Mor Jokai

The Poor Plutocrats

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CHAPTER I
BOREDOM

"Was it you who yawned so, Clementina?"

Nobody answered.

The questioner was an old gentleman in his eightieth year or so, dressed in a splendid flowered silk Kaftan, with a woollen night-cap on his head, warm cotton stockings on his feet, and diamond, turquoise, and ruby rings on his fingers. He was reclining on an atlas ottoman, his face was as wooden as a mummy's, a mere patch-work of wrinkles, he had a dry, thin, pointed nose, shaggy, autumnal-yellow eyebrows, and his large prominent black eyes protected by irritably sensitive eyelids, lent little charm to his peculiar cast of countenance.

"Well! Will nobody answer? Who yawned so loudly behind my back just now?" he asked again, with an angry snort. "Will nobody answer?"

Nobody answered, and yet there was a sufficient number of people in the room to have found an answer between them. In front of the hearth was sitting a young woman about thirty or thirty-five, with just such a strongly-pronounced pointed nose, with just such high raised eyebrows as the old gentleman's, only her face was still red (though the favour of Nature had not much to do with that perhaps) and her eyebrows were still black; but her thin lips were just as hermetically sealed as the old man's, when she was not speaking. This young woman was playing at Patience.

In one of the windows sat a young girl of sixteen, a delicate creature of rapid growth, whose every limb and feature seemed preternaturally thin and fragile. She was occupied with some sort of sewing. At another little sewing-table, immediately opposite to her, was a red-cheeked damsel with a frightful mop of light hair and a figure which had all the possibilities of stoutness before it. She was a sort of governess, and was supposed to be English, though they had only her word for it. She was reading a book.

On the silk ottoman behind lay the already-mentioned Clementina, who ought to have confessed to the sin of yawning. She was a spinster already far advanced in the afternoon of life, and had cinder-coloured ringlets around her temples and a little bit of beard on her chin. She was no blood relation of the family but, as an ancient companion to a former mistress of the house, had long eaten the bread of charity under that roof. She was now engaged upon some eye-tormenting, fine fancy work which could not have afforded the poor creature very much amusement.

The old gentleman on the sofa used to divert himself the whole day by assembling as many human beings around him as possible and driving them to desperation by his unendurable nagging and chiding; they, on the other hand, had by this time discovered that the best defence against this domestic visitation was never to answer so much as a word.

"Of course! Of course!" continued the old gentleman with stinging sarcasm. "I know what a bore it is to be near me and about me. I see through it all. Yes, I *know* that I am an unendurable old fellow on whom not a single word should be wasted. I know well enough that you are not sitting here beside me because you like to be here. Who compels you to? I certainly shall not prevent anybody's petticoat from going away by laying hold of it. The gate is not closed. Nothing easier than to be off. Yet nobody likes the idea, eh? Ah-ha! It is possible that when the eye of old Lapussa no longer sees, the heart of old Lapussa may no longer remember. Besides, nobody can tell exactly when the old man may die. Indeed they are waiting for his death every hour—he is beyond eighty already. A most awful bore certainly. Ah ha! The old fool is unable to get up any more, he is not even able to strike anybody. If he cries out, nobody is afraid of him; but, at any rate, he has strength enough to pull the bell-rope, send for his steward, tell him to go to the office of the *alispán*[1] there ferret out and bring back his last will and testament—and then he can dictate another will to his lawyer quite cosily at his ease."

[1] Vice-lieutenant of the county.

And in order to emphasize his words more terribly, he there and then gave a tug at the bell-rope.

Yet for all that nobody turned towards him; the lady kept dealing out the cards, the young girl continued working beads into her sampler, the governess went on reading, and the old spinster was still intent upon some delicate operation with her needle—just as if nobody had spoken a word.

In answer to the bell an ancient serving-man appeared in the doorway, and the old gentleman, after waiting a little to see from the countenances of those present (he could observe them in the mirror opposite) whether his allusion to his will had produced any effect, and finding no notice taken of it whatever, said in a sharp, petulant voice: "Louis!"

The servant approached the sofa and then stood still again.

"My dinner!"

This was the end of the awe-inspiring threat.

The old gentleman observed, or rather, suspected, some slight amusement in the company present.

"Miss Kleary!" he observed irritably, "don't you observe that Henrietta is looking out of the window again? I am bound, Miss, to direct your attention to the fact that I consider such a thing decidedly unbecoming in a young lady."

"Dear Grandpapa.....!" began the accused.

"Silence! I did not speak to Henrietta, I spoke to Miss Kleary. Miss Henrietta is still a child who understands nothing. I neither address her nor attempt to explain anything to her. But I keep Miss Kleary in this house, I pay Miss Kleary a princely salary, in order that I may have some one at hand to whom I can explain my educational ideas. Now my educational ideas are good; nay, Miss, I think I may even say that they are very good. I will therefore beg you to do me the favour to stick to them. I know what ought and what ought not to be allowed young girls; I know that....."

The young girl's face blushed beneath the reproachful look of the old tyrant, whilst the governess rose defiantly from her place, and in order that she might wreak her anger upon some one, industriously proceeded to pick holes in Henrietta's sewing and effectually spoil her whole day's work.

