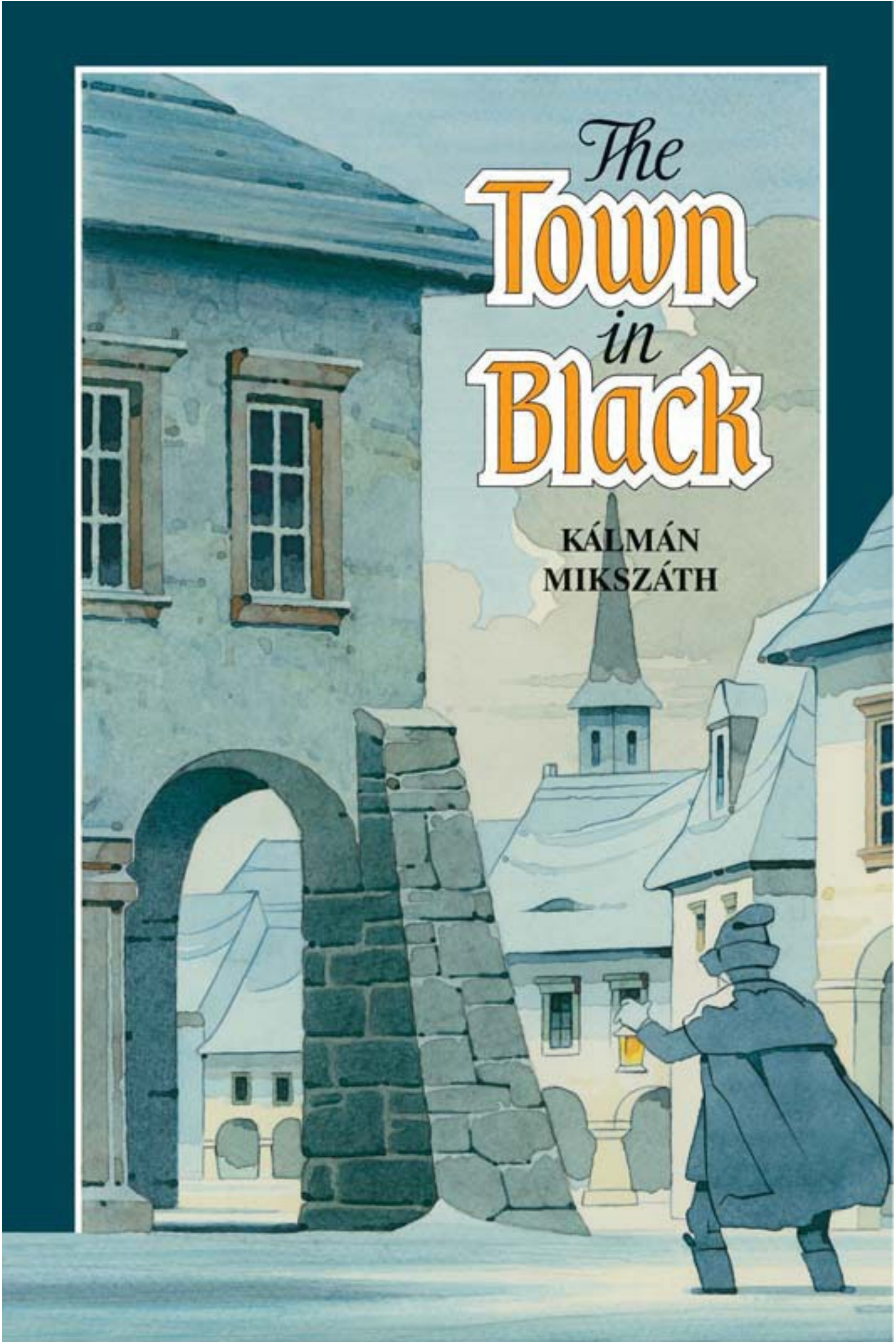
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