

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FINGER-POST OF DEATH

LORAND threw himself exhausted into his arm-chair. There was an end to every attempt at escape. He had been recognized by the very woman who ought to detest him more bitterly than anyone in the world.

Nemesis! the liberal hand of everlasting justice!

He had deserted that woman in the middle of the road, on which they were flying together passionately into degradation, and now that he wished to return to life, that woman blocked his way.

There was no hope of pity. Besides, who would accept it—from such a hand? At such a price? Such a present must be refused, were it life itself.

Farewell calm happy life! Farewell, intoxicating love!

There was only one way, a direct one—to the opened tomb.

They would laugh over the fallen, but at least not to his face.

The father had departed that way, albeit he had a loving wife, and growing children:—but he was alone in the world. He owed nobody any duty.

There were two enfeebled, frail shadows on earth, to which he owed a duty of care; but they would soon follow him, they had no very long course to run.

Fate must be accomplished.

The father's blood besprinkled the sons. One spirit drew the other after it by the hand, till at last all would be there at home together.

Only a few days more remained.

These few days he must be gay and cheerful: must

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deceive every eye and heart, that followed attentively him who approached the end of his journey,—that no one might suspect anything.

There was still one more precaution to be taken.

Desiderius might arrive before the fatal day. In his last letter he had hinted at it. That must be prevented. The meeting must be arranged otherwise.

He hurriedly wrote a letter to his brother to come to meet him at Szolnok on the day before the anniversary, and wait for him at the inn. He gave as his reason the cynicism of Topándy. He did not wish to introduce him as a discord in that tender scene. Then they could meet, and from there could go together to visit their parents.

The plan was quite intelligible and natural. Lorand at once despatched the letter to the post.

So does the cautious traveler drive from his route at the outset, the obstacles which might delay him.

Scarcely had he sent the letter off when Topándy entered his room.

Lorand went to meet him. Topándy embraced and kissed him.

"I thank you that you chose my home as a place of refuge from your prosecutors, my dear Lorand; but there is no need longer to keep in hiding. Later events have long washed out what happened ten years ago, and you may return to the world without being disturbed."

"I have known that long since: why, we read the newspapers; but I prefer to remain here. I am quite satisfied with this world."

"You have a mother and a brother from whom you have no reason to hide."

"I only wish to meet them when I can introduce myself to them as a happy man."

"That depends on yourself."

"A few days will prove it."

"Be as quick as you can with it. Let only one thought possess your mind: Melanie is now in Sárkölyi's house. The great spiritual delight it will afford me to think of the hypocrite's death-face which that Pharisee

will make when that trivial woman discloses to him that the young man, who is living in the neighborhood, is Lörincz Aronffy's son, can only be surpassed by my anxiety for you, caused by his knowledge of the fact. For, believe me, he will leave no stone unturned to prevent you, who will remind him of that night when we spoke of great and little things, from being able to strike root in this world. He will even talk Melanie over."

Lorand, shrugging his shoulders, said with light-hearted indifference:

"Melanie is not the only girl on this earth."

"Well said. I don't care. You are my son: and she whom you bring here is my daughter. Only bring her; the sooner the better."

"It will not take a week."

"Better still. If you want to act, act quickly. In such cases, either quickly or not at all; either courageously or never."

"There will be no lack of courage."

Topándy spoke of marriage, Lorand of a pistol.

"Well in a week's time I shall be able to give my blessing on your choice."

"Certainly."

Topándy did not wish to dive further into Lorand's secret. He suspected the young fellow was choosing between two girls, and did not imagine that he had already chosen a third:—the one with the down-turned torch.*

Lorand during the following days was as cheerful as a bridegroom during the week preceding his marriage—so cheerful!—as his father had been the evening before his death.

The last day but one came: May again, but not so chilly as ten years before. The air in the park was flower-perfumed, full of lark trills, and nightingale ditties.

* The torch, which should have been held upright for the marriage festivities, would be held upside down for the festivities of death, just as the life would be reversed.

Czipra was chasing butterflies on the lawn.

Ever since Melanie had left the house, Czipra's sprightly mood had returned. She too played in the lovely spring, with the playful birds of song.

