Mor Jokai

The Day of Wrath

Publio

The Day of Wrath

Maurus Jókai

Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER I.
THE BIRD OF ILL-OMEN.

Whoever has traversed the long single street of Hétfalu will have noticed three houses whose exterior plainly shows that nobody dwells in them.

The first of these three houses is outside the village on a great green hill, round which the herds of the village peacefully crop the pasture. Only now and then does one or other of these quiet beasts start back when it suddenly comes upon a white skeleton, or a bleached bullock-horn, in the thickest patches of the high grass. The house itself has no roof, and the soot with which years of heavy rains have bedaubed the walls, points to the fact that once upon a time the place was burnt out. Now, dry white stalks of straw wave upon the mouldering balustrades.

The iron supports have been taken out of the windows, on the threshold thorns and thistles grow luxuriantly. There is no trace of a path—perhaps there never was one.

The land surrounding this house is full of all sorts of fragrant flowers.

The second house stands in the centre of the village, and was the castle of the lord of the manor. It is a dismal wilderness of a place. A stone wall, long since fallen to pieces, separated it at one time from the road. Now only a few fragments of this wall still stand upright, and the wild jasmine creeps all over it, casting down into the road its poisonous dark red cherries. The door lolls against its pillars, it looks as if it had once upon a time been torn from its hinges and then left to take care of itself. The house itself, indeed, is intact, only the windows have been taken out and the empty spaces bricked in. Every door, too, has been walled up, boards have been nailed over the ventilators in the floor, the white stone staircase leading up to the hall has been broken off and propped up against the wall, and the same fate has befallen a red marble bench on the ground floor.

Here and there the cement has fallen away from the front of the house, and layers of red bricks peep through the gap. In other places large heaps of white stone are piled up in front of the building. In the rear of it, which used to look out upon a garden, it is plain that a good many of the windows have also been built in, and, to obliterate all trace of them, the whole wall has been whitewashed. All round about many fruit-trees seem to have been rooted up, and for three years running, the caterpillar-host has fallen upon the remnant; nobody looks after them, and they are left to perish one by one, consumed by yellow mould.

The third house is a little shanty at the far end of the village, shoved away behind a large ugly granary, with its little yard full of reeds, in the midst of which is a crooked, dilapidated pump. The panes of glass in the lead-encased frames have been frosted over, the marl of the thatched chimney

is crumbling away, and the whole of the roof is of a beautiful green, like velvet, due to the luxuriantly spreading moss.

It is thirty years since these three houses were inhabited.

In the little hut, on the reed-thatched roof of which the screech-owl now lays its eggs, dwelt thirty years ago, a crazy old woman, they called her Magdolna. She must have been for a long time out of her wits; some said she had been born so, others maintained that the roof had fallen right upon her head and injured her brain; others again affirmed that the marriage of her only daughter with the hangman was the cause of her mental aberration. There were some who even remembered the time when this woman was rich and respected, and then suddenly she had become a beggar, and subsequently a crazy beggar. Be that as it may, in those days this old woman exercised a peculiar influence over the superstitious peasantry.

A sort of awe-inspiring exaltation seemed to take possession of this creature whenever she stood at the threshold of her hut, within the walls of which she usually remained in a brown study insensible to her surroundings for days together.

When, at such times of exaltation, she stepped forth into the street, all the dogs in the village would fall a howling as they are wont to do when the headsman goes his rounds. All who met her timidly shrunk aside, for, not infrequently, she would foretell the hours of their death, and cases were known in which her prophesies had come true. She could tell at a single glance which of the young unmarried women did honour to their *pártás*1 and which did not. She could read in the faces of the children the names of their parents, and she often gave them names very different from the names they bore. The maids and young married women of the village therefore, not unnaturally, trembled before her.

1 *Pártá*—head-dress of the young peasant maids.

She recognised the stolen horse in front of the cart, and shouted to the farmer who drove it: "You stole that, and it will be stolen back again!"

At other times she would sit in the church-door, lay her crutch across the threshold, and wait to see who would dare to step across it. Woe then to whomsoever had transgressed any of the commandments! All through the summer the ague would plague him, his oxen would die, the tares would choke his corn, his limbs would be racked with pleurisy, or he would be nearly mauled to death in the village tavern.

Often she sat for hours at home, among her thorns and thistles, sobbing and moaning, and at such times the common folks believed that the whole district would be visited by a hailstorm. Sometimes she roamed about for weeks, nobody knew where, nobody knew why, and during all that time the hosts of grasshoppers, wood-lice, spiders, caterpillars, and other Heaven-sent plagues, multiplied terribly throughout the land; but the moment the old woman returned they all disappeared again in a day without leaving a trace behind them.

At one time they fancied she was at the point of death.