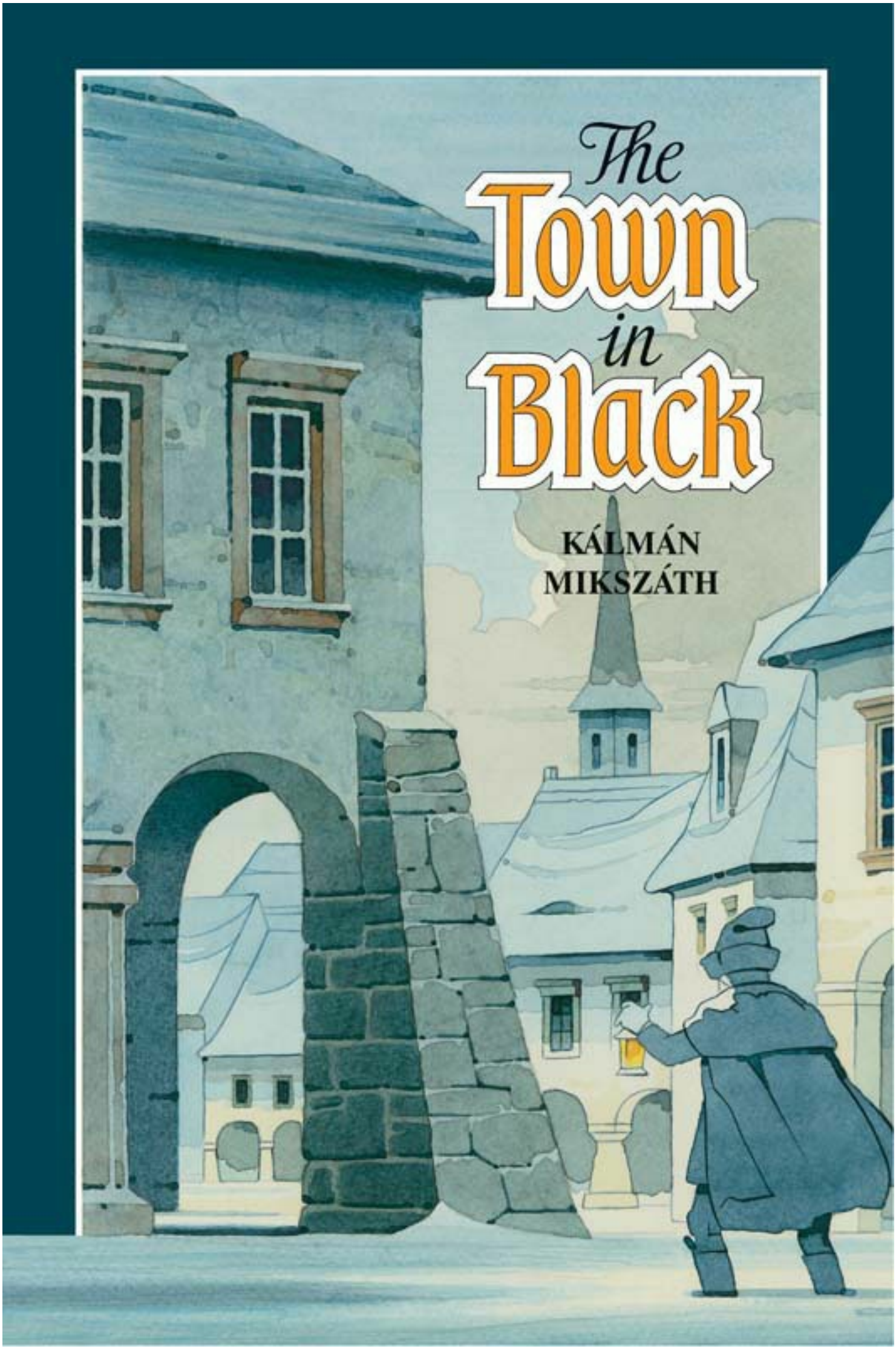
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Chapter One