Lorand allowed her to draw him into her circle of playmates:

"How does this hyacinth look in my hair?"

"It suits you admirably, Czipra."

The gypsy girl took off Lorand's hat, and crowned it with a wreath of leaves, then put it back again, changing its position again and again until she found out how it suited him best.

Then she pressed his hand under her arm, laid her burning face upon his shoulder, and thus strolled about with him.

Poor girl! She had forgotten, forgiven everything already!

Six days had passed since that ruling rival had left the house: Lorand was not sad, did not pine after her, he was good-humored, witty, and playful; he enjoyed himself. Czipra believed their stars were once more approaching each other.

Lorand, the smiling and gay Lorand, was thinking that he had but one more day to live; and then—adieu to the perfumed fields, adieu to the songster's echo, adieu to the beautiful, love-lorn gypsy girl!

They went arm-in-arm across the bridge, that little bridge that spanned the brook. They stopped in the middle of the bridge and leaning upon the railing looked down into the water;—in the self same place where Melanie's engagement ring fell into the water. They gazed down into the water-mirror, and the smooth surface reflected their figures; the gypsy girl still wore a green dress, and a rose-colored sash, but Lorand still saw Melanie's face in that mirror.

In this place her hand had been in his: in that place she had said of the lost ring "leave it alone:" in that place he had clasped her in his arms!

And to-morrow even that would cause no pain! Topándy now joined them.

"Do you know what, Lorand?" said the old Manichean cheerily: "I thought I would accompany you this afternoon to Szolnok. We must celebrate the day you meet your brother: we must drink to it!"

"Will you not take me with you?" inquired Czipra half in jest.

"No!" was the simultaneous reply from both sides.

"Why not?"

"Because it is not fit for you *there*.—There is no room for you *there*!"

Both replied the same.

Topándy meant "You cannot take part in men's carousals; who knows what will become of you?" while Lorand—meant something else.

"Well, and when will Lorand return?" inquired Czipra eagerly.

"He must first return to his parents," answered Topándy.

(—"Thither indeed" thought Lorand, "to father and grandfather"—)

"But he will not remain *there* forever?"

At that both men laughed loudly. What kind of expression was that word "forever" in one's mouth? Is there a measure for time?

"What will you bring me when you return?" inquired the girl childishly.

Lorand was merciless enough to jest: he tore down a leaf which was round, like a small coin; placing that on the palm of her hand, he said:

"Something no greater than the circumference of this leaf."

Two understood that he meant "a ring," but what he meant was a "bullet" in the centre of his forehead.

How pitiless are the jests of a man ready for death.

Their happy dalliance was interrupted by the butler who came to announce that a young gentleman was waiting to speak with Master Lorand.

Lorand's heart beat fast! It must be Desi!

Had he not received the letter? Had he not acceded

to his brother's request? He had after all come one day sooner than his deliberate permission had allowed.

Lorand hastened up to the castle.

Topándy called after him:

"If it is a good friend of yours bring him down here into the park: he must dine with us."

"We shall wait here by the bridge," Czipra added: and there she remained on the bridge, she did not herself know why, gazing at those plants on the surface of the water, that were hiding Melanie's ring.

Lorand hastened along the corridors in despondent mood: if his brother had really come, his last hours would be doubly embittered.

That simulation, that comedy of cynical frivolity, would be difficult to play before him.

The new arrival was waiting for him in the reception room.

When Lorand opened the door and stood face to face with him, an entirely new surprise awaited him.

The young cavalier who had thus hastened to find him was not his brother Desi, but—Pepi Gyáli.

Pepi was no taller, no more manly-looking than he had been ten years before; he had still that childish face, those tiny features, the same refined movements. He was still as strict an adherent to fashion: and if time had wrought a change in him, it was only to be seen in a certain, distinguished bearing,—that of those who often have the opportunity of playing the protector toward their former friends.

"Good day, dear Lorand," he said in a gay tone, anticipating Lorand. "Do you still recognize me?"

("Ah," thought Lorand: "you are here as the finger-post of death.")

