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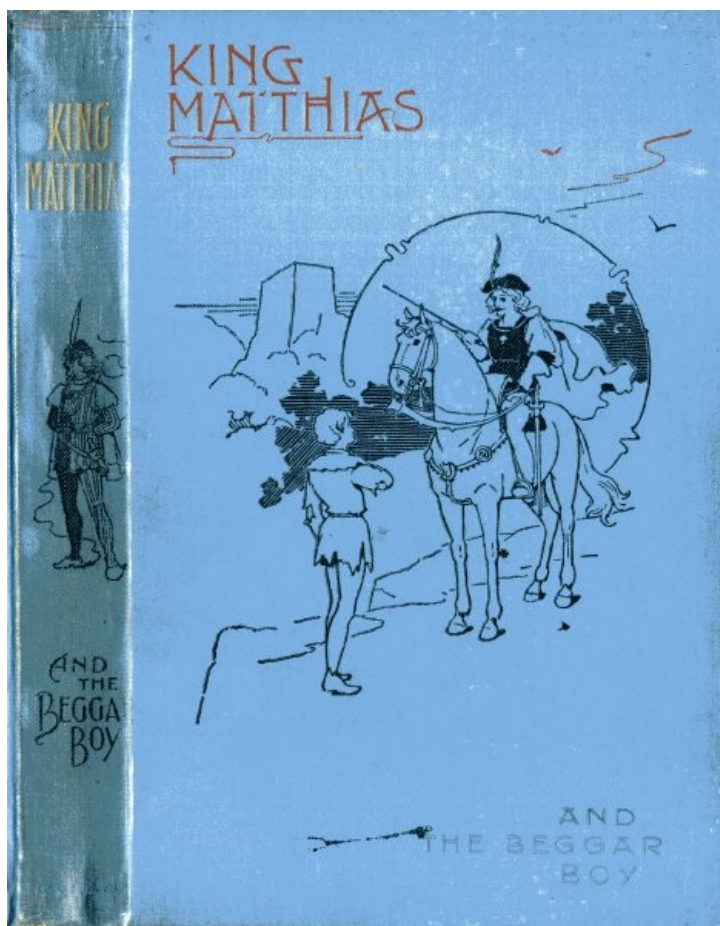
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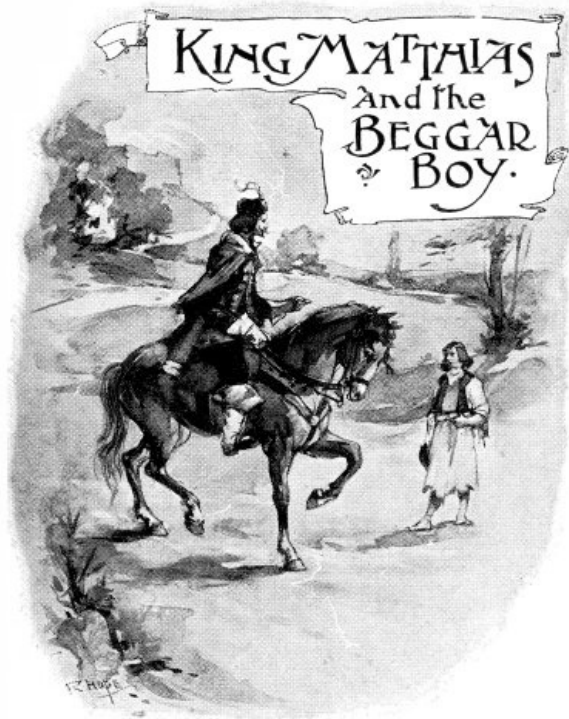
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KING MATTHIAS AND THE BEGGAR BOY.



"Come here, gossip Jew; there is nothing to fear." [Page 66.](#)



T. Nelson & Sons

KING MATTHIAS
AND THE BEGGAR BOY

ADAPTED FROM THE HUNGARIAN OF
BARON NICHOLAS JÓSIKA

BY
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Author of "Ilka: The Captive Maiden," "Dickie Winton," &c. &c.



