

him such a healthy box on the ears that it made them sing; then she darted out and banged the door after her.

Topándy became like a pillar of salt in his astonishment. He knew that Czipra had a quick hand, but that she would ever dare to raise that tiny hand against her master and benefactor, because of a mere trifling jest, he was quite incapable of understanding.

She must be in some great trouble.

Though he never said a word, nor did Czipra, about the blow he had received, and though when next they met they were the same towards one another as they had ever been, Topándy ventured to make a jest at table about this humorous scene, saying to Lorand:

"Bálint, ask Czipra to repeat that prayer which she has learned from me: but first seize her two hands."

"Oho!" threatened Czipra, her face burning red. "Just play some more of your jokes upon me. Your lives are in my hands: one day I shall put belladonna in the food, and poison us all together."

Topándy smilingly drew her towards him, smoothing her head; Czipra sensitively pressed her master's hand to her lips, and covered it with kisses;—then put him aside and went out into the kitchen,—to break plates, and tear the servants' hair.

## CHAPTER XVI

## THAT RING

THE tenth year came: it was already on the wane. And Lorand began to be indifferent to the prescribed fatal hour.

He was in love.

This one thought drove all others from his mind. Weariness of life, atheism, misanthropy,—all disappeared from his path like will-o'-the-wisps before the rays of the sun.

And Melanie liked the young fellow in return.

She had no strong passions, and was a prudent girl, yet she confessed to herself that this young man pleased her. His features were noble, his manner gentle, his position secure enough to enable him to keep a wife.

Many a time did she walk with Lorand under the shade of the beautiful sycamores, while Czipra sat alone beside her "czimbalom" and thrashed out the old souvenirs of the plain,—alone.

Lorand found it no difficult task to remark that Melanie gladly frequented the spots he chose, and listened cheerfully to the little confessions of a sympathetic heart. Yet he was himself always reserved.—And that ring was always there on her finger. If only that magic band might drop down from there! Two years had already passed since her father's death had thrown her into mourning; she had long since taken off black dresses; nor could she complain against "the bread of orphanhood." For Topándy supplied her with all that a woman holds dear, just as if she had been his own child.

One afternoon Lorand found courage enough to

take hold of Melanie's hand. They were standing on a bridge that spanned the brook which was winding through the park, and, leaning upon its railing, were gazing at the flowers floating on the water—or perhaps at each other's reflection in the watery mirror.

Lorand grasped Melanie's hand and asked:

"Why are you always so sad? Whither do those everlasting sighs fly?"

Melanie looked into the youth's face with her large, bright eyes, and knew from his every feature that heart had dictated that question to heart.

"You see, I have enough reason for being sad in that no one has ever asked me that question; and that had someone asked me I could never have answered it."

"Perhaps the question is forbidden?"

"I have allowed him, whom I allowed to remark that I have a grief, also to ask me the reason of it. You see, I have a mother, and yet I have none."

The girl here turned half aside.

Lorand understood her well:—but that was just the subject about which he desired to know more: why, his own fate was bound up with it.

"What do you mean, Melanie?"

"If I tell you that, you will discover that I can have no secret any more in this world from you."

Lorand said not a word, but put his two hands together with a look of entreaty.

"About ten years have passed since mother left home one evening, never to return again. Public talk connected her departure with the disappearance of a young man, who lived with us, and who, on account of some political crime, was obliged to fly the same evening."

"His name?" inquired Lorand.

"Lorand Aronffy, a distant relation of ours. He was considered very handsome."

"And since then you have heard no news of your mother?"

"Never a word. I believe she is somewhere in Germany under a false name, as an actress, and is seeking the world, in order to hide herself from the world."

"And what became of the young man? She is no longer with him?"

"As far as I know he went away to the East Indies, and from thence wrote to his brother Desiderius, leaving him his whole fortune—since that time he has never written any news of himself. Probably he is dead."

Lorand breathed freely again. Nothing was known of him. People thought he had gone to India.

"In a few weeks will come again the anniversary of that unfortunate day on which I lost my mother, my mother who is still living: and that day always approaches me veiled: feelings of sorrow, shame, and loneliness involuntarily oppress my spirit. You now know my most awful secret, and you will not condemn me for it?"