She lay outside her hut close to the well and drank incessantly of its water. At last she collapsed altogether, she could not even lift her hands. The passers-by perceived that she was parched with thirst, was wrestling with death, and yet could not die. If they had but given her a drink of cold water, she would immediately have been freed from the torments of life, but nobody durst approach to give her to drink. On that same day the lightning thrice struck the village, and such a deluge of

rain descended that the water flooded the roads and invaded the houses.

The next day there was nothing at all the matter with the old woman, but she went about bowed down, shaking and leaning heavily on her crutch as at other times.

When the spring of 1831 was passing away, all sorts of terrible premonitory signs warned the people of the frightful visitation which was about to befall humanity. Nature herself made the people anxious and uncomfortable. There were showers of falling stars, it rained blood in various places, death-headed moths flew about in the evenings, wolves, tame and fawning like dogs, appeared in the village and let themselves be beaten to death before the thresholds of the houses.

What was going to happen?—nobody could tell.

Everyone augured, feared, felt that mourning and woe were close at hand; yes, everyone.

The trees made haste to put forth their blossoms, they made even greater haste to produce their ripened fruit. All nature knew not what to do, man least of all.

In those days when a single good word spoken in season, a single lucid idea might have meant the saving of many lives, the sole prophet in the whole country-side was this crazy old woman, who, in the dolorous exaltation of her deranged mind, sometimes blindly blurted out things on which the future was to impress the seal of truth. But, for the most part, her multitudinous, ambiguous utterances might be interpreted this way or that, according to the liking of her hearers, and obscured rather than revealed the future.

When the summer came, with its terribly hot days, the woman's madness seemed to culminate in downright frenzy, for whole nights together she went shrieking through the village. The dogs crept forth from under the gates to meet her, and she sat down beside them, put her arms round their heads, and they would howl together in hideous unison. Then she would go into the houses weeping and moaning, and would ask for a glass of water, and would moisten her hands and her eyes therewith. In some of the houses she would simply say: "Why don't you smoke the room out, there's a vile odour of death in it;" in other places she would ask for a Prayer Book, and would fold down the page at the Office of Prayers for the Dead. Or she would send messages to the other world through people who were on their legs hale and hearty, and would tell them not to forget these messages.

"Get a cross made for you!" was her most usual greeting. And woe betide the family into whose windows she cried: "Get two crosses made! Get three made! One for yourself, one for your wife, one for each of your sons and each of your daughters!"

The people lived in desperate expectation; they would have run away had they known whither to run.

And what then were the wise and learned doing all this time, they who knew right well that a mortal danger was approaching; for they had read of its ravages, they had looked upon the very face of it in pictures, they knew the pace at which it was travelling day by day—what did they do to soothe the anguish of the people, and inspire them with confidence in the tender mercies of God?

All they did was to have a cemetery ready dug for those who were to die in heaps in the course of the year.

CHAPTER II.
THE HEADSMAN'S FAMILY.

The house of the headsman is surrounded by a stone wall, its door is studded with huge nails, acacia trees rustle in front of it. Its windows are hidden by a high fence. On its roof from time to time something flap-flaps like a black flag; it is a raven which has chosen the roof of that house as a refuge. No other animal likes the hangman. The dogs bay at him, the oxen run bellowing out of his way, only the ravens acknowledge him as their host. They are his own birds.

It is late in the evening, the sun has long since set, it may be about nine or ten o'clock, and yet the sky is unusually bright. Everywhere a strange reflected glare torments the eye of man. Not a cloud is visible; there is not a star in the heavens, yet a persistent, murky yellowness embraces the whole sky like a shining mist, as if the night, instead of putting on her usual cinder-grey garment, had clothed herself in flame-coloured weeds. Any sounds that may be audible seem as if they come from an immeasurable distance, and are hollow and awe-inspiring.

Close to the horizon the pointed steeples of Hétfalu are visible, their black outlines stand out in sharp contrast against the burning sky.

The whole district is empty and deserted. At other times, in the summer evenings, one would have seen tired yet boisterous groups of peasants returning home from working in the fields and hastening back to their respective villages. The voice of the vesper bell would everywhere have been resounding, the sweetly-sad songs of the good-humoured peasant girls would have soothed the ear, mingled with the jingle of the bells of the homeing kine, and the joyous barking of the dogs bounding on in front of their masters. Now everything is dumb. The fields for the most part lie fallow and overgrown by weeds and thistles, never seen before. In other places the green wheat crop, choked by tares, has already been mown down. Means of communication have everywhere been interrupted by the sanitary cordons. The high road is covered with broad patches of grass on both sides. Men hold handkerchiefs to their mouths and noses, and do not trust themselves to breathe. The tongues of the bells have everywhere been removed. At the end of every village stands a good-sized four-cornered piece of ground surrounded by a ditch, and within it, here and there, graves have been dug well beforehand.