Sundry preliminaries and details knowledge of which is imperative

A renowned alispán of Szepes County was Pál Görgey in Thököly's time. It was a wicked, uncertain world. On Monday the labancwould be masters, while on Wednesday thekurucgave the orders [1]. One had to walk on eggshells, and a false step cost a man his head. It was, however, true that at the time men's heads were cheaper than eggs. All the same, power is power, and people's attitude to it is the same as that of the morphine addict: they want ever greater doses. For when all is said and done, power is merciless only upwards, and downwards always merciful.

Pál Görgey was quite a wealthy man, and his family had been in positions of corresponding importance in the Szepes region; now, however, they were not what they had been under the Árpáds of old, God rest them, even if He did visit their country with eternal unrest.

Ah, time went by and by, and the Görgeys slipped a little lower. Their first ancestor Arnold and his sons had borne the office of Count of the Saxons and had been the greatest of oligarchs on the Polish marches. This Arnold had enticed the Saxons into the unpopulated Szepes region, but one could not treat the Transylvanian Saxons

in the way that the Pied Piper of Hamelin did. Those Saxons were clever and the sound of the pipe had no effect on them; they required promises and privileges, and they got them. Indeed, the king, His Majesty Béla IV [2] , granted a little land to Arnold himself, too, an area between the Dunajec and the silky waters of the Poprád, because the Árpáds were bountiful kings and measured land not by the cadastral acre but from river to river. Arnold's sons likewise were men of valour, especially Count Jordán. László IV [3] endowed them with the village of Görgő, from which they derived their name.

As lords of huge tracts of land they played first violin in Szepes. A whole line of countssprang from them, and for many generations they occupied the alispán's seat [4] . God alone knows, however, in what way the earth turned (perhaps on a sword-point), but suffice it to say that as time passed they became poorer and poorer and new dynasties rose above them. Along came the mighty families of Csák, Zápolya and Thurzó, and at the time in question the Csákys, who upstaged them and pushed them ever farther down in matters of glory and importance. The Dunajec and the Poprád flowed on where they always had done, but the lands between them were no longer theirs, and what remained here and there were trifles; the family tree had, as it were, reached the end of its life, and no longer produced leaders and statesmen but at the most mere alispáns and szolgabírós [5] , and although the septuagenarian Gipsy woman of Késmárk told Mihály Görgey that the family tree was just as hale and hearty as ever; it was living through a time of winter and repose, to be sure, which would last two hundred years, after which it would begin again to put forth a new branch which would spread into all the family trees of seventy-seven lands.

Our hero Pál Görgey now belonged only among the so-called wealthy common nobility together with the Berzeviczkys, Jekelfalussys, Máriássys and Darvases, but his sister Katalin was married to a Darvas at Osgyán in Gömör County [6] . I mention the nexus [7] rather than the two or three thousand acres that belonged to the fort-like Görgő farmhouse with its bastions because the measure of a gentleman was his nexus, not the estate. In those days it was just as easy to acquire a large estate with a great nexus as it is these days, when I write, to acquire a great nexus with a large estate. The true-blue aristocrats such as the Balassas and Csákys have had their ups and downs, sometimes having five or six castles in their possession, sometimes nothing but the clothes in which they hid in dark forests, seeking refuge in woodsmen's hovels and thatched cottages; but this is, so to speak, nothing of consequence, a little sport, and they pay it scant attention. The king takes away and the king gives back, because nexus is what counts; if one member of a family puts bad wood on the fire, a second or a third is meanwhile sure to be rubbing against the royal mantle, and gradually everything comes to order.

There was therefore nothing remarkable about the shrinking of the Görgey estates, or even their having nothing, but the harm came from their falling from the ranks of the dynastic families. Why and how this arose is not worth dwelling on. There was at the time a formula for happiness: Fight well and marry well. Well, they probably married badly, because the annals show that they fought well enough. Later they went astray in other ways: they picked the wrong king in the days of János Szapolyai and Ferdinand [8] , and then chose the wrong God by accepting the teachings of Luther.