"I did not want to avoid you: as soon as I knew from the Bálnokházys that you were here, I came to find you."

After all it was "*she*" that had put him on Lorand's track!

"I have business here with Sárköly in Madame Bálnokházy's interest—a legal agreement."

Lorand's only thought, while Gyáli was uttering

these words, was—how to behave himself in the presence of this man.

"I hope," said the visitor tenderly extending his hand to Lorand, "that that old wrangle which happened ten years ago has long been forgotten by you—as it has by me."

("He wishes to make me recollect it, if perchance I had forgotten.")

"And we shall again be faithful comrades and true."

One thought ran like lightning in a moment through Lorand's brain. "If I kick this fellow out now as would be my method, everyone would clearly understand the origin of the catastrophe, and take it as satisfaction for an insult. No, they must have no such triumph: this wretch must see that the man who is gazing into the face of his own death is in no way behind him, who burns to persecute him to the end with exquisiteness, in cheerful mood."

So Lorand did not get angry, did not show any sullenness or melancholy, but, as he was wont to do in student days of yore, slapped the dandy's open hand and grasped it in manly fashion.

"So glad to see you, Pepi. Why the devil should I not have recognised you? Only I imagined that you would have aged as much as I have since that time, and now you stand before me the same as ever. I almost asked you what we had to learn for to-morrow?"

"I am glad of that! Nothing has caused me any displeasure in my life except the fact that we parted in anger—we, the gay comrades!—and quarrelled!—why? for a dirty newspaper! The devil take them all!—Taken all together they are not worth a quarrel between two comrades. Well, not a word more about it!"

"Well, my boy, very well, if your intentions are good. In any case we are country fellows who can stand a good deal from one another. To-day we calumniate each other, to-morrow we carouse together."

Ha, ha, ha!

"But you must introduce me to the old man. I hear

he is a gay old fool. He does not like priests. Why I can tell him enough tales about priests to keep him going for a week. Come, introduce me. I know his mouth will never cease laughing, once I begin upon him."

"Naturally it is understood that you will remain here with us."

"Of course. Old Sárköly, as it is, had made sour faces enough at the unusual invasion of guests: and he has a cursedly sullen housekeeper. Besides it is disagreeable always to have to say nice things to the two ladies: that's not why a fellow comes to the country. *A propos*, I hear you have a beautiful gypsy girl here."

"You know that too, already?"

"I hope you are not jealous of her?"

"What, the devil! of a gypsy girl?"

("Well just try it with her," thought Lorand, "at any rate you will get 'per procura,' that box on the ears which I cannot give you.")

"Ha, ha! we shall not fight a duel for a gypsy girl, shall we, my boy?"

"Nor for any other girl."

"You have become a wise man like me: I like that. A woman is only a woman. Among others, what do you say to Madame Bálnokházy? I find she is still more beautiful than her daughter. *Ma foi*, on my word of honor! Those ten years on the stage have only done her good. I believe she is still in love with you."

"That's quite natural," said Lorand in jesting scorn.

In the meantime they had reached the park; they found Topány and Czipra by the bridge. Lorand introduced Pepi Gyáli as his old school-fellow.

That name fairly magnetized Czipra.—Melanie's fiancé!—So the lover had come after his bride. What a kind fellow this Pepi Gyáli was! A really most amiable young man!

Gyáli quite misunderstood the favorable impression his name and appearance made on Czipra: he was ready to attribute it to his irresistible charms.

After briefly making the acquaintance of the old man,

he very rapidly took over the part of courtier, which every cavalier according to the rules of the world is bound to do; besides, she was a gypsy girl, and—Lorand was not jealous.

"You have in one moment explained to me something over which I have racked my brains a whole day."

"What can that be?" inquired Czipra curiously.

"How it is that some one can prefer fried fish and fried rolls at Sárvölgyi's to cabbage at Topándy's?"

"Who may that someone be?"

"Why, I could not understand that Miss Melanie was able to persuade herself to change this house for that; now I know: she must have put up with a great persecution here."

"Persecution?" said Czipra, astonished:—the gentlemen too stared at the speaker.—"Who would have persecuted her?"

