Mor Jokai

The Golden Age in Transylvania

Publio

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CHAPTER I
A HUNTING PARTY IN THE YEAR 1666

Before we cross the Kiralyhago, let us cast a parting glance at Hungary. I will unroll before your eyes a scene, partly the result of an adverse fate, partly of a dark mystery, representing joy and also deep sorrow. An incident of a moment becomes the turning-point of a whole century.

My soul is saddened by the images thus conjured up; the figures out of the past blind my sight. Would that my hand were mighty enough to write down what my soul sees in that magic mirror. May your impressions, your recollections, complete the scene wherever the writer fails through weariness.

We find ourselves in the valley of the Drave, in one of those boundless tracts where even the wild beasts lose themselves. Here are primeval forests, the roots of which rest in the water of a great swamp encircled not by water lilies and reed-grass, but by giant trees whose branches, dropping below the surface, form new roots in the quickening water. Here the swan builds its nest; this is the haunt of the heron and all those wild creatures one of which only now and then marches out into more frequented regions. On the higher ground, where in late summer the waters ebb, spring such flowers as might have been seen just after the deluge, so luxuriant and so strange is their mighty growth out of the slimy mud. The branches of ivy, stout as grape vines, reach from tree to tree winding about the trunks and decking the dark maples as if some wood-nymph had garlanded her own consecrated grove.

When the sun has set, life grows active in this watery kingdom; swarms of water-birds rise, and with their monotonous, gruesome cries sound the note of the bittern, the whistle of the turtle, and the four notes of the swan, now heard only in the land of fable, for there alone mankind is not; that kingdom still belongs to God.

Occasionally bold hunters venture to penetrate this pathless maze, making their way among the trees in small boats, often overturned by the long roots under the water many fathoms deep, although the dark grass, the yellow marsh flowers and the small dark-red lizard seem to be within reach of one's hand. Sometimes a thicket bars the way of the boat, trees never touched by human hand are rotting here heaped mountain-high thousands of years before. Those trunks that have fallen into the water have been petrified, and the grasses and vines have grown over them in such a tangle that they form a strong crust which sways and bends but does not break beneath the tread. This crust appears to stretch far and wide, but in reality one step too far brings death, so that this strange and remote region is but rarely visited.

On the south flows the Drave, whose rapid current frequently sweeps away the tallest trees, to the peril of the boatmen. To the north the forest stretches as far as Csakathurm, and where the swamp ends, oaks and beeches tower higher and mightier than any in all Hungary. Throughout this wilderness are wild beasts of every kind; especially the wild boar that wallows in the swampy ground; and here too the stag grows to his greatest strength and beauty. In the days that we write of, the buffaloes roamed through this wilderness, making nightly raids on the neighboring millet fields, but at the first attempt to catch them they plunged into the heart of the swamp and were safe from pursuit.

On the edge of the forest in those days stood a castle of so many styles of architecture that one must conclude it had been the favorite hunting-resort of some Hungarian or Croatian noble. The greater part of the building seemed to be a century older than the rest, in fact the oldest part was merely a hut of oak logs rudely put together, its roof overgrown with moss and its walls with ivy and periwinkle; over the door were the antlers of a patriarchal stag; the later lords must have entertained a pious regard for its builder or they would have torn down this hut. On the side toward the woods was a long, barn-like building of one room, intended for the large hunting parties of later times; here masters and servants, horses and hounds, staid in friendly companionship when the bad weather brought them together. Around an old oak with wide-spreading branches was a strange looking hermitage, the oak forming its single column of support; the entire hut had been built of the skulls of boars taken in a single hunt. Finally, on a hill somewhat higher than the rest, where the trees had been cleared away stood the most modern building; it consisted of a small, tasteful hunting-castle, with columns in front, tiled roof, marble terraces, oriel windows and other features of mediæval architecture. The bastions near by, begun but left unfinished, the deep moats and the walls stretching beyond all proportions, seemed to indicate that the man who had begun the building had intended a stronghold, perhaps against the Turks. Behind the building were still to be seen two long culverins and a stout iron mortar with a Turkish inscription that threw some light on their origin; but the times and the spirit of the times had

changed, and later comers had built a Tusculan villa upon foundations intended for a fortress.