Of all the Görgeys, however, it was Pál that had

inherited most from his ancestors; little of their estates, of course, but all of their haughtiness. He was a big, burly man, and from his piercing grey eyes there issued such a chill that there might have been two balls of ice beneath his bushy eyebrows. He had a coarse, ruddy face, but when he spoke at the County Assembly a sharp mind gleamed from it and it looked handsome. Beneath his nose hung a heavy moustache, but he no longer sported a beard that by this time consisted of sparse red hairs, while his forehead bulged prominently and the wrinkles on it gave rise to expectations of cunning and harshness. His lips he kept, for the most part, tightly compressed; no smile played about them, though they often quivered with rage. That face was, as it were, a landscape on which the sun never shone and was only occasionally illumined by lightning.

So large was his head that he had to have his hats specially made by János Kammleitner, the celebrated hatter of Lőcse; there was, however, a good brain in that head. He could do as he pleased with the noble County. Although he was only forty-two, he had been elected alispán three times, always unanimously. He set great store by that unanimity, because after every election he concluded the proceedings with the daring statement:

“My noble brethren! If there is so much as one among you that does not wish me to be alispán, let him speak, and I will not accept the office, so help me God!”

Of course, a regular silence of the grave followed. The noble brethren certainly would not have spoken out, but everyone secretly wished that his neighbour would jump at the chance. That was, however, considered a death-leap. Pál Görgey himself probably took it quite seriously as a sign of popularity, as did those present, at the same time reasoning within themselves: “I can do without him,

actually, but the rest like him, so I'd be silly to take that leap."

Popularity! A remarkable little item. It is the one commodity the semblance of which is worth as much as the reality. Indeed, perhaps more, because if a man is considered popular it can take him a long way in public life even if he is deeply hated. On the other hand it leads to nothing if one is loved but does not appear so. Realities are surely rocks of granite, but the greatest careers are nevertheless built on appearances.

Frankly, Pál Görgey was universally disliked, but the attribute of loved and respected had become so encrusted on his person that no one dared to chip it off. He was considered ruthless, vain, ill-tempered, suspicious and conceited, not to mention lazy. These bad qualities were, however, in part only appearance. His ruthlessness and so-called bullying could be traced back to his tendency to sudden outbursts of passion. At such times he was quite beside himself, but when he had cooled down he recovered his composure and regretted what he had done, and at times would make amends.

Once, it is said, he was taken ill during an Assembly at Lőcse [9] ; he caught a chill, and his orderly, András Plasznyik, fed him quinine day and night, but he shook terribly with cold and no medicine was of any use; after lying there for some days in his lodging in County Hall he sent his hussar to Görgő to ask his housekeeper, Mrs Marják, to send his flannel vest. The hussar brought it, but as he was putting it on he noticed that the top button was missing, at which he fell into a wild rage, leapt out of bed, flung on his clothes, rushed outside, mounted the hussar's horse tethered there, and galloped off.

"What on earth?" exclaimed the gentlemen of the County in astonishment.

“For the love of God, what’s Your Honour up to?” gasped the orderly in terror, as he met him.

“Got to go home for a moment,” he replied hoarsely, his eyes gleaming wildly, “to box my housekeeper’s ears.”

He galloped for half-an-hour down the old twisting road to Görgő, during which time his rage ran out of steam, and on arrival he turned round nice and quietly, having lost his chill through the great outburst of temper.

So well did he know himself in that respect that he kept the stocks, whipping-post, fetters and other implements of justice locked in a closet, and after each occasion of use one of the ostlers had to take the key to a lofty branch of the poplar that grew in the courtyard and tie it on with string. Then when it was needed the alispán would take his gun and fire at the key until it clattered down. That afforded him some entertainment, and as it sometimes took him an hour to hit the key — his hands trembled so in his rage — he usually did so only when he had become calmer, and therefore took a calmer and cooler view of the malfeasance that he intended to punish and excused himself in the majority of cases from carrying out whimsical sentences.

