

Mor Jokai

Peter the Priest

 Publio

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Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER I. IN THE MONASTERY.

There were six of them besides the Prior and Abbot. The seventh was away in the village, collecting the gifts of charity.

"Benedicite," began the Prior. "Here is a message from our most gracious patroness." With that he laid upon the table a sealed letter in Latin, which the others passed from hand to hand. All understood it, but it was evident that not one of them liked the letter, for they turned up their noses, pursed their lips and knit their eyebrows.

"One of us is bidden to the court of our most munificent patroness to educate her only son."

"He is a little devil!" exclaimed the Abbot.

"He talks and whistles in church," cried another.

"He reviles the saints and the souls of the departed."

"He torments animals." Each one had something to say; especially the last.

"He is the accursed child of a mad mother."

"She is the destruction of all men," continued the Abbot. "She sins against all the commandments."

"She tramples under foot all the sacraments."

"She is a raging fury and a sacrilegious witch."

"She sent her husband to his grave with a deadly drink."

The Prior met all these horrible comments with a stoical calm. "Still she is our gracious patroness, and her son also will one day be our patron. We must drink the bitter cup to its dregs. Let us choose."

Still all shook their heads.

"I have the fever in my bones," said one, rubbing his leg.

"I have trouble with my liver," said another, and as proof he put out his tongue to the opposite brother, who hastened to say:

"It is my vocation to heal the sick."

Now all three looked at the fourth, who felt very confident of having the best excuse:

"And I am not acquainted with the Scythian speech, neither the Hungarian nor the Slavic."

The fifth was embarrassed what excuse to give:

"I have taken a vow never to speak to a woman."

Evidently no one cared for the office.

"Then let us send Peter," said the Prior calmly.

At this all five cried out: "He is too young," said one.

"But he is stern of character," replied the Prior.

"He will meet with very great temptations," threw in a second.

"The greater will be his triumph," returned the Prior.

"But he is still only a brother," a third protested.

"We can make him a father," the Prior answered. An answer which brought them all to their feet, opposing it loudly:

"That cannot be! that cannot be! our rules are against it."

"Then let some one else go," said the Prior coldly.

Silence fell upon the group: they shrugged their shoulders, fell back into their large richly carved arm-chairs, and murmured:

"Then let Peter be made father, and let father Peter go."

It was the student John's week in the bake-house, and from there he had heard every word; and now that the worthy fathers had gone away, he came out of the bake-house and hobbled off to the kitchen. The master of the kitchen was not there, but Samuel, a fellow-student, hung over the edge of a large two-handled tub. John was lank, and Samuel was thickset; both were in rags, out of respect to the golden saying, "In rags is a student at his best." It was the daily duty of these two students to carry to the pigs this large tub full of kitchen refuse. As soon as John saw that the kitchen master was not there, he began rummaging in the tub among the crusts of bread, apple parings, and scraps of mouldy cheese, selecting with an experienced eye.

"Leave some for Peter," growled Samuel, without raising his head from his knees.

John could not answer, for both cheeks were full. Samuel sprang up full of envy that John should be enjoying his feast with such gusto.

"Stop, you rascal! Leave some for the pigs." Then John looked for the pole to put through the handles of the tub.

"Take hold of the other end."

"I won't. Peter will be here soon and he carries it out alone."

"Peter will not be here."

"I hear his cart creaking now."

"All the same, he won't carry that tub out again. I heard what they said when I was in the bake-house."

"What did they say?" And the two sat down together on the edge of the tub for a gossip.

"The mistress of the castle sends for an instructor for her son, and they say that he a small devil."

"That's true, he's equal to twelve."

"He whistles in church."

"He puts sulphur in the incense when he assists at mass!"

"He curses and reviles the saints and the souls of the departed."

"He torments animals."

"You're right he does! He put a lighted sponge in my donkey's ear, and the poor beast smashed my cart."

"They said that he is as wild as his mother; and the Abbot said of her that she was the ruin of every man. Is that so?"

"Yes, she is a witch, who bridles men and rides them off to the devils' dance."

"They did say that she was a witch, and and that she broke all the ten commandments, and put the sacraments under her feet; and listen,—they said that she mixed poison in her husband's drink, and he died of it!"

"That's like her! Once they sent me to her with a letter, and she ordered a cup of mead that had something in it that made me feel all night long as if I must crawl up the wall."

"But the Prior said that she was our gracious patroness, and that her son would one day be our patron, and that we must drink the bitter cup."

"I can see how they all trembled!"

"One said that he had fever in his bones, another had trouble with his liver, a third said he was busy healing the sick, a fourth that he did not know either Hungarian or Slavic, and the fifth was bound by a holy vow not to speak to a woman."

"And so in the end they send Peter."

"The Devil's in you! You've guessed it!"

"It may turn out well for him."

