

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE NIGHT-STRUGGLE

THE dark figure, which seized Czipra's hand so suddenly, stared with a blood-thirsty grin into his victim's face, whose every limb shuddered with terror at her assailant.

"What do you want?" panted the girl in a choking, scarcely audible voice.

"What do I want?" he hissed in answer. "I want to cut your gander's throat, you goose! Do you want a nightingale?"

Then he whistled a shrill whistle.

His mates leaped out suddenly from their ambush at the sound of the whistle.

At that moment Czipra recovered her self control in sheer despair: she suddenly tore her hand from the robber's grasp, and in three bounds, like a terrified deer, reached the threshold of the door she had left open.

But the wolf had followed in her tracks and reached her at the door. The girl had no time to close it in his face.

"Don't whine!" hissed Kandur, seizing the girl's arm with one hand, with the other attempting to close her mouth.

But terror had made Czipra frantic: tearing down the robber's hand from her mouth, she pushed him back from the door, and with shrill cries awoke the echoes of the night.

"Lorand, help! Robbers!"

"Silence, you dog, or I'll stab you!" thundered the robber, pointing a knife at the girl's breast.

The knife did not frighten Czipra: as she struggled

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unceasingly and desperately with the robber, she cried "Lorand! Lorand! Murder! Help!"

"Damn you!" exclaimed the robber thrusting his knife into the maiden's bosom.

Czipra suddenly seized the knife with her two hands.

At that moment Lorand appeared beside her.

At the first cry he had rushed from his room and, unarmed, hastened to Czipra's aid.

The girl was still struggling with the robber, holding him back, by sheer force, from entering the door.

Lorand sprang towards her, and dealt the intruder such a blow with his fist in the face, that two of his teeth were broken.

Two shots rang out, followed by a heavy fall and a cry of cursing.

Topándy had fired from the window and one of the four robbers fell on his face mortally wounded, while another, badly hit, floundered and collapsed near the corridor.

The two shots, the noise behind his back, and the unexpected blow confused Kandur; he retreated from the door, leaving his knife in Czipra's hand.

Lorand quickly utilized this opportunity to close the door, fasten the chain, and draw the bolt.

The next moment the robbers' vehement attack could be heard, as they fell upon the door with crowbars.

"Come, let us get away," said Lorand, taking Czipra's hand.

The girl faintly answered.

"Oh! I cannot walk. I am fainting."

"Are you wounded?" asked Lorand, alarmed. It was dark, he could not see.

The girl fell against the wall.

Lorand at once took her in his arms and carried her into his room.

The lamp was still burning: he had just finished his letters.

He laid the wounded girl upon his bed.

He was terrified to see her covered with blood.

"Are you badly wounded?"

"Oh, no," said the girl: "see, the knife only went in so deep."

And she displayed the robber's knife, showing on the blade how far it had penetrated.

Lorand clasped his hands in despair.

"Here is a kerchief, press it on the wound to prevent the blood flowing."

"Go, go!" panted the girl. "Look after your own safety. They want to kill you. They want to murder you."

"Aha! let the wretches come! I shall face them without running!" said Lorand, whose only care was for Czipra: he quickly tried to stem the flow of blood from the wound in the girl's breast with a handkerchief. "Lie quiet. Put your head here. Here, here, not so high. Is it very painful?"

On the girl's neck was a chain made of hair: this was in the way, so he wished to tear it off.

"No, no, don't touch it," panted the girl, "that must remain there as long as I live. Go, get a weapon, and defend yourself."

The blows of the crowbars redoubled in force, and the bullets that broke through the closed windows dislodged the plaster from the walls; shot followed shot.

Lorand had no other care than to see if the wounded girl's pillows were well arranged.

"Lorand," said the girl breathlessly. "Leave me. They are numerous. Escape. Put the lamp out, and when everything is dark—then leave me alone."

Certainly it would be good to extinguish the lamp, because the robbers were aiming into that room on account of it.