Thus, it will be perceived, only one person had the right to speak; the only right the other people had was not to listen to him.

But there was someone else in the background who had better rights than anybody, and this someone now began to hammer with his fists on the door, that very door at which the oldest and most trusty domestics hardly dared to tap—began, I say, to hammer with his fists and kick with his heels till everyone was downright scared.

This was the little grandson, the old gentleman's spoiled darling little Maksi.

"Why don't you let in little Maksi?" cried the old gentleman, when he heard him. "Open the door for little Maksi; don't you know that he is not tall enough to reach the door-handle? Why don't you let him come to me when he wants to come?"

At that moment the footman opened the door and the little family prince bounded in. It was a pale little mouldy sort of flower, with red eyes and a cornerless mouth like a carp, but with the authentic family nose and the appurtenances thereof, which took up so much room as to seriously imperil the prospects of the rest of the head growing in proportion. The little favourite was wearing a complete Uhlan costume, even the four-cornered chako was stuck on the side of his head; he was flourishing a zinc sword and grumbling bitterly.

"What's the matter with little Maksi? Has anybody been annoying him?"

Grandpapa succeeded at last in making out that on running out Maksi had tripped over his sword, that his tutor had wanted to take it away, that Maksi had thereupon drawn his weapon and made the aggressor's hand smart with it, and that finally he had fled for refuge to grandpapa's room as the only place where he was free from the persecutions of his instructors.

Grandpapa, in a terrible to do, began to question him: "Come here! Where did you hit yourself? On the head, eh! Let us see! Why, it is swollen up—quite red in fact! Put some opodeldoc on it! Clementina, do you hear?—some opodeldoc for Maksi!" So the family medicament had to be fetched at once; but Maksi, snatching it from the worthy spinster's hand, threw it violently to the ground, so that the whole carpet was bespattered with it.

Nobody was allowed to scold him for this, however, as grandpapa was instantly ready with an excuse: "Maksi must not be vexed," said he. "Does not Maksi wear a sword by his side already? Maksi will be a great soldier one of these days!"

"Yes," replied the lad defiantly, "I'll be a general!"

"Yes, Maksi shall be a general; nothing less than a general, of course. But come, my boy, take your finger out of your mouth."

The English governess here thought she saw an opportunity of insinuating a professional remark.

"He who would be a general, must, first of all, learn a great deal."

"I don't want to learn. I mean to know everything without learning it. I say, grandpapa, if you've lots of money, you will know everything at once without learning it, won't you?"

The old man looked around him triumphantly.

"Now that I call genius, wit!" cried he.

And with that he tenderly pressed the little urchin's head to his breast and murmured: "Ah! he is my very grandson, my own flesh and blood."

He was well aware how aggravated all the others would be at these words.

Meanwhile the footman was laying a table. This table was of palisander wood and supported by the semblance of a swan. It could be placed close beside the ottoman and was filled with twelve different kinds of dishes. All these meats were cold, for the doctor forbade his patient hot food. The old gentleman tasted each one of the dishes with the aid of his finger-tips, and not one of them pleased him. This was too salt, that was too sweet, a third was burnt, a fourth was tainted. He threatened to discharge the cook, and bitterly complained that as he did not die quickly enough for them, they were conspiring to starve him. They might have replied that he had ordered all these things himself yesterday; but nobody took the trouble to contradict him any longer, so gradually the storm died away of its own accord and the old man, turning towards Maksi, tenderly invited him to partake of the disparaged dishes.

"Come and eat with me, Maksi, my darling."

"That I will," cried the little horror, grabbing at everything simultaneously with both hands.

"Oh, fie, fie!" said grandpapa gently. "Take Maksi out for a ride and let the lacquey go with him instead of his tutor!" The old gentleman then pushed the little round table aside and signalled to the footman that he was to put all the dishes carefully away, as he should want to see them again on the morrow. The footman conscientiously obeyed this command—which was given regularly every day—and locked up all the dishes well aware that he would get a sound jacketting if he failed to produce a single one of them when required to do so.

The old man knew well enough that there was not a servant in the house who, for any reward on earth, would think of touching any food that had ever lain on his table; indeed, they held it in such horror that they used regularly to distribute it among the poor. In order therefore that the very beggars might have nothing to thank him for, he had the food kept till it was almost rotten before he let them have it. As for his own family, he had not dined at the same table with them for ten years.

It was certainly not a sociable family. For example, the old gentleman's widowed daughter, red-cheeked Madame Langai, did not exchange a single word with her father for weeks at a time. At first he had expected her to remain in the same room with him till nine o'clock every evening, dealing out cards for him or boring herself to death in some other way for his amusement. She endured it for a whole month without a word; but at last, one evening, at seven o'clock, she appeared before him in evening dress and said that she was going to the theatre.

Old Lapussa glared at her with all his eyes.

"To the theatre?" cried he.

"Yes, I have ordered a box."

"Really? Well, I hope you will enjoy yourself!"

The lady quitted him with a shrug. She knew that from that moment she would inherit a million less than her elder brother; but nevertheless she went to the theatre regularly every day, and never stirred from her box so long as there was any one on the stage who had a word to say.