On one of the brightest days of the year in which our story begins, a large hunting party was stirring at the castle. Hardly had the sun sent his first rays through the dense trees when the boys of the stable and kennel led out the horses and the hounds straining at the leash and bounding to the shoulders of their keepers in their excited anticipation. Long wagons, drawn by six to ten oxen, had already gone to the meet to bring back the game. The villagers summoned to the chase, variously armed with axes, forks, or occasional guns, were divided into groups by the hunters. Some peasants, in parties of twos and threes, carried on their shoulders boats hollowed from the trunks of trees, to drive back the game if it escaped to the swamp. Men and beasts alike showed signs of haste and impatience; only a few of the older men took the time to sit over the fire and cook their bacon. At last the hunting-horn sounded from the castle yard, the company sprang with shouts of joy upon their snorting horses; the restless, yelping pack dragged their keepers this way and that; the hunters armed themselves,—in short, everything was ready and waited only for the lords and ladies. In a few moments a group of riders came down the hill attended by the squires; in front rode a tall, muscular man, the lord of the castle; the rest seemed involuntarily to have fallen behind him. His broad shoulders and well-rounded chest were of Herculean strength; his face was burned by the sun and showed no trace of age; his close-trimmed beard and heavy moustache gave his countenance a martial aspect, and the Roman nose and coal black, bushy eyebrows added to his features an imperious look, though the melancholy curve of the lips and the delicate oval of the blue eyes lent a certain poetic expression to his knightly countenance. A round cap with an eagle's feather covered his short hair; he wore a plain, shaggy coat unfastened, beneath which showed a white dolman of deerskin ornamented with silver; at his side hung a broad sword in ivory sheath, and from his studded girdle of red shone the pearl handle of a Turkish dagger. Next him rode a young knight and a youthful Amazon; the knight could count scarcely twenty years and the lady looked still younger. Two people better suited to each other could not be found. The young man had pale, gentle features and rich chestnut hair curling on his shoulders; a small moustache barely covered his upper lip, his blue eyes wore a constant smile of carelessness, if not frivolity, and had not the strong sinews of his arm shown under his close-fitting sleeves one would have taken him for only a fanciful boy; on his head he wore a marten cap with a heron's feather and his garments were of silk; from his shoulder hung a magnificent tiger skin, its claws serving for buckles joined by a sapphire clasp. He rode a coal-black Turkish horse with housings embroidered in gold, some woman's delicate handiwork.

The Amazon, to whom the youth seemed to be whispering many a sweet word, formed a complete contrast to him; she had an earnest, fearless, lively countenance; her eyes were brighter than garnets; she loved to curl her lip and draw down her fine, thick eyebrows, giving to her face an expression of pride, then when she glanced up again and parted her lips with a spirited smile, you might see a heroine indeed. Her dark braids hung over her shoulders half their length and then were looped back under her cap of ermine with its waving plume. She wore a silk riding habit fitting closely to her slender figure and falling in heavy folds over the flanks of her Arab horse. Figure and face called for homage rather than love; no smile played over these features, her great, dark, fathomless eyes rested many a time upon the youth as he bent toward her, shedding a rare charm, a fulness of love, a nobler, higher longing which means more than love, more than ambition, which is perhaps the self-consciousness of great souls who have a hint of their eternal fame.

Behind this beautiful pair rode two men whose dress indicated their high rank; one about thirty years old, the other a pale, elderly man with dress simple to affectation. It is worth while to mark this man's face, for we shall often meet him; cold dry features, thin blonde hair and beard mixed with grey, a pointed cleft chin, scornful pale lips, quick watery blue eyes with red rims, jutting eyebrows, a high bald shining forehead which with every change of feeling was wrinkled in all directions. This face we may not forget. The rest—the Herculean rider, the smiling youth, the stately girl,—will hurry past us like fleeting pictures which come only to go; but this last will accompany us throughout the entire course of events, ever appearing only to cast down or to build up, to determine the fate of great men and lands. The bald head moved nearer to the knight at his side who was testing his lance as if for a throw, and said to him in an undertone, evidently continuing a conversation:

"So, then, you Transylvanians will not have anything to do with this affair?"

"Let me have a rest from politics to-day," answered the other, starting impatiently. "You have got so that you cannot live a single day without intrigues, but I beg of you, spare me to-day. To-day I wish to hunt, and you know how passionately I love the chase."

With these words he spurred his horse forward, and joined the stately knight.

Thus rebuffed, the older man bit his lips in vexation, then turned with a smile to the youthful knight riding before him.

"A glorious morning, gracious lord; would that our horizon were as bright in every direction."

"Would that it were," answered the youth, without really knowing what it was to which he was replying, while the beautiful Amazon leaned over and said to him:

"I don't know why it is but I cannot place any confidence in that man. He is forever putting questions and never answers any himself."

Just then the stately rider came up with the group of hunters, acknowledged their loud greetings and stopped in their midst.

"David," he called to an old grey-bearded hunter who came forward, cap in hand, "put your cap on. Have the drivers of the game all taken their places?"

"Every man is in his place, gracious lord. I have already sent boats to the swamp in case the beasts are frightened back there."

"You think of everything. Now start with the men and hounds and follow the road that we usually take; we alone are enough for the road I have in mind, we will go straight through the forest."