"Lorand! Where are you? Lorand," Topány's voice sounded in the corridor.

At that sound Lorand began to realize the danger that threatened the whole household.

"Come and take your gun!" said the old man standing in the doorway. His face was just as contemptuous as ever. There was not the least trace of excitement, fright or anger upon it.

Lorand rose from his kneeling posture beside the bed.

"Don't waste time putting your boots on!" bawled the old fellow. "Our guests are come. We must meet them. Where is Czipra? She can load our weapons while we fire."

"Czipra cannot, for she is wounded."

Topány then discovered for the first time that Czipra was lying there.

"A shot?" he asked of Lorand.

"A knife thrust."

"Only a knife thrust? That will heal. Czipra can stand that, can't you, my child? We'll soon repay the wretches. Remain here, Czipra, quietly, and don't move. We two will manage it. Bring your weapon and ammunition, Lorand. Bring the lamp out into the corridor. Here they can spy directly upon us. Luckily the brigands are not used to handle guns; they only waste powder."

"But can we leave Czipra here alone?" asked Lorand anxiously.

Czipra clasped her hands and looked at him.

"Go," she panted. "Go away: if you don't I shall get up from here and look out for myself."

"Don't be afraid. They cannot come here," said Topány; then, lifting the lamp from the table himself, and taking Lorand's hand, he drew him out from the room.

In the corridor they halted to decide on a plan of action.

"The villains are still numerous," said Topány: "yet I've accounted for two of them already. I have been round the rooms, and see that every exit is barred. They cannot enter, for the doors have been made just for such people, and the windows are protected by bolts and shutters. I have eight charges myself: even if they break in, before anyone can come this far, there will be no one left.—But something else may happen. If the wretches see we are defending ourselves well they will set the house on fire over us and so compel us to rush into the open. Then the advantage is theirs. So

your business is to take a double-barrelled gun and ascend to the roof. My butler and the cook have hidden themselves away and I cannot entice them out: if they were here I should send one of them with you."

The robbers were beating the door angrily with their crowbars.

"In a moment!" exclaimed Topándy jokingly.—"The rogues seem to be impatient."

"And what shall I do on the roof?" asked Lorand.

"Wait patiently! I shall tell you in good time. No Turk is chasing you.—You go up and make your exit upon the roof by means of the attic window: then you crawl round on all fours along the gutter, without trying to shoot: leave them to pound upon all four doors. I shall join in the serenade, when necessary. But if you see they are beginning to strike lights and set straw on fire, you must put a stop to it. The gutter will defend you against their fire, they cannot see you, but when they start a blaze, you can accurately aim at each one. That is what I wanted to say."

"Very well," said Lorand, taking his cartridges from his gun-case.

"You'd better use shot instead of bullets," remarked Topándy. "It's easier to hit with shot when one is shooting in the dark, especially in the case of a large company. A little *sang froid*, my boy—you know: all of life is a play."

Lorand grasped the old man's hand and hurried up to the garret.

There in the dark he could only feel his way. For a long time he wandered aimlessly about, striking matches to discover his whereabouts, until he came upon the attic window, which he raised with his head and so came out on the roof.

Then he slid down softly on his stomach as far as the gutter.

Below him the ball was in progress. The thunder of crowbars, the cracking of panels, the strong blows dealt to the tune of oaths; fresh oaths, thunder, pole-axe blows upon the wall. The robbers, unable to break in the doors, were trying to dislodge their posts,

And in the distance no noise, no sign of help. The cowardly neighbors, shutting themselves in, were crouching in their own houses: nor could one blame unarmed men for not coming to the rescue. A gun is a terrible menace.

Silence reigned in the servants' hall. They too dared not come out. Courage is not for poor men.

In the whole courtyard there were but two men who had stout hearts in their bosoms.

The third courageous heart was that of a girl, who lay wounded.

As he thought of this, Lorand became the victim of an excited passion. He felt his head swimming: he felt that he could not remain there, for sooner or later he must leap down.

Leap down!

