

"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.

room of the inn, while I strolled the whole day about the courtyard on the watch for every arriving carriage.

An unusual number of guests came on that day to the inn: gay companions of Topándy from the neighborhood, to whom Lorand had given a rendezvous there. Some I knew personally, the others by reputation; the latter's acquaintance too was soon made.

It struck me as peculiar that Lorand had written to me that he did not wish the elegiac tone of our first gathering to be disturbed by the voice of the stoics of Lankadomb, yet he had invited the whole Epicurean alliance here—a fact which was likely to give a dithyrambic tone to our meeting.

Well, amusement there must be. I like fellows who amuse themselves.

It was late evening when a five-horsed coach drove into the courtyard—in the first to get out I recognized Gyáli.

What did he want among us?

After him stepped out a brisk old man whose moustache and eyebrows I remembered of old. It was my uncle, Topándy.

Remarkable!

Topándy came straight towards me.

So serious was his face, when, as he reached me, he grasped my hand, that he made me feel quite confused.

"You are Desiderius Áronffy?" he said: and with his two hands seized my shoulders, that he might look into my eyes. "Though you do not say so, I recognize you. It is just as if I saw your departed father before me. The very image!"

Many had already told me that I was very like what my father had been in his young days.

Topándy embraced me feelingly.

"Where is Lorand?" I inquired. "Has he not come?"

"He is coming behind us in a wagon," he answered, and his voice betrayed the greatest emotion. "He will soon be here. He does not like a coach. Remain here and wait for him."

Then he turned to his comrades who were buzzing around him.

"Let us go and wait inside, comrades. Let us leave these young fellows to themselves when they meet. You know that such a scene requires no audience. Well, right about face, quick march!"

Therewith he drove all the fellows from the corridor: indeed did not give Gyáli time to say how glad he was to meet me again.

The gathering became all the more unintelligible to me.

Why, if Topándy himself knew best what there was to be felt in that hour, what necessity had we to avoid him?

Now the wagon could be heard! The two steeds galloped into the courtyard at a smart pace with the light road-cart. He was driving himself.

I scarcely recognized him. His great whiskers, his closely-cropped hair, his dust-covered face made quite a different figure before me from that which I had been wont to draw in my album,—as I had thought to see, as mother or grandmother directed me, saying "that is missing, that feature is other, that is more, that is less, that is different," times without number we had amused ourselves with that.

Lorand was unlike any portrait of him I had drawn. He was a muscular, powerful, rough country cavalier.

As he leaped out of the wagon, we hastened to each other.

The centre of the courtyard was not the place to play an impassioned scene in. Besides neither of us like comedy playing.

"Good evening, old fellow."

"Good evening, brother."

That was all we said to each other: we shook hands, kissed each other, and hurried in from the courtyard, straight to the room filled with roysterers.

They received Lorand with wall-shaking "hurrahs," and Lorand greeted them all in turn.

Some embittered county orator wished to deliver a

speech in his honor, but Lorand told him to keep that until wine was on the table: dry toasts were not to his taste.

Then he again returned to my side and took my face in his hands.

"By Jove! old fellow, you have quite grown up! I thought you were still a child going to school. You are half a head taller than I am. Why I shall live to see you married without my knowing or hearing anything about it."

I took Lorand's arm and drew him into a corner.

"Lorand, mother and grandmother are here too."

He wrenched his arm out of my hand.

"Who told you to do that?" he growled irritably.

"Quietly, my dear Lorand. I have committed no blunder even in formalities. It will be ten years to-morrow since you told me I might in ten years tell mother where you are. Then you wrote to me to be at Szolnok to-day. I have kept my promise to mother as regards telling her to-morrow and to you by my appearance here. Szolnok is two days distant from our home:—so I had to bring them here in order to do justice to both my promises.

Lorand became unrestrainedly angry.

"A curse upon every pettifogger in the world! You have swindled me out of my most evident right."

"But, dear Lorand, are you annoyed that the poor dear ones can see you one day earlier?"

"That's right, begin like that.—Fool, we wanted to have a jolly evening all to ourselves, and you have spoilt it."

"But you can enjoy yourselves as long as you like."

"Indeed? 'As long as we like,' and I must go in a tipsy drunken state to introduce myself to mother?"

"It is not your habit to be drunk."

"What do you know? I'm fairly uproarious once I begin at it. It was a foolish idea of yours, old fellow."

"Well, do you know what? Put the meeting first, after that the carousal."

"I have told you once for all that we shall make no

bargains, sir advocate. No transactions here, sir advocate!"