At once a murmur of astonishment and incredulity arose among the hunters.

"Beg pardon, gracious lord," said the old man, with his cap again in his hand, "I know the way, and no God-fearing man should make trial of it; the impenetrable undergrowth, the deep water and slimy ground threaten with a thousand perils; and besides, straight through the forest goes the wide devil's gorge that no human being with horse has yet crossed."

"We shall get over, my good fellow. We have already been through more difficult places. No bad luck befalls the man who follows me; you know yourself that fate favors me."

The hunter obediently made ready to march forward with the rest. At this moment the bald head rode to the noble's side.

"Gracious lord," he said, quietly, not to say sarcastically, "I consider it a great calamity for a human being to imperil his life for a mere brute, especially when he has urgent need of that life, but your grace has made the decision and I know it will be carried out. Still, have the goodness to look about you for a moment and remember that we are not all men here; there is a delicate lady in our midst, and to expose her to death for the sake of our adventure is surely want of tenderness."

During this speech the knight did not look at the older man but gazed fixedly at the young Amazon, and the glow of pride on his cheeks was brighter as he saw how calmly the stately lady measured with her eye her unbidden protector, and with what proud self-reliance she took her lances from her page, chose one, and sharpening the point on her pommel, assumed the position of a true matadore.

"Look at her," cried the knight, "do you feel any anxiety for this girl, my niece?"

These words of the knight echoed loudly; there was no voice like his, deep as thunder and carrying far.

The young Amazon allowed the knight who had called her his niece to put his arm about her and kiss her blushing cheek, for in those days the Hungarian woman still blushed even if the kiss came from a kinsman's lips.

"Is it to no purpose that she sprang from my blood? shall she not match the best man in fearlessness? Have no anxiety for her, she will face greater dangers than these and bring her husband to them too."

With these words the hero put spurs to his horse; the startled creature reared and plunged but the hard knees of his rider brought him under control.

"Follow me," he cried, and the brilliant company vanished in the thicket of the forest.

Let us arrive there before them. Let us hurry to the place where the stags take their noonday rest in the shady grove, where the turtles sun themselves and the herons bathe. What dwellings are these in groups of fives and sixes between the water and the wilderness—these huts built up on piles with round roofs clay-covered and bound with twigs? Who built this dam, and for what purpose, so that the water at the entrance of their dwellings should never fail? Here dwell the dear, industrious beavers whom Nature has taught the art of building. This is their colony. These thick beams they have hewn with their teeth. They have shaped all this,—they have dug down into the earth to build a dam, and year after year they keep this dam in repair. See, at this very moment comes one gliding out from the lowest story of his dwelling below the water; with what a gentle eye he looks around him; as yet he has never seen a human being. But let us go back to the day of the hunt. In the shadow of an old hollowed tree was resting a family of deer—stag, doe and little fawns. The stag had stepped into the sunlight where he might see his own shadow; his stately form seemed to please him; he licked his bright coat, scratched his back with his branching antlers and walked proudly, stepping high with a certain affectation; the movements of his slender figure were marked by the play of his muscles. The doe lay lazily in the muddy sedge; at times raising her beautiful head, her great dark eyes full of feeling, she gazed at her companion or at the sporting fawns; if she noticed that they were too far away she gave a certain restless moaning cry, at which the lively creatures would hasten to her, tumbling over each other, leaping and bounding about the mother, never an instant quiet, their limbs quivering and every movement quick and graceful. Suddenly the stag stood fixed. Scenting danger he gave a cry and lifted his nose; his nostrils dilated as he snuffed the air, pawed the ground and ran restlessly about, angrily shaking his antlers; again he stood still and his wide-opened eyes showed instinctive fear; he ran to his precious doe and with unspeakable tenderness they put their two heads together,—they too have a language in which they understand each other. The two fawns fled to their mother, their slender legs trembling. Then the stag with long, noiseless stride, made his way into the forest. The doe remained licking her trembling fawns, who returned the motherly caresses with their little red tongues. At every noise she raised her head and pricked up her ears; suddenly she bounded into the air; she had heard something hardly perceptible to human ear; far, far away there was a sound in the forest; hunters know this sound well—the chase had begun. The doe cast restless glances about her, then quietly lay down; she knew that her mate would come back and that she must wait for him. Nearer and nearer came the chase. Soon the stag came noisily back and turned with a peculiar sound to his mate, who at once sprang up and with her young fled straight across the line of chase. The stag stood still for a moment, digging up the ground with his antlers, either with rage or to efface the traces of his mate's lying there. Then he stretched his neck and

barked loudly in imitation of the hounds, to lead them on a false scent; a trick often observed by hunters. He then bounded away, tossing his antlers, and followed the doe. Ever nearer came the chase; with the barking of dogs was heard also the cracking of the underbrush and the shouts of the hunters. The forest became alive: the startled hares and foxes ran among the trees in every direction to escape the cries of the men. Now and then a fox fled in haste to a hole, only to bound back again frightened by the fiery eyes of the badger. Among the timid hares a grey striped wolf stood forgetful of his thirst for blood; switching his tail he looked about him for some possible escape and ran howling on, driven by the nearing voices.