No doubt he endeavoured to act justly, and so was not a wicked man. No, no, Görgey was merely an embittered sort, whom blows rendered nervous. It was no good his being the brains of the County if he could not do three things: forget, eat and sleep. What would he not have given for a good, sound sleep! He had the entire race of cockerels removed from the vicinity of the mansion, those of neighbouring peasants, too, and the cowherd that sounded his horn at dawn received twenty-five lashes. It was not advisable to disturb his postprandial nap in particular, as many found out, because sleep in the afternoon is sweet. Night-time sleep is God-given, but

that in the afternoon one steals from the County if one is a County official. That is why it is so precious.

Every living being had to walk past his windows on tiptoe, and when he rose from lunch (an event marked by the discharge of a cannon on the ramparts) the nearby mill had to cease grinding because the noise would have disturbed him. Everyone took care to make not a sound; well might not creak, chain might not rattle, mortar might not be pounded, because His Worship was taking a nap. Singing and loud conversation were forbidden. Even old Mihály Apró, the gardener, if imperative necessity caused him to pass the windows, retained sufficient of his little wits to take off his hobnailed boots of Muscovy leather and in winter to put on felt boots, while in summer he would go barefoot through the danger-area.

On one occasion it happened that Apró's grandson came to visit during the school holidays. They doted on the dear boy, who was becoming quite a gentleman because his father, a confectioner of Késmárk, was having him trained for the priesthood because of his delicate constitution. The poor, worthy elderly couple lavished upon him every attention, even warming the chair he was to sit on, and lo and behold! they left him to his own devices for perhaps no more than a minute or two, and what happened? (Oh God, oh God, these children will always find something that they're not allowed to do.) The boy found a harmonica on top of some cupboard, took it and went outside with it into the shady courtyard, sat down under the linden right beside the alispán's bedroom window and merrily began to play the doleful old song:

Buda, oh Buda, who would believe

How many bold Magyars for you did bleed?

This had gone on for no more than a minute, if that, before the people in the courtyard ran over to warn him. Mrs Apró (by then a shuffling little woman) simply flew, her clean, starched skirts crackling and rustling, and snatched the harmonica from his hand.

“Hush, you wretch! Come away at once!”

She tugged at him, covering him with protective affection and her apron, and led him off by the shortest route, because she could hear the window opening (Oh, my Lord and Creator!) and a sharp, commanding voice grumbled:

“Right, what’s going on?”

No answer came, only a rustling of bushes and shrubs that faded into the distance.

With eyes bloodshot and starting from his face he rushed out into the courtyard, which Apró by long tending had made as lovely as a fairy garden. He had planted magnificent bushes among the tall trees and was at the time depicting in splendid flowers the armorial achievements of the County of Szepes, which consisted of a combination of those of the Thurzós, Berzevickys and Draveczkys, with the unicorn of the Korotnoky family. On Sundays peasants used to come from distant parts to gaze on the wonder, because they attributed it not to Apró’s skill but to the very soil, which had put forth of itself the arms of Szepes County in coloured flowers as a sign that royal rank was now about to come to a man of Szepes.

(We had certainly come close, but it was all over by then. Thököly and his wife were in exile far away in the East [10] .)

The servants were just taking the plants for the fine coat of arms from their pots when Pál Görgey appeared on the porch.

“Bring that harmonica player here,” he bellowed. “Take him alive or dead, but do it at once.”

He ground his teeth in his rage. He had ugly yellow teeth, which showed him to be progressive. (Progressive was what people were called at the time who had learned from the Turks and adopted the manly delights of smoking.)

The servants looked at one another, rigid with fear, and old Apró turned white as chalk, while Mrs Marják began scrubbing the waffle-iron with some kind of white powder.

“Who was it?” he demanded grimly.

No one answered, although everyone knew; the servants were fond of the Aprós and remained silent for their sake.

“Mrs Marják, you must have seen.”

“No, I didn’t,” answered Mrs Marják recklessly, “may I be bent like this.” (She had the good sense in the meantime to keep her fingers straight.)