The Lapussa family was of too recent an origin for the great world to take much notice of it, and the fame of its fabulous wealth went hand in hand with the rumour of a sordid avarice which was not a recommendable quality in the eyes of the true gentry. The Lapussas were, in fact, not of gentle blood at all, but simply rich. Madame Langai's elder brother, John, was notoriously the greatest bore in the town, whom nobody, from the members of his own family down to his coffee-house acquaintances, could endure for a moment. Only his father made much of him. For all his great wealth, he was very stingy and greedy; he even lent money at usury to his best friends. Our amusing little friend Maksi was this man's son. The slender, fanciful damsel, Henrietta, who appeared in that family like an errant angel specially sent there to be tormented for the sins of her whole race, was the orphan daughter of another son of old Lapussa, who had lost father and mother at the same time in the most tragical manner; they had both been drowned by the

capsizing of a small boat on the Danube. Henrietta herself had only been saved with the utmost difficulty. She was only twelve years old at the time, and the catastrophe had had such an effect upon her nerves that ever afterwards she collapsed at the least sign of anger, and often fell a weeping for no appreciable cause. Since the death of her parents, who had loved her dearly, Henrietta had been obliged to live at her grandfather's house, where nobody loved anybody.

But no, I am mistaken. She had a brother, Koloman by name, who was a somewhat simple but thoroughly good-natured youth. He used to appear very rarely among his relations because they always fell foul of him. The poor fellow's sole fault was that he was in the habit of regularly selling his new clothes. Still, I am doubtful, after all, whether this can fairly be imputed to him as a fault at all, for although it was always being dinned into his ears that his family was immensely rich, he was never blessed with a penny to spend in amusing himself with his comrades, and therefore had to do the best he could to raise the wind. Another failing of Koloman's was that he would not learn Latin, and in consequence thereof he had to suffer many things. Old Lapussa and his son John indeed had no notion whatever of the Latin tongue. The former in his youthful days had never gone to school at all, because he was occupied in building up a business. The latter had not gone to school in *his* youth because by that time his people were already rich and he considered it beneath him. The consequence was that neither father nor son had a proper idea on the simplest subjects, except what they picked up on their travels. Still that was no reason why Koloman should not learn, but as the tutor had his hands full already with little Maksi, Koloman was obliged to go to the national school in order to become a wiser man than his forbears.

Poor Henrietta often slaved away for hours at a time with her younger brother sitting at the table by her side, helping him to struggle through the genders, declensions, conjugations, or whatever else the infernal things were called; and the end of it all was that, at last, she learnt to know Latin better than Koloman, and secretly translated all his exercises from Cornelius Nepos and the Bucolics of Virgil for him.

But we must not linger any longer over these Latin lessons, for a much more important event claims our attention—Mr. John is coming home, and we must hasten forward to admire him.

Mr. John Lapussa was a perfect prototype of the whole family. His extraordinarily lanky pinched figure seemed even lankier than it was by nature because he always carried his head so high: he peered down from that elevation upon humanity at large as if there was something the matter with his eyes which prevented him from properly raising the lids. In him the dimensions of the family nose were made still more remarkable by an inordinately tiny chin and thin compressed lips. His moustache was shaved down to the very corners of his mouth, only a little mouse-tail sort of arrangement being left on each side, which was twisted upwards and dyed black with infinite skill. His costume was elegant and ultra-refined, and only differed from the fashion in being extra stiff and tight-fitting. Moreover, all the buttons of his shirt and his waistcoat were precious stones, and he had a plenitude of rings on his fingers which he delighted to show off by ostentatiously adjusting his cravat in the course of conversation, or softly stroking the surface of his superfine coat.

Mr. John entered the room without looking at a soul, and paced up and down it with his hands behind his back. Then he suddenly caught sight of his father, kissed his hand and resumed his dignified saunter. It was evident that he was bursting for some one to speak and ask him what was the matter.

Clementina was the first to speak.

"Your honour!" said she.

"What is it?" he asked, lifting his head still higher.

"I have finished the embroidery for your shirt front which your honour was pleased to command."

His honour with a haughty curl of the lip condescended to glance down upon the proffered embroidery. I am afraid Clementina was a poor physiognomist, she might have noticed from his face how utterly indifferent he was to her and her embroidery, which he regarded with puckered eyes and screwed-up mouth.

"No good. Those flowers are too big; it is the sort of thing the Wallachian peasants stitch on to their shirts." And with that he took up Clementina's scissors from the work-table and deliberately snipped into little bits the whole of the difficult piece of work which the worthy woman had been slaving away at for a week and more, finally pitching it away contemptuously while she sat there and stared at him dumfoundered.

"John, John!" said the old man in mild remonstrance.

"To show me such rubbish when I am mad! When I am wroth! When I am beside myself with fury!"

"Why are you angry, and with whom?"

John went on as if he did not mean to tell the cause of his anger. He flung himself into an armchair, crossed his legs, plunged his hands into the depths of his pockets and then, starting up, began to pace the room again.

"I am furious."

"Then what's the matter?" enquired the old man anxiously.

John again flung himself into an armchair and cocked one leg over the arm of the chair: "It is all that good-for-nothing Hátszegi!" he cried. "The fellow is a villain, a scoundrel, a robber!"