"Don't 'sir advocate' me!"

"Wait a moment. If you could be so cursedly exact in your calculation of days, I shall complete your astronomical and chronological studies. Take out your watch and compare it with mine. It was just 11:45 by the convent clock in Pressburg, when you gave me your word. To-morrow evening at 11:45 you are free from your obligation to me: then you can do with me what you like."

I found his tone very displeasing and turned aside.

"Well don't be dispirited," said Lorand, drawing me towards him and embracing me. "Let us not be angry with each other: we have not been so hitherto. But you see the position I am in. I have gathered together a pack of dissolute scamps and atheists, not knowing you would bring mother with you, and they have been my faithful comrades ten years. I have passed many bad, many good days with them: I cannot say to them 'Go, my mother is here.' Nor can I sit here among them till morning with religious face. In the morning we shall all be 'soaked.' Even if I conquer the wine, my head will be heavy after it. I have need of the few hours I asked you for to collect myself, before I can step into my dear ones' presence with a clear head. Explain to them how matters stand."

"They know already, and will not ask after you until to-morrow."

"Very well. There is peace between us, old fellow."

When the company saw we had explained matters to each other, they all crowded round us, and such a noise arose that I don't know even now what it was all about. I merely know that once or twice Pepi Gyáli wished to catch my eye to begin some conversation, and that at such times I asked the nearest man, "How long do you intend to amuse yourselves in this manner?" "How are you?" and similar surprising imbecilities.

Meanwhile the long table in the middle of the room had been laid: the wines had been piled up, the savory

victuals were brought in; outside in the corridors a gypsy band was striking up a lively air, and everybody tried to get a seat.

I had to sit at the head of the table, near Lorand. On Lorand's left sat Topándy, on his right, beside me, Pepi Gyáli.

"Well, old fellow, you too will drink with us to-day?" said Lorand to me playfully, putting his arms familiarly round my neck.

"No, you know I never drink wine."

"Never? Not to-day either? Not even to my health?"

I looked at him. Why did he wish to make me drink to-day especially?

"No, Lorand. You know I am bound by a promise not to drink wine, and a man of honor always keeps his promises, however absurd."

I shall never forget the look which Lorand gave me at these words.

"You are right, old fellow:" and he grasped my hand. "A man of honor keeps his promises, however absurd. . . ."

And as he said so, he was so serious, he gazed with such alarming coldness into the eyes of Gyáli, who sat next to him. But Pepi merely smiled. He could smile so tenderly with those handsome girlish round lips of his.

Lorand patted him on the shoulder.

"Do you hear, Pepi? My brother refused to drink wine, because a man of honor keeps his promises. You are right, Desi. Let him who says something keep his word."

Then the banquet began.

It is a peculiar study for an abstainer to look on at a midnight carousal, with a perfectly sober head, and to be the only audience and critic at this "divina comedia" where everyone acts unwittingly.

The first act commenced with the toasts. He to whom God had given rhetorical talent raises his glass, begs for silence,—which at first he receives and later

not receiving tries to assure for himself by his stentorian voice;—and with a very serious face, utters very serious phrases:—one is a master of grace, another of pathos: a third quotes from the classics, a fourth humorizes, and himself laughs at his success, while everybody finishes the scene with clinking of glasses, and embraces, to the accompaniment of clarion "hurrahs."

Later come more fiery declamations, general outbursts of patriotic bitterness. Brains become more heated, everyone sits upon his favorite hobby-horse, and makes it leap beneath him; the socialist, the artist, the landlord, the champion of order, everyone begins to speak of his own particular theme—without keeping to the strict rules of conversation that one waits until the other has finished: rather they all talk at once, one interrupting the other, until finally he who has commenced some thrilling refrain hands over the leadership to all: the song becomes general, and each one is convinced from hearing his own vocal powers, that nowhere on earth can more lovely singing be heard.

And meantime the table becomes covered with empty bottles.

Then the paroxysm grows by degrees to a climax. He who previously delivered an oration now babbles, comes to a standstill, and, cuts short his discomfiture by swearing; there sits one who had already three times begun upon some speech, but his bitterness, mourning for the past, so effectually chokes his over-ardent feelings that he bursts into tears, amidst general laughter. Another who has already embraced all his comrades in turn, breaks in among the gypsies and kisses them one after the other, swearing brotherhood to the bass fiddler and the clarinetist. At the farther end of the table sits a choleric fellow, whose habit it is always to end in riotous fights, and he begins his freaks by striking the table with his fist, and swearing he will kill the man who has worried him. Luckily he does not know with whom he is angry. The gay singer is not content with giving full play to his throat, helping it out with his hands and feet: he begins to dash bottles

and plates against the wall, and is delighted that so many smashed bottles give evidence of his triumph. With a half crushed hat he dances in the middle of the room quite alone, in the happy conviction that everybody is looking at him, while a blessed comrade had come to the pass of dropping his head back upon the back of his chair, only waking up when they summon him to drink with him—though he does not know whether he is drinking wine or tanner's ooze.