"One thought he was still too young, and the Prior said, but he is of strong character; another that he would be exposed to great temptations; several objected that Peter was still a brother. Then the Prior said, we'll make him a father. Then all objected, and the Prior said, Then one of you must go. Then they all gave in and said, well, make Peter a father, and let Father Peter be the one to go."

And then both the students began to laugh. "Peter will be in the right place there!" In the mean time, the creaking of the cartwheels stopped at the rear door; then came a knock; through this rear gate was an entrance into the court, but the duty of door-tender was limited to the main entrance.

"Do you hear? Peter's knocking."

"You hear him, yourself."

"Go open the gate."

"You can do it as well as I."

"I can't find my feet, I don't know which of the four they are." At that John struck the four bare legs with his birch broom, and his fellow scholar at once discovered his own; then they seized each other by the hair; the question was which should throw the other out of the kitchen; the vanquished one was to open the gate. During this struggle, they upset the tub and the contents streamed over the floor. Then, indeed, they separated, thoroughly pommelled and frightened.

"Get out, you overturned it."

"You pushed me into it."

"When the kitchen-master sees us, he'll beat you well." Neither one would set things to rights; meanwhile their brother, tired of knocking at the rear gate, had gone around to the main gate, been let in there, and now opened the rear gate for himself to bring in what he had collected in the villages.

It was a lumbering cart; its wobbling wheels described the letter S in their course, and as they had been long ungreased, creaked dismally. A one-eared donkey drew the cart filled with all kinds of provisions, which the begging monk had collected in the villages; this was called "temporizing." The steward was already waiting in the court, slate in hand to note down the receipts. He did not fail at each item to make severe criticisms and to look sharply at the collector. Everything he found poor; picking out the bad eggs, he said, "You can have those yourself, Peter." The meal was very coarse. "Go sift it, and make yourself a cake out of the bran." On the head of the brother rained down the thanks, "Do-nothing," "Bread-consumer," "Donkey;" he endured all with bowed head. The hood of his black cowl covered his face to his eyebrows, and from his beard hung large raindrops; under his cowl, which was fastened by a cord, could be seen his bare feet, covered with mud to the ankle; his sandals he carried on his staff, so that they should not be worn out on the rough road. There was no rest for the wet and weary monk. The kitchen-master at once called through the vaulted porch, "Petre, Petre, hue acceleras: ad culinam!" (Peter, Peter, come to the kitchen, quick!)

It was a fine kitchen; now when we look at its ruins, we might believe it a chapel and a tower; but it really was only a kitchen and a chimney. For Peter this roomy kitchen had the disadvantage that he had to put it in order.

The contents of the overturned tub had spread over the marble floor, and those who had been the cause of this condition could not repair the mischief, because the Abbot was at that moment investigating their case in a corner by means of the lash. The two students knelt before him; and so somebody else must clean up the floor, and that somebody was Peter. He went obediently to work; threw off his coarse black cowl; and as he rolled up his sleeves, one could see from the fine white skin that he had not from childhood been accustomed to such slave's work. His face was still young, his features regular, and, through the dulling discipline of self-denial, immovable. He was only a brother, so the monk's tonsure had not taken the place of his blond hair; and though his eyes filled with tears, it was clearly caused only by coming suddenly from the cold into the heated kitchen. Without a word, he knelt down to clean the floor with shovel, broom, and whisk of straw.

Meanwhile, the Abbot questioned the two rascals to find out who had done the mischief. It stood to reason neither one had. According to an old proverb, Mischief has no master. That they had scuffled, their faces bore evidence; John had a black and blue spot under the eye, and Samuel a bloody scratch on his brow, but both denied any scuffle.

"Then how came this black and blue spot under your eye?" The same story suggested itself to John which Baron de Manx was to use later in a critical situation.

"When I tried to light the fire I could not find the flint, so I struck myself in the eyes with one fist and with the other I held the match to it, so when my eyes saw sparks I lighted the match by them."

The Abbot said nothing, but turned to the other: "How did you get that wound on your forehead?" Samuel, encouraged by John's example, was also ready with an excuse:

"I bit myself."

"How could you bite yourself in the forehead?"

"In the looking-glass."

"But you could not reach it!"

"Yes I could, I climbed up on the bench."

The Abbot compressed his lips till his fat cheeks stood out from each other, and then pronounced the sentence:—"Joannes quia bene mentitus est, accipiat viginti verbera; Samuel, quia male mentitus est, accipiet triginta." (John, because he has lied well, shall have twenty lashes; Samuel, because he has lied badly, shall have thirty.)

The two lads gave themselves up to weeping and howling and wiping away the tears with their fists; but in secret, while the Abbot turned away, they winked at each other slyly, and this meant, I'll not strike hard, if you won't. But the Abbot had eyes that could see without looking.

"Peter," he said to the working monk who had just finished his cleaning, "come here."