"Who? Why these eyes!" said Gyáli, gazing flatteringly into Czipra's eyes. "The poor girl could not stand the rivalry. It is quite natural that the moon, however sweet and poetic a phenomenon, always flees before the sun."

To Czipra this speech was very surprising. There are many who do not like overburdened sweetness.

"Ah, Melanie is far more beautiful than I," she said, casting her eyes down, and growing very serious.

"Well it is my bounden duty to believe in that, as in all the miracles of the apostles: but I cannot help it, if you have made a heretic of me."

Czipra turned her head aside and gazed down into the water with eyes of insulted pride: while Lorand, who was standing behind Gyáli, thought within himself:

("If I take you by the neck and drown you in that water, you would deserve it, and it will do good to my soul: but I should know I had murdered you: and no one should ever be able to boast of *that*? My name shall never be connected with yours in death.")

For Lorand might well have known that Gyáli's ap-

pearance on that day had no other object than that of reminding Lorand of his awful obligation.

"My dear boy," said Lorand patting Gyáli's shoulder playfully, "I must show what a general I should have made. I have an important journey this afternoon to Szolnok."

"Well, go; don't bother yourself on my account. Do exactly as you please."

"That's not how matters lie, Pepi: you must not stay here in the meantime."

"The devil! Perhaps you will turn me out?"

"Oh dear no! To-night we shall have a glorious carnival at Szolnok, in honor of my regeneration. All the gay fellows of the neighborhood are invited to it. You must come with us too."

"Ha! Your regeneration carnival!" cried Gyáli, in a voice of ecstasy, the while gazing at Czipra apologetically. "Albeit other magnets draw me hither with overpowering force—I must go there without fail. I must deliver a 'toast' at your 'regeneration' festival, Lorand."

"My brother Desi will also be there."

"Oho! little Desi? That little rebel. Well all the better. We shall have much in common with him; of old he was an amusing boy, with his serious face. Well I shall go with you. I sacrifice myself. I capitulate. Well we shall go to Szolnok to-night."

Why, anyone might have seen plainly—had he not come that day just to revel in the agony of Lorand?

"Yes, Pepi," Lorand assured him, "we shall be gay as we were once ten years ago. Much hidden joy awaits us: we shall break in suddenly upon it. Well, you are coming with us."

"Without fail: only be so good as to send some one next door for my traveling-cloak. I shall go with you to your 'regeneration' fête!"

And once again he grasped Lorand's hand tenderly, as one who was incapable of expressing in words all the good wishes with which his heart was brimming over.

"You see I should have been a good general after all," said Lorand smiling. "How beautifully I captured the besieging army."

"Oh, not at all; the blockade is still being kept up."

"But starvation will be a difficult matter where the garrison is well nourished."

The poor gypsy girl did not understand a word of all this jesting, which was uttered for her edification: and if she had understood it, was she not a gypsy girl, just to be sported with in this manner?

Were not Topándy and his comrades wont to jest with her after this manner.

But Czipra did not laugh over these jests as much as she had done at other times.

It exercised a distasteful influence upon her heart, when this young dandy spoke so lightly of Melanie, and even slighted her before the eyes of another girl. Did all men speak so of their loved ones? And do men speak so of every girl?

Topándy turned the conversation. He knew his man at the first glance: he had many weak sides. He began to "my lord" him, and made inquiries about those foreign princes, whose plenipotentiary minister M. Gyáli was pleased to be.

That had its effect.

Gyáli became at once a different person: he strove to maintain an imposing bearing with a view to raising his dignity, for all the world as if he had swallowed a poker; he straightened his eyebrows, put his hands behind him under the tails of his lilac-colored dress-coat and formed his mouth into the true diplomatic shape.

It was a supreme opportunity for being able to display his grandiose achievements. Let that other see how high he had flown, while others had remained fastened to the earth.

"I have just concluded a splendid business for his Excellency, the Prince of Hohenelm-Weitbreitstein."

"A ruling prince, of course?" inquired Topándy, in naïve wonder.

"Why, you know that."

"Of course, of course. His possessions lie just where the corners of the great principalities of Lip-pedtmold, Schwarzburg-Sondershausen and Reuss-major meet."