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CONTENTS.

I. MR. SAMSON'S CASTLE,	9
II. MISKA THE BEGGAR BOY,	21
III. "TOUCH ME AT YOUR PERIL!"	32
IV. IN THE ROBBER'S NEST,	42
V. CAUGHT,	53
VI. I AM THE KING'S PAGE!	68
VII. SENT TO PRISON,	80
VIII. THE BEGGAR BOY'S SONG,	94
IX. THE KING'S WHIM,	109

KING MATTHIAS AND THE BEGGAR BOY.

[Pg 9]

CHAPTER I. MR. SAMSON'S CASTLE.

Towards the close of a gloomy day in autumn, a very dusty traveller was riding quietly up to a castle which stood perched on a height in one of the northern counties of Hungary. A very extraordinary-looking castle it was, if it was a castle at all, which one might be inclined to doubt; for it looked more like a square block hewn by giants out of the ribs of the mountain, and left to itself for centuries, until its walls had become mouldy and moss-grown. One thing which gave it an odd appearance was that, as far as could be seen, it had no roof; the fact being that it was built round a quadrangle, and that the roof, or rather half-roof, sloped downwards and inwards from the top of the outer walls.

[Pg 10]

But what was even more remarkable still was that the building had neither door nor window in any one of its four sides; so that how the inhabitants, if there were any, ever went in or out, was quite a mystery.

People had had a good deal to say about the owner of this extraordinary stronghold for many a year past, and all sorts of wild stories were told of him. But no one but his own hired servants and men-at-arms had ever set eyes upon him—so far as they knew, that is to say.

Neither he nor his servants were ever to be seen coming or going, and how they managed was quite unknown; but for all that they made their presence felt, and very unpleasantly felt too.

The man on horseback had drawn nearer by this time, and was gazing up at the huge pile, scanning it carefully, but quite unable to discover so much as a chink or cranny in the grey, weather-beaten walls.

At last he shook his head and said with a smile, "Why, the castle is in such a strong position and so well fortified that it must be almost impregnable! But of course it is inhabited, and the inhabitants are human beings, not demons; and wherever human beings can dwell, human beings

[Pg 11]

must also be able to enter.

"Well, I am here at last! and little enough Mr. Samson guesses what manner of visitor has come so close to his hiding-place. I am glad I came, for it is always best to see with one's own eyes. And now that I am here, the next thing is how to get in. Let us look and consider. No use," he continued, after a moment or two; "I can't think of any way. If I could only see some one, a living creature of some sort, to make inquiries of! Nonsense! I'll wager I know more about the nest than any one hereabouts.

"But still, I have been six hours on horseback, and as far as the eye can see there is no wayside inn or public-house or even farm-house in sight, and a man can't help being tired even if he be a vice-count—or more! Well, let's be going on," he went on, putting his horse once more in motion.

The young man before us was of middle height and strongly built, with fiery dark eyes, and curly chestnut hair; he was very plainly clad, and his horse was no better caparisoned than if it had belonged to some son of the *puszta*, or steppes.

Quietly, and with eyes and ears both on the alert, he rode round the height on which the fortress stood. [Pg 12]

"If I don't see anything," he said to himself with a laugh, "they don't see me; let's be off!

"Eh, and yet I should be glad if I could come across a human being of some sort, if he were no bigger than the rowel of my spur.—Hi! hi there, *földi* [countryman]," cried the horseman all at once, as he caught sight of some one trudging along the road round the shoulder of the hill.

The wayfarer thus addressed turned and came up to him, and as soon as he was within speaking distance he said in humble tones, "*Uram* [sir], I am hungry; I have not eaten a morsel to-day. Have pity on me, *kegyelmed*^[1] [your grace]."

[1] A common form of polite address in Hungarian.

