

"Why don't you allow the poor child to learn to know them?"

"What, her alphabet? Because in my eyes it is quite superfluous. A mad idea once occurred to me of picking some naked gypsy child out of the streets, with the intention of making a happy being therefrom. What is happiness in the world? Ease and ignorance. Had I a child of my own, I should do the same with it. The secret of life is to have a good appetite, sound sleep, and a good heart. If I reflect what bitternesses have been my lot my whole life, I find the cause of each one was what I have learned. Many a night did I lie awake in agonized distraction, while my servants were snoring in peace. I desired to see before me a person as happy as it was my ideal to be; a person free from those distressing tortures, which the civilized world has discovered for the persecution of man by man. Well, I have begun by telling you why I did not teach Czippa her alphabet."

"And God?"

Topánydy took his eyes off the telescope, with which he had just been gazing at the starry sky.

"I don't know Him myself."

Lorand turned from him with a distressed air. Topánydy remarked it.

"My dear boy, my dear twenty-year-old child, probably you know more than I do; if you know Him, I beg you to teach me."

Lorand shrugged his shoulders, then began to discuss scientific subjects.

"Does Dollond's telescope show stars in the Milky Way?"

"Yes, a million twinkling stars o'erspread the Milky Way, each several star a sun."

"Does it dissipate the mist in the head of the Northern Hound?"

"The mist remains as it was before—a round cloudy mass with a ring of mist around it."

"Perhaps Gregory's telescope, just arrived from Vienna, magnifies better?"

"Bring it here. Since its arrival there has been no clear weather, to enable us to make experiments with it."

Topánydy gazed at the heavens through the new telescope with great interest.

"Ah," he remarked in a tone of surprise. "This is a splendid instrument; the star-mist thins, some tiny stars appear out of the ring."

"And the mass itself?"

"That remains mist. Not even this telescope can disperse its atoms."

"Well, shall we not experiment with Chevalier's microscope now?"

"That is a good idea; get it ready."

"What shall we put under it? A rhinchites?"

"That will do."

Lorand lit the spirit-lamp, which threw light on the subject under the magnifying glass; then he first looked into it himself, to find the correct focus. Enraptured, he cried out:

"Look here! That fabled armor of Homer's *Iliad* is not to be compared with this little insect's wing-shields. They are nothing but emerald and enamelled gold."

"Indeed it is so."

"And now listen to me: between the two wings of this little insect there is a tiny parasite or worm, which in its turn has two eyes, a life, and life-blood flowing in its veins, and in this worm's stomach other worms are living, impenetrable to the eye of this microscope."

"I understand," said the atheist, glancing into Lorand's eyes. "You are explaining to me that the immensity of the world of creation reaching to awful eternity is only equalled by the immensity of the descent to the shapeless nonentity; and that is your God!"

The sublime calm of Lorand's face indicated that that was his idea.

"My dear boy," said Topánydy, placing his two hands on Lorand's shoulder, "with that idea I have long been acquainted. I, too, fall down before immensity, and

recognize that we represent but one class in the upward direction towards the stars, and one degree in the descent to the moth and rust that corrupt; and perhaps that worm, that I killed in order to take rapt pleasure in its wings, thought itself the middle of eternity round which the world is whirling like Plato's featherless two-footed animals; and when at the door of death it uttered its last cry, it probably thought that this cry for vengeance would be noted by some one, as when at Warsaw four thousand martyrs sang with their last breath, 'All is not yet lost.'

"That is not my faith, sir. The history of the ephemeral insect is the history of a day,—that of a man means a whole life; the history of nations means centuries, that of the world eternity; and in eternity justice comes to each one in irremediable and unalterable succession."

"I grant that, my boy; and I allow, too, that the comets are certainly claimants to the world whose suits have been deferred to this long justice, who one day will all recover their inheritances, from which some tyrant sun has driven them out; but you must also acknowledge, my child, that for us, the thoughtful worms, or stars, if you like, which can express their thoughts in spirited curses, providence has no care. For everything, everything there is a providence: be it so, I believe it. But for the living kind there is none, unless we take into account the rare occasions when a plague visits mankind, because it is too closely spread over the earth and requires thinning."

"Sir, many misfortunes have I suffered on earth, very many, and such as fate distributes indiscriminately; but it has never destroyed—my faith."