Oh, Gyáli must have been very full of self-confidence when he answered to the old magistrate's peculiar geographical definition, "yes."

"Your lordship has already doubtless found an excellent situation in the Principality?"

"I have an order and a title, the gift of His Excellency."

"Of course it may lead to more."

"Oh yes. In return for my winning His Excellency's domains, which he inherited on his mother's side, he will settle on me 5,000 acres of land."

"In Hohenelm-Weitbreitstein?"

"No: here in the Magyar country."

"I thought in Hohenelm-Weitbreitstein: for that is a beautiful country."

Gyáli began to see that it was after all something more than simplicity that could give utterance to such easily recognized exaggeration; and when the old man began to inform him, in which section of which chapter of the Corpus Juris would be found inscribed His Excellency's Magyar "indigenatus," etc., etc., Gyáli began to feel exceedingly uncomfortable, and began to again change the course of the conversation. He chattered on about His Excellency being a fine, free-thinking man, related a hundred anecdotes about him, how he turned out the Jesuits from his possessions, what jokes he had played on the monks, how he persecuted the pietists, and other such things as might be very inconvenient incumbrances to the Principality of Hohenelm-Weitbreitstein,—in the case of any such principality existing in the world.

The theme lasted the whole of dinner time.

Czipra wanted to do all she could to-day for herself. For the farewell-dinner she sought out all that she had

found Lorand liked, and Lorand was ungrateful enough to allow Gyáli the field of compliment to himself: he could not say one good word to her.

Yet who knew when he would sit at that table again?

Dinner over, Lorand spent a few minutes in running over the house: to give instructions to every servant as to what was to be done in the fields, the garden and the forest before his return in two weeks' time. He gave everyone a tip to drink to his health; for to-morrow he was to celebrate a great festival.

Topándy, too, was looking over the preparations for the journey. Czipra was the lady of the house: it was her task, as it had always been, to amuse the guest who remained alone. Topándy never troubled himself to amuse anyone, for whose entertainment he was responsible. Czipra was there, he must listen to what she had to say.

In the meantime the butler, who had been sent to Sárköly's to bring Gyáli's traveling cloak, came back.

He brought also a letter from the young lady for Lorand

"From the young lady?"

Lorand took the letter from him and told him to take the cloak up to the guest's room.

He himself hastened to his own room.

As he passed through the saloon, Gyáli met him, coming from Czipra's room. The dandy's face was peculiarly flurried.

"My dear friend," he said to Lorand, "that gypsy girl of yours is a regular female panther, and you have trained her well, I can tell you.—Where is there a looking-glass?"

"Yes she is," replied Lorand. He scarcely knew why he said it: he heard, but only unconsciously.

Only that letter! Melanie's letter!

He was in such a hurry to reach his room with it. Once there and alone, he shut the door, kissed the fine rose-colored note, and its azure-blue letters, the red seal upon it; and clasped it to his breast, as if he would find out from his heart what was in it.

Well, and what could be in it?

Lorand put the letter down before him and laid his fist heavily upon it.

"Must I know what is in that letter?"

"Suppose she writes that she loves me, and awaits happiness from me, that her love can outbalance a whole lost world, that she is ready to follow me across the sea, beyond the mocking sneers of acquaintances, and to disappear with me among the hosts of forgotten figures!"

"No. I shall not break open this letter.

"My last step shall not be hesitating.

"And if what seems such a chance meeting is nought but a well planned revenge? If they have all along been agreed and have only come here together that they may force me to confess that I am humiliated, that I beg for happiness, for love, that I am afraid of death because I am in love with the smiling faces of life; and when I have confessed that, they will laugh in my face, and will leave me to the contempt of the whole world, of my own self. . . .

"Let them marry each other!"

Lorand took the beautiful note and locked it up in the drawer of his table, unopened, unread.

His last thought must be that perhaps he had been loved, and that last thought would be lightened by the uncertainty: only "perhaps."

And now to prepare for that journey.

It was Lorand's wont to carry two good pistols on a journey. These he carefully loaded afresh, then hid them in his own traveling trunk.