"What has he done?"

"What has he done?" cried John, leaping to his feet again, "I'll tell you. Yesterday he sent word to me by his broker that he would like to buy those houses of ours in the Szechenyi Square which I have offered for sale. Wishing to save broker's expenses I went to see him myself at twelve o'clock. Surely that is the most convenient time for paying business calls. At least I have always supposed so. I entered his ante-chamber and there stood a flunkey. He told me I must wait! Told *me* forsooth—*me*, John Lapussa—that I must cool my heels in an ante-chamber, at an inn, to please that wretched Hátszegi. Very well. I waited. I sent him a message that I *would* wait. Meanwhile I found I could not sit down anywhere, for the rascal had piled dirty boots and brushes on all the chairs. Presently the rascal of a servant came back and told me that his master could not see me then, would I come back again in the afternoon—I, John Lapussa, forsooth! Absolutely would not speak to me, but told me to come again another time! Thou dog, thou wretched rascal! But wait, I say, that's all!"

At this the old man also grew excited.

"Why did you not box his ears?" cried he.

"I'll do it, and do it well. I'll not stand it. What! send a Lapussa packing! It cannot be overlooked. I shall immediately go and find two seconds and challenge him to a duel."

"Nay, John, don't do that! Don't even box his ears in the street, but give a street-porter ten shillings to cudgel him well as he comes out of the theatre; that will be best!"

"No, I will kill him. I will shed his blood. He who insults me in a gentlemanly manner must be shown that I can revenge myself like a gentleman. I will wipe off the score with pistols—with pistols I say."

The old man and the female members of the family were duly impressed by this bragging, or rather all except Madame Langai, who was getting ready for the theatre and took no notice of the general conversation.

Mr. John was much put out by her indifference. "Matilda," he asked, "what do *you* say? Ought I not to fight, after such an insult?"

Madame Langai answered the unavoidable question with a cold smile: "I would only say that if anyone angers you another time you had better expend your wrath upon him before dinner, for if you nurse your wrath till after dinner you spoil the whole thing."

Mr. John listened to her in silence and then resumed his promenade with his hands behind his back snorting furiously. Suddenly he snatched up his cap and rushed out.

"John, John, what are you going to do?" the old man called after him in a supplicating voice.

"You'll very soon see, I'll warrant you," and he banged the door behind him.

The old man turned reproachfully towards Madame Langai. "Why did you irritate him when he was mad enough already?" he cried. "What will you gain by his death? He has a son who will inherit everything, you know. Yes, everything will belong to little Maksi."

Madame Langai calmly went on tying her bonnet strings.

"I know what fiery blood he has," mumbled the old man. "When he is angry he will listen to nobody, and is capable of facing a whole army. We must prevent this duel somehow. And you are actually preparing to go to the theatre when things have come to such a pass? You are actually going to see a comedy!"

"The actor Ladislaus plays just the same parts on the stage as John does off the stage," replied Madame Langai bitterly. "And I am as little afraid of John's rhodomontade as I am of the result of stage duels. Don't be afraid! He'll come to no harm."

A lacquey now entered to announce that the coach was ready, and Madame Langai, adjusting her mantilla, went to the playhouse where the actors were, at least, amusing.

CHAPTER II
A NEW MODE OF DUELLING

Old Lapussa always liked to have under his eye, night and day, some one or other whom he could plague and worry. Till eight o'clock every evening he was fully occupied in tormenting the whole family. Then Madame Langai went to the theatre and Henrietta

and the governess had to sit down at the piano in the large drawing-room till it was time to put the child to bed. But when Clementina and the domestics had had supper and there was no longer anybody else with him, the turn of the night nurse began.

The duties of a night nurse are never very enviable or diverting at the best of times, yet penal servitude for life was a fate almost preferable to being the nocturnal guardian of old Demetrius Lapussa. The unhappy wretch who was burdened with this heavy charge had to sit at Mr. Lapussa's bed from nine o'clock at night till early the following morning and read aloud to him all sorts of things the whole time. Old Demetrius was a very bad sleeper. The whole night long he scarcely slept more than an hour at a time. His eyes would only close when the droaning voice of some one reading aloud made his head dizzy, and then he would doze off for a short time. But at the slightest pause he would instantly awake and angrily ask the reader why he left off, and urge him on again.

The reader in question was a student more than fifty years old, who, time out of mind, had been making a living by fair-copying all sorts of difficult manuscripts. He was an honest, simple creature who, in his time, had tried hard to push his way into every conceivable business and profession without ever succeeding till, at last, when he was well over fifty, he was fortunate enough to fall in with an editor who happened to know that Demetrius Lapussa wanted a reader, and recommended the poor devil for the post. He knew Hungarian, Latin, and Slovack well enough to mix them all up together; German he could read, though he did not understand it, but this was not necessary, for he was not expected to read for his own edification.

This worthy man, then, grew prematurely old in reading, year out year in, aloud to Mr. Demetrius, one after another, all the German translations of French novels procurable at Robert Lempel's circulating library without understanding a single word of them. Mr. Demetrius had, naturally, no library of his own, for reading to him, in his condition, was pretty much the same as medicine, and who would ever think of keeping a dispensary on his own premises? I may add that the reader received free board and lodging and ten florins a month pocket-money for his services.

