of ours, who will love and protect him."

"But when will you tell us where he is?"

"One day, soon, mother dear."

"But when? When? Why not at once? When?"

"Soon,—in ten years."—I could scarce utter the words.

Both were horrified at my utterance.

"Desi, do you wish to play some joke upon us?"

"If it were only a joke? It is true: a very heavy truth! I promised Lorand to tell neither mother nor grandmother, for ten years, where he is living."

Grandmother seemed to understand it all: she hinted with a look to Fanny to leave us alone: she thought that I did not wish to reveal it before Fanny.

"Don't go Fanny," I said to her. "Even in your absence I cannot say more than I have already said."

"Are you in your senses then?" grandmother sternly addressed me thinking harsh words might do much with me. "Do you wish to play mysteries with us: surely you don't think we shall betray him?"

"Desi," said mother, in that quiet, sweet voice of hers. "Be good."

So, they were deceived in me. I was no longer that good child, who could be frightened by strong words, and tamed by a sweet tongue,—I had become a hard, cruel unfeeling boy:—they could not force me to confession.

"That I cannot tell you."

"Why not? Not even to us?" they asked both together.

"Why not? That I do not know myself. But not even to you can I tell it. Lorand made me give him my word of honor, not to betray his whereabouts—not to his mother and grandmother. He said he had a great reason to ask this, and said any neglect of my promise would produce great misfortune. I gave him my word, and that word I must keep."

Poor mother fell on her knees before me, embraced me, showered kisses upon me, and begged me so to tell her where Lorand was. She called me her dear "only" son: then burst into tears: and I,—could be so cruel as to answer to her every word, "No—no—no."

I cannot describe this scene. I am incapable of reflecting thereupon. At last mother fainted, grandmother cursed me, and I left the room, and leaned against the door post.

During this indescribable scene the whole household hastened to nurse my mother, who was suffering terrible pain; then they came to me one by one, and tried in turn their powers of persuasion upon me. First of all came Mother Fromm, to beg me very kindly to say that one word that would cure my mother at once; then came Grandmother Fromm with awful threats: then Father Fromm, who endeavored to persuade me with sage reasoning, declaring that my honor would really be greatest if I should now break my word!

It was all quite useless. Surely no one knew how to beg, as my mother begged kneeling before me! No one could curse as my terrible grandmother had done, and no one knew the wickedness of my character as well as I did myself.

Let them only give me peace! I could not tell them.

Last of all Fanny came to me: leaned upon my shoulder, and began to stroke my hair.

"Dear Desi."

I jerked my shoulder to be rid of her.

"Dear Desi,' indeed!—Call me 'wicked, bad, cursed Desi!'—that is what I am."

"But why?"

"Because no other name is possible. I promised because I was *obliged* to promise; and now I am keeping my word, because I promised."

"Your poor mother says she will die, if you do not tell her where Lorand is."

"And Lorand told me he will die if I do tell her. He told me that, when I discovered his whereabouts to mother or grandmother, he will either report himself at the nearest military station, or will shoot himself, according as he feels inclined. And in our family such promises are not wont to dissolve in thin air."

"What might have been his reason for exacting such a promise from you?"

"I do not know. But I know he would not have done it without cause. I beg you to leave me."

"Wait a moment," said Fanny, standing before me. "You said Lorand made you swear not to tell your mother or grandmother where he had gone to. He did not forbid you to tell another?"

"Naturally not," I answered with irritated pride. "He knew all along that there has not yet been born into the world that other who could force the truth out of me with red-hot pincers."

"But that other has been born," interrupted Fanny with wild earnestness. "Just twelve years, eight months and five days ago."

I looked at her.

"I should tell you? is that what you think?"

I admired her audacity.

"Certainly, me. For your parole forbids you to speak only to your mother and grandmother. You can tell me: and I shall tell them. You will not have told anybody anything, and they still will know it."

"Well, and are you 'nobody?'"

Fanny gazed into my eyes, became serious, and with trembling lips said:

"If you wish it—I am nobody. As if I had never been born."