Throughout this lonely wilderness the furious barking of a watch-dog suddenly resounds, to which all the dogs in the distant village instantly begin to respond. Two men are fumbling at the latch of the headsman's door, and the chained dog within the courtyard, scenting a stranger, gives him a hostile greeting.

"Who is there?" inquires from within an unpleasant, hoarsely screeching voice, the owner whereof at the same time soothing the big dog which, snarling fiercely, thrusts his nose between the door and the lintel, and snaps from time to time through the opening.

"Open the door, Mekipiros, and don't bawl!" answers one of the new arrivals, impatiently beating with his fists upon the door. "There's no necessity for closing the door either, for who is likely to come? Even if you left it wide open, nobody would stray in, I'll be bound, save your pal, Old Nick, and here he is."

At this well-known voice the wolf-hound ceased to bark, and when the door was opened leaped joyously upon the neck of the new-comer, whining and sniffing.

"Send this filthy sea-bear to the deuce, Mekipiros, can't you? It's licking my very nose off."

The person so addressed was a curious sport of nature. It was a square-set creature dressed completely in women's clothes. Its features were those of a semi-bestial type. It had an immense round head covered with short, tangled, unkempt hair, a large broad mouth, a stumpy,

wide-spreading nose, a projecting forehead furrowed with deep wrinkles, thick bushy eyebrows, and one half of the horny-skinned face was covered by immature furry whiskers. And this masculine creature wore women's clothes! On perceiving the new-comer, it seized the yelping dog, big as a calf though it was, by the chain with a bony hand and hurled it backwards, grinning and grunting all the time without any apparent cause.

"Come! go in and don't stand staring aimlessly about," said the new-comer turning to his comrade, who was standing in melancholy amazement on the threshold, wrapped up in a large mantle, with a broad-brimmed hat on his head.

The dog accompanied the guests as far as the door of his kennel, sniffing all the time at the heels of the stranger, whilst the gabbling Mekipiros tugged away at its chain. A hideous moustache had been painted on the monster's lip either with blood or red chalk, and he tried to call attention to it with extreme self-satisfaction.

"Is the master at home, or the missus, eh! Mekipiros?" inquired the first-comer.

"The master is singing and the mistress is dancing," replied the half-man with a bestial chuckle.

"Tell them that we have arrived, come! off you go, and look sharp about it," and with that he gave a kick accompanied by a vigorous buffet to the monster, who regarded him for a time with a broad grin, as if expecting a repetition of the dose, and then plunged clumsily through the kitchen door bellowing with mirth. Meanwhile the two men remained outside in the courtyard.

One of them was a tall fair youth clad from head to foot in a greasy leather costume. He had round washed-out features, a callous sort of apathy played around his lips, and a cold indifference to suffering was visible in his red-rimmed green eyes. What struck one most about him was the furtive, prying expression of his face; he was evidently a spy by nature, although he attempted to conceal his real character beneath a mask of stupidity and absent-mindedness. But he pricked up his ears at every word spoken in his presence. He reminded one of a snake which, when captured, stiffens itself out and pretends to be dead, and will let itself be broken in pieces before it will move.

The other youth was a pale-faced man, plainly a prey to the most overwhelming depression. The ends of his little black moustache straggled uncared for about the corners of his mouth, his hat was pressed right down over his eyes. You could see at a glance that his mind and his body were wandering miles apart from each other.

There they stood, then, in the courtyard of the headsman's house. The appearance of this courtyard formed an overwhelming contrast with the idea one generally pictures to one's self of such a place. A pretty green lawn covered the whole courtyard, clinging to the walls were creeping fig and apricot trees; in the background was a pretty vine; heart-shaped flower-beds had been cut out of the lawn, and they were full of fine wallflowers and the most fragrant sylvan flowers of every species; further away stood melon beds, sending their far-reaching shoots in every direction, red currant bushes, a weeping willow or two, yellow rose bushes, myriad hued full-blown poppies—and little white red-eyed rabbits were bounding all over the grass plot.

And yet this is the dwelling of the headsman.

"You can come in!" cried a strong, penetrating, sonorous woman's voice from within, and the same instant Mekipiros bounded through the door with his huge shaggy head projecting far in front of him. It was plain that he had not quitted the room voluntarily, but in consequence of a vigorous impulsion from behind.

The man in leather now shoved his melancholy comrade on in front of him, and the headsman's door closed behind them.

It was a kitchen into which they had entered, in no way different from the hearth and home of ordinary men. The plates and dishes shone with cleanliness, everything was in apple-pie order, the fire flickered merrily beneath the chimney, and yet—fancy was continually finding something in every object reminiscent of blood-curdling circumstances. That axe, for instance, stuck in a block in front of the fireplace? Two years ago the executioner had beheaded a parricide—perchance 'twas on that very block!