Lorand gently drew her delicate little hand towards his lips, and kissed its rosy finger-tips, while all the time he fixed his eyes entreatingly on that ring which was on one of her fingers.

Melanie understood the inquiry which had been so warmly expressed in that eloquent look.

"You ask me, do you not, whether I have not some even more awful secret?"

Lorand tacitly answered in the affirmative.

Melanie drew the ring off her finger and held it up in her hand.

"It is true—but it is for me no longer a living secret. I am already dead to the person to whom this secret once bound me. When he asked my hand, I was still rich, my father was a man of powerful influence. Now I am poor, an orphan and alone. Such rings are usually forgotten."

At that moment the ring fell out of her hand and missing the bridge dropped into the water, disappearing among the leaves of the water-lilies.

"Shall I get it out?" inquired Lorand.

Melanie gazed at him, as if in reverie, and said:

"Leave it there. . . ."

Lorand, beside himself with happiness, pressed to his lips the beautiful hand left in his possession, and

showered hot kisses, first on the hand, then on its owner. From the blossoming trees flowers fluttered down upon their heads, and they returned with wreathed brows like bride and bridegroom.

Lorand spoke that day with Topándy, asking him whether a long time would be required to build the steward's house, which had so long been planned.

"Oho!" said Topándy, smiling, "I understand. It may so happen that the steward will marry, and then he must have a separate lodging where he may take his wife. It will be ready in three weeks."

Lorand was quite happy.

He saw his love reciprocated, and his life freed from its dark horror.

Melanie had not merely convinced him that in him she recognized Lorand Áronffy no more, but also calmed him by the assurance that everyone believed the Lorand Áronffy of yore to be long dead and done for: no one cared about him any longer; his brother had taken his property, with the one reservation that he always sent him secretly a due portion of the income. Besides that one person, no one knew anything. And he would be silent for ever, when he knew that upon his further silence depended his brother's life.

Love had stolen the steely strength of Lorand's mind away.

He had become quite reconciled to the idea that to keep an engagement, which bound anyone to violate the laws of God, of man, and of nature, was mere folly.

Who could accuse him to his face if he did not keep it? Who could recognize him again? In this position, with this face, under this name,—was he not born again? Was that not a quite different man whose life he was now leading? Had he not already ended that life which he had played away *then*?

He would be a fool who carried his feeling of honor to such extremes in relations with dishonorable men; and, finally, if there were the man who would say "it is a crime," was there no God to say "it was virtue?"

He found a strong fortress for this self-defence

in the walls of their family vault, in the interior of which his grandmother had uttered such an awful curse against the last inhabitant. Why, that implied an obligation upon him too. And this obligation was also strong. Two opposing obligations neutralize each other. It was his duty rather to fulfil that which he owed to a parent, than that which he owed to his murderer.

These are all fine sophisms. Lorand sought in them the means of escape.

And then in those beautiful eyes. Could he, on whom those two stars smiled, die? Could he wish for annihilation, at the very gate of Heaven?

And he found no small joy in the thought that he was to take that Heaven away from the opponent, who would love to bury him down in the cold earth.

Lorand began to yield himself to his fate. He desired to live. He began to suspect that there was some happiness in the world. Calm, secret happiness, only known to those two beings who have given it to each other by mutual exchange.

We often see this phenomenon in life. A handsome cavalier, who was the lion of society, disappears from the perfumed drawing-room world, and years after can scarcely be recognized in the country farmer, with his rough appearance and shabby coat. A happy family life has wrought this change in him. It is not possible that this same happy feeling which could produce that out of the brilliant, buttoned dress-coat, could let down the young man's pride of character, and give him in its stead an easy-going, wide and water-proof work-a-day blouse, could give him towards the world indifference and want of interest? Let his opponent cry from end to end of the country with mocking guffaws that Lorand Áronffy is no cavalier, no gentleman; the smile of his wife will be compensation for his lost pride.

Now the only thing he required was the eternal silence of the one man, who was permitted to know of his whereabouts, his brother.