“Well, you’re all leading me a fine dance,” Görgey raged. “Do none of you know?”

Again, no reply.

“Don’t even you know, Preszton?” (That was the hajdú’s name.)

“No, Your Worship, sir.”

“Nor you either, Mátyás?” (This to the coachman.)

“Nor I,” he croaked in a stifled voice.

“Very well then, very well, you’re very decent people,” and he ground his teeth with a blood-curdling laugh (he was at his most merciless when he played the nice man), “but if you don’t produce the harmonica-player within

half an hour Ill have the lot of you thrashed. Dixi [11] .”

With that he withdrew into the mansion with dreadful mutterings, and could be heard slamming doors and kicking the dogs which went everywhere and lay in the rooms. Their pitiful howls could be heard outside and made one’s hair stand on end.

Great was the disquiet in the courtyard, and the servants whispered together, discussing what they were to do, should they hand over the schoolboy or not, and his old grandmother, Mrs Apró, wrung her hands: she would never live through the day, she would rather go and jump down the well than let her grandson suffer punishment. (My God, my God, what would my poor daughter have to say about it?)

On hearing the boy’s grandmother weep and wail, old Apró too lost his head and, being no man of action, ran to his room to find not his head but his rosary. As a good Catholic he began to tell his beads in case it helped, and only Mrs Marják put her hands on her hips.

“Well, I won’t let that poor delicate boy be misused for the sake of any pagan! Never fear, my boy, I’ll protect you.” (She stroked the schoolboy’s head, as he trembled at her side.) “Go into the kitchen and I’ll lock you in. Not even Father Herkó will go in there as long as I’m in charge. You just go in there and sit quietly until it all blows over. You’ll find a little cheese tart and a goose-leg in the pantry. Now, I’ll be off and I’m taking the key with me. You just put your mind at rest, Mrs Apró!”

Mrs Marják went round the garden and from there by a little gate went straight to the pasture, where the Gipsies from the village were making mud-bricks. The oldest Gipsy was Peti, a rascally individual from his youth. Mrs Marják caught sight of him and persuaded him with honeyed words to take the blame for the harmonica.

After much bargaining he agreed and allowed himself, in return for a four-week old piglet and two white loaves, to be taken to the master’s door.

The servants loitering in the courtyard and Mrs Apró realised how crafty Mrs Marják had been (she was not just a handsome head of hair), and welcomed Peti the rescuer with great affection, and with all manner of reassurances and spiritual encouragement helped to usher him into the presence of His Honour, and only the two-faced Preszton disconcerted him by whispering in his ear: “I wouldn’t like to be in your shoes, Gipsy.”

It seemed that now he himself was not feeling too happy about the affair, and certain signs indicated that he would have liked to escape, but Mrs Marják took a firm grip on his collar, marched up to the door of the study and with a grand gesture, so to speak, tossed him in.

“Here’s the culprit, Your Honour,” she exclaimed eagerly.

The alispán, who was quietly smoking his chibouk, sprawled on a couch covered with a bearskin, gave him a long, tired look.

“Ah!” he said indifferently, and yawned. “You play the harmonica nicely, Petyuskó! Mrs Marják, give him a Rhenish forint and four ells of cloth.”

Numerous similar incidents could be quoted to demonstrate that it was hard to fathom Pál Görgey. He was inscrutability itself. Whatever he did, however, was never held against him. An unusual good fortune danced in his path and held up such distorting mirrors before his misdeeds that they seemed almost becoming. Another would long ago have been killed, but he was defended. Leave the poor man alone. You have to understand people. That great spirit of his. He’s still upset about his

wife. He’s in mourning, and you mustn’t judge a man at such a time. Irascible, sour, harsh, it just goes to show what a great heart he has.

Some, however, whispered (audiatur et altera pars [12]) something to the effect that time had by then purged the great grief from his heart and left his bad qualities, and that he was not the cold ascetic that he showed himself publicly to be, and that when evening spread its cloak over the mansion of Görgő shadows were often to be seen flickering over the walls and the rustle of skirts heard in the deserted corridors.