He left his servant to pack in the trunk as much linen as would be enough for two weeks, for they were going to journey farther.

Topándy had two carriages ready, his traveling coach and a wagon.

When the carriages drove up, Lorand put on his traveling cloak, lit his pipe and went down into the courtyard.

Czipra was arranging all matters in the carriages, the trunks were bound on tightly and the wine-case with its

twenty-four bottles of choice wine, packed away in a sure place.

"You are a good girl after all, Czipra," said Lorand, tenderly patting the girl's back.

"After all?"

Was he really so devoted to that pipe that he could not take it from his mouth for one single moment?

Yet she had perhaps deserved a farewell kiss.

"Sit with my uncle in the coach, Pepi," said Lorand to the dandy, "with me you might risk your life. I might turn you over into the ditch somewhere and break your neck. And it would be a pity for such a promising youth."

Lorand sprang up onto the seat and took the reins in his hands.

"Well, adieu, Czipra!"—The coach went first, the wagon following.

Czipra stood at the street-door and gazed from there at the disappearing youth, as long as she could see him, resting her head sadly against the doorpost.

But he did not glance back once.

He was going at a gallop towards his doom.

And when evening overtakes the travelers, and the night's million lights have appeared, and the tiny glow-worms are twinkling in the ditches and hedges, the young fellow will have time enough to think on that theme: that eternal law rules alike over the worlds and the atoms—but what is the fate of the intermediate worms? that of the splendid fly? that of ambitious men and nations struggling for their existence? "Fate gives justice into the two hands of the evil one, that while with the right he extinguishes his life, with the left he may stifle the soul."

CHAPTER XIX

FANNY

SOME wise man, who was a poet too, once said: "the best fame for a woman is to have no fame at all." I might add: "the best life history is that, which has no history."

Such is the romance of Fanny's life and of mine.

Eight years had passed since they brought a little girl from Fürsten-Allee to take my place: the little girl had grown into a big girl,—and was still occupying my place.

How I envied her those first days, when I had to yield my place to her, that place veiled with holy memories in our family's mourning circle, in mother's sorrowing heart; and how I blessed fate, that I was able to fill that place with her.

My career led me to distant districts, and every year I could spend but a month or two at home; mother would have aged, grandmother have grown mad from the awful solitude had Heaven not sent a guardian angel into their midst.

How much I have to thank Fanny for.

For every smile of mother's face, for every new day of grandmother's life—I had only Fanny to thank.

Every year when I returned for the holidays I found long-enduring happy peace at home.

Where everyone had so much right every day madly to curse fate, mankind, the whole world; where sorrow should have ruled in every thought;—I found nothing but peace, patience, and hope.

It was she who assured them that there was a limit to suffering, she who encouraged them with renewed hopes, she who allured them by a thousand possible

variations on the theme of chance gladness, that might come to-morrow or perhaps the day after.

And she did everything for all the world as if she never thought of herself.

What a sacrifice it must be for a fair lively girl to sacrifice the most brilliant years of her youth to the nursing of two sorrow-laden women, to suffering with them, to enduring their heaviness of disposition.

Yet she was only a substitute girl in the house.

When I left Pressburg and the Fromm's house her parents wished to take her home; but Fanny begged them to leave her there one year longer, she was so fond of that poor suffering mother.

And then every year she begged for another year; so she remained in our small home until she was a full-grown maiden.

Yes Pressburg is a gay, noisy town. The Fromm's house was open before the world and the flower ought to open in spring—the young girl has a right to live and enjoy life.

Fanny voluntarily shut herself off from life. There was no merriment in our house.

My parents often assured her they would take her to some entertainments, and would go with her.

"For my sake? You would go to amusements that I might enjoy myself? Would that be an amusement for me? Let us stay at home.—There will be time for that later."

And when she victimized herself, she did it so that no one could see she was a victim.

There are many good patient-hearted girls, whose lips never complain, but hollow eyes, pale faces, and clouded dispositions utter silent complaints and give evidence of buried ambitions.