Should he make everything known to him?—give

entirely into his hands the duel he had accepted, his marriage and the power that held sway over his life, that he might keep off the threatening terror which had hitherto kept him far from brother and parents?

It was a matter that must be well considered and reflected upon.

Lorand became very meditative some days later.

Once after dinner Czipra grasped his hand and said playfully:

"You are thinking very deeply about something.

You are pale. Come, I will tell you your fortune.

"My fortune?"

"Of course: I shall read the cards for you: you know

" "A gypsy woman was my mother,  
Taught me to read the cards of fortune,  
In that surpassing many wishes.' "

"Very well, my dear Czipra: then tell me my fortune."

Czipra was delighted to be able to see Lorand once more alone in her strange room. She made him sit down on the velvet camp-stool, took her place on the tiger-skin and drew her cards from her pocket. For two years she had always had them by her. They were her sole counsellors, friends, science, faith, worship—the sooth-saying cards.

A person, especially a woman, must believe something!

At first she shuffled the cards, then, placing them on her hand offered them to Lorand.

"Here they are, cut them: the one, whose future is being told, must cut. Not with the left hand, that is not good. With the right hand, towards you."

Lorand did so, to please her.

Czipra piled the cards in packs before her.

Then, resting her elbows on her knees and laying her beautiful sun-goldened face upon her hand she very carefully examined the well-known picture-cards.

The knave of hearts came just in the middle.

"Some journey is before you," the gypsy girl began to explain, with a serious face. "You will meet the mourning woman. Great delight. The queen of hearts is in the same row:—well met. But the queen of jealousy \* and the murderer \* stand between them and separate them. The dog \* means faithfulness, the cat \* slyness. The queen of melancholy stands beside the dog.—Take care of yourself, for some woman, who is angered, wishes to kill you."

Lorand looked with such a pitying glance at Czipra that she could not help reading the young man's thoughts.

She too replied tacitly. She pressed three fingers to her bosom, and silently intimated that she was not "that" girl. The yellow-robed woman, the queen of jealousy in the cards, was some one else. She placed her pointing fingers to the green-robed—that queen of melancholy. And Lorand remarked that Czipra had long been wearing a green robe, like the green-robed lady in the fortune-telling cards.

Czipra suddenly mixed the cards together:

"Let us try once more. Cut three times in succession. That is right."

She placed the cards out again in packs.

Lorand noticed that as the cards came side by side, Czipra's face suddenly flushed; her eyes began to blaze with unwonted fire.

"See, the queen of melancholy is just beside you, on the far side the murderer. The queen of jealousy and the queen of hearts are in the opposite corner. On the other side the old lady. Above your head a burning house. Beware of some great misfortune. Some one wishes to cause you great sorrow, but some one will defend you."

Lorand did not wish to embitter the poor girl by laughing in her face at her simplicity.

\* These prophecies are made with Magyar cards and the gypsy girl pointing at certain cards, gives an interpretation of her own to them.

"Get up now, Czipra, enough of this play."

Czipra gathered the cards up sadly. But she did not accept Lorand's proffered hand, she rose alone.

"Well, what shall I do, when I don't understand anything else?"

"Come, play my favorite air for me on the *czimbalom*. It is such a long time since I heard it."

Czipra was accustomed to acquiesce: she immediately took her seat beside her instrument, and began to beat out upon it that lowland reverie, of which so many had wonderingly said that a poet's and an artist's soul had blended therein.

At the sound of music Topándy and Melanie came in from the adjoining rooms. Melanie stood behind Czipra; Topándy drew a chair beside her, and smoked furiously.

Czipra shruck the responsive strings and meantime remarked that Lorand all the while fixed his eyes in happy rapture upon the place where she sat; though not upon her face, but beyond, above, upon the face of that girl standing behind her. Suddenly the *czimbalom*-sticks fell from her hand. She covered her face with her two hands and said panting:

"Ah—this pipe-smoke is killing me."

For answer Topándy blew a long mouthful playfully into the girl's face.—She must accustom herself to it: and then he hinted to Lorand that they should leave that room and go where unlimited freedom ruled.