On that particular night when Mr. John flung out of the house in such a violent rage, Mr. Demetrius was particularly sleepless. I know not whether Monte Cristo, the first volume of which honest Margari happened to be reading just then, was the cause of this, or whether it was due to the old man's nervousness about the terrible things John was likely to do, but the fact remains that poor Margari on this occasion got no respite from his labours. At other times Margari did manage to get a little relief. Whenever he observed that Mr. Demetrius was beginning to draw longer breaths than usual he would let his head sink down on his book and fall asleep immediately till the awakened tyrant roused him out of his slumbers and made him go on again. But now he was not suffered to have a moment's peace.

Monte Cristo had already been sitting in his dungeon for some time when Madame Langai's carriage returned from the theatre. Then Mr. Demetrius rang up the porters to inquire whether Mr. John had also returned home. No, was the answer. At eleven o'clock Mr. John had still not returned. Meanwhile Monte Cristo's neighbour had traced the figure on the floor of the dungeon. Mr. Demetrius here demanded a fuller explanation of the circumstances. "How was that, Margari?" he enquired.

"I humbly beg your honour's pardon, but I don't understand."

"Very well, proceed!"

Every time a door below was opened or shut, Mr. Demetrius rang up the porter to enquire whether Mr. John had come in, to the intense aggravation of the porter, who appeared in the door of the saloon with a surlier expression and his hair more and more ruffled on each occasion, inwardly cursing the fool of a student who had not even wit enough to send an old man asleep, and envying the other servants who at least were able to sleep at night without interruption.

And still Margari went on reading.

By this time Monte Cristo had had himself sewn up in a sack and flung into the sea as a corpse.

"Would you have dared to have that done to you, Margari?" interrupted Mr. Demetrius.

"If I had a lot of money I might, begging your honour's pardon, but a poor devil like me is only too glad to live at any price," replied Margari, whose answer naturally had no relation whatever to the text, not a word of which he understood.

"You are a simple fellow, Margari; but go on, go on!"

Margari gaped violently, he would have liked to have stretched himself too, but he bethought him in time that his coat had already burst beneath his armpits, and he had no wish to make the rent still larger, so he let it alone and proceeded with his bitter labour.

By the time Monte Cristo had swum back to dry land, Margari's eyelids were almost glued to his eyes and still the old gentleman showed no sign of drowsiness. Mr. John's threat had kept Mr. Demetrius awake all night, and consequently had kept poor Margari awake too. Once or twice an unusually interesting episode excited the old man's attention, and for the time he forgot all about John's duel—for example, when Monte Cristo discovered the enormous treasure on the island—and he would then rouse up Margari and make him go and find a map and point out the exact position of Monte Cristo's island. Margari searched every corner of the sea for it, and at last looked for it on the dry land also without finding it. Tiring at length with the fruitless search he proposed, as the best way out of the difficulty, that he should write on the afternoon of the following day to Monsieur Alexander Dumas himself to explain to his

honour where the island used to be and whether it still existed.

"What a blockhead you are," said the old man, "but go on, go on!"

Margari gave a great sigh and looked at the clock on the wall, but, alas! it was still a long way from six o'clock. At last, however, while he was still reading, the clock *did* strike six. Margari instantly stood up in the middle of a sentence, marked the passage with his thumb-nail so as to know at what word to begin again on the following evening, turned down the leaf and closed the book.

"Well! is that the end of it?" enquired Mr. Demetrius in angry amazement.

"I humbly beg your honour's pardon," said Margari with meek intrepidity, "there's nothing about reading *after six* in our agreement"—and off he went. Mr. Demetrius thereupon flew into a violent rage, cursed and swore, vowed that he would dismiss his reader on the spot, and as the morning grew lighter fell into a deep, death-like, narcotic sleep from which he would not have awakened if the house had come tumbling about his ears. When he did awake, about ten o'clock, his first care was to make enquiries about Mr. John. Then he sent the porter to the police station to inform the authorities that his son and Mr. Hátszegi, who were both staying at the Queen of England inn, were going to fight a duel, which should be prevented at all hazards. A police constable, at this announcement, flung himself into a hackney-coach and set off at full speed to make enquiries. Half an hour later a heyduke was sent back to the porter to tell him that either the whole affair must be a hoax, as nothing was known of a duel, or else that the two combatants must already be dead and buried, as not a word could be heard of either of them. Luckily, towards the afternoon, Mr. John himself arrived in a somewhat dazed condition, like one who has been up drinking all night. The members of the family were all sitting together as usual in Mr. Demetrius's room, listening in silence to his heckling, when the tidings of Mr. John's arrival reached him. Demetrius immediately summoned him. He sent back word at first that he was lying down to try to sleep, which was an absurd excuse for even the richest man to give in the forenoon; on being summoned a second time he threatened to box the porter's ears; only the third time, when Clementina was sent with the message that if he did not come at once, his sick father would come and fetch him, did he respond to the call and appear before them in a pet.

"Well, thou bloodthirsty man, what has happened? What was the end of it?"

"What has happened?" repeated John with monstrously dilated eyes. "What marvel do you expect me to relate?"