"No misfortune has ever attacked me. It is not suffering that has made me sceptical. My life has always been to my taste. Should some one divide up his property in reward for prayer, I should not benefit one crumb from it.—It is hypocrites who have forcibly driven me this way. Perhaps, were I not surrounded by such, I should keep silence about my unbelief, I should

not scandalize others with it, I should not seek to persecute the world's hypocrites with what they call blasphemy. Believe me, my boy, of a million men, all but one regard Providence as a rich creditor, from whom they may always borrow—but when it is a question of paying the interest, then only that one remembers it."

"And that one is enough to hallow the ideal!"

"That one?—but you will not be that one!"

Lorand, astonished, asked:

"Why not?"

"Because, if you remain long in my vicinity, you must without fail turn into such a universal disbeliever as I am."

Lorand smiled to himself.

"My child," said Topándy, "you will not catch the infection from me, who am always sneering and causing scandals, but from that other who prays to the sound of bells."

"You mean Sárkölygyi?"

"Whom else could I mean? You will meet this man every day. And in the end you will say just as I do—'If one must go to heaven in this wise, I had rather remain here?'"

"Well, and what is this Sárkölygyi?"

"A hypocrite, who lies to all the saints in turn, and would deceive the eyes of the archangels if they did not look after themselves."

"You have a very low opinion of the man."

"A low opinion? That is the only good thing in my heart, that I despise the fellow."

"Simply because he is pious? In the world of to-day, however, it is a kind of courage to dare to show one's piety outwardly before a world of scepticism and indifference. I should like to defend him against you."

"Would you? Very well. Let us start at once. Draw up a chair and listen to me. I shall be the devil's advocate. I shall tell you a story concerning this fellow; I was merely a simple witness to the whole. The man never did me any harm. I tell you once again that I

have no complaint to make either against mankind or against any beings that may exist above or below. Sit beside me, my boy."

Lorand first of all stirred up the fire in the fire-place, and put out the spirit lamp of the microscope, so that the room was lighted only by the red glare of the log-fire and the moon, which was now rising above the horizon and shed her pale radiance through the window.

"In my younger days I had a very dear friend, a relation, with whom I had always gone to school and such fast comrades were we that even in the class-room we sat always side by side. My comrade was unapproachably first in the class, and I came next; sometime between us like a dividing wall came this fellow Sárkölyi, who was even then a great flatterer and sneak, and in this way sometimes drove me out of my place—and young schoolboys think a great deal of their own particular places. Of course I was even then so godless that they could not make sufficient complaints against me. Later, during the French war, as the schools suffered much, we were both sent together to Heidelberg. The devil brought Sárkölyi after us. His parents were parvenues. What our parents did they were always bound to imitate. They might have sent their boy to Jena, Berlin, or Nineveh; but he must come just where we were."

"You have never mentioned your friend's name," said Lorand, who had listened in anguish to the commencement of the story.

"Indeed?—Why there's really no need for the name. He was a friend of mine. As far as the story is concerned it doesn't matter what they called him. Still that you may not think I am relating a fable, I may as well tell you his name. It was Lőrincz Áronffy."

A cold numbness seized Lorand when he heard his father's name. Then his heart began suddenly to beat at a furious pace. He felt he was standing before the crypt door, whose secret he had so often striven to fathom.

"I never knew a fairer figure, a nobler nature, a warmer heart than he had," continued Topányi. "I admired and loved him, not merely as my relation, but as the ideal of the young men of the day. The common knowledge of all kinds of little secrets, such as only young people understand among themselves, united us more closely in that bond of friendship which is usually deferred until later days. At that time there broke out all over Europe those liberal political views, which had such a fascinating influence generally on young men. Here too there was an awakening of what is called national feeling; great philosophers even turned against one another with quite modern opposition in public as well as in private life. All this made more intimate the relations which had till then been mere childish habit.

"We were two years at the academy; those two years were passed amidst enough noise and pleasure. Had we money, we spent it together; had we none, we starved together. For one another we went empty-handed, for one another, we fought, and were put in prison. Then we met Sárkölyi very seldom; the academy is a great forest and men are not forced together as on the benches of a grammar-school.

"Just at the very climax of the French war, the idea struck us to edit a written newspaper among ourselves." (Lorand began to listen with still greater interest.)

"We travestied with humorous score in our paper all that the 'Augsburger' delivered with great pathos: those who read laughed at it.