But Czipra began to put the strings of the *czimbalom* out of tune with her tuning-key.

"Why did you do that?" inquired Melanie.

"Because I shall never play on this instrument again."

"Why not?"

"You will see it will be so: the cards always foretell a coffin for me; if you do not believe me, come and see for yourself."

Therewith she spread the cards again out on the table, and in sad triumph pointed to the picture portrayed by the cards.

"See, now the coffin is here under the girl in green."

"Why, that is not you," said Melanie, half jestingly, half encouragingly, "but you are here."

And she pointed with her hand to the queen of hearts.

But Czipra—saw something other than what had been shown her. She suddenly seized Melanie's tender wrist with her iron-strong right hand, and pointed with her ill-foreboding first finger to that still whiter blank circle remaining on the white finger of her white hand.

"Where has *that* ring gone to?"

Melanie's face flushed deeply at these words, while Czipra's turned deathly pale. The black depths of hell were to be seen in the gypsy girl's wide-opened eyes.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### THE YELLOW-ROBED WOMAN IN THE CARDS

LORAND deferred as long as possible the time for coming to an agreement with Desiderius as to what they should both do, when the fatal ten years had passed by.

His mother and grandmother would be sure to press the latter, when the defined period was over, to tell them of Lorand's whereabouts. But if they learned the story and sought him out, there would be an end to his saving alias: the happy man who was living in the person of Bálint Tátray would be obliged to yield place to Lorand Áronffy who would have to choose between death and the sneers of the world.

When he had made Desiderius undertake, ten years before, not to betray his whereabouts to his parents, he had always calculated and intended to fulfil his fatal obligation. Desiderius alone would be acquainted with the end, and would still keep from the two mothers the secret history of his brother. They had during this time become accustomed to knowing that he was far from them, and his brother would, to the day of their death, always put them under the happy delusion that their son would once again knock at the door, and would show them the letters his brother had written; while he would in reality long have gone to the place, from whence men bring no messages back to the light of the sun. Yet the good peaceful mothers would every day lay a place at table for the son they expected, when the glass had long burst of its own accord.

In place of this cold, clean, transparent dream is now that hot chaos. What should he do now that he wished to live, to enjoy life, to see happy days?

Wherever he would go, in the street, in the field, in

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the house, everywhere he would feel himself walking in that labyrinth; everywhere that endless chain would clank after him, which began again where it had ended.

He did not even notice, when some one passed him, whether he greeted him or not.

To escape, to exchange his word of honor for his life, to shut out the whole world from his secret—what has pride to say to that?—what the memory of the father who in a like case bowed before his self-pride and cast his life and happiness as a sacrifice before the feet of his honor? What would the tears of the two mothers say?—how could tender-handed love fight alone against so strong adversaries?

How could Bálint Tátray shake off from himself that whole world which cleaved like a sea of mud to Lorand Áronffy?

As he proceeded in deep reflection beside the village houses, his hat pressed firmly down over his eyes, he did not even notice that from the other direction a lady was crossing the rough road, making straight for him, until as she came beside him she addressed him with affected gaiety:

“Good day, Lorand.”

The young fellow, startled at hearing his name, looked up amazed and gazed into the speaker's face.

She, with the cheery smile of undoubted recognition, grasped his hand.

“Yes, yes! I recognized you again after so long a time had passed, though you know me no more, my dear Lorand.”

Oh! Lorand knew her well enough! And that woman—was Madame Bálnokházy. . . .

Her face still possessed the beautiful noble features of yore; only in her manner the noblewoman's graceful dignity had given way to a certain unpleasant freedom which is the peculiarity of such women as are often compelled to save themselves from all kinds of delicate situations by humorous levity.

She was dressed for a journey, quite fashionably, albeit a little creased.

"You here?" inquired Lorand, astonished.

"Certainly: quite by accident. I have just left my carriage at the Sárköly's. I have won a big suit in chancery, and have come to the 'old man' to see if I could sell him the property, which he said he was ready to purchase. Then I shall take my daughter home with me."

"Indeed?"