Yet no one was hunting these poor creatures—a greater quarry was the game,—a stag with mighty antlers.

The hunting net was drawn closer and closer, already the dogs were on the track and the horn gave a signal that they were near the stag. "Hurrah, hurrah!" rang out from afar. The hunters coming from the opposite direction halted and blocked the way. The noise of the pursuers came rapidly nearer. Suddenly, a peculiar noise was heard; the two deer with their young broke through the bushes and disappeared; between them and the hunters was a wide ravine; the noble quarry leaped like lightning over the tree trunks lying in the way, and at last reached the ravine. Before and behind were the hunters, but the pursuit from behind was more terrible; there were the knight, the fearless Amazon and the eager hunter. The stag bounded across the broad ravine without the slightest effort, raising both feet at once and throwing back his head; the doe too made ready for the leap but her young shrank back from the edge; then the doe gave out, her knees sank, her head drooped, and she stayed with her young. A lance hurled by the Transylvanian hunter pierced her side. The wounded creature gave a distressed cry, like the wail of a human being only more terrible. Even her murderer in his pity did not venture to approach her until her struggles were over. The two fawns stood sorrow-stricken by their mother and allowed themselves to be taken alive. Meanwhile the stag, already across the ravine, dashed wildly toward the hunters before him, who blocked his way, and tossed his heavy antlers in fury. The hunters knew the courage born of despair which comes to these animals otherwise so timid, and throwing themselves to the ground, gave him free pass. Only a few hounds ran after him, but the maddened creature tossed them on his antlers and leaving them to roll on the ground in their blood, plunged on to the swamp.

"After him," roared the knight with thundering voice, and galloped at full speed to the ravine over which the stag had fled.

"May the Lord help him," screamed those on the other side, in terror; but the next moment their terror was turned to shouts of joy, for the horse with his bold rider was over. Of the entire company only two ventured to follow, the stately Amazon and the delicate youth. The two horses made the leap in the same moment; the lady's habit swelled out like a pennant in the breeze and she glanced backward as if to ask if any man had so much courage. The rest of the company considered it advisable not to try the bold leap, except Nicholas, the Transylvanian, who made a dash although his horse had already hurt his hind foot in the woods and the huntsman might have been very sure that he was not equal to the leap.

Fortunately for the rider, just before the spring his saddle-girth gave way and he fell on the edge of the bank, while the horse just reached it with his forefeet, and tumbling, fell into the depths of the ravine. The three riders were alone in their pursuit of the fleeing stag which, once out of the circle, led his followers on to the bog. The knight went first. The Amazon and her comrade followed by a sweeping détour through the tree trunks; just as they were on the edge of the bog, there suddenly appeared snorting before them two wild boars;—they had come into the lair of these beasts which had been deaf to everything around them as they lay in the reeds and mud, only noticing the newcomers when the young man's horse trampled to death two young ones rubbing themselves against the old sow. The rest of the young scattered into the sedge while the old ones, with threatening growls, turned upon the intruders. The sow plunged blindly at the youth, while the boar stood still a moment, his bristles raised and ears pointed. He leveled his tusks and, with deep grunt and blood-shot eye, charged at the maiden. The young man hurled his lance from a safe distance at the sow; the whizzing weapon struck into the hard skull of the creature, the point piercing to the brain. The sow ran like a monstrous unicorn, the lance still sticking in her skull, but her eyes had lost the power of sight and she passed the rider and fell without a sound at a little distance. The maiden waited calmly for the raging boar; seizing her lance with her left hand she aimed its point downward and held her bridle firmly. The noble horse stood quiet against his raging opponent, pricking up his ears, and with a turn of his neck kept his eye on the boar so that just as the tusk would have entered the side, the trained animal bounded away, and at the same moment the Amazon bent over and hurled her lance deep between the shoulder-blades of the boar. The creature, wounded to the death, sank down with a groan, but made one more onset at the maiden, when the youth sprang like lightning from his horse and dealt him a final blow with his sword. Just then from afar was heard the sound of the horn; the other riders who, by making a long circuit, had now overtaken the leaders, greeted the heroes of the day, the knight, the Amazon and the youth, with loud huzzas. The strongly-built man was bespattered with mud and the others did not look much better. Only the riding habit of the lady was without spot and without rent. Even in such circumstances as these, ladies know how to take care of their clothes. When the knight saw the monster that his niece had laid low, looking larger than ever now that it was stretched out in death, he appeared like one just realizing the peril to which his darling had been exposed, and cried out in terror, "My dear Helen!" Then he took her hand with a smile and glanced at the bystanders with triumph.

