Mor Jokai

Told by the Death's Head

Publio

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A Romantic Tale

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PART I.

CHAPTER I.
THE "FIRE-POT."

The hero of our romantic narrative, or better, narratives, was a constable. Not one of that useful class appointed, in our day, to direct the vehicles which pass over the two approaches to the suspension-bridge in Budapest; rather, he was the chief of a body whose task it is to provoke disturbance, who win all the more praise and glory the greater the havoc and destruction they create. In a word: he was a gunner.

The chronicle of his exploits gives only his Christian name, which was "Hugo."

In the year 1688, when the French beleaguered Coblentz, Hugo had charge of the battery in the outermost tower of Ehrenbreitstein fortress—the "Montalembert Tower."

Coblentz and Ehrenbreitstein are opposite one another on the banks of the Rhine, as are Pesth and Ofen; and the Blocksberg looks down on us, as does the citadel of Ehrenbreitstein on Coblentz.

The city, which is strongly fortified on all sides, had become accustomed to being beleaguered—now by the French, now by the Prussians; today by the Austrians, tomorrow by the Swedes.

On the occasion of which I write, Coblentz was under a terrible fire from the French guns, which created great havoc in that portion of the city known as the "Old Town."

Specially memorable and remarkable was the manner in which the "fire-balls" seemed to know just where to find the abodes of the duke, and the commandant of the fortress. It mattered not how often they changed their quarters, the Frenchmen would always discover them, and aim accordingly—though it was impossible to see into the city from outside the walls. There certainly must have been some witch-craft at work. Hugo's Montalembert tower was on the side of the fortress most exposed to the assaults of the enemy; its successful defense, therefore, was all the more worthy of praise.

The management of ordnance in those days was not the comparatively simple matter it is today, with the Krupp and the Uchatius guns. It was a real science to fetch from the furnace a white-hot cannon-ball, ram it into the long, slender culverin, and if, after the discharge, the ball remained sticking in the throat of the gun, to remove it with the various forceps, nippers, and tongs; and, after every shot, to examine with a curious implement resembling Mercury's caducens, the interior of the culverin to learn whether the discharge had caused a rupture anywhere.

However, it is not necessary to be a great genius in order to master all the intricacies and technicalities of a gunner's trade. An ordinary man might even learn, after some practice, how to handle an "elephant;" and, if he were intrusted with the quadrant, he might also manage to discharge the heavier bombs with satisfactory result. It must be remembered, though, that a gunner needs to possess considerable skill as well as experience in order to hurl successfully against the approaching foe a "fire-shield," which discharges simultaneously from every one of its thirty-five holes as many bullets; and the "storm-tub" requires even more dexterity. This implement of warfare runs on two wheels. The axles are spiked with keen-edged knives, and the wheels are filled with gunpowder, which ignites and explodes when the machine is set in motion. If the powder ignites promptly in both wheels at the same instant, the infernal thing dashes like an infuriated bull into the ranks of the enemy, burning the eyes of some, scorching the beards of others, and hacking and slashing everything with which its revolving knives come in contact. If the powder in only one of the wheels explodes, the machine spins around on the motionless wheel like a top, and scatters an entire company; if the second wheel explodes only half a second after the first, then those who have the management of the demon will do well to take to their heels with all speed possible.

It is not necessary to explain at length the advantages of the chain-shot. Anyone will be able to understand its operation if he will but remember that, when two balls connected by a chain are discharged toward the enemy, and one of the balls strikes a man, the other ball will, naturally, circle around the unfortunate until the entire length of chain is wound tightly about him; the circling ball,

meanwhile, will strike with various results: the head, the nose, the ear, or some other portion of the bodies of the soldiers within its radius. It is greatly to be regretted that the use of the "handle-ball" has been discontinued. This weapon was shaped very much like two pot-ladles, bound together at the handles by an iron ring. The man who chanced to be caught between the two ladles might congratulate himself that he escaped with nothing worse than a choking; while the two soldiers on his right and left, whose heads had been caught in the bowls of the ladles, would remember, to the end of their days, the peculiar and disagreeable sensation experienced. There were two more wonderful implements of warfare: one a German, the other a French invention. The former, which was an emanation from Hugo's brain, was called a "*Bombenjungen-werfer*."[1] It was a huge mortar, the central cavity capable of holding a bomb of fifty pounds weight; surrounding this cavity were eight smaller bores, each holding a five-pound bomb. The same charge hurled every one of the nine bombs in rapid succession from the mortar; and one can imagine the astonishment of the Frenchman when, after hearing but one report, the eight "babies" followed, one after the other, the mother bomb.