"Clementina, Miss Kleary, Henrietta, retire," cried the old man; "retire, go into the next room. These are not the sort of things that children should hear."

When they had all withdrawn except Madame Langai, Demetrius again questioned his son: "Now then, what about this affair, this *rencontre* with Hátszegi; did you challenge him, did you meet him?"

"Eh? Oh—yes! Naturally. Of course I sought him out, I have only just come from him. We have been making a night of it together at the Queen of England. I can honestly say that he is a splendid fellow, a gallant, charming gentleman. He has really noble qualities. I am going to bring him here this afternoon. You shall all see him. Even you will like him, Matilda. But now, adieu, I must really have a little sleep, we were drinking champagne together all night. Oh, he is a magnificent, a truly magnificent character."

Mr. Demetrius said not a word in reply, but he compressed his thin lips and wagged his head a good deal. Nobody made any observation. Mr. John was allowed to go to bed according to his desire. A little time after he had withdrawn, however, the old man said to Madame Langai: "What are you doing Matilda?"

"I am trying to guess a rebus which has just appeared in 'The Iris.'"

"Don't you think that what John has just said is rather odd?"

"I have not troubled my head about it one way or the other."

"I can see through it though. John wants to pay off Hátszegi in his own coin. He has invited him here this afternoon in order to keep him waiting in the ante-chamber, and then send him word that he can't see him till to-morrow. Oh! Jack is a sly lad, a very sly lad, but I can see through him. I can see through him."

Mr. John passed the whole afternoon in his father's room; he did not even go to his club. No doubt he was awaiting his opportunity for revenge. He amused himself by sitting down beside his niece, stroking her hand, admiring the whiteness of her skin, and, drawing the governess into the conversation, enquired how Henrietta was getting on with her studies, whether she had still much to learn in English and French, and whether she was not, by this time, quite a virtuoso at the piano. He insinuated at the same time that it would be just as well, perhaps, if she made haste to learn all that was necessary as soon as possible, because she was no longer a child, and when once a woman is married she has not very much time for study.

"By the way, Henrietta," he added suddenly, "have you chosen a lover yet?"

Henrietta was too much afraid of him even to blush at this question, she only glanced at him with timid, suspicious eyes and said nothing.

"Don't be afraid, sisterkin," continued Mr. John encouragingly. "I'll bring you such a nice bridegroom that even your grandpapa, when he sees him, will snatch up his crutches in order to go and meet him half-way." Here the old man growled something which John smothered with a laugh. "Yes, and if he won't give you up we'll carry you off by force."

Henrietta shuddered once or twice at her uncle's blandishments, like one who has to swallow a loathsome medicine and has caught a whiff of it beforehand.

The porter interrupted this cheerful family chat by announcing that his lordship Baron Hátszegi wished to pay his respects to Mr. Lapussa.

Mr. Demetrius immediately raised himself on his elbows to read from Mr. John's features what he was going to do. Would he tell the lacqueys to turn Hátszegi out of the house? or would he send him word to wait in the ante-chamber, as he himself had waited at Hátszegi's, and then put him off till the morrow? Oh! John would be sure to do something of the sort, for a very proud fellow was John.

But, so far from doing any of these things, Mr. John rushed to the door to meet the arriving guest and greeted him aloud from afar in the most obliging, not to say obsequious, terms, bidding him come in without ceremony and not make a stranger of himself. And with that he passed his arm through the arm of his distinguished guest and, radiant with joy, drew him into the midst of the domestic sanctum sanctorum and presenting him in a voice that trembled with emotion: "His lordship, Baron Leonard Hátszegi, my very dear friend!"

And then he was guilty of the impropriety of introducing his guest first of all to his father and his niece, simply because they happened to be the nearest, only afterward he bethought him of turning towards Matilda to introduce her, whereupon Matilda's face assumed a stony expression like that of the marble maiden in Zampa, to the great confusion of John, who felt bound to enquire in a half-whisper: "Why, what's the matter?"

"You dolt," she whispered back, "have you not learnt yet that the lady of the house should be introduced to her guests not last, but first?"

John's first impulse was to be shocked, his second was to be furious, but finally he thought it best to turn with a smile to Baron Hátszegi, who courteously helped him out of his embarrassment by observing: "It is my privilege to be able to greet your ladyship as an old acquaintance already. Many a time have I had the opportunity of secretly admiring you in your box at the theatre."

"Pray be seated, sir...!"

CHAPTER III
AN AMIABLE MAN

Baron Hátszegi was certainly a very amiable man. He had a handsome face full of manly pride, sparkling eyes, and a powerful yet elegant figure. He moved and spoke with graceful ease, bore himself nobly, picked his words—in short, was a perfect gentleman. Mr. Demetrius was quite taken with him, although Hátszegi hardly exchanged a word with him, naturally devoting himself principally to the widowed lady who played the part of hostess. What the conversation was really about nobody distinctly recollected—the usual commonplaces no doubt, balls, soirees, horse-racing. Henrietta took no part in the talk; Mr. John, on the other hand, had a word to say on every subject, and, although nobody paid any attention to him, he enjoyed himself vastly.

When Hátszegi had departed, John, with a beaming face, asked Madame Langai what she thought of the young man.