That rope, again, attached to that bucket, that curved piece of iron glowing red in the fire, that heavy chain dangling down from the chimney—who knows of what accursed horrible scenes they may not have been the witnesses at some time or other? Yet, perhaps, there may be nothing sinister at all about them; perhaps they are employed for quite simple, honest, culinary purposes. Still, this is the headsman's house, remember!

Here and there on the walls black spots are visible. What are they? Blood, perhaps. One's eye cannot tear itself away from them; again and again it goes back to them, and the mind cannot reconcile itself to the thought: perchance this may be the blood of some beast, the blood of some common fattened beast which man must kill that he may eat and live—for is not this the dwelling of the headsman?

A woman is roasting and frying over the hearth, a tall, muscularly built virago, to whose sinewy arms, dome-like breast, red shining cheeks, and burning eyes, the flickering flames gave a savage, uncanny look; her fine black locks are wound up in a large knot at the back of her head, her large eyebrows have grown together, and the upper surface of her red, swollen lips are amber-coloured with masculine down.

"Sit down!" she cries to the new arrivals with a rough growling voice. "You are hungry, eh? Well, soon you shall have something to eat. There's the table"—and she went on cooking and piling up the fire; as it roared up the chimney it gave her red face an infernal expression. This was the headsman's wife.

The melancholy youth sat down abstractedly at the table, the other strode up to the hearth and began whispering to the woman, whilst from time to time they cast glances at the stranger-guest.

The man's whispers were inaudible, but it was possible to catch every word the woman said, for, try as she might, she could not soften down her thunderous voice into a whisper.

"I know him," said she, "he will soon get used to this place.... Nobody will look for him here.... Get away from here? How can he?"

Presently she placed a dish of boiled flesh before her guests. The pale youth picked at his food slowly and sadly, the other attacked it with ravenous haste, throwing a word over his shoulder to the woman the while, or urging his comrade to eat, or flinging bones to the dog and kicking him viciously in the ribs when he snapped them up.

"Can one have a word with the old man?" he inquired of the woman.

"Let him bide, the old man is plagued with his devils again. Don't you hear how he sings? Why, he voices it as lustily as any Slovak student on St Lucia's day."

And indeed from some room far away now came this verse of a well-known hymn, sung in a deep

vibrating voice full of a woeful, contrite tremulousness:

"Oh, Lord, the number of our sins And vileness, who shall purge? Withhold the fury of Thy wrath, Though we deserve its pouring forth, And stay Thy chastening scourge!"

Melancholy, heart-rending was the sense of penitence conveyed by this deep, vibrating, bell-like voice. A penitential hymn in the house of the headsman!

The sad-faced youth shivered at the sound of this voice and seemed to awake suddenly from out of a reverie. He passed his hand once or twice across his forehead as if to rally his wits and reduce the chaos within and around him to some sort of order, but gradually sank back again into his former lethargy.

A short time afterwards the same hymn was heard again; but the voice of the singer this time was not the sonorous, manly voice they had heard before, it was a heavenly, pure, childlike voice which now began to sing, full of the magic charm and sweetness of a crystal harmonica:

"Yet know we, Lord, whoso repents And turns his heart to Thee, Shall aye find favour in Thy sight; Nor wilt thou hide from him Thy light, Thy mercy he shall see."

Angels in Heaven could not have sung more sweetly than the voice that sang this verse. Who could it be? An angel proclaiming remission of sins in the house of the headsman!

"So the old cut-throat still keeps the girl under a glass case, eh?"

"He wants to bring her up as a saint on purpose to aggravate me, for he knows very well that I never could endure anything of the saintly sort."

"Apparently the old chap is stark staring mad."

"He is possessed by devils, I fancy. Last week three of his 'prentices bolted because they could not stand his sanctimoniousness any longer. Before dinner he would insist on reading to them out of the Bible for half an hour at a stretch, and if any of them dared to laugh he flung him out of doors like a puppy dog; you may imagine what a pretty figure a headsman cuts who is always preaching about the other world, and proclaiming the word of the Lord with his clenched fists."

"I'll be bound to say he has even taught Mekipiros to go down on his hams."

"Ho, ho, ho! Call him in! Come hither, Mekipiros, you bear's cub, you!"

Mekipiros came in.

"Come hither, I would box your chaps. There, take that! What, still grinning, eh? There's another then! Weep immediately, sirrah! can't you! Pull a wry mug! So! Put your hands together! Cast down your eyes! So! And now fire away!"