"However, there came an end to our amusement, when one fine day we received the 'consilium abeundi.'

"I was certainly not very much annoyed. So much transcendental science, so much knowledge of the world had been driven into me already, that I longed to go home to the company of the village sexton, who, still believed that anecdotes and fables were the highest science.

"Only two days were allowed us at Heidelberg to collect our belongings and say adieu to our so-called 'treasures.' During these two days I only saw Áronffy

twice: once on the morning of the first day, when he came to me in a state of great excitement, and said, 'I have the scoundrel by the ear who betrayed us!—If I don't return, follow in my tracks and avenge me.' I asked him why he did not choose me for his second, but he replied: 'Because you also are interested and must follow me.' And then on the evening of the second day he came home again, quite dispirited and out of sorts! I spoke to him; he would scarcely answer; and when I finally insisted: 'perhaps you killed someone?' he answered determinedly, 'Yes.'

"And who was that man?" inquired Lorand, taken aback.

"Don't interrupt me. You shall know soon," Topányd muttered.

"From that day Aronffy was completely changed. The good-humored, spirited young fellow became suddenly a quiet, serious, sedate man, who would never join us in any amusement. He avoided the world, and I remarked that in the world he did his best to avoid me.

"I thought I knew why that was. I thought I knew the secret of his earnestness. He had murdered a man whom he had challenged to a duel. That weighed upon his mind. He could not be cold-blooded enough to drive even such a bagatelle from his head. Other people count it a 'bravour,' or at most suffer from the persecutions of others—not of themselves. He would soon forget it, I thought, as he grew older.

"Yet my dear friend remained year by year a serious-minded man, and when later on I met him, his society was for me so unenjoyable that I never found any pleasure in frequenting it.

"Still, as soon as he returned home, he got married. Even before our trip to Heidelberg he had become engaged to a very pleasant, pretty, and quiet young girl. They were in love with each other. Still Aronffy remained always gloomy. In the first year of his marriage a son was born to him. Later another. They say both the sons were handsome, clever boys. Yet that never brightened him. Immediately after the honey-

moon he went to the war, and behaved there like one who thinks the sooner he is cut off the better. Later, all the news I received of him confirmed my idea that Aronffy was suffering from an incurable mental disease.—Does a man, the candle of whose life we have snuffed out deserve that?"

"What was the name of the man he murdered?" demanded Lorand with renewed disquietude.

"As I have told you, you shall know soon: the story will not run away from me! only listen further.

"One day—it might have been twelve years since the day we shook off the dust of the Heidelberg school from our boots—I received a parcel from Heidelberg, from the Local Council, which informed me that a certain Dr. Stoppelfeld had left me this packet in his will.

"Stoppelfeld? I racked my brains to discover who it might be that from beyond the border had left me something in his testament. Finally it occurred to me that a long light-haired medical student, who was famous in his days among the drinking clubs, had attended the same lectures as we had. If I was not deceived, we had drunk together and fought a duel.

"I undid the packet, and found within it a letter addressed to me.

"I have that letter still, but I know every word by heart so often have I read it. Its contents were as follows:

"MY DEAR COMRADE:

"You may remember that, on the day before your departure from Heidelberg, one of our young colleagues, Lörincz Aronffy, looked among his acquaintances for seconds in some affair of honor. As it happened I was the first he addressed. I naturally accepted the invitation, and asked his reason and business. As you too know them—he told me so—I shall not write them here. He informed me, too, why he did not choose you as his second, and at the same time bound me to promise, if he should fall in the duel, to tell you that you might follow the matter up. I accepted, and went

with him to the challenged. I explained that in such a case a duel was customary, and in fact necessary; if he wished to avoid it, he would be forced to leave the academy. The challenged did not refuse the challenge, but said that as he was of weak constitution, short-sighted and without practice with any kind of weapons, he chose the American duel of drawing lots!"

. . . Topandy glanced by chance at Lorand's face, and thought that the change of color he saw on his countenance was the reflection of the flickering flame in the fire-place.

"The letter continued:

"At our academy at that time there was a great rage for that stupid kind of duel, where two men draw lots and the one whose name comes out, must blow his brains out after a fixed time. Asses! At that time I had already enough common sense, when summoned to act as second in such cases, to try to persuade the principals to fix a longer period, calculating quite rightly that within ten or twelve years the bitterest enemies would become reconciled, and might even become good friends: the successful principal might be magnanimous, and give his opponent his life, or the unsuccessful adversary might forget in his well-being, such a ridiculous obligation.