[1] Anglice: "Hurler of baby-bombs."

This was a diversion Hugo prepared for the beleaguerers, who in return invented an amusement for him. It was a "fire-pot," was shaped exactly like the earthen water-jug the Hungarian reaper carries with him to the harvest field to preserve his drinking-water fresh and cool. The machine was made of iron, and filled with a diabolical mixture. It had four spouts—precisely like our water-jug—from which the fire would hiss and sputter; it was intended to set fire to everything combustible where it fell.

The Germans also had what are called "fire-balls," which hiss and spit, and set fire to everything about them; and other bombs which explode the moment they touch the earth. The French fire-pot, however, combined these two properties: it set fire first, and exploded afterward.

The beleaguered understood very well how to manage a fire-ball. Like Helene Zrinyi, the heroine who defended the fortress of Munkács, the Germans had learned, so soon as a fire-ball fell inside the walls, to cover it with a wet bullock's-hide, which would at once smother the fire-spitting monster, and render it harmless.

But the fire-pot was not to be treated so summarily. If the Germans attempted to smother the fire-demon, to prevent the air from reaching his four noses, he would burst, and woe to him who chanced to be in the way of the flying splinters! He, at least, would have no further desire to sport with a fire-pot.

It happened one day that a fire-pot, which had fallen inside the fortress, did not explode after it had hissed and spit out its fury. When it became cool enough it was taken to Hugo.

"Now I shall find out what is inside this dangerous missile," remarked the constable; "then I'll make some like it and send them to our friends over yonder."

Over the neck of the fire-pot was a sort of hat, shaped like those covering the necks of the Hungarian wooden bottles (*esutora*). This hat, of course, could be removed. After this discovery Hugo invited the commandant, the grand-duke, the governor and mayor of the city, the syndic, and the duke's alchemist to be present at the opening of the fire-pot.

Now each one of the invited said to himself: "It will be enough if the others are there—why should I go? The infernal machine may explode when they are opening it."

And so they all stopped bravely at home and Hugo alone found out what was in the fire-pot.

After it was opened, and Hugo had convinced himself of the nature of the diabolical compound it contained, he proceeded to cast several fire-pots like the French one; and, in the presence of the commandant and the grand-duke, shot them into the enemy's camp. The two distinguished gentlemen, who were peering through their telescopes, were highly delighted when they saw the bombs, which flew through the air like dragons with tails of fire, reach the points at which they had been aimed, ignite everything inflammable, and afterward explode. Now and again it would happen that one of Hugo's fire-pots would fail to explode in the Frenchmen's camp, just as theirs would sometimes fail to do what was expected of them. But Hugo always collected the enemy's unexploded bombs, and, after opening and refilling them with fresh explosives, would hurl them back whence they came.

Oh, I tell you war was conducted in those good old days on economical lines!

As late even as the year 1809 Napoleon had his men collect 28,000 of the enemy's cannon-balls on the battle-field of Wagram, and shot them back at the Austrians; and had the fight continued two days longer, the opposing armies would have ricocheted the same balls back and forth so long as the cannonading made it necessary.

The grand-duke, as was proper, rewarded the constable for his discovery by an increase of pay—from sixteen to twenty thalers a month; and in addition made him a present of a barrel of strong beer, which gave offence to the commandant, who was obliged to quench his thirst with a weaker brew.

Hugo had many enviers, but none of them ventured to pick a quarrel with him. He had the frame of an athlete; his face, with its luxuriant red-beard, resembled that of a lion. He was always in a good humor; no one had ever seen Hugo angry, embarrassed, or frightened. There were no traces of trouble and grief on his countenance. He was perhaps forty years of age, was somewhat disfigured

by small-pox pits, but wherever there was a pretty girl or woman to be won, Hugo was sure to attract her. He was fond of good living—liked everything to be of the best, consequently his money never remained long in his pockets.