And the monster did indeed begin to recite a prayer. One might perhaps have expected him to mumble something altogether unintelligible. But no! He recited it to the end with a solemn voice, and his eyes remained cast down the whole time. His face even began to assume a more human expression, and when he came to the words which announced remission of sins to the truly penitent sinner, two heavy tear-drops welled forth and ran down his rough wrinkled face.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the headsman's wife, and she smacked the forehead of the suppliant

repeatedly with the palm of her hand; "a lot of good may it do you!"

Suddenly, like the rolling echo of a descending thunderbolt, a song of praise uttered in an awe-inspiring voice from the adjoining room cut short this inhuman mockery.

"Who thunders so loudly in the lurid heavens above? What means this mighty quaking? Why doth the round earth move?"

At the same instant the boiling water overflowed from the caldron and put the fire out, and they were all in darkness. There was a dead silence, when suddenly a blast of wind caught the half-open door and slammed it to violently, and in the dead silence that followed could be heard something like the cry of a bird of ill-omen or the yell of a maniac flying from the pursuit of his own soul: "Death!—a bloody death—a death of horror!"

Gradually the last sounds of this voice died away in the distance. The chained watch-dog sent a dismal howl after it.

And when the feeble light of the tallow candles shone again through the darkness, it fell upon three shapes which had sunk upon their knees in terror, the two 'prentices of the headsman, and the monster. But the proud, defiant virago turned towards the elder of the 'prentices, and looked him up and down contemptuously.

"Then you, too, are one of them, eh?" cried she.

"Did you not hear the cry of the death-bird?" stammered he.

"What are you afraid of? Tis only my half-crazy old mother."

At night the headsman's apprentices sleep on the floor of the loft. The headsman himself has a room overlooking the courtyard; Mekipiros slept in the stable outside with the watch-dog.

All was silent. Outside, the wind had died away, not the leaf of a tree was stirring; one could distinguish the deep breathing of the sleepers.

At such times the lightest sound fills the sleepless watcher with fear. Sometimes he fancies that a man hidden beneath the bed is slowly raising his head, or that someone is lifting a latch, or the wind shakes the door as if someone were rattling it from the outside. There is a humming and a buzzing all around one. Night beetles have somehow or other lit upon a piece of paper, and they crinkle it so that it sounds as if someone were writing in the dark. Out in the street men seem to be running to and fro and muttering hoarsely in each other's ears. The church clocks strike one after another, thrice, four times—one cannot tell how often. The time is horribly long and the night is an abyss of blackness.

On a bed of straw, with a coarse coverlet thrown over them, the headsman's two apprentices sleep side by side. Are they really asleep? Can they sleep at all in such a place? Yet their eyes are closed. No, one of them is not asleep. When he perceives that his comrade does not move, he slowly pushes the coverlet from off him and creeps on all fours into the inner room; there he lies down flat on his stomach and peeps through a crevice in the rafters. Then he arises, creeps on tiptoe to the chimney and knocks at the partition wall three times, then he climbs down from his loft by means of a ladder, withdraws the ladder from the opening, and whistles to the watch-dog to come forth. One can hear how the chained beast scratches his neck, and growling and sniffing lies down before the door of the loft.

Meanwhile the other apprentice has been carefully observing every movement of his companion with half open eyes. Whenever the first riser turns towards him he feigns to be asleep; but as soon as he takes his eyes off him he opens his own eyes again and looks after him.

When the last sound has died away, he also arises from his sleepless couch and looks through that crevice into the inner room through which his comrade had looked before. It was easy to find, the ray of a lamp pierced through the crevice in the beam, and that ray comes from the hangman's bedroom.

Carefully he bends down and looks through this little peep-hole.

He sees before him a room furnished with the most rigorous simplicity. Close to the wall stands a black chest, fastened with three locks; in the middle of the room is a strong wooden table; further away are two beds, a large one and a small one; there are also two armless four-legged chairs; in the window recess are a few shabby books; above the beds is a heavy blunderbuss. The pale light of the lamp falls upon the table. Sitting beside it is a child reading out of the Bible. At the feet of the child lies a man with his face pressed down to the ground.

The man is of mighty stature—a giant, and he lays down his head, covered with a wildered shock of grey hair, at the feet of a child whose beauty rivets the eye and makes the heart stand still.

It is a pretty little light-haired angel, twelve or thirteen years of age, her hair is of a silvery lightness, like soft feather-grass or moonbeams, her face is of a heavenly whiteness, she has the smile of an angel. The smile of this white face is so unearthly, that neither joy nor good-humour is reflected from it, but something of a higher order, which the human heart is not pure enough to comprehend.

The old man lies there on the ground, with his fingers clutching his grey locks, and the ground on which his face has rested is wet. But the little girl, with hair like soft feather-grass, reads with a honey-sweet voice verses full of mercy and pardon from the Holy Book. From time to time her little fingers turn a leaf over, and whenever she comes to the name of the Lord she raises gentle eyes full of devout reverence.