An idea occurred to him. A difficult feat, but once thought out, it could be accomplished.

He scrambled up the roof again: cut away one of those long dry ropes which in the garrets of many houses stretch from one rafter to another, tied to one end of it the weight of an old clock lying idle in the attic, and returned again to the roof.

Not far from the house there stood an old sycamore tree: one of its spreading branches bent so near to the house that Lorand could certainly reach it by a cast of the rope. The lead-weighted rope, like a lasso, swung over and around the branch and fastened itself on it firmly.

Lorand looped the other end of the rope round a rafter.

Then, throwing his gun over his shoulder, and seizing the rope with both his hands, he leaned his whole weight on it, to see if it would hold.

When he was convinced that the rope would bear his weight, he began to clamber over from the roof to the sycamore tree, suspended in the air, on the slender rope.

Those below could not see him as they were under the verandah, nor could they notice the noise because of their own efforts: the little disturbance caused by

the shaking of a branch and the dropping of a figure from the tree was drowned by the shaking of doors, and the discharge of firearms.

Lorand reached the ground without mishap.

The sycamore tree stood at a corner of the castle, about thirty paces from the besieged door.

Lorand could not see the robbers from this position: the northern side of the verandah was overgrown with creepers which covered the windows.

He must get nearer to them.

The bushes under Czippa's window offered him a suitable position, being about ten paces from the door, which was plainly visible from them.

Lorand cocked both triggers, and started alone with one gun against the whole robber-band.

When he reached the bushes he could see the rascals well.

They were four in number.

Two were trying the effect of the "jimmy" on the heavy iron-bound door, while a third, the wounded one, though he could no longer stand, still took part in the siege, notwithstanding his wounds. He put the barrel of his gun into the breaches made and fired over and over, so as to prevent the people inside from defending the door.

Sometimes single shots answered him from within, but without hitting anybody or anything.

The fourth robber, crowbar in hand, was striving to break down the door-supports. That was Vasgyúró.

On the other side of the courtyard Lorand saw two armed figures keeping guard over the servants' hall. It was six to one.

And there were still more than that altogether.

The door was very shaky already: the hinges were breaking. Lorand thought he heard his name called from within.

"Now, all together," thundered the robbers in self-encouragement, exerting all their united force on the crowbars. "More force! More!"

Lorand calmly raised his gun to his shoulder and fired twice among them in quick succession.

No cry of pain followed the two shots—merely the thud of two heavy bodies. They were so thoroughly killed, they had no time to complain.

The one in whose hands the crowbar remained dropped it behind him, as he darted away.

The man who had been previously wounded began to cry for assistance.

"Don't shout," exclaimed the fifth robber. "You'll alarm the others."

Then putting two fingers in his mouth he whistled shrilly twice.

Lorand saw that at this double whistle the two robbers running hastily came in his direction, while the din that arose on the farther side of the castle informed him of an attack from that side, too. So he was between three fires.

He did not lose his presence of mind.

Before the new-comers arrived he had just time to load both barrels:—the bushes hid him from anyone who might even stand face to face, so that he could take no sure aim.

Haste, care and courage!

Lorand had often read stories of famous lion-hunters, but had been unable to believe them: unable to imagine how a lonely man in a wild waste, far from every human aid, defended only by a bush, could be courageous enough to cover the oldest male among a group of lions seeking their prey, and at a distance of ten paces fire into his heart. Not to hit his heart meant death to the hunter. But he is sure he will succeed, and sure, too, that the whole group will flee, once his victim has fallen.

What presence of mind was required for that daring deed! What a strong heart, what a cool hand!

Now in this awful moment Lorand knew that all this was possible. A man feels the extent of his manliness, left all to himself in the midst of danger.

He too was hunting, matched against the most dangerous of all beasts of prey—the beasts called "men."

Two he had already laid low. He had found his mark as well as the lion-hunter had found his.