The constable's epicurean tastes irritated the mayor, who, as chief of the city militia, outranked the artillerist. But Hugo managed on all occasions to out-do his superior officer. Rieke, the trim little suttler-wife, would slap the militia captain's fingers if he ventured to give her a chin-chuck, but a hearty hug from the smiling constable never met with a repulse. In consequence of the siege prices for the necessaries, as well as for the luxuries of life, had become exorbitant in both cities. Three thalers was the unheard-of price asked at market for a fat goose. The mayor's wife haggled for a long time about the price without success, when along came pretty Rieke.

"How much for your goose?" she asked.

"Three thalers."

"I'll take it."

She paid the money and marched away with the goose.

By some means the mayor learned that Hugo had a baked fat goose for his dinner.

"Look here, constable," he said next day to the artillerist, "how comes it that you can afford to feast on fat goose while I, the mayor, and your superior officer, must content myself with lean herring, cheese and bread? Your pay is only twenty thalers a month; mine is three florins a day. Pray tell me how you manage it?"

To which Hugo made answer:

"Well, mayor, if I wanted to deceive you, I should say that the money for all the good things I enjoy does not come from my pocket; that Rieke, who is infatuated with me (how I managed *that* part of the business I shouldn't tell you), supplies me with whatever I want. But I'll be honest with you and tell you the truth—but pray don't betray my secret, for I don't want to have anything to do with the priests. What I tell you is in strictest confidence and must not go any farther: I have a magic thaler, one of those coins, vulgarly called a 'breeding-penny,' that always returns to my pocket no matter how often I may spend it—"

"You don't say so! And how came you by such a coin, constable?"

"I'll tell you that, too, mayor, only be careful not to let the Capuchins hear of it. I got the thaler in the Hochstatt marshes, from a *bocksritter*—"[2]

[2] Satyr.

"I hope you didn't bond your soul to him for it?" interrupted the mayor.

"Not I. I outwitted the devil by giving the ritter an ignorant Jew lad in my stead."

"You must keep that transaction a secret," cautioned the mayor; then he hastened to repeat what he had heard to the grand-duke.

"Would to heaven every thaler I possess were a breeding-penny!" exclaimed the high-born gentleman. "It would make the carrying on a war an easy matter."

From the day it became known that Constable Hugo possessed that never-failing treasure, a magic coin, and was in league with the all-powerful bocksritter, he rose in the esteem of his fellows.

Meanwhile Ehrenbreitstein and Coblentz continued under bombardment from the Frenchmen. The enemy's fire-pots never failed to find the grand-duke's quarters, notwithstanding the fact that he changed them every day. This at last became so annoying that treason began to be suspected, and the duke offered a reward for the detection of the spy who gave the information to the enemy. That a spy was at work in the German camp was beyond question, though the outlets of both cities were so closely guarded that it would have been impossible for a living mortal to pass through them. Nor could the treason have been committed by means of carrier-pigeons, for, whatever of domestic fowl-kind had been in the cities had long since been devoured by the hungry citizens. The mayor, ever on the alert for transgressors, had his suspicions as to who might be the spy. Every man but one in the beleaguered cities fasted, lamented, prayed, cursed, wept, as the case might be, save this one man, who remained constantly cheerful, smiling, well-fed.

When one of the Frenchmen's fiery monsters came hissing and spitting into the fortress this one man, instead of taking to his heels and seeking the shelter of a cellar, as did the rest of his comrades, would coolly wait until the fire-pot fell to the ground, and, if it failed to burst he would dig it out of the earth into which it had bored itself and carry it to the foundry.

Surely this was more than foolhardiness!

The constable always opened the enemy's unexploded fire-pots in his subterranean work-room; refilled them there, then hurled them back without delay. There was something more than amusement behind this.

One day, when Hugo came up from his subterranean workroom, he encountered the mayor, who said to him:

"Stay, constable, I want to see what you put into that fire-pot—open it."

Without a moment's hesitation Hugo unscrewed the lid and revealed the explosives wrapped in coarse linen; at the same time he explained how much gunpowder, hazel-wood charcoal, sulphur, resin, pitch, sal-ammoniac, borax and acetate of lead were necessary to make up the amount of unquenchable fire required for the bomb.