"Pray, pray, my angel, go on praying! God will hear thy words. Oh! thy father is indeed a sinner, a great, great sinner!"

The child leant over him, kissed his grey head, and went on reading.

The old man fell a-weeping bitterly.

"Oh! thy father's hands are so bloody! Who can ever wash them clean? I have killed so many men who never offended me, never did me any harm. Oh! how they feared death! how sad they were as they waited for me! how they looked and looked to see whether a white flag would not be hoisted after all! Oh! how they begged and prayed, how they kissed my hands in order that I might wait a moment, but one moment more—life was so sweet to them, yes, so sweet! And yet I had to kill them. I murdered them—because the law commanded it."

A deep and bitter sob choked the old man's voice.

"Who will answer for me when God asks in a voice of thunder: 'Who has dared to deal out death—the prerogative of God alone?' Who will answer for me, who will defend me, when my judges will be so many pale, cold shapes, me in whose hands were Death and Terror? And if we meet together above there—or, perchance, down below, we, the executioner and the executed, and sit

down at one table! oh! those bloody souls!—moving about headless, perchance, even in the other world, oh! horrible, horrible! To have to answer for the head of a man! And what if he were innocent besides, what if the judge erred, and the blood of the condemned cries out to Heaven for vengeance? Alas! oh, Mighty Heavenly Father!"

The grey-headed giant writhed on the ground convulsively, and smote his bosom with his clenched fists. One could now catch a glimpse of his face. It was a hard, weather-beaten countenance, bronzed by the suns of many a year, large patches of his beard were grizzled, but his eyebrows were of a deep black. He was quite beside himself, every muscle writhed and quivered.

The little girl knelt down beside him and tenderly stroked his sweat-covered forehead, took his head into her lap, and did not seem to fear him terrible as he looked—like one of the damned on the verge of the grave.

The old man kissed the girl's hands and feet, and timidly, tenderly embracing her with his large, muscular, tremulous arms, bent over her, hid his face in her lap, and sobbing and groaning, spoke in a voice near to choking—it was as though his very soul was bursting away from his bosom along with these terrible words.

"Look, my little girl!—once the judges condemned a young man to death—my God! there was no trace of a beard upon his face, so young was he. For three days he was placed in the pillory, and everybody wept who beheld him—the youth was accused of having murdered his father. He could not deny that he slept in the same room, and a bloody knife was concealed in the bed. In vain he said that he was innocent, in vain he called God to witness—he must needs die. On the day when he was beheaded, two women, weeping and wailing, and dressed in deep mourning, ran beside the felon's car to the place of execution. One was his dear mother, the other his loving sister. In vain they screamed that he was innocent, that he ought not to die, and, even if he were guilty they forgave him the mourning dresses they wore, though they were the sufferers and had lost everything. It was useless, he must needs die. When he sat down in front of me in the chair of death, and took off his clothes, even then he turned to me and said: 'Woe is me that I must die, for I am innocent.' I bound up his eyes. But my hand shook as I aimed the blow at him, and the blood that spurted on to my hand burnt like fire. Oh, my child! that blood was innocent. A year ago I executed a notorious highwayman, and as I was ascending the ladder with him, he turned and laughed in my face: 'Ha, ha!' cried he, 'it was in this very place that you beheaded a fine young fellow whom they accused of having murdered his father; it was I who killed that father of his and hid the knife in his bed, and now hang me up and look sharp about it.' Oh, my child, thou fair angel, beseech God that *He* will let me forget those words!"

"Go to sleep, go to sleep, my good father. God is good, God is wrath with no man. Why dost thou weep? Thou art not a bad man, surely, else thou wouldst not love me. Look now! Last summer two children went from the village into the woods to pluck flowers, there Heaven's warfare overtook them, and when they sought a refuge beneath a tree to avoid the rain, the lightning struck both of them dead. Yet the lightning is God's own weapon, and both the children were innocent. God knows wherefore He gives life and death, we do not. Go to sleep, my good father! God is everywhere near us, and turns away from nobody who lifts up his eyes towards Him. Look, I see Him everywhere. He watches over me when I sleep, He holds me by the hand when I walk in the darkness; I see Him if I look up at the sky, I see Him when I cast down my eyes. He abandons nobody. Kiss me and go to sleep!"