He heard steps of the animals he was hunting approaching his ambuscade on two sides: and the leader of all stood there under cover, leaning against a pillar of the verandah, ready to spring, ten paces away. He had only two charges, with which he had to defend himself against attack from three sides.

Dangerous sport!

One of the robbers who hurried from the servants' hall disappeared among the trees in the garden, while the other remained behind.

Lorand quietly aimed at the first: he had to aim low for fear of firing above him in the dark.

It was well that he had followed his uncle's advice to use shot instead of bullets. The shot lamed both the robber's legs: he fell in his flight and stumbled among the bushes.

The one who followed was alarmed, and standing in the distance fired in Lorand's direction.

Lorand, after his shot, immediately fell on his knees: and it was very lucky he did so, for in the next moment Kandur discharged both his barrels from beside the pillar, and the aim was true, as Lorand discovered from the fact that the bullets dislodged leaves just above his head, that came fluttering down upon him.

Then he turned to the third side.

There had come from that direction at the call of the whistle Korvé, Pofók, and Bogrács, who had been guarding the street-door and the other exit from the castle.

At the moment they turned into the garden their comrade Fosztó, seeing Kanyó fall, stood still and fired his double-barrelled gun and pistols in the direction of Lorand's hiding-place. It was quite natural they should think some aid had arrived from the shooting-box, for the bullets whistled just over their heads: so they began to fire back: Fosztó, alarmed, and not understanding this turn of affairs, fled.

Old Kandur's hoarse voice could not attract their attention amidst the random firing. He cried furiously: "Don't shoot at one another, you asses!"

They did not understand, perhaps did not hear at all in the confusion.

Lorand hastened to enlighten them.

Taking aim at the three villains, who were firing wildly into the night, he sent his second charge into their midst from the bushes, whence they least expected it.

This shot had a final effect. Perhaps several were wounded, one at any rate reeled badly, and the other two took to flight: then, finding their comrade could not keep up with them, they picked him up and dragged him along, disappearing in a moment in the thickest part of the park.

Only the old lion remained behind, alone, old Kandur, the robber, burning with rage. He caught a glimpse of Lorand's face by the flash of the second discharge, recognized in him the man he sought, whom he hated, whose blood he thirsted after: that foe, whom he remembered with curses, whom he had promised to tear to pieces, to torture to death, who was here again in his way, and had with his unaided power broken up the whole opposing army, for all the world like the archangel himself.

Kandur knew well he must not allow him time to load again.

It was not a moment for shooting:—but for a pitched battle, hand to hand.

Nor did the robber load his weapon: he rushed unarmed from his ambuscade as he saw Lorand standing before him, and threw himself in foaming passion upon the youth.

Lorand saw that here, among the bushes, he had no further use for his gun, so he threw it away, and received his foe unarmed.

Now it was face to face!

As they clutched each other their eyes met.

"You devil!" muttered Kandur, gnashing his teeth; "you have stolen my gold, and my girl. Now I shall repay you."

Lorand now knew that the robber was Czipra's father.

He had tried to murder his own daughter.

This idea excited such rage in Lorand's heart that he brought the robber to his knees with one wrench.

But the other was soon on his feet again.

"Oho! You are strong too? You gentlemen live well: you have strength. The ox is also strong, and yet the wolf pulls him down."

And with renewed passion he threw himself on Lorand.

But Lorand did not allow him to come close enough to grasp his wrist. He was a practised wrestler, and was able to keep his opponent an arm's length away.

"So you won't let me come near you? You won't let me kiss you, eh? Won't let me bite out a little piece of your beautiful face?"

The wild creature stretched out his neck in his effort to get at Lorand.

The struggle was desperate. Lorand was aided by the freshness of his youthful strength, his *sang froid*, and practised skill: the robber's strength was redoubled by passion, his muscles were tough, and his attacks impetuous, unexpected, and surprising like those of some savage beast.

Neither uttered a sound. Lorand did not call for help, thinking his cries might bring the robbers back: and Kandur was afraid the house party might come out.