"Of course—poor thing, she has lived long enough in orphan state in the house of a half-madman. But be so kind as to give me your arm to lean on: why I believe you are still afraid of me: it is so difficult, you know, for some one who is not used to it, to walk along these muddy rough country roads.—I am going to sell my property which I have won, because we must go to live in Vienna."

"Indeed?"

"Because Melanie's intended lives there too."

"Indeed?"

"Perhaps you would know him too,—you were once good friends—Pepi Gyáli!"

"Indeed?"

"Oh, he has made a great career! An extraordinarily famous man. Quite a wonder, that young man!"

"Indeed?"

"But you only taunt me with your series of 'indeeds.' Tell me how you came here. How have I found you?"

"I am steward here on Mr. Topándy's estate!"

"Steward! Ha ha! To your kinsman?"

"He does not know I am his kinsman."

"So you are incognito? Ever since *then*? Just like me: I have used six names since that day. That is famous. And now we meet by chance. So much the better; at least you can lead me to Topándy's house: the atheist's dogs will not tear me to pieces if I am under your protection.—But after that you must help again to defend me."

Lorand was displeased by the fact that this woman

turned into jest those memories in which the shame of both lay buried.

Topándy was on the verandah of the castle in company with the girls when Lorand led in the strange lady.

Lorand went first to Melanie:

"Here is the one you have so often sighed after," . . . then turning to Topándy—"Madame Bálnokházy."

For a moment Melanie was taken aback. She merely stared in astonishment at the new arrival, as if it were difficult to recognize her at once, while her mother, with a passion quite dramatic, rushed towards her, embraced her, clasped her to her bosom, and covered her with kisses. She sobbed and knelt before her; as one may see times without number in the closing scene of the fifth act of any pathetic drama.

"How beautiful you have become! What an angel! My darling, only, beloved Melanie!—for whom I prayed every day, of whom every day I dreamed.—Well, tell me, have you thought sometimes of me?"

Melanie whispered in her mother's ear:

"Later, when we are alone."

The woman understood that well ("later when we are alone, we can talk of cold, prosaic things: but when they see us, let us weep, faint, and embrace.") This scene of meeting was going to begin anew, only Topándy was good enough to kindly request her ladyship to step into the room, where space was confined, and circumstances are more favorable to dramatic episodes. Madame Bálnokházy then became gay and talkative. She thanked Topándy (the old atheistical fool) thousands, millions of times, for giving a place of refuge to her child, for guarding her only treasure. Then she looked around to see whom else she had to thank. She saw Czipra.

"Why," she said to Lorand, "you have not yet introduced me to your wife."

Everybody became embarrassed—with the exception of Topándy, who answered with calm humor:

"She is my ward, and has been so many years."

"Oh! A thousand apologies for my clumsiness. I certainly thought she was already married."

Madame Bálnokházy had time to remark that Czippa's eyes, when they looked upon Lorand, seemed like the eyes of faithfulness; and she had a delicious opportunity of cutting to the heart two, if not three people.

"Well, it seems to me what is not may be, may it not, 'Lorand?'"

"Lorand!" cried three voices in one.

"There we are! Well I have betrayed you now. But what is the ultimate good of secrecy here between good friends and relations? Yes, he is Lorand Aronffy, a dear relation of ours. And you had not yet recognized him, Melanie?"

Melanie turned as white as the wall.

Lorand answered not a word.

Instead of answering he stepped nearer to Topándy, who grasped his hand, and drew him towards him.

Madame Bálnokházy did not allow anyone else to utter a word.

"I shall not be a burden long, my dear uncle. I have taken up my residence here in the neighborhood, with Mr. Sárkölyi, who is going to buy our property; we have just won an important suit in chancery."

"Indeed?"

Madame Bálnokházy did not explain the genesis of the suit in chancery any further to Topándy, who had himself now fallen into that bad habit of saying, "indeed" to everything, as Lorand did.

"For that purpose I must enjoy myself a few days here."

"Indeed?"

"I hope, dear uncle, you will not deny me the pleasure of being able to have Melanie all this time by my side. I should surely have found it much more proper to take up my quarters directly here in your house, if

Sárkölyi had not been kind enough to previously offer his hospitality."