"Did I not tell you that she was of my blood?" Every man hurried forward to compliment the brave heroine, who on this occasion seemed to experience that extraordinary pleasure peculiar to the lucky hunter.

"Nicholas, my son, do the boars grow as large as that in Transylvania?"

The Transylvanian, already somewhat out of sorts from his recent accident, could not let this pass without denying that there was anything in Hungary better worth having than Transylvania could produce, so he answered sulkily, "Yes, indeed, and even larger." No reply possible could have so angered the knight as this;—to say to an excited hunter that there is better game anywhere than that he has just praised; and still more, that had been laid low by his own darling.

"Good, my son, good," growled the knight, "it remains to be seen."

With undisguised signs of annoyance on his countenance he turned aside from the ill-natured Transylvanian and gave orders to have the game carried back to the hunting castle. On the way thither he spoke no word except to his dear one, whom he flattered and extolled to the very heavens.

It was already late in the afternoon when the hunters sat down to their meal. The simple but appetizing food had been arranged on a large grassplot in the middle of the forest; wine and joy thawed out their spirits and they talked of this and of that, of the war and of the chase, of beautiful women and of poesy, which at that time was in great favor among the upper circles. But in spite of the merry conversation the knight could not keep from asking, in a tone of reproach, "So, then, there really is better game in Transylvania?" until the repeated question became irksome to the young man, who had not intended his reply to be taken with such seriousness.

The bald head saw the situation and attempted to give another turn to the conversation by taking up his beaker and proposing this toast;—"May God put the Turks in good spirits."

The knight in his vexation overturned his glass and replied angrily, "That He shall not! I have not grown old fighting against them to turn round now and pray for them. He is a fool who changes only to find a new master."

"The Turk is a gracious master for us," said the young man, with an ambiguous smile.

"Didn't I say so? With you, even the Turks are finer and greater than with us. So it is; in Transylvania everything is better than it is in Hungary; the boars are larger and the Turks are smaller than with us."

While they were talking the old huntsman David approached his master and whispered in his ear. The features of the knight lighted as by magic, and springing from his seat he cried,

"Give me a gun."

Seizing his silver-mounted rifle, with a happy expression he said to his guests:

"Just stay here, there is a colossal boar near by. You shall see him, my son," he said, touching Nicholas on the shoulder. "Twice already have I given him chase, but this time I will have him. He is the genuine descendant of the Calydonian boar."

With that the knight directed his steps in eager self-forgetfulness toward that part of the forest pointed out by the huntsman, whom he commanded to turn back, for he would have no one with him.

"I do not know why it is," whispered Helen to the youth at her side, "but I feel as if I had cause to fear some peril threatening my uncle." The youth rose without a word and took his rifle. "Do not follow him," called out the Transylvanian when he noticed this move, "you would only anger him. Never fear, he will do it alone. A man that has wiped out entire armies of Tartars will surely be able to manage an unreasoning beast." And in this way the young man was held back at the very moment of departing. The men went on drinking and the maiden continued with her thoughts, from time to time glancing anxiously toward the forest. Suddenly there was a shot heard in the forest; all set down their glasses, and looked expectantly in that direction. A few moments later came the cry of a boar in pain; not the sound of a boar at the point of death, but the rattling sound of an interrupted struggle.

"What's that?" each asked of another.

"Surely he would call if he were in peril."

With that came a second shot.

"What's that?" all shouted, and sprang to their feet. "Up! Up!" cried the maiden, trembling in every limb, and the entire company hurried in the direction of the shot.

The knight had gone only a few steps into the forest when he came upon the boar at the foot of a great oak. It was a monstrous boar with long black bristles on his back and forehead; his skin like iron lay in thick folds on his neck and his feet were long and sinewy. He had dug himself a litter in the brush, where he now lay. Where he had laid his monstrous head he had torn up by the roots shrubs as thick as one's arm. When the monster heard the steps of a man he raised his head, opened wide his jaws and looked sidewise at his opponent. In order to get a better aim the knight had dropped on one knee, and shot through the sedges at the beast just at the moment when he raised his head. Instead of hitting the skull the ball entered the creature's neck, wounding but not killing him. The wounded animal sprang up, and in his charge at the knight struck his crooked tusks together so that the sparks flew. Such a furious attack might easily have been avoided by a spring to one side, but the knight was not the man to avoid his antagonist. He threw down his gun, tore his sword from its scabbard, stood face to face with the boar and dealt a blow at his head which might have cleft it through and through; but the dangerous stroke fell on the tusk, and upon this, hard as stone, the sword was broken in two at the hilt. Stunned by the blow the boar, though he plunged at the knight with his tusks, inflicted only a light wound in his thigh, at which the man seized the animal by the ears with both hands and a furious struggle began. Without weapon he fought the beast which turned its head with grunt and groan, but the steel-like grasp of the man held his broad ears with irresistible might and when the