Or perhaps neither thought of any such thing: each was occupied with the idea of overthrowing his opponent with his own hand.

Kandur merely muttered through his teeth, though his passion did not deter his devilish humor. Lorand did not say a single word.

The place was ill-adapted for such a struggle.

Amid the hindering bushes they stumbled hither and thither; they could not move freely, nor could they turn much, each one fearing that to turn would be fatal.

"Come, come away," muttered Kandur, dragging Lorand away from the bushes. "Come onto the grass,"

Lorand agreed.

They passed out into the open.

There the robber madly threw himself upon Lorand again.

He tried no more to throw him, but to drag him after him, with all his might.

Lorand did not understand what his foe wished.

Always further, further:—

Lorand twice threw him, but the robber clung to him and scrambled up again, dragging him always further away.

Suddenly Lorand perceived what his opponent's intention was.

A few weeks previously he had told his uncle that a steward's house was required: and Topandy had dug a lime-pit in the garden, where it would not be in the way. Only yesterday they had filled it to the brim with lime.

The robber wished to drag Lorand with him into it.

The young fellow planted his feet firmly and held back with all his might.

Kandur's eyes flashed with the stress of passion, when he saw in his opponent's terrified face that he knew what his intention was.

"Well, how do you like the dance, young gentleman? This will be the wedding-dance now! The bridegroom with the bride—together into the lime-pit. Come, come with me! There in the slacked lime the skin will leave our bodies: I shall put on yours, you mine: how pretty we two shall be!"

The robber laughed.

Lorand gathered all his strength to resist the mad attempt.

Kandur suddenly caught Lorand's right arm with both of his, clung to him like a leech, and with a devilish smile said, "Come now, come along!"—and drew Lorand nearer, nearer to the edge of the pit. A couple of blows which Lorand dealt with his disengaged fist upon his skull were unnoticed: it was as hard as iron.

They had reached the edge of the pit.

Then Lorand suddenly put his left arm round the

robber's waist, raised him in the air, then screwing him round his right arm, flung him over his head.

This acrobatic feat required such an effort that he himself fell on his back—but it succeeded.

The robber, feeling himself in the air, lost his head, and left hold of Lorand's arm for a moment, with the intention of gripping his hair; in that moment he was thrown off and fell alone into the lime-pit.

Lorand leaped up at once from the ground and, tired out, leaned against the trunk of a tree, searching for his opponent everywhere, and not finding him.

A minute later from amidst the white lime-mud there rose an awful figure which clambered out on the opposite side of the pit, and with a yell of pain rushed away into the courtyard and out into the street.

Lorand, exhausted and half dazed, listened to that beast-like howl gradually diminishing in the distance.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SPIDER IN THE CORNER

THAT day about noon the old gypsy woman who told Czipra her fortune had shuffled into Sárköly's courtyard, and finding the master out on the terrace, thanked him that he did not set his dogs upon her—did not tear her to pieces.

"I wish you a very good day, sir, and every blessing that is on earth or in Heaven."

Mistress Borcsa looked out from the kitchen.

"Well, it's just lucky you didn't wish what is in hell! And what is in the water! Gypsy, don't leave us a blessing without fish to go with it, for fish is wanted here twice a week."

"Don't listen to Mistress Boris' jokes."

"Good day, my daughter," said the master gently.

"Well he actually calls the ragged gypsy woman 'my daughter,'" grumbled the old housekeeper. "Blood is thicker than water."

"Well, what have you brought, Marcsa?"

"Csicsa sent to say he will come with his twelve musicians this evening: he begs you to pay him in advance as the musicians must hire a conveyance—then," she continued, dropping her voice to a tone of jesting flattery,— "a little suckling pig for supper, if possible."

"Very well, Marcsa," said Sárköly, with polite gentility. "Everything shall be in order. Come here towards evening. You shall get payment and sucking pig too."

Yet this overflowing magnanimity was not at all in conformity with the well-established habits of the devotee. Close-fisted niggardliness displayed itself in his