"Indeed?" (Topándy knew sometimes how to say very mocking "indeeds.")

"So please don't offer any objections to my request that I may take Melanie to myself for these few days. Later on I shall bring her back again, and leave her here until fortune desires you to let us go forever."

At this point Madame Bálnokházy put on an extremely matronly face. She wished him to understand what she meant.

"I find your wish very natural," said Topándy briefly, looking again in the woman's face as one who would say "What else do you know for our amusement?"

"Till then I render you endless thanks for taking the part of my poor deserted orphan. Heaven will reward you for your goodness."

"I didn't do it for payment."

Madame Bálnokházy laughed modestly, as though in doubt whether to understand a joke when the inhabitants of higher spheres were under consideration.

"Dear uncle, you are still as jesting as ever in certain respects."

"As godless—you wished to say, did you not? Indeed I have changed but little in my old age."

"Oh we know you well!" said the lady in a voice of absolute grace: "you only show that outwardly, but everyone knows your heart."

"And runs before it when he can, does he not?"

"Oh, no: quite the contrary," said Madame apologetically, "don't misinterpret our present departures to prove how much we all think of that beneficial public life which you are leading. I shall whisper one word to you, which will convince you of our most sincere respect for you."

That one word she did whisper to Topándy, resting her gloved hand on his shoulder—:

"I wish to ask my dear uncle to give Melanie away, when Heaven brings round the happy day."



At these words Topándy smiled: and, putting Madame Bálnokházy's hand under his arm, said:

"With pleasure. I will do more. If on that certain day of Heaven the sun shines as I desire it, this my godless hand shall make two people happy. But if that day of Heaven be illumined otherwise than I wish, I shall give 'quantum satis' of blessing, love congratulatory verses, long sighs and all that costs nothing. So what I shall answer to this question depends upon that happy day."

Madame Bálnokházy clasped Topándy's hand to her heart and with eyes upturned to Heaven, prayed that Providence might bless so good a relation's choice with good humor, and then drew Melanie too towards him, that she might render thanks to her good uncle for the gracious care he had bestowed upon her.

Lorand gazed at the group dispiritedly, while Czipra, unnoticed, escaped from the room.

"And now perhaps Lorand will be so kind as to accompany us to Sárvölgyi's house."

"As far as the gate."

"Where is your dear friend, Melanie, that beautiful dear creature? Take a short leave of her. But where has she gone to?"

Lorand did not move a muscle to go and look for Czipra.

"Well we shall meet the dear child again soon," said Madame Bálnokházy, noticing that they were waiting in vain. "Give me your arm, Lorand."

She leaned on Lorand's right arm, and motioned to Melanie to take her position on the other side; but the girl did not do so. Instead she clasped her mother's arm, and so they went along the street, the mother waving back affectionately to Topándy, who gazed after them out of the window.

Melanie did not utter a single word the whole way.

"The old fellow, it seems, is on bad terms with Sárvölgyi?"

"Yes."

"Is he still as iconoclastic, as godless, as ever?"

"Yes."

"And you have been able to stand it so long?"

"Yes."

"And yet you were always so pious, so god-fearing; are you still?"

"Yes."

"So Topándy and Sárvölgyi are living on terms of open enmity?"

"Yes."

"Yet you will visit us several times, while we are here?"

"No."

"Heaven be praised that once I hear a 'no' from you! That heap of *yes's* began already to make me nervous. Then you too are among *his* opponents?"

"Yes."

Meantime they had reached the gate of Sárvölgyi's house. Here Lorand stopped and would proceed no further.

Madame Bálnokházy clasped Melanie's hand that she might not go in front.

"Well, my dear Lorand, and are you not going to take leave of us even?"

Lorand gazed at Melanie, who did not even raise her eyes.

"Good-bye, Madame," said Lorand briefly. He raised his hat and was gone.

Madame Bálnokházy cast one glance after him with those beautiful expressive eyes.—Those beautiful expressive eyes just then were full to the brim of relentless hatred.

When Lorand reached home Czipra was waiting for him at the door.

Raising her first finger, she whispered in his ear:

"That was the yellow-robed woman!"

Yet she had nothing yellow on her.