Then he cast a glance, not altogether devoid of envy, at the dainty horseman, who was so comfortably clad, and who looked, to judge by his countenance, as if his hunger had been well satisfied.

"Here," said the rider, giving the beggar a small coin; for the boy attracted him, and he thought to himself that he could hardly ever remember to have seen a face with such a peculiarly taking expression. Moreover, in spite of the mud and dirt with which his skin was incrustated, it was impossible not to be struck by his fine features, which were of a purely Oriental type, and lighted up by a pair of large dark eyes as black as the raven's wing. [Pg 13]

The man on horseback had given the lad a trifle on the spur of the moment, because he looked so poverty-stricken; but a second glance made him fancy, rightly or wrongly, that he was not a beggar of the common sort, to whom people give careless alms because he stirs their pity for the moment. This beggar excited something more and better than mere pity—at least in the man before us. Some people, it is true, might not have noticed the expression of the lad's face; but to those who had eyes it told of something more than poverty and distress. It was not the look of the beggar who is content to be a beggar, who would rather beg than work, rather live upon others than labour for himself. One might almost fancy, indeed, that the lad was ashamed of his present plight, and rather indignant with things in general for not providing him with some better employment.

The horseman was one well accustomed to reading character, and rarely mistaken in his judgment; and being touched as well as favourably impressed by the boy, it suddenly occurred to him that he might be turned to account. [Pg 14]

"Just answer me a few questions, my boy, will you?" said he. "Can you write?"

"No, I can't; I have never had any teaching."

And, indeed, writing was a by no means general accomplishment in the reign of the good King Matthias, when many of the first nobles in the land could not even sign their own names. But still there seem to have been elementary schools not only in the towns but in other places as well, so that the question was not altogether unreasonable.

"Then you can't read either?"

"Of course not; as if it were likely!"

"Have you ever been in service?"

"Never, sir, thank Heaven; but I have worked as a day-labourer."

"Why don't you turn soldier?"

"Because my head is worth more than my arms," said the beggar: "besides, they wouldn't take such a ragged chap as I."

"Are you to be trusted, I wonder?"

The boy looked up at the speaker at this, and then answered with an air of wounded pride, "I have not had a good meal for a fortnight, yet I have not stolen so much as a plum from a tree. You [Pg 15]

may trust me with a purse full of money."

"Well, *öcsém*^[2] [little brother], it is possible you may be a regular rascal, for anything I know to the contrary at present; but you have a good face, and I should like to see such a head as yours on many a pair of shoulders which are covered with gold and marten-fur. Well, I don't care! I am going to trust a good pair of eyes and a clear forehead. Listen, boy. I like you. Stand here before me, and let me see what you have got in you, gossip! for if you hold good measure, you have been born under a lucky star, I can tell you."

[2] A common way of addressing younger persons.

"You can amuse yourself in return for the money you have given me," said the boy, looking repeatedly at his gift; "you may take my measure as much as you like, and I will be looking at the horse meantime. Ah! you are a lucky man to have such a horse as that. How he snorts! and his eyes flash as if he were Játos^[3] himself."

[3] A magic horse.

"Boy!" said the horseman, who looked as if he were at least a vice-count—"boy, you are up to the mark so far; there is room for good measure in you, and a few pints over! But, *koma* [gossip], I have often seen a good-looking cask full of nothing but bad, sour wine. Let us see whether you hold one full measure."

[Pg 16]

"One measure?" said the beggar, offended. "I shouldn't be my father's son if my wretched skin did not cover a man of a hundred measures, especially when I have had a good dinner. It's a couple of weeks now since I have had a stomachful when I lay down at night."

"My little brother," said the horseman, "a fellow who is ruled by his stomach is not worth a farthing. You have lost three measures out of your cask by that foolish speech."

"Ha," said the beggar boldly, "my stomach grumbles badly, and it is no joke when it goes on for long. However, it's no wonder you can't guess what it feels like to be hungry, for I daresay you are a hall-porter, or even maybe a poultry-dealer, and such people as those are always well fed."