creature raised himself on his hind legs to throw his opponent, the knight with giant strength gave him a push and threw him over backward. True, he fell too as he did so, but he was on top and raising himself up, pressed down the wild beast struggling in vain against his superior strength, and seated himself in triumph on his belly. The boar seemed to be entirely conquered. His glazing eye grew dim, blood streamed from jaws and nose, he had ceased to roar and made only a rattling sound; his legs contracted, his nose hung down; in a few moments he must certainly die. The knight should have called to his comrades, only a little way off, or kept quiet until the boar bled to death, but this took too much time. He remembered that he had in his girdle a Turkish knife and he thought to put a quick end to the struggle, so he pressed down the head of the boar with one knee, that he might be able to spring when he drew out his knife at his side, and with one hand seized his girdle. Just then, a shot was heard in the forest; the overmastered boar, feeling the pressure of hand and knee lightened, with his remaining strength threw the knight off and dealt one last blow with his tusk. This blow was fatal—it tore the man's throat.

The guests and relations hurrying to him, found the hero dying beside the dead boar. With cries of sorrow they strove to bind his terrible wound.

"It is nothing, my children, nothing," said the knight, even then dying, and he was gone.

"Poor knight!" said the bystanders.

"My poor fatherland," cried Helen, raising to heaven her eyes heavy with tears.

The day of rejoicing was changed to one of mourning; the hunt to a funeral feast. In sorrow the guests attended the corpse of their best friend back to Csakathurm. Only the bald head took another direction.

"That is just what I said," he muttered to himself, "one needs his life for something more. Well, what matters it? there are still people elsewhere; I'll go to the next country."

So died Nicholas Zrinyi, the younger, the greatest writer and the bravest fighter of his fatherland. So died the man, who had been the favorite of fortune, the darling of his country, its protection and its glory. In vain would you look now for the hunting-lodge or the castle;—all is gone—the name, the family of the hero, even his memory. The general and the statesman have fallen into oblivion; one part only of the man is left, one part only lives forever,—the writer.

CHAPTER II
THE HOUSE IN EBESFALVA

We now move forward one country;—one country forward, and four years backward. We are in Transylvania in the year 1662. Before us is a dwelling, plain but of the nobility, at the lower end of Ebesfalva, almost the last house in the place. The building was planned more for convenience than for fancy; on both sides are stables for horses and for sheep, built partly of stone, partly of plaster and partly of wood; sheds for wagons, poultry-yards, open barns, high-gabled sheep pens covered with straw; in the rear is a fruit garden where one catches sight of the arched top of a beehive, and finally, in the middle of the courtyard stands the whitewashed dwelling of one wing, with shady nut-trees under which is a round table improvised out of a mill-stone. A stone wall separates the court of the dwelling from the threshing floor, where are to be seen piles of hay and great heaps of grain, from the top of which a peacock utters his disagreeable cries. It is evening; the men have returned from the fields; the oxen are loosed from their heavy wagons loaded with corn; the sheep come with tinkling bells from the meadow; the grunting swine hurry through the open gate each to his own trough; the cocks quarrel together on the nut-trees where they went to roost at sunset; in the distance is heard the sound of the evening bell; and from still farther away comes the sound of the village maidens going to the fountain. The men look after the cattle, one brings a great bundle of fresh-mown grass, and another carries in a large pail of fresh milk, fragrant and foaming. From the kitchen comes the gleam of a blazing fire, over which a maiden with round red cheeks is holding a great pan that gives out the fragrance of food, soon to be placed on the heavy green earthenware. The farm hands sit round the mill-stone table, eating heartily, while the patient house-dogs watch them with thoughtful attention. Then the dishes are cleared away and the ears of corn are taken from the wagon and put under cover. The peasant maidens of the neighborhood gather for the husking; the more timid are frightened for their lives by the mischievous lads who hollow out ripe pumpkins, cut eyes and mouth and set a burning light inside to use as a lantern. The more clever of the lads, seated on upturned baskets, weave long garlands of the corn husks; and over their quiet work ring out jolly songs, and fairy tales are told of golden-haired princesses and waifs. Here and there a game is played, not without kisses proclaimed to all the world with loud shrieks. The children make merry if they chance to find a red ear in the corn. And so they sit and sing and tell stories and laugh over trifles until the heaps of corn are all gone. Then come the long farewells; down the length of the street they sing on their way home, partly in joyousness of spirit and partly to keep up their courage. Each one goes to his house, locks the door and puts out the fire; the shepherd-dogs throughout the village answer one another, the moon rises and the night watchman begins to call off the hours in measured rhythm, while the other villagers sleep unmindful of the golden proverbs of his song.