The big muscular man slowly struggled to his knees. He pressed the fair child to his bosom and raised his hard rough face. He looked up, his lips quivered, he seemed to be praying, and his tears flowed apace. Then he stood up, and the little girl embraced his arm, that huge arm of his like the

trunk of a tree. Fumbling his way along, he allowed himself to be led to his bed, and plunged down upon it fully dressed as he was. After turning about restlessly for a moment or two, a loud snore like thunder, which made the whole room vibrate, proclaimed that he had fallen asleep at last. But his slumbers were restless and uneasy. Frequently he would start and cry aloud as if in agony, or utter broken unintelligible half sentences and groan horribly.

But the fair little girl extinguished the lamp before she got ready to lie down herself. The pale light of the moon shone through the window and made her face whiter, her hair more silvery than ever, as if by enchantment. It shone right upon her snow-white bed. It shone upon her soft eyebrows, her smiling face, upon her sweet lips as they tremulously prayed.

So slumber came upon her in the shape of a snow-white moonbeam. With a smiling face, hands clasped together, and praying lips, she fell asleep—and her guardian angel stood at the head of her snow-white bed.

The youth had watched the whole scene through the rift in the door with bated breath and great amazement. When he rose to his feet, he remained for a long time, rapt in a brown study, leaning against the wall and staring blankly before him, lost in wonder that two such different beings should be slumbering together beneath the same roof.

He sighed deeply. In the stillness of the night it seemed to him as if he heard the echo of his own sigh coming back to him in whispering words. He listened attentively—he could plainly distinguish the deep droning voice of the headsman's wife, which seemed to him to come from somewhere below at the opposite end of the house.

He went in the direction of the voice, and when he came to the place where his comrade had knocked thrice on the boards near the chimney, he distinctly heard two people talking to each other in a low voice. It was the headsman's wife and her lover.

The youth turned away full of loathing. Nevertheless, it soon occurred to him that this tempestuous *tête-à-tête* could have little to do with love. The voice of the headsman's wife frequently arose in anger.

"Let him go to hell!" he heard her exclaim.

"Hush! hush!" murmured the young 'prentice, "somebody might overhear us."

"Pooh! God and men both slumber now."

What could they be talking about? Whom did they want to harm? Such folks had it not in them to love anyone. Woe to those whom they had cause to remember!

So he crept softly to the spot and listened.

"If these people should rise they will not leave one stone upon another," the headsman's apprentice was saying.

"And do you suppose they will rise up because you tell them to?"

"I have thought the matter well out. The common folks about here do not love their masters, there is no reason why they should. Their lords have kicked and cuffed and spat upon them, and treated them worse than dogs. You have but to cast a burning fagot into the mass of discontent, and it will flame up at once. Even the wisest among them who do know something about it, are the most

narrow-minded. If there be two versions of a matter they always believe the most absurd one. I told them to be on their guard against danger. I told them to look after their wells and their granaries, as their masters wanted to poison them. When they asked why? I told them that the whole kingdom was surrounded on every side by enemies, and the gentry wanted to raise a pestilence in the kingdom to keep the enemy out of it. At my words the common people at once became suspicious, for they have heard for a long time that the gentry were expecting a pestilence, and as this was the first explanation of the prophesied epidemic that had come to their ears, they believed it at once. Suspicion is contagious. And as the gentry have since had the imprudence to order a separate graveyard to be dug for the corpses of those who may die of the cholera (naturally in order to prevent the dead bodies from spreading the contagion), the common folks have believed my words as if I were a prophet, and quite expect that the gentry are going to poison the poor people. The digging of the churchyard they take to be a first move in that direction."

"Devilish clever of you, Ivan, I must say."

"And then don't forget the announcement of the Kassa doctors to the effect that if the common folks will not take the salutary bismuth powder voluntarily, it must be forced upon them, thrown into their wells and scattered about their barns. It looks as if everyone was intent upon playing into our hands."

"Does the young chap upstairs suspect anything?"

"I don't think so, but let us speak in a lower tone. I promised to hide him here. He fancies he has shot his captain dead. He caught him with his sweetheart and banged away at him; the man fell to the ground, but he did not die. But the young fellow ran away and deserted his colours. I have been persuading him to desert for a long time, as I had need of him. This, in fact, is the third time he has deserted, and if they catch him now they will undoubtedly string him up. Not a bad idea for him to fly to the headsman's house, eh? They will seek him everywhere but under the gallows-tree. And if they find him here, they won't have very much more trouble with him, that's all."

"Ho, ho, ho! Suppose he were to hear you?"

And he did hear!

"You see, this was my object all along. I shall put his pursuers on his track in any case, and they will capture him here and take him to Hétfalu, where the court-martial will pronounce sentence of death, and then have him exposed in the pillory. All the common folk about Hétfalu love the youth as if he was their own son, but they hate his father like the devil. It will be no very great masterpiece to stir up the people in these troublous times, and when they see the young fellow led out to be hanged they will be quite ready to seize their scythes and dung-forks, set him free, raise him on their shoulders, and rush with him to the castle of his father (who, by the way, has done his best to hound his son to death), and level it with the ground, and there you have a peasant revolt in full swing straight off."