"Very good," quoth the city functionary, "but what beside these is there in the bottom of the pot?"

"Under this earthen plate, your honor, is more gunpowder. When the explosives on top are burnt out this plate, which has become red-hot, explodes the powder and bursts the bomb—that is the whole secret of the infernal machine."

"I should like to see what is under the earthen plate."

As the mayor spoke these words the constable gave a sudden glance over his shoulder. In the glance was expressed all the temerity of the adventurer, mingled with rage, determination and alarm. But only for an instant. The mayor's bailiffs surrounded him, closing every avenue of escape. Then he burst into a loud laugh, shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"Very well, your honor, see for yourself what is under the earthen plate."

The mayor forced open with the blade of his pocket-knife the earthen plate. There was no powder in the bottom of the bomb, only some ordinary sand; but in it was concealed a folded paper that contained a minute description of the situation in the German camp.

"Bind him in chains!" exclaimed the mayor in a triumphant voice. "At last we have the proofs of your treachery, knave! I'll give you a pretty Rieke! I'll serve up a fat goose for you!"

Hugo continued to laugh while the bailiffs were placing the fetters on his hands and feet.

As if to complete the evidence against him, there came hissing at that moment a fire-pot from the French camp. When it was opened and the earthen plate removed it was found to contain two hundred Albert thalers!

CHAPTER II.
THE TRIAL.

pointing finger

The hand with the two lines under it signifies, in the court records (for the sake of brevity), that at this point in the trial, the chief of the tribunal gave the signal to the executioner for another turn of the wheel. When this had been done, the notary would take down the confession until the prisoner on the rack would cry out:

"Have mercy!—compassion!"

The prince was seated at a separate table, on a black-draped throne-like arm-chair with a canopy.

The mayor occupied the inquisitor's chair.

First question addressed to the accused:

"What is your name?"

"My name, in Podolia, is 'Jaroslav Tergusko;' in Zbarasz it is 'Zdenko Kohaninsky;' in Odessa it is 'Frater Hilarius;' in Hamburg, 'Elias Junker;' in Münster it is 'William Stramm;' in Amsterdam, 'Mynheer Tobias van der Bullen;' in Singapore, 'Maharajah Kong;' on the high seas, 'Captain Rouge;' in The Hague, it is 'Ritter Malchus;' in Lille, 'Chevalier de Mont Olympe;' in Pfalz, 'Doctor Sarepta;' here, I am called 'Hugo von Habernik.'

"Have you any more names?" inquired the chair.

At this question everybody began to laugh—the prince, the judges, the prisoner, even the skull on the table. The chair alone

remained grim and dignified.

"I can't remember any more of my names," was the prisoner's reply.

pointing finger

SECOND QUESTION:

"What is your religion?"

"I was born an Augsburg Confession heretic. When I went to Cracow I became a Socinian; in the Ukraine I joined the Greek church; afterward I became an orthodox Catholic; later, a Rosicrucian; then a Quaker. I have also professed the faith of Brahma; and once I was a member of the community of Atheists and devil-worshipping Manichees, called also Cainists."

"A fine array, truly!" commented the chair, as the notary entered the list in the register.

pointing finger

THIRD QUESTION:

"What is your occupation, prisoner?"

"I have been ensign; prisoner; slave; robber-chief; parasite; ducal grand-steward; mendicant friar; recruiting sergeant; sacristan; knight; shell-fish dealer; stock-jobber; ship-captain; viceroy; pirate; teacher; knacker's assistant; conjuror; bocksritter; hangman; pikeman; quack-doctor; prophet; constable—"

"Stop! Stop!" interrupted the chair. "The notary cannot keep up with you."

Again the court-room resounded with laughter; the prisoner on the rack, as well as the skull on the table, again joined in the merriment. Everybody seemed in a good humor—that is, everybody but the mayor. He alone was grave.

After the signal to the executioner the fourth question followed:

"Of what crimes are you guilty?"

(For the purpose of greater perspicuity the chair dictated to the recording secretary the Latin nomenclature of the crimes confessed.)

Prisoners: "I was a member of a band of robbers and incendiaries."

"*Primo, latrocinium*," dictated the chair.

Prisoner: "I won the affections of my benefactor's wife."

Chair: "*Secundo, adulterium*."