Only in one window of the manor house is there still a light: there only they have not yet gone to rest. The watchers are an old maidservant, grown grey in service, and a younger one. The old woman is reading laboriously something from the Psalter that she already knows by heart from beginning to end. The young maid has sat down to her spindle as if she had not done enough through the long day, and is drawing the long threads of the silken flax, which yesterday she combed and to-day carded.

"Go to bed, Clara," said the old woman kindly, "if I sit up, that is enough. To-morrow you will have to get up early just the same."

"Surely I could not go to sleep before the return of our noble lady," replied the other, continuing her work. "Even though the men are all at home I am afraid while she is not here; but when once the noble lady comes I feel as safe as if castle walls surrounded us."

"You are right, my child, she is worth more than many men, poor soul! For many years all the cares that belong to a man have rested on her shoulders. She has to look out for everything; and as if that were not enough she has leased beside the estate of her sisters, Madame Banfy and Madame Beleky. How many lawsuits she has had to carry on with this and that neighbor or kinsman! but they meet their match in her! She goes herself to the judge and the courts and is so clever that an advocate might learn of her. Once, when my lord Banfy came to play the gallant with her, thinking our gracious lady one of those grass-widows, how quickly she showed him the door; the good man hardly knew which foot to put first and yet he is one of the royal judges. To pay for that he quartered on us the head collector with a mixed crowd of troopers. You were here then, weren't you, when our noble lady had them driven out of the village? How they took to their heels when they saw that our noble lady herself stood there with her gun."

"If they hadn't," boasted the excited maiden, "I would have struck them over the head with my oven-cloth."

"You see, Clara, when a woman is compelled to take care of a house alone for so long a time, to defend herself and her family with her own strength, she comes to feel just like a man. That is why our lady has that determined look, as if she had not been a maiden of high birth."

"But tell me, Aunt Magdalene," said the girl, drawing her stool nearer, "are we really never to see our gracious master again?"

"God only knows," replied the old woman, with a sigh, "when the poor man will be set free. I have a sure presentiment which I have told, but nobody listens to me. When the late Prince George became dissatisfied with his own country and set out to conquer Poland with the best Hungarian nobility, our Master Michael went with him. How hard I tried to keep him back, and so did his noble lady; for they had been married then but a short time; and the good master himself had no wish to go, he had much rather sit in the house and read books or build mills and take care of his trees, but honor bade him go. However, I insisted that he should at least take my son Andy with him; surely God ordained it wisely that he should go with him, otherwise we never should have heard anything more of our gracious master. For when the prince saw the beastly crowd of Tartars drawn up against him in the field he hurried home, while all the nobility were taken prisoners by the heathen Tartars and carried off to Tartary to bitter bondage. My son Andy begged so hard that they finally let him come home, especially as he had a wound that made him unfit for work. He brought back the news that our Master Michael was pining away there in imprisonment and that the Tartars, when they observed in what esteem he was held by the other prisoners, took him for a duke and demanded such a frightfully high ransom for him that all his estate turned into money would not pay it. However, our noble lady was very happy when she learned that her husband was still living, and went round trying to raise the money. But neither relatives nor good friends would help her, not even for security, for in war-times people do not like to lend on real estate. So she sold all the valuables she had brought with her from home; beautiful silver plates, bracelets set with precious stones, gold cups that were heirlooms, beautiful garments embroidered with silk and threads of gold, rings, buckles, clasps, real pearls, in short everything that can be turned to gold. Yet as all that was not half of what the Tartars demanded she leased the estates of her sisters, and had the fallow ground ploughed and the woods cleared away to make room for grain fields. She turned night into day to find time for all the work. Nothing connected with farming that would bring money did she leave undone; she had loam-pits made and stone-quarries opened; she raised cattle that the Armenian cattle drivers bought; she herself went to market, took her wine even into Poland, her grain to Hermanstadt, her honey, wax and dried fruits to Kronstadt; she even went as far as Debreczin to get a good price for her wool; and how prudently she lived all that time! she never took anything from her serving people that belonged to them, but she herself saved every bit. In harvest time, when she would be in the field all day long she would often go a week at a time without having any dinner cooked; her entire meal then would be a small piece of bread, so small that a child would not have been satisfied with it, and a glass of cold water. But you can take my word for it, Clara, that no one ever saw her out of temper, and no bitter tear ever fell on the dry bread which was all she allowed herself in loyalty to her husband."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I mean that the money that she got together in this way, by hard work and saving, has been carried by Andy into Tartary at this season every year to make up the ransom. During this time the poor lady stinted herself in every way." The old servant wiped the tears from her eyes.