"But will the lad consent to be put at the head of such an enterprise?"

"Never fear! Death is an awful prospect. There is no road, however terrible, which a man will not take in order to avoid it. Besides, at such times a man is not himself, but does everything almost unconsciously, and thus our names will not appear in the business at all; and if it is put down, he will be looked upon as the ringleader. Not the shadow of a suspicion will fall upon us."

"Bravo, Ivan! I could kiss you for this."

"A more amazing popular rebellion than this will be has never been known. From village to village the rumour will fly that his own son has risen against his poisoner of a father at the head of the people, has cut to pieces every member of his family, and levelled his ancestral halls to the ground. He will be looked upon as a public avenger. Horribly black rumours will be noised abroad all over the kingdom, and at the tidings thereof the people will run downright mad with savage fury, and the gentry will not know which way to turn to escape the unforeseen danger which will suddenly break out at their very doors."

"You are the Devil's own son, Ivan; come and let me cuddle you."

The youth rose from the chimney-place trembling in every limb. He had heard every word they said.

For an instant he remained standing there quite beside himself, half mad, half senseless from sheer terror and amazement. Presently he began to gaze about him with desperate alertness, like a wild beast that has fallen into a trap and looks eagerly for a way out of it, rallying all its powers for a final struggle, becoming resourceful and inventive in proportion to its peril, and forgetting the very instinct of life in the longing for freedom, at last gets to fear nobody and nothing. After fruitless struggles it surrenders in despair, lies down, closes its eyes, and the next instant once more begins the hopeless fight for liberty.

The youth looked down through the opening in the floor. The ladder had been removed, and in the courtyard below a big shaggy dog was slouching surlily about and shaking its collar, and from time to time it would tear at its skin with its teeth or worry its tail and bay at the moon.

And now there is a good sharp knife in the youth's hands. He sticks it between his teeth and looks carefully around him. In case of need he would have risked a fight with the dog, and perhaps killed it; but this could not happen without a great deal of noise, and he wished, at any price, to escape unnoticed.

The fence, too, surrounding the enclosure, was very high, how was he to get over it? Nowhere could he see the ladder.

At the extreme end of the house, right opposite the windows of the headsman's bedroom, was a large mulberry tree, whose wide-spreading branches bent down over the roof of the house. With the help of these branches one could easily get to the fence, and then a bold leap down from the top of it would do the rest.

Like a panther escaping from its cage the young man crept along the narrow window-ledge of the garret with his knife between his teeth. Wriggling along on his belly he clutched hold of the ridge of the house, and crawled cautiously on till he came to the branches of the mulberry-tree, then he seized an overhanging branch, clambered up it and scrambled to the very end of it—and all so quietly, without making the least noise.

From the extreme edge of the branch, however, to the top of the fence he had to make a timely spring, and in so doing overestimated the strength of the branch on which he stood—with a great crash it broke beneath him, and he remained clinging like grim death to the fence half-way up.

At the sound of the snapping branch the watch-dog became aware of the fugitive, and rushed barking towards him; and while he was struggling with all his might to scramble up to the top of the fence it seized him by one of the tails of his coat and furiously tried to drag him down.

"Who is that?" a loud voice suddenly roared. The headsman had been aroused by the noise outside

his window, and was now looking down into the courtyard. He there perceived a man quite unknown to him clambering up the fence, while the dog was tugging away at him to bring him down. "Ho, there! stop, whoever you are!" he thundered, and mad with rage he seized the musket and took aim at the fugitive. His eyes were wild and bloodshot.

Then a white hand lowered the weapon, and a clear ringing childish voice from behind him exclaimed:

"Wilt thou slay yet again, oh, my father?"

The man's hand sank down. For a moment he was motionless, and his face grew very pale. Then the calm look of self-possession came back to him. He embraced the child who had pushed the gun aside. Then he took aim once more. There was a loud report, and the watch-dog, without so much as a yelp, fell to the ground stiff and stark. The fugitive with a final effort leaped over the fence.

CHAPTER III.
A CHILDISH MALEFACTOR.

That house which stands all deserted in the middle of Hétfalu was not always of such a doleful appearance.

Its windows which are now nailed up or bricked in were once full of flowers; those trees which now stand around it all dried up and withered as if in mourning for their masters, and with no wish to grow green again after the many horrors which have taken place among them, those trees, I say, once threw an opulent shade on the marble bench placed beneath them, where a grave old gentleman used to sit of an evening and rejoice in the splendid wallflowers with which the courtyard abounded.

Yes, he could rejoice in the sweet flowers although his own heart was full of thorns.