Prisoner: "I robbed a church."

Chair: "*Tertio, sacrilegium*."

Prisoner: "I masqueraded as a nobleman under a false name."

Chair: "*Quarto, larvatus*."

Prisoner: "I committed a forgery."

Chair: "*Quinto, falsorium.*"

Prisoner: "I killed my friend in a duel."

Chair: "*Sexto, homicidium ex duello.*"

Prisoner: "I cheated my partners in business."

Chair: "*Septimo, stellionatus.*"

Prisoner: "I betrayed state secrets confided to me."

Chair: "*Octavo, felonia.*"

Prisoner: "I used for my own purpose money belonging to others."

Chair: "*Nono, barattaria.*"

Prisoner: "I worshipped idols."

Chair: "*Decimo, idololatria.*"

Prisoner: "I married a second wife while the first was still living."

Chair: "*Undecimo, bigamia.*"

Prisoner: "I also took a third, fourth, fifth and sixth wife."

Chair: "*Eodem numero trigamia, polygamia.*"

Prisoner: "I murdered a king."

Chair: "*Decimo secundo, regicidium.*"

Prisoner: "I have been a pirate."

Chair: "*Decimo tertia, pirateria.*"

Prisoner: "I killed my first wife."

Chair: "*Decimo quarto, uxoricidium.*"

Prisoner: "I practiced conjuring."

Chair: "*Decimo quinto, sorcellaria.*"

Prisoner: "I have been in league with Satan."

Chair: "*Decimo sexto, pactum diabolicum implicitum.*"

Prisoner: "I have coined base money."

Chair: "*Decimo septimo, adulterator monetarium.*"

Prisoner: "I preached a new faith."

Chair: "*Decimo octavo, hæresis schisma.*"

Prisoner: "I have been a quack doctor."

Chair: "*Decimo nono, veneficus.*"

Prisoner: "I betrayed a fortress intrusted to my guardianship."

Chair: "*Vigesimo, crimen traditorum.*"

Prisoner: "I have eaten human flesh."

Chair: "*Vigesimo primo, anthropophagia. Cannibalismus!*" cried the mayor in a loud tone, bringing his fist with considerable force down on the pandects lying before him on the table. The perspiration was rolling in great beads over his forehead.

The prisoner on the rack laughed heartily; but this time no one laughed with him. The executioner had mistaken the chief's wink for a signal to turn the wheel, which he did, and the sound which came from the victim's throat was a strange mixture of merriment and agony—as if he were being tickled and strangled at the same moment.

What the chief's dictation was really intended to signify was that the proceedings were concluded for the day; that the accused should be released from the rack and taken back to his dungeon.

It was a most unusual case—unique in the annals of the criminal court. Never before had a prisoner acknowledged himself guilty of, or accessory to, so many crimes. It was the first time such a combination of misdemeanors had come before the tribunal. The accused would certainly have to be tried without mercy; no extenuating circumstances would be allowed to interfere with justice.

The prince was extremely interested in the case. He was curious to learn the coherence between the individual transgressions, in what manner one led to the other, and gave orders that the trial should not be resumed the next day until he should arrive in court.

The prisoner had cause for laughter. Before his confession reached its conclusion, before he could relate the history of his one-and-twenty crimes, the Frenchmen would capture Coblentz and release him from imprisonment and death.

But one may laugh too soon!

What was to be done with this fellow?

That the death penalty was his just desert was unquestionable; but in what manner should it be imposed? Had he confessed only the crime for which he was now under arrest—treason—the matter might be settled easily enough: he would be shot in the back. But with so many transgressions to complicate the matter it was going to be difficult exceedingly to pronounce judgment.

For instance: the wheel is the punishment for robbery; the polygamist must be divided into as many portions as he has wives; the regicide must be torn asunder by four horses. But how are you going to carry out the last penalty if the accused has already been carved into six portions? Also, it is decreed that the right hand of a forger be cut off; the servitor of Satan must suffer death by fire. But if the accused has been consumed by flames, how will it be possible to bray him to pulp in a mortar for having committed uxoricide? or, how carry out the commands of the law which prescribes death by starvation for the wretch who is guilty of cannibalism?