Peter obeyed. "Take these two delinquents in charge; they would handle each other with sly consideration, and avoid their punishment, your hand will let the rods fall more heavily;" and he handed him a bundle of birch rods, dipped in salt water.

Now the two lads began to howl lustily and to crawl about on their knees, in their fear. But Peter did not reach out his hand for the bundle of rods. The demon of pride had stirred his blood to insurrection; his countenance glowed; his eyes blazed; he tossed back the lock of hair from his brow, clenched his fists, and advanced one foot. He emboldened himself to speak, although he had not been questioned. "I am no hangman's slave, I never learned to beat men with a besom; lock up the culprits, and I will do their work as long as they are confined, but I do not like to whip boys."

"Petre!" said the Abbot in even tones, "Putasve quod adhuc sis dux equitum nobilium? Es servus servorum." (Do you think you are still at the head of noble knights? You are the slave of slaves.) And in order to let him feel how completely he was under the rod, he laid the bundle of sticks on the head of the defiant youth. Under this frightful burden, the uplifted head gradually sank and the lids closed over the blazing eyes. He unclenched his fists and crossed them on his breast. The handsome knight was changed again to the humble monk. He reached tremblingly for the bundle of rods, which he raised to his speechless lips:

"Parce, pater." (Spare me, father.)

But as he laid hold of the instrument of shame, whose work it is to disgrace that masterpiece of creation, man; to reduce to an animal him whom God had created in his own likeness, then once again his pride reasserted itself; he raised that noble hand, accustomed to grasp the sword hilt, whose greatest pleasure was to cut through with sharp steel helmet and armor; and which was now compelled with a jailer's scourge to belabor the bare skin of unmannerly clowns.

He was only a novice, and had not yet learned that there are seventy-seven devils in the body, and that the body receives as many

blows as there are devils. He had learned that we must regard the nail-studded belt and the hooked lash as our benefactors, and that to scourge the body at night until the blood flowed was an equivalent for a day of prayer. But to beat howling students was still a horror to him. Soon he will become accustomed to that too. At this moment was heard in the hall the voice of the Prior. "Petre ad me tendas." ("Peter, come to me.") Peter sighed with lightened heart and handed back the bunch of rods to the Abbot. "The Prior calls me."

"He commands you; hasten to him."

Peter wanted to lay aside his wet cowl and put on his coarse sandals. "Go just as you are," said the Abbot, "either you will come back here barefooted, or you will go hence in another garb."

The Jesuit Brother dared not inquire concerning what he did not understand, he knew only to obey, so Peter went barefooted to the Prior.

"Dearly beloved son," said the Prior to him, "it is now two years that you have practised obedience. You have learned to be poor, to beg, to take care of the sick, and to do the work of a day laborer. You have six years yet, before you can be numbered among the fathers. Three years you must pass in the library, must learn Saint Augustine by heart, and also the Turkish, Arabic, Greek, and Russian languages; for it is possible that when you are through your studies you may be sent into the desert of Arabia to convert the heathen, or to Russia to encourage to steadfastness the faithful of the Church who are persecuted by Ivan the Terrible. So then you must spend three years among your books, keeping awake night and day, and forcing your way into learning as yet unknown to you. The next three years, you must wander about among hostile peoples, where crucified martyrs and impaled saints will mark your way. The seventh year, you must make a pilgrimage into Spain to endure the test of your fidelity. If you endure all these tests, and all these temptations, then may you be numbered among the fathers. All this long way you can put behind you with one step, and out of all this learning you need only the one word, I will. This day you may lay down your novitiate, and tomorrow arise Father Peter, if you will voluntarily and obediently undertake this mission. Read!" And he handed him the letter of the Patroness.

When the young monk glanced at the hand-writing, (he must have known it before) his whole countenance expressed sudden horror; he held the letter in his hand as if afraid to read it; then he took it, and as he read, his brow wrinkled, his face expressed contempt, and through his open lips, one could see his tightly closed teeth. He read the letter through and let his hand fall listlessly.

"We have chosen you," said the Prior. "To-morrow you will become Father Peter, and need only to say, 'I will'."

The youth looked steadfastly at the ground.

"Have you become speechless?"

The youth raised his head; his face had regained its manly calm. "Give me time for consideration, my father," he said, with a sweetly ringing voice, in which was heard the sincere vibration of a naive nature. "Let me compare the beginning and the end of this course. Surely it is not so far for me to the desert of Bab-el-Mandeb, or to the ice-sea of Siberia, as from the threshold of this monastery to the gate of the Madocsany castle. Neither the raging of Ivan the Terrible at his gory banquets, nor the nightly howl of the hyena, prowling after the dead through the desert of sand, is to me so terrible as one whisper of this woman. More rapidly can I learn Turkish and Arabic, Greek and Russian, and, if necessary, Sanskrit and Mongolian, than the one word, 'I will,' Grant me until to-morrow early to think of this."