Instead of replying, Madame Langai asked what had induced him to bring him there.

"Well, but he's a splendid fellow, isn't he?"

"You said yesterday that he was a vagabond."

"I said so, I know, but it is not true."

"You said, too, that he was a robber."

"What! I said that? Impossible. I didn't say that."

Old Demetrius here intervened as a peacemaker.

"You said it, John, you did indeed; but you were angry, and at such times a man says more than he means."

"So far from being a robber or a vagabond," replied John, "he is one of the principal landowners in the Hátszegi district. How *could* I have said such things! He has a castle that is like a fortress. He is like a prince, a veritable prince in his own domains. He is just like a petty sovereign. I must have been downright mad to call him a vagabond. . . ."

"Yet, yesterday, you would have called him out," continued Madame Langai teasingly.

"Yes, I was angry with him then, but there are circumstances which may reconcile a couple of would-be duellists, are there not?"

"Oh, certainly, if a man is a man of business before all things, or has perhaps a valuable house or two on his hands."

"This has nothing to do with business or selling houses. If you must know," he continued, lowering his voice, "it is about something entirely different, but of the very greatest importance."

"Indeed?" returned Madame Langai, "a new Alexander the Great, I suppose, who has gone forth to conquer, and who has come to look not for a house, but for a house and home perhaps?"

She thought to herself that it was some adventurer whom her brother John would palm off upon her as a husband so as to get her away from the old man.

"Something of the sort," replied John. "Yes, you have guessed half—but the wrong half."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Ah!" put in the old man sarcastically, "Matilda will never marry again, I'm sure; she loves her old dad too much and feels far too happy at home to do that."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed John scornfully, "I did not mean Matilda, I was not thinking of her. Ho, ho, ho! Madame Langai imagines that *she* is the only person in the house whose hand can be wooed and won."

Dame Langai, with a shrug, looked incredulously round the room to see if there was anybody else who could possibly become the object of the baron's sighs. All at once her eyes accidentally encountered those of Henrietta, and immediately she knew even more than her brother John did. For she now clearly understood three things: the first was that Henrietta had taken in John's meaning more quickly than she had done, the second was that John had brought the suitor to the house on Henrietta's account, and the third was that Henrietta loathed the man.

She at once bade Miss Kleary give Henrietta an extra lesson on the piano in the adjoining room, and when they had taken her at her word and disappeared, she said to John in her usual quiet, mincing tone:

"You surely do not mean to give Henrietta to that man?"

"Why not, pray?"

"Because she is still a mere child, a mere schoolgirl; five years hence it will be quite time enough to provide her with a husband."

"But the girl is sixteen if she is a day."

"Yes, and delicate, sickly, and nervous."

"She will soon be well enough when she is married."

"And who, may I ask, *is* this suitor of yours. Is it not your duty, Demetrius Lapussa, as the girl's grandfather, to make the fullest enquiries about any man who may sue for your grand-daughter's hand? Is it not your duty, I say, to find out who and what he is and everything relating to him? For brother John may be very much mistaken in fancying his dear friend to be a wealthy and amiable nobleman. Whether he be amiable or not does not concern you personally, I know; but you ought certainly to know how he stands, for he may have castles and mansions and yet be up to the very ears in debt. In such a case if he is a nobleman so much the worse for you: for he will then have all the greater claim upon you. It may cost you dearly to admit a ruined baron into the bosom of your family."

John grew yellow with rage: "How dare you talk like that of anyone you do not know?" he cried.

"Then, do you know him any better?"

But here the old man intervened:

"You're a fool, John," said he. "Matilda is right. I will send for my lawyer, Mr. Sipos. He understands all about such things and will advise us in the matter. We *must* find out how the baron stands."

CHAPTER IV
CHILDISH NONSENSE

Meanwhile Hátszegi continued to call every day, dividing his attention equally between the widow and Henrietta; and at the end of a fortnight everyone was charmed with his personal qualities. It could not be denied that he was a delightful companion, always merry, lively, frank, and entertaining. He even made the old gentleman laugh aloud more than once; in fact Demetrius Lapussa grew quite impatient if Hátszegi was five minutes late. Mr. John was more delighted with him than ever. They took walks together, invariably drove in the same carriage to the park, and John was to be seen every night in the baron's box at the theatre, talking at the top of his voice so that everybody might become aware of the fact. Nay, he succeeded, through the courtesy of his new friend, in making the acquaintance of one or two magnates who subsequently lifted their hats to John in the street and thus gratified the dearest desire of his heart.

The enquiries made about Hátszegi also proved extremely satisfactory. He was certainly sound and solid financially, had never had a bill dishonoured, had no dealings with usurers, always paid cash and was never even in temporary embarrassment, as is so often the case with most landed proprietors when the crops fail. In fact, he seemed to have unlimited funds constantly at his disposal and to be scarcely less wealthy than old Lapussa himself.

So far then, everything was as it should be, and everyone was enchanted with him personally.

But what of Henrietta, the intended bride?