After much deliberation the prince, with the wisdom of a Solomon, decided as follows:

"The prisoner, who is arraigned at the bar for treason, having confessed to twenty-one other transgressions, shall relate to the court a detailed account of each individual crime, after which he shall be sentenced according to the crime or crimes found by the judges to be the most heinous."

This decision was perfectly satisfactory to the mayor; and the judges gave it as their opinion that, as the accused would require all his strength for so prolonged an examination, it would be advisable to substitute the torture by water for that of the rack, as was first decided.

"No! no!" objected the prince. "The man who is forced to drink nothing but water is not in the mood to relate adventures (I know that by experience!) Let the prisoner be subjected to mental torture. Sentence him at once to death, and when he is not before the tribunal let him be shut up in the death-cell. The hours spent in that gloomy hole are a torture sufficient to bring any criminal, however hardened he may have become, to repentance. Besides, it will be a saving of expense to the city. The curious citizens, who like to gape at a condemned prisoner, will, out of compassion, supply this one also with food and drink. When he has eaten and drunk his fill, we will have him brought to the court-room. The man who has had all he wants to eat and drink is talkative!"

The judges concurred with his highness; but the mayor growled in a dissatisfied tone:

"This knave, who confesses to having committed twenty-one crimes in addition to the treachery in which we detected him, will, by the decision of his highness, fare better than his judges, who have learned during the siege what it is to hunger and thirst."

To which the syndic responded consolingly:

"Never mind, god-father! Let the poor wretch gormandize between the rack and the gallows. Remember the old saw: 'Today, I—tomorrow, you.'"

PART II.

CHAPTER I.
WITH THE ROBBERS—THE PRSJAKA CAVES.

I was ensign in a regiment under command of General Melchior Hatzfeld of the imperial forces. (Thus Hugo began his confession the next day when he had been brought to the court-room from the death-cell.) My conduct at that time was exemplary; I acquired so much skill in handling fire-arms that, at the siege of Cracow, I was advanced to the position of chief gunner of a battery.

Cracow at that time was in the hands of George Rákóczy, prince of Transylvania, who had leagued with Sweden to subdue Poland; and he would most likely have succeeded had not the imperial army come to the assistance of the Poles.

I shall not dwell long on the siege of Cracow lest I awake in the minds of the honorable gentlemen of the court a suspicion that, by relating incidents not immediately connected with my transgressions, I am purposely prolonging my recital. I shall therefore speak only of those occurrences which it will be necessary to mention in order to explain why I committed the crimes of which I am guilty. While with the army before Cracow I made the acquaintance of the daughter of a Polish noble. The young lady, who took a great fancy to me—I wasn't a bad-looking youth in those days, your honors—was a charming creature of sixteen years, with the most beautiful black eyes. If I remember rightly her name was Marinka. She taught me how to speak her language—and something else, too: how to love—the fatal passion which has all my life been the cause of much of my trouble.

During the siege my general frequently sent me to reconnoiter among the Hungarian camps; and as I was a fearless youth, I would venture to the very gates of the manor-houses in the neighborhood of Cracow. At one of these houses I met my sweetheart; and after that, you may guess, honored sirs, that it was not for the general's "yellow boys" alone I risked my neck night after night. No, my little Marinka's sparkling eyes were as alluring as the gold pieces; and I knew when I set out on my nightly tour that my sweetheart would be waiting for me at the gates of her father's place. But our secret meetings were at last discovered. There was an old witch of a housekeeper who ferreted out her young mistress' secret, and informed the old noble. One moonlight night Marinka was teaching me in her own little cozy chamber how to say: "*Kocham pana z calego zersa*"—which is "Mistress, I love you with my whole heart,"—when we heard her father's heavy footsteps ascending the staircase. I tell you I was frightened and said to myself, "This is the end of you, my lad!" but Marinka whispered in my ear:

"*Nebojsa!* (don't be afraid), go into the corridor, walk boldly toward my father, and to whatever he may say to you, do you reply 'God is One.'"

Then she softly opened the door, pushed me into the corridor, closed and locked the door behind me. The old gentleman was coming up the stairs very slowly because of a lame leg which he had to drag after him step by step. He had a square red face which I could see only indistinctly above the burning lunt he carried in one hand, blowing it continually to prevent it from going out. In the other hand he held a musket. The blazing lunt must have blinded him, for he did not see me until the muzzle of the musket came in contact with my breast. Then he stopped and cried in a stern voice:

"*Kto tam? Stoj!*" (Who are you? Stand!)