Fanny's face was always rosy and smiling: her eyes cheerful and fiery, her disposition always gay, frank and contented; her every feature proved that what she did, she did from her heart and her heart was well pleased. Her happy ever-gay presence enlightened the whole gloomy circle around her, as when some angel

walks in the darkness, with a halo of glory around his figure.

From year to year I found matters so at home when I returned for the holidays: and from year to year one definite idea grew and took shape in our minds mutually.

We never spoke of it: but we all knew.

She knew—I knew, her parents knew and so did mine; nor did we think anything else could happen. It was only a question of time. We were so sure about it that we never spoke of it.

After finishing my course of studies, I became a lawyer; and, when I received my first appointment in a treasury office, one day I drew Fanny's hand within mine, and said to her:

"Fanny dear, you remember the story of Jacob in the Bible?"

"Yes."

"Do you not think Jacob was an excellent fellow, in that he could serve seven years to win his wife?"

"I cannot deny that he was."

"Then you must acknowledge that I am still more excellent for I have already served eight years—to win you."

Fanny looked up at me with those eyes of the summer-morning smile, and with childish happiness replied:

"And to prove your excellence still further, you must wait two years more."

"Why?" I asked, downcast.

"Why?" she said with quiet earnestness. "Do you not know there is a vacant place at our table; and until that is filled, there can be no gladness in this house. Could you be happy, if you had to read every day in your mother's eyes the query, 'where is that other?' All your gladness would wound that suffering heart, and every dumb look she gave would be a reproach for our gladness. Oh, Desi, no marriage is possible here, as long as mourning lasts."

And as she said this to prevent me loving her, she only forced me to love her the more.

"How far above me you are!"

"Why those two short years will fly away, as the rest. Our thoughts for each other do not date from yesterday, and, as we grow old, we shall have time enough to grow happy. I shall wait, and in this waiting I have enough gladness."

Oh how I would have loved to kiss her for those words: but that face was so holy before me, I should have considered it a sacrilege to touch it with my lips.

"We remain then as we were."

"Very well."

"Not a word of it for two years yet, when you are released from your word of honor you gave to Lorand, and may discover his whereabouts. Why this long secrecy? That I cannot understand. I have never had any ambition to dive more deeply into your secret than you yourselves have allowed me to: but if you made a promise, keep it; and if by this promise you have thrown your family, yourself, and me into ten years' mourning, let us wear it until it falls from us."

I grasped the dear girl's hand, I acknowledged how terribly right she was; then with her gay, playful humor she hurried back to mother, and no one could have fancied from her face, that she could be serious for a moment.

I risked one more audacious attempt in this matter.

I wrote to Lorand, putting before him that the horizon all round was already so clear, that he might march round the country to the sound of trumpets, announcing that he is so and so, without finding anyone to arrest him, as it was the same whether it was ten years or eight, he might let us off the last two years, and admit us to him.

Lorand wrote back these short lines in answer:

"We do not bargain about that for which we gave our word of honor."

It was a very brief refusal.

I troubled him no more with that request. I waited and endured, while the days passed. . . . Ah, Lorand, for your sake I sacrificed two years of heaven on earth!

CHAPTER XX

THE FATAL DAY!

It had come at last!

We had already begun to count the days that remained.

One week before the final day, I received a letter from Lorand, in which he begged me not to go to meet him at Lankadomb, but rather to give a rendezvous in Szolnok: he did not wish the scene of rapture to be spoiled by the sarcasms of Topányi.

I was just as well pleased.

For days all had been ready for the journey. I hunted up everything in the way of a souvenir which I had still from those days ten years before when I had parted from Lorand, even down to that last scrap of paper,* which now occupied my every thought.

It would have been labor lost on my part to tell the ladies how bad the roads in the lowlands are at that time of year, that in any case Lorand would come to them a day later. Nor indeed did I try to dissuade them from making the journey. Which of them would have remained home at such a time? Which of them would have given up a single moment of that day, when she might once more embrace Lorand? They both came to me.

We arrived at Szolnok one day before Lorand: I only begged them to remain in their room until I had spoken with Lorand.

They promised and remained the whole day in one

* The paper of Madame Bálnokházy's letter which was used for the fatal lot-drawing.