Oh! she was not even consulted in the matter; it is not usual, and besides she had neither mind nor will enough to have a voice in so important a matter as the disposal of her hand. Nay, she was not even told that she was going to be married. She only got an inkling of it from various phenomena that struck her from time to time, such as the polite attentions of the baron, the whispering of the domestics, the altered attitude towards her of the various members of the family—who now addressed her in the tone you employ when speaking to a baroness that is to be. And then there was Clementina's chatter! Clementina was now for ever talking of all the sewing and stitching that had to be done for the young lady, and of the frightful quantities of linen and lace and silk that were being made up into dresses and other garments. Six seamstresses were hard at work, she said, and she was helping them and yet they had to make night into day in order to get the necessary things ready in time.

So gradually they accustomed her to the idea of it, till at last one day Madame Langai took her aside and lectured her solemnly as to the duties of women in general and of women of rank in particular, pointing out at the same time how much such women owed to their own families for looking after and providing for them and expressing the hope that Henrietta would be duly grateful to the end of her days to *her* family—from all which she was able to gather that any opposition on her part would not be tolerated for a moment.

The day was already fixed for the exchange of the bridal rings, but the night before that day, Henrietta suddenly fell ill, and, what is more, dangerously ill, so that they had to run off for the family physician incontinently. The doctor was much struck by the symptoms of the illness and the first thing he did was to make the patient swallow a lot of milk and oil. Then he drove the servants headlong to the chemist's, and descending into the kitchen closely examined every copper vessel there by candle light, scolded the cook and the scullery maids till they were in tears, and terrified Clementina by telling her she was the cause of it all to the speechless confusion of the innocent creature. Not content with this, he made his way at once to Mr. Demetrius's room and there cross-examined everyone with the acerbity of an Old Bailey judge. What had the young lady been in the habit of eating and drinking? They must fetch what had been left over from her meals, he must see and examine everything. What had she eaten yesterday evening? Preserves? Then what sort of sugar was used, and where was the spoon? He insisted on seeing everything.

"But doctor," whined old Lapussa, "you surely don't mean to say that the child has been poisoned?"

"I do indeed, and with copper oxide too."

"How is that possible?"

"Why, simply because some of her food, preserve, for instance, has been allowed to stand too long in a copper or silver vessel and copperas has been developed."

The old man did not know enough of chemistry to understand how copperas could be developed from silver, but he was seriously alarmed.

"I hope there's no danger?" said he.

"It is a good job you sent for me when you did," replied the doctor, "for otherwise she would have been dead before morning. Copperas is a very dangerous poison, and if it gets into one's food in large quantities there is practically no antidote. A vigorous constitution, indeed, has a good chance of throwing it off; but, taking into consideration the state of the young lady's nerves and her general debility, I should say that her case was downright dangerous; anyhow she will be ailing for some time."

"Oh, doctor, doctor! and we all love Hetty so much, she is the very light of our eyes! I cannot tell you how anxious I am, on her account I should be so glad, doctor, if you could stay with her night and day and never leave the house. I would richly recompense you."

"I will do all I can, though I can't do that, and unless any unforeseen accident arise, I think I can answer for the result. But one

thing I must insist upon, all these copper and silver vessels of yours must go to the devil. I'll come to-morrow and examine thoroughly the whole lot of them by daylight. The health of the family must not be endangered by such recklessness. And let me tell your honour something else. Are you aware that your honour's business-man, Mr. Sipos, who is only a lawyer and, therefore, can ill afford to do so in comparison with your honour, are you aware, I say, that he has on this very occasion sent all his copper vessels to the lumber-room?"

"On this occasion! what do you mean?" enquired the old man eagerly.

"I mean that I have just come from him and a similar case has happened in his house. His assistant—a fine young fellow, you know him, perhaps?—has also been poisoned by copperas. I have only this instant quitted him."

"What an odd coincidence."

"Very odd, indeed. Two exactly similar cases of poisoning at the same time and all because copper vessels were used and not properly cleaned."

"And how is the young man progressing? Is he out of danger?"

"Fortunately; although at the outset his was an even worse case than the young lady's. But then he is so much stronger. Well, good-bye! I will look in again to-morrow."

"But I should be so much easier, doctor, if you never left my grandchild's side."

"I would willingly do even that if I had not other patients in the town to attend to."

"Could you not entrust them to someone else?"

"Impossible. My reputation would be at stake. Besides I do not often have the chance of studying two such interesting parallel cases of poisoning at the same time."

"Very well, doctor. All I ask of you is to cure our little one."

"I hope to save the pair of them. And now I'll go up and have a look at her, and then I must return to Mr. Sipos's house. But I shall be here again in an hour or so."

And with that the old man had to be content.

During the whole course of Henrietta's illness he sent to enquire after his grandchild every hour. Clementina and an old maid-servant took it in turns to watch by her bedside. It was strictly forbidden to leave Henrietta alone for an instant, and Mr. Demetrius gave special orders that her brother Koloman was not to be allowed to approach within six paces of her bed because he was sure to bring cold air into the room, or convey to her surreptitiously something which she ought not to have and behave like a blockhead generally. So he was obliged to keep his distance.

At last when weeks and weeks had flown by, God and blessed nature helped the doctor to triumph over the effects of the poison. Henrietta slowly began to mend. She was still very weak, but the doctor assured them that she was quite out of danger and that the little capricious fancies of convalescence might now be safely humoured.