From that moment Fanny began to be "someone," in my eyes.

Her little sophism pleased me. Perhaps on these terms we might come to an agreement.

"You have asked something very difficult of me, Fanny; but it is not impossible. Only you must wait a little: give me time to think it over. Until I have done so, be our go-between. Go in and tell grandmother what you have recommended to me, and that I said in answer, 'it is well.'"

I was cunning. I was dissembling. I thought in that moment, that, if Fanny should burst in childish glee into the neighboring room, and in triumphant voice proclaim the concession she had wrung out of me, I might tell her on her return the name of some place that did not exist, and so throw the responsibility off my own shoulders.

But she did not do that.

She went back quietly, and waited long, until her friends had retired by the opposite door: then she came and whispered:—

"I have been long: but I did not wish to speak before my mother. Now your parents are alone: go and speak."

"Something more first. Go back, Fanny, and say that I can tell them the truth, only on the condition that mother and grandmother promise not to seek him out, until I show them a letter from Lorand, in which he invites them to come to him: nor to send others in search of him: and, if they wish to send a letter to him, they must first give it to me, that I may send it off to him, and they never show, even by a look, to anyone that they know aught of Lorand's whereabouts."

Fanny nodded assent, and returned into the neighboring room.

A few minutes later she came out again, and held open the door before me.

"Come in."

I went in. She shut the door after me, and then, taking my hand, led me to mother's bedside.

Poor dear mother was now quiet, and pale as death.

She seemed to beckon me to her with her eyes. I went to her side, and kissed her hand.

Fanny bent over me, and held her face near my lips, that I might whisper in her ear what I knew.

I told her all in a few words. She then bent over mother's pillow and whispered in her ear what she had heard from me.

Mother sighed and seemed to be calmed. Then grandmother bent over dear mother, that she might learn from her all that had been said.

As she heard it, her grey-headed figure straightened, and clasping her two hands above her head, she panted in wild prophetic ecstasy:

"O Lord God! who entrustest Thy will to children: may it come to pass, as Thou hast ordained!"

Then she came to me and embraced me.

"Did you counsel Lorand to go there?"

"I did."

"Did you know what you were doing? It was the will of God. Every day you must pray now for your brother."

"And you must keep silent for him. For when he is discovered, my brother will die and I cannot live without him."

The storm became calm: they again made peace with me. Mother, some minutes later, fell asleep, and slumbered sweetly. Grandmother motioned to Fanny and to me to leave her to herself.

We let down the window-blinds and left the room.

As we stepped out, I said to Fanny:

"Remember, my honor has been put into your hands."

The girl gazed into my eyes with ardent enthusiasm and said:

"I shall guard it as I guard mine own."

That was no child's answer, but the answer of a maiden.

CHAPTER XII

A GLANCE INTO A PISTOL-BARREL

THE weather changed very rapidly, for all the world as if two evil demons were fighting for the earth: one with fire, the other with ice. It was the middle of May; it had become so sultry that the earth, which last week had been frozen to dry bones, now began to crack.

The wanderer who disappeared from our sight we shall find on that plain of Lower Hungary, where there are as many high roads as cart-ruts.

It is evening, but the sun had just set, and left a cloudless ruddy sky behind it. On the horizon two or three towers are to be seen so far distant that the traveller who is hurrying before us cannot hope to reach any one of them by nightfall.

The dust had not so overlaid him, nor had the sun so tanned his face that we cannot recognize in these handsome noble features the pride of the youth of Pressburg, Lorand.

The long journey he has accomplished has evidently not impaired the strength of his muscles, for the horseman who is coming behind him, has to ride hard to overtake him.

The latter leaned back in his shortened stirrups, after the manner of hussars, and wore a silver-buttoned jacket, a greasy hat, and ragged red trousers. Thrown half over his shoulders was a garment of wolf-skins; around his waist was a wide belt from which two pistol-barrels gleamed, while in the leg of one of his boots a silver-chased knife was thrust. The horse's harness was glittering with silver, just as the ragged, stained garments of its master.

The rider approached at a trot, but the traveller had