The horseman laughed. "You have got the cow's udder between its horns now, *koma*; but whatever and whoever I may be, I am a great man while my purse is full, and so listen to me. Do you see that castle there?"

"To be sure."

"Have you ever been inside?"

[Pg 17]

"Well, to be sure, I am well off, I am! but may the Tatars catch me, if I would take my teeth in there!"

"Hm!—and why?"

"Why?" asked the beggar, considering; "I really can't tell you. But what should take me there? Besides—well, they say it is inhabited by demons, and that they live on Jews' flesh. The Jews are constantly going there, just as if they had been invited to dinner; but they get eaten up."

"Simple Stevie of Debreczin!"^[4] cried the horseman. "Do you believe such nonsense?"

[4] "Simple Stevie" is said to have been a student in the college of Debreczin, where he was notorious for his simplicity.

The beggar grinned. "What would you have?" said he. "People say a great many things of all sorts, and a fellow like me just believes and blunders along with the rest! If His Grace in there does live on Jews' flesh, I wish him good health; but for my own part I had rather have a little bit of chicken than roast Jew."

"Now, boy, listen. Just look there," began the horseman again: "if you can get into that castle and bring me word again how the world wags there, you shall have a hundred gold ducats in your hand."

"A hundred ducats!" cried the beggar. "Why, I could buy a whole county with that, surely!"

[Pg 18]

"Not so much as that, little brother," said the rider; "but still it is a great deal of money!"

"And who will give it me?" asked the beggar, looking eagerly at the horseman.

"I myself," he answered. "But I am slow to believe people, and so I want first to know whether I can trust you."

The boy still had his eyes turned towards the castle. "Thunder!" said he presently, "the devil himself doesn't get in there by the proper way. But just wait a moment, sir, and let me think a little. So they don't live on Jews' flesh in there, eh, sir?"

"To be sure not! I fancy they live on something better than that."

"But still the Jews do go in and out—at least so people say, and what is in everybody's mouth is half true at all events."

"Right; but what then?"

"Why, I'll be a Jew, and go in, if they don't eat people up."

"But how?"

"I don't know yet. Give me a little time, or I shall not be able to hit upon it."

"Of course. And now listen. Before I trust you blindly, I am going to prove you." He drew a sealed letter from his breast, wrote a few lines on the back with a pencil, and went on: "See this letter? Make haste with it to Visegrád; ask for admission, and say merely that you have brought the governor a letter from his son. Do you quite understand? But I don't know your name; what is it?"

[Pg 19]

"Tornay Mihály [Michael Tornay]," answered the boy; and then went on, "I see! what is there difficult about that? I quite understand: you are the son of the governor of Visegrád, and you are sending a letter to your father."

"Right!" said the horseman. "You will come straight on to Buda with the answer, and ask at the palace for Mr. Galeotti, and give it into his hands. You won't forget the name?"

"Galeotti," repeated the boy. "But will they let me in, in such rags?"

"You will get proper clothes and a horse in Visegrád."

"A horse!" exclaimed the boy, his eyes sparkling. "I have never done anything more than help a coachman to swim his horses now and then, and now I shall have a horse myself!"

"For service, gossip; and don't you go off with it!"

[Pg 20]

The beggar's face was all aflame. "Am I a horse-stealer," he cried, "just because your elbows don't show through your dolmány, while my clothes are so full of holes that twenty cats together would not be able to catch one mouse in them?"

"Don't be angry," said the horseman, who was more and more pleased with the boy every moment. "Here, as a sign that I put more trust in some people's faces than I do in other people's written word—here is a purse of money. And now hurry off; you have no time to lose. The sooner you bring back the answer, the more faith I shall have in you."

The boy stared at the purse, and being very hungry, poor fellow, it seemed to him to be full of ham and sausage.

"You must be an estate-manager," he gasped, "or—a bishop, to have so much money."