"In this case I arranged a period of sixteen years between the parties. I knew my men: sixteen years were necessary for the education of the traitorous schoolfox\* into a man of honor, or for his proud, upright young adversary to reach the necessary pitch of *sang froid* that would make a settlement of their difference feasible.

"Aronffy objected at first: "At once or never!" but he had finally to accept the decision of the seconds: and we drew lots.

"Aronffy's name came out."

. . . Lorand was staring at the narrator with

\*i. e., Schoolfox, a term of contempt.

fixed eyes, and had no feeling for the world outside, as he listened in rapt awe to this story of the past.

"The name that was drawn out we gave to the successful party, who had the right to send this card, after sixteen years were passed, to his adversary, in order if the latter deferred the fulfilment of his obligation, to remind him thereof.

"Then we parted company, you went home and I thought we should forget the matter as many others have done.

"But I was deceived. To this, the hour of my death, it has always remained in my memory, has always agonized and persecuted me. I inquired of my acquaintances in Hungary about the two adversaries, and all I learned only increased my anguish. Aronffy was a proud and earnest man. It is surely stupidity for a man to kill himself, when he is happy and faring well: yet a proud man would far rather the worms gnawed his body than his soul, and could not endure the idea of giving up to a man, whom yesterday he had the right to despise, of his own accord, that right of contempt. He can die, but he cannot be disgraced. He is a fool for his pains: but it is consistent."

Lorand was shuddering all over.

"I am in my death-struggles," continued Stoppel-feld's letter: "I know the day, the hour in which I shall end all; but that thought does not calm me so much, seeing that I cannot go myself and seek that man, who holds Aronffy in his hands, to tell him: "Sir, twelve years have passed. Your opponent has suffered twelve years already because of a terrible obligation: for him every pleasure of life has been embittered, before him the future eternity has been overclouded; he contented with that sacrifice, and do not ask for the greatest too. Give back one man to his family, to his country, and to God—" But I cannot go. I must sit here motionless and count the beats of my pulse, and reckon how many remain till the last.

"And that is why I came to you: you know both, and were a good friend to one: go, speak, and act. Per-

'haps I am a ridiculous fool: I am afraid of my own shadow; but it agonizes and horrifies me; it will not let me die. Take this inheritance from me. Let me rest peacefully in my ashes. So may God bless you! The man who has Aronffy's word, as far as I know, is a very gracious man, it will be easy for you to persuade him—his name is Sárvölgyi.'

. . . At these words Topándy rose from his seat and went to the window, opening both sides of it: so heavy was the air within the room. The cold light of the moon shone on Lorand's brow.

Topándy, standing then at the window, continued the thrilling story he had commenced. He could not sit still to relate it. Nor did he speak as if his words were for Lorand alone, but as if he wished the dumb trees to hear it too, and the wondering moon, and the shivering stars and the shooting meteors that they might gainsay if possible the earthy worm who was speaking.

"I at once hurried across to the fellow. I was now going with tender, conciliatory countenance to a man whose threshold I had never crossed, whom I had never greeted when we met. I first offered him my hand that there might be peace between us. I began to appraise his graciousness, his virtues. I begged him to pardon the annoyances I had previously caused him; whatever atonement he might demand from me I would be glad to fulfill.

"The fellow received me with gracious obeisance, and grasped my hand. He said, upon his soul, he could not recall any annoyance he had ever suffered from me. On the contrary he calculated how much good I had done him in my life, beginning from his school-boy years:—I merely replied that I certainly could not remember it.

"I hastened to come straight to the point. I told him that I had been brought to his home by an affair the settlement of which I owed to a good old friend, and asked him to read the letter that I had received that day.

"Sárvölgyi read the letter to the end. I watched his

face all the time he was reading it. He did not cease for a moment that stereotyped smile of tenderness which gives me the shivers whenever I see it in my recollections.

"When he was through with the letter, he quietly folded it and gave it back.

"'Have you not discovered,' he said to me with pious face, 'that the man who wrote that letter is—mad?'

"'Mad?' I asked, aghast.