But the fever does not increase indefinitely.

Like other attacks of fever, it has a crisis, beyond which a turn sets in!

After midnight the uproarious clamor subsided. The first heating influence of the wine had already worked itself out. One or two who could not fight with it, gave in and lay down to sleep, while the others remained in their places, continuing the drinking-bout, not for the sake of inebriety, merely out of principle, that they might show they would not allow themselves to be overcome by wine.

This is where the real heroes' part begins, of those whom the first glass did not loosen, nor the tenth tie their tongues.

Now they begin to drink quietly and to tell anecdotes between the rounds.

One man does not interrupt another, but when one has finished his story, another says, "I know one still better than that," and begins: "the matter happened here or there, I myself being present."

The anecdotes at times reached the utmost pitch of obscenity and at such times I was displeased to hear Lorand laugh over such jokes as expressed contempt for womankind.

I was only calmed by the thought that "our own" were long in bed—it was after midnight—and so it were impossible for mother or someone else out of curiosity to be listening at the keyhole, waiting for Lorand's voice.

All at once Lorand took over the lead in the conversation.

He introduced the question "Which is the most celebrated drinking nation in the world?"

He himself for his part immediately said he considered the Germans were the most renowned drinkers.

This assertion naturally met with great national opposition.

They would not surrender the Magyar priority in this respect either.

Two peacefully-inclined spirits interfered, trying to produce a united feeling by accepting the Englishman, then the Servian as the first in drinking matters—a proviso which naturally did not satisfy either of the disputing parties. Lorand, alone against the united opinion of the whole company, had the audacity to assert that the Germans were the greatest drinkers in the world. He produced celebrated examples to prove his theory.

"Listen to me! Once Prince Batthyány sent two barrels of old Göncz wine to the Brothers of Hybern. But the duty to be paid on good Magyar wine beyond the Lajta* was terrible. The recipients would have had to pay for the wine twenty gold pieces*—a nice sum. So the Brothers, to avoid paying and to prevent the wine being lost, drank the contents of the two barrels outside the frontier."

Ah, they could produce drinkers three times or four times as great, this side of the Lajta!

But Lorand would not give in.

"Well, your namesake, Pépó Henneberg," related Lorand, turning to Gyáli, "introduced the custom of drawing a string through the ears of his guests, who sat down at a long table with him, and compelled them all to drain their beakers to the dregs, whenever he drank, under penalty of losing the ends of their ears."

"With us that is impossible, for we have no holes bored in our ears!" cried one.

* A river near Pressburg, the boundary between Austria and Hungary.

† Probably 200 florins.

"We drink without compulsion!" replied another.

"The Magyar does all a German can do!"

That assertion, loudly shouted, was general.

"Even draining glasses as they did at Wartburg?" cried Lorand.

"What the devil was the custom at Wartburg?"

"The revellers at Wartburg, when they were in high spirits used to load a pistol, and then to fill the barrel to the brim with wine: then they cocked the trigger, and drained this curious glass one after another for friendship's sake."

(I see you, Lorand!)

"Well, which of you is inclined to follow the German cavaliers' example?"

Topándy interrupted.

"I for one am not, and Heaven forbid you should be."

"I am."

—Which remark came from Gyáli, not Lorand.

I looked at him. The fellow had remained sober. He had only tasted the wine, while others had drunk it.

"If you are inclined, let us try," said Lorand.

"With pleasure, only you must do it first."

"I shall do so, but you will not follow me."

"If you do it, I shall too. But I think you will not do it before me."

One idea flashed clearly before me and chilled my whole body. I saw all: I understood all now: the mystery of ten years was no longer a secret to me: I saw the refugee, I saw the pursuer, and I had both in my hand, in such an iron grip, as if God had lent me for the moment the hand of an archangel.

You just talk away.

Lorand's face was a feverish red.

"Well, well, you scamp! Let us bet, if you like."

"What?"

"Twenty bottles of champagne, which we shall drink too."

"I accept the wager."

"Whoever withdraws from the jest loses the bet."

"Here's the money!"

Both took their purses and placed each a hundred florins on the table.