"And what is the ransom required?"

"I don't know exactly, my child. Andy has always brought back a paper on which the Tartar has written the amount received and what still remains to be paid, and the noble lady keeps it very carefully. Of course I do not like to ask any questions."

The maiden became silent and seemed thoughtful; the spindle went twice as fast in her hands and her heart beat more rapidly.

"My son Andy has gone on such a journey now, and I am expecting him back every hour; from him we shall know something certain."

At that very moment the outside gate creaked; a small wagon was driven noisily into the courtyard and the joyous barking of the dogs showed that it was no stranger who had come.

"They've come," cried the two serving women, and had just time to rise from their seats when Anna Bornemissa, wife of Michael

Apafi, entered,—a well-built woman, almost as tall as a man; through the plain grey linen gown showed the slender but rounded outlines of a strong figure; she might have been thirty-six years old. Her face was one of those that give no trace of time until far on in years. She was sunburned, but with the bloom of youth and her healthy color this only heightened her peculiar beauty. Her glance was quick and masterful but its charm lay in the soul which it reflected. In her features there was nothing hard, rough or masculine; her brow was arched, smooth, free from wrinkles and full of nobility; her eyebrows were delicately marked, her eyes exquisitely shaped, with long lashes that only half shaded them; they were not the fierce black, but rather nut-brown eyes, showing fire and light, yet now so cold. The nose and the oval of her face were delicately formed, her lips when her mouth was closed were gentle and delicate. The rest of her features seemed to be making an effort not to share her smile, and the mouth when open was proud and authoritative.

"What, still awake!" she said to her maids. Her voice had a pleasant ring although the lower tones were subdued by sorrow.

"We wished to sit up for your ladyship so that you would not have to wait outside for us," answered the old woman, bustling about her mistress and taking the heavy cloak from her shoulders.

"Is not Andy back yet?" asked Madame Apafi, in a voice almost stifled.

"Not yet, but I am expecting him every moment." The lady sighed deeply. How much suppressed sorrow, how many vanishing hopes, what depths of resignation lay in that sigh! Before the strong soul of this woman passed the many sufferings of her joyless life, her struggles with fate, mankind and her own heart; her love had been grafted upon pain that could bring forth wishes only—no pleasures. Another year of her life had passed, rich only in struggles. With the industry of a bee, she had succeeded in getting together a few offerings for the single purpose of her life, and who knew how many more such years there must be before she could attain it: thus far, she had only work, patience and a joyless love. Madame Apafi forced her countenance back into its wonted coldness, bade her servants good-night and was just going to her room, when Clara kissed the hand of her mistress, causing her to look at the maid with astonishment. She felt a hot tear on her hand, which had come in spite of the maiden.

"What is the matter with you?" asked the lady, taken aback.

"Nothing is the matter with me," sobbed the maiden, "but you—most gracious lady—I am so sorry for you. I have for a long time been thinking of something, but have never dared tell it. We often talk of it—how our master has been taken prisoner, and how hard it is to get his ransom;—I mean my friends in the village;—all of us have necklaces with much useless gold and silver coin on them, and so we girls have agreed to put this money together that we have no use for and give it to you, gracious lady, to send off as ransom for our master." Madame Apafi pressed the hand of her maidservant and a tear came to her eye.

"I thank you, my girl," she said, touched. "I prize this offering of yours far more than I should if my sister Banfy had placed ten thousand gold necklaces at my disposal. But God will help us." Just then a horse's hoofs were heard in the courtyard and the dogs began a tremendous barking.

"Who's that? Robbers, perhaps,—the redcoats," stammered the old woman, and neither of the serving women dared go to the door; but Madame Apafi took the light from the table, and boldly going to the door opened it so that the light shone far out into the courtyard.

"Who is that?" she called, in a strong firm voice.

"Us—I mean me," answered somebody, confusedly; and all three at once recognized Andy by the voice.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Come, be quick," called Madame Apafi, joyously, and pulled the evidently confused servant into the house. He stood twirling his cap, not knowing how to begin.

"Did you see him—speak with him?—is he well?" asked Madame Apafi, quickly.

"Yes, well," answered the boy, glad to find a starting point. "He sends you greetings and kisses, my noble lady."

"Why do you look around that way?—whom are the dogs barking at outside?"

"Perhaps at the black horse; they are so glad to see him again."

"Did you give the money to Murza?"

Instead of answering Andy began rummaging in the pocket of his fur coat, and as the opening of the pocket was very high and the bottom seemed very deep, he turned all colors while he was searching for the paper, and trembled as he handed it over to his mistress.

"Is there much left yet? What did Murza say?" asked Madame Apafi, in a tone almost trembling.