"God is One," I made answer. What else could I have said? The old gentleman's aggressive mien changed at once. He became quite friendly; he extinguished the lunt by stamping on it with his foot, tapped my shoulder in a confidential manner and called me little brother. Then taking me by the arm he led me down the stairs to a room where a huge fire was blazing on the hearth. Here he bade me seat myself on a settee covered with a bear skin and placed before me an English flagon of spirits. After he had arranged everything for my comfort he fetched from a secret cupboard a small book—it was so small I could have hidden it in the leg of my boot—and began to read to me all manner of heretical phrases such as "There is no need for a Holy Trinity, because the little which is done on earth in the name of God can easily be done by One alone."

My hair stood on end as I listened to the sinful words and I found what a trap I had fallen into. My Marinka's father was a Socinian, a leader of the heretical sect, and he was trying to make a proselyte of me.

The doctrines of Blandrata had spread extensively throughout Poland, but, owing to the persecution of its adherents, they could meet and work only in secret. The old noble's manor was one of their retreats, where recent converts were received for instruction. When the old gentleman believed he had enlightened me sufficiently he produced a heavy volume, bade me lay my right hand on it and repeat after him the vows of the society.

You may believe I was in a dilemma!

If I refused to repeat the vows I should have to confess that I had come to the manor for Marinka's sake, then the old noble would fetch his musket and send me straightway to paradise. If, on the other hand, I repeated the vows, then I was sure to journey to hades. Which was I to choose?

Should I elect to travel by extra-post, direct, without stopping, into the kingdom of heaven, or should I journey leisurely by a circuitous route, with frequent halts, to hades?

I was a mere lad; I was sorry for my pretty curly head—I chose the latter alternative!

From that time I became a daily visitor in the retreat of the followers of Socinus. Being a neophyte I was permitted to take part in their meetings only during the singing; when the sermon began I was sent to the gates to guard against a surprise. This was a welcome duty; for, once outside the house, all thought of taking up my station at the gates would leave me and, instead, I would climb the tree which grew close to my Marinka's window, swing myself by a branch into her room, in which she was kept a prisoner by her father to prevent our meeting; and there, while the sages below-stairs expounded the dogma of the unity of God, we two ignorant young people demonstrated how two human hearts can become as one.

One day our little community received an unexpected addition to its membership. There arrived from Cracow a troop of Hungarian soldiers who announced themselves as followers of Socinus. They received a hospitable welcome from the old noble, whom they overwhelmed with joy by telling him the prince of Transylvania had become an adherent of Socinus; that his highness had averred that, were he the King of Poland, all persecution of the heretics should cease at once and that some of the churches should be given over to them for their worship.

When I repeated this piece of news to my general he became so excited he sprang from his seat—his head almost struck the roof of the tent—and shouted: "It is perfectly outrageous how those Hungarians will stoop to base methods in order to win allies! If they succeed in inveigling the Polish Socinians to their ranks then we may as well stop trying to get them out of Poland!"

Fortunately, however, there arose dissensions between the Hungarian and the Polish adherents of Socinus. I must mention here, in order to explain how I became cognizant of the facts I am about to relate, that Marinka's father had begun to suspect me. Instead of sending me to stand guard at the gates when the sermon began, I was permitted to hear it and take part in the disputations.

The Hungarian troopers maintained that it was the duty of all pious Socinians to commemorate, at every one of their meetings, the death of the Savior by drinking wine; and they were so extremely devout that an entire quarter-cask of their host's best Tokay was emptied at every celebration. After the meetings, when the old noble would lift and shake the empty wine-cask, I could read in his countenance signs that heterodoxy was gradually taking root in him. At first he contented himself with remonstrating against the frequency of the celebration; surely it ought to satisfy the most devout member of the sect to observe the ceremony on Sundays, and holy days. But the troopers met his arguments with scriptural authority for their practices.