I too produced my purse and took a crumpled paper out of it:—but it was no banknote.

Lorand cried to the waiter.

"Take my pistols out of my trunk."

The waiter placed both before him.

"Are they really loaded?" inquired Gyáli.

"Look into the barrels, where the steel head of the bullets are smiling at you."

Gyáli found it wiser to believe than to look into the pistol barrels.

"Well, the bet stands; whichever of us cannot drink out his portion pays for the champagne."

Lorand seized his glass to pour the red wine that was in it into the pistol-barrel.

The whole company was silent: some agonized restraint ruled their intoxicated nerves: every eye was rested on Lorand as if they wished to check the mad jest before its completion. On Topándy's forehead heavy beads of sweat glistened.

I quietly placed my hand on Lorand's, in which he held the weapon and amid profound silence asked:

"Would it not be good to draw lots to see who shall do it first?"

Both looked at me in confusion when I mentioned drawing lots.

Could their secret have been discovered?

"Only if you draw lots about it," I continued quietly, "don't omit to be quite sure about the writing of each other's name, lest there be a repetition of that farce which took place ten years ago, when you drew lots as to who was to dance with the white elephant."

I saw Gyáli turn as white as paper.

"What farce?" he panted, beginning to rise from his chair.

"You always were a jesting boy, Pepi: at that time you made me draw lots for you, and told me to put both the one I had drawn and the other in the grate: but instead of doing so I threw the dance programme in the

fire, and put those papers aside and kept them. You, instead of your own, wrote my brother's name on the paper, and so whichever was drawn, Lorand Áronffy must have come out of the hat. Look, the two lottery tickets are still in my possession, those same two pieces of paper, a sheet of note paper torn in two, both with the same name on them, and on the other side the writing of Madame Bálnokházy."

Gyáli rose from his seat like one who had seen a ghost, and gazed at me with a look of stone.

Yet I had not threatened him. I had merely playfully jested with him. I smilingly spread out the two pieces of lilac-colored papers, which so exactly fitted together.

But Lorand with flashing eyes glared at him, and as the dignified upright figure stood opposite him, threw the contents of the glass he held in his hand into the fellow's face, so that the red wine splashed all over his laced white waistcoat.

Gyáli with his serviette wiped from his face the traces of insult and with dignified coldness said:

"With men in such a condition no dispute is possible. We cannot answer the taunts of drunken men."

Therewith he began to back towards the door.

Everybody, in amazement at this scene, allowed him to go: for all the world as if everyone had suddenly begun to be sober, and at the first surprise no one knew how to think what should now happen.

But I . . . I was not drunk. I had no need to become sober.

I leaped up from my place, with one bound came up to the departing man, and seized him before he could reach the door, just as a furious tiger fastens up a miserable dormouse.

"I am not drunk! I have never drunk wine, you know," I cried losing all self-restraint, and pressing him against the wall so that he shivered like a bat.—"I shall be the one to throw that cursed forgery in your face, miserable wretch!"

And I know well that that single blow would have been the last chapter in his life—which would have been

a great pity, not as far as he was concerned, but for my own sake—had not Heaven sent a guardian angel to check me in my wickedness.

Suddenly someone behind seized the hand raised to strike. I looked back, and my arm dropped useless at my side.

It was Fanny who had seized my arm.

"Desi," cried my darling in a frightened voice: "This hand is mine: you must not defile it."

I felt she was right. I allowed my uncontrollable anger to be overcome; with my left hand I threw the trembling wretch out of the door—I do not know where he fell—and then I turned round to clasp Fanny to my breast.

Already mother and grandmother were in the room.

The poor women had spent the whole evening of agony in the neighboring room, keeping perfectly still, so as not to betray their presence there, with the intention of listening for Lorand's voice: and they had trembled through that last awful scene, of which they could hear every word. When they heard my cry of rage, they could restrain themselves no longer, but rushed in, and threw themselves among the revellers with a cry of "My son, my son."

Everyone rose at their honored presence: this solemn picture, two kneeling women embracing a son snatched from the jaws of death.

The surprising horror had reduced everyone to soberness: all tipsiness, all winy drowsiness, had passed away.

"Lorand, Lorand," sobbed mother, pressing him frantically to her breast, while grandmother, unable to speak or to weep, clutched his hand.

"Oh Lorand, dear. . ."

But Lorand grasped the two ladies' hands and led them towards me.

"It is him you must embrace, not me: his is the triumph."

Then he caught sight of that sweet angel bowed upon my shoulder, who was still holding my hand in hers: he