"'Without doubt,' answered Sárvölgyi; 'he himself writes that he has a disease of the nerves, sees visions, and is afraid of his shadow. The whole story is—a fable. I never had any conflict with our friend Aronffy, which would have given occasion for an American or even a Chinese duel. From beginning to end it is—a poem.'

"I knew it was no poem: Aronffy had had a duel, but I had never known with whom. I had never asked him about it any more after he had, to my question, 'perhaps you have murdered someone?' answered, 'Yes.' Plainly he had meant himself. I tried to penetrate more deeply into that man's heart.

"'Sir, neighbor, friend,—be a man! be the Christian you wish to be thought: consider that this fellow-man of ours has a dearly-loved family. If you have that card which the seconds gave you twelve years ago, don't agonize or terrify him any more; write to him that "the account is settled," and give over to him that horrible deed of contract. I shall honor you till my death for it. I know that in any case you will do it one day before it is too late. You will not take advantage of that horrible power which blind fate has delivered into your hand, by sending him his card empty to remind him that the time is up. You would pardon him then too. But do so now. This man's life during its period of summer, has been clouded by this torturing obligation, which has hung continuously above his happiness; let the autumn sunbeams shine upon his head. Give, give him a hand of reconciliation now, at once!'

"Sárvölgyi insisted that he had never had any kind of 'cartell': how could I imagine that he would have the heart to maintain his revenge for years? His past and present life repudiated any such charge. He had never had any quarrel with Áronffy, and, had there been one, he would long ago have been reconciled to him.

"I did not yet let the fellow out of my hands. I told him to think what he was doing. Áronffy had once told me that, should he perish in this affair, I was to continue the matter. I too knew a kind of duel, which surpassed even the American, because it destroyed a man by pin-pricks. So take care you don't receive for your eternal adversary the neighboring heathen in exchange for the pious, quiet and distant Áronffy.

"Sárvölgyi swore he knew nothing of the affair. He called God and all the saints to witness that he had not the very remotest share in Áronffy's danger.

"Well, and why is Áronffy so low-spirited?"

"—As if you should not know that," said the Pharisee, making a face of surprise: "not know anything about it?"

"Well I will whisper it to you in confidence. Áronffy has not been happy in his family life. You know, of course, that when he came home he married, and immediately joined the rebel army. With a corps of volunteers he fought till the end of the war, and returned again to his family. But he has still that worm in his soul."

It was well that the fire had already died out:—well that a dark cloud rolled up before the moon:—well that the narrator could not see the face of his listener, when he said that:

"And I was fool enough to believe him. I credited the calumny with which the good fame of the angelically pure wife of an honorable man had been defiled. Yes, I allowed myself to be deceived in this underhand way! I allowed myself to rest calm in the belief that there is many a sad man on the earth, whose wife is beautiful.

"Still, once I met by chance Áronffy's mother, and

produced before her the letter which had been accredited a fable. Her ladyship was very grateful, but begged me not to say a word about it to Áronffy.

"I believe that from that day she paid great attention to her son's behavior.

"Four years I had managed to keep myself at a respectful distance from Sárvölgyi's person.

"But there came a day in the year, marked with red in my calendar, the anniversary of our departure from Heidelberg.

"Three days after that sixteenth anniversary I received a letter, which informed me that Áronffy had on that red-letter day killed himself in his family circle."

The narrator here held silence, and, hanging down his hands, gazed out into the brilliant night; profound silence reigned in the room, only the large "grandfather's clock" ticked the past and future.

"I don't know what I should have done, had I met the hypocrite then: but just at that time he was away on a journey: he left behind a letter for me, in which he wrote that he, too, was sorry our unfortunate friend—our friend indeed!—had met with such a sad end: certainly family circumstances had brought him to it. He pitied his weakness of mind, and promised to pray for his soul!

"How pious.

"He killed a man in cold blood, after having tortured him for sixteen years! Sent him the sentence of death in a letter! Forced the gracious, quiet, honorable man and father to cut short his life with his own hand!

"With a cold, smiling countenance he took advantage of the fiendish power which fate and the too sensitive feeling of honor of a lofty soul had given into his hand; and then shrugged his shoulders, clasped his hands, turned his eyes to heaven, and said 'there is no room for the suicide with God.'

"Who is he, who gives a true man into the hands of the deceiver, that he may choke with his right hand his breath, with his left his soul.