Then the old gentleman, finding his remonstrances of no avail, made an assault upon the dogma itself. He delivered an impassioned address in which he sought to disprove the divinity of Jesus. To this blasphemous assertion the Magyars made reply:

"If what you say be true, then He was the son of an honest man, and a good man Himself. Therefore, it is meet and right for us to show Him all honor and respect." And another quarter-cask was brought from the cellar. The old noble became daily more fanatical in his assaults upon the tenets to which he had so devoutly adhered before the accession to his little congregation of the Hungarian troopers; and, at last declared that Jesus was a Jew; that He deserved to be put to death, because He had promulgated the unjust law of taxation. But not even this fearful blasphemy deterred the Hungarians from their frequent celebrations. They said:

"If the Nazarene is so unworthy, then it is our plain duty to shed His blood, the symbol of which is wine—"

"Tremendously clever fellows, those Magyars!" here interrupted the prince.

"They were impious devils!" exclaimed the mayor reprovingly. "Impious devils!"

"*Habet rectum*," responded his highness. Then to the prisoner: "Continue, my son."

Hugo resumed his confession:

When the last cask was brought from the cellar the old noble declared to his congregation that the entire story of the Divine birth was a myth invented by the priests—

"And you took part in those blasphemous meetings?" sternly interrupted the mayor.

No, indeed, your honor! That is a crime of which I am guiltless. I never said one word; and escaped from the meetings whenever I could manage to do so. I had determined to flee with Marinka from the sinful community. Our plan was: I was to steal from the meeting on a certain night, assist my pretty Marinka to descend from her room by means of the tree outside her window and then set fire to the sheep-stables. The conflagration would scatter the blasphemers; everybody would run to the stables to release the horses, and in the general confusion Marinka would hastily secure as many of the family jewels as could be packed into a portmanteau. Then she and I would mount two of the freed horses and gallop straightway to my camp, where I would introduce her as my wife—

"A pious idea, certainly," commented the prince.

"How can your highness say so!" in a tone of reproof, exclaimed the mayor. "It was incendiarism pure and simple: *Incendiarii ambitiosi comburantur*; and further: *raptus decem juvencis puniatur*, and *rapina palu affigatur*."

"Very well, then," assented his highness. "My son, for the incendiarism you shall be burned at the stake; for the rape of the maid you shall pay a fine of ten calves; for the theft of the jewels, the punishment is impalement. Continue."

Unfortunately, resumed the prisoner, our plans miscarried, through the intermeddling of the old housekeeper I spoke of. Her suspicions had been aroused by Marinka's preparations for flight; she informed the old noble, who set spies to watch me. I was caught in the act of firing the stables and was flogged with hazel rods until I confessed that I was a spy from the enemy's camp. The old noble wanted to bind me to the well-sweep; but one of the Hungarian troopers took compassion on me and offered to buy me for sixteen Polish groschen. His offer was accepted; I was sold to him and taken to Cracow. I should not have had such a hard time as a slave had I not been compelled to grind all the pepper used in the Hungarian army. I ground enormous quantities, for the Magyars like all their food strongly seasoned with the condiment. My eyes were red constantly; my nose was swollen to the size of a cucumber. The only other complaint I had to make was that my master compelled me to eat everything that was set before me. He would say, when he placed before me enough for three men:

"You shall not be able to say that you hungered while you were my slave."

When I had eaten until I could not swallow another morsel, my master would seize me by the shoulders, shake me as one shakes a full bag in order to get more into it, and he would repeat the operation until the contents of every dish had been emptied into me. I used to sicken at the approach of meal-times, and whenever I saw the huge spoon—twice the size of my mouth—with which the food was ladled into me. Your honors will hardly believe that there is no greater torture than to be stuffed with food—

"We have never tried that method," remarked the prince.

"Nor are we likely to test it very soon," supplemented the mayor, with a grim expression on his countenance.

I yearned to be released from my unpleasant situation, resumed the prisoner. For the first time I realized the enormity of the transgression I had committed in joining the Socinian Community. Now I had no one to intercede for me with the Supreme Ruler of the earth. Had I become a Mussulman I should have had Mohammed; had I adopted the Jewish faith I should have been able to call to my aid Abraham, or some one of the other fathers in Israel. But I had no one. However, my desire to be released from the tortures of food-stuffing and pepper-grinding was at last fulfilled; I was captured, together with the entire Hungarian army, by the Tartars—