Those that knew Pál Görgey better did not believe it, he was not that sort of person, but those that knew the young peasant wives of Görgő better than they knew him had no doubts, because the young married women of Görgő were famous far and wide for their beauty and their coquetry alike, and certainly the majority of the men bit the dust in contest with the King of Késmárk.

These scandals about the wild man that took wing aroused well-merited annoyance in the closer confines of the Görgey family, with its Puritan morals, and it was only the easy-going János Görgey, Pál’s much older brother, that passed them off with a joke:

“I don’t really believe it, but if he does so, it’s no crime. It’s ten years now since poor Karolina died. He’s not made of wood, you know, and if he were, he’s no headboard on some grave. And in any case, in ten years even that will decay. And when all’s said and done, whose business is it? One adds to one’s peasantry as best one may.”

His wife, Mária Jánoki, gave János a resounding thump on the back for those words, but with that the question of her brother-in-law was wiped off the slate, and with her he was like the rest of the family, because

János was the family oracle; he might not be as clever as his brother Pál, but he was a good kinsman, a great kuruc, and at heart as pure as freshly-fallen snow.

Well, yes, Pál Görgey had been widowed those ten years and had since then become a wild man. So he was called in the family. Old János used to say to him straight out: “You’ve jumped out of the Görgey coat of arms, brother.” (The arms of the Görgey family bore a wild man, perhaps in token of their clearing of forest land.)

Previously he had been a merry, calm, loveable person, but that death had left his nerves in shreds. It is said that even then deep down in his heart there was much goodness and feeling, but since the loss of his wife he had become so immersed in grief that he could seldom break out of it. That was when he had become irritable, flighty, despotic, in a word, a wild man, and then he was censured for it, but now people censured him for not continuing to be a wild man. Is the world not mad?

As for the deceased lady, she was indeed to be lamented. “We lay in the ground a true pearl,” were the opening words of the eulogy spoken by Sámuel Podolinczi, who himself burst into tears at the funeral though he would have had cause to curse, too.

If Karolina Jekelfalussy had been renowned far and wide for her beauty as a girl, what of her as a young bride! We read in the Porubszky chronicle that by the age of seventeen she had received ninety-six proposals, and her proud father György Jekelfalussy would on no account give her in marriage to Kristóf Máriássy (although he struck him, as he did his daughter, as a dashing and wealthy suitor) until she had received the round hundred. And so Kristóf Máriássy took it upon himself craftily to persuade a number of his good friends to make spurious proposals so that the old man’s whim

should be accommodated. Thus along went Pál Görgey with his big head, just for a joke, and goodness! what came of it but that they fell passionately in love with one another; there was not another thought of Máriássy (the fair sex are all the same), the wedding took place and that was that. Imre Thököly himself opened the dancing with the lovely bride and became so intoxicated that he actually embraced her two or three times, to the evident displeasure of the bridegroom.

“Well now, what’s the matter? What are you grumbling at, Görgey?” smiled the prince at the wedding breakfast. “She’s mine more than yours. If I’m King [13] of Upper Hungary (he had just received the title from the Sultan), who is the Queen of Upper Hungary?”

His words appeared to be a joke, but must have contained a grain of seriousness too. Even during the honeymoon he turned up in Görgő once or twice, incognito, with a single horseman as escort, like any ordinary rider. That annoyed Görgey and when on one occasion he was in Késmárk with a deputation Thököly pleasantly informed his wife that he was going to Görgő in the next few days for a nice little holiday he reddened and growled in reply:

“We shall not be at home in the next few days.”

Thököly frowned. Mihály Bereviczky tugged at Görgey’s dolman-like black coat with tactless goodwill and begged him in an undertone:

“Look after your head, young man, per amorem dei. [14] ”

To which the young man replied with a haughty, dismissive gesture:

“That is His Highness, so let His Highness look after it, but my wife is mine, and I’ll look after her.”

Thököly was pleased at the reply and burst out