"What does that matter to you?" answered the horseman. "Make haste, and I shall see whether you are a man of your word."

The lad raised his tattered cap, and the next moment he was out of sight.

[Pg 21]

CHAPTER II. MISKA THE BEGGAR BOY.

The beggar boy stopped for a moment to roll the purse up carefully in a rag, and to put it and the letter away in the pocket of his dilapidated old jacket. This done he ran on again quickly.

But he was hungry, desperately hungry, famishing—his eyes were starting out of his head; and though he had been much cheered by the liberal present he had received, a good hunch of bread would really have been worth a hundred times as much to him just at this moment. He could think of nothing but the nearest wayside inn.

People who have never known what it is to be more than just hungry enough to have a good appetite, have no idea what the pangs of hunger are, nor what keen pain it is to be actually starving.

Never in his life had he felt such an intense craving as he did now for a plate of hot food and a draught of good wine. He had to summon up all his failing strength, or he would have been quite exhausted before he caught sight of the first roof away in the distance. But when he did catch sight of it, though it was still far off, it put new life into him; and as he hurried on, he could think of nothing but the meal he was going to have. What a sumptuous dinner he gave himself in imagination! It was like a dream without an end, too good to be believed.

[Pg 22]

At last he stood before the little inn. The chimney was smoking away merrily, and his mouth positively watered as he turned towards the signboard.

All at once, however, he came to a dead halt, struck by a sudden thought.

For a few moments his feet seemed to be rooted to the ground; then he muttered to himself, "Didn't that good gentleman, who has made a rich man of me, say that the business he entrusted me with was of importance, and that he was in a hurry about it? This is the first important thing I

have ever been trusted with; and the gentleman was so honourable, and put such confidence in me, and I want to sit down to a feast! It is six months since a drop of wine has touched my lips, and the devil never goes to sleep: I might drink myself as drunk as a dog!"

His right foot was still turned towards the inn, and his eyes were adoringly fixed on the beautiful blue smoke issuing from the chimney. He felt just as if he were bound hand and foot, and a dozen horses were all tugging at him, dragging him to the wineshop.

[Pg 23]

"I *won't* go!" said he to himself, sadly but firmly. "It's not the first time I have known what it is to be hungry for twenty-four hours; and he is in a hurry—it's important business."

With that he stepped up to the entrance of the low white house, daring himself, as it were, to go any further, asked for some bread, which he paid for and began to devour at once, drank a good draught of water from the well-bucket, and then ran on as if the Tatars were at his heels, or as if he were afraid to trust himself any longer in such a dangerous neighbourhood.

No royal banquet could have been more delicious than that hunch of dry bread seemed to him, and something in the beggar boy's heart cheered him more than even the best Tokay would have done.

"Miska, ^[5] you're a man!" he said to himself. "I shall soon be in Visegrád, where I shall feast like a lord. I don't know how it is, but I declare I feel better satisfied with this bit of bread than if I had eaten a whole yard of sausage."

[Pg 24]

[5] Short for Mihály = Michael.

But Visegrád was still a long way off—long, that is, when the journey had to be made on foot; for the castle stood on a hill on the Danube, just where the river makes a sudden bend to the south. On the hillside, under the wing of the old fortress, stood a palace built by one of the former kings of Hungary, which is said to have been equal in splendour to Versailles or any other of the most magnificent palaces of Europe; for with its three hundred and fifty rooms it could accommodate two kings, several foreign dukes and marquises, with their respective suites, all at the same time.

The floor of the great hall was paved with valuable mosaics, the ceiling was adorned with Italian frescoes, and the gardens, with their musical fountains, brilliant flower-beds, and marble statues, were declared to be a faithful imitation of the hanging gardens of Babylon!

But Miska's business was with the castle, not the palace; and at last, after a journey which was becoming every hour more and more wearisome, he beheld it rising before him in the distance. It looked, indeed, as if it were but a little way off, so clear was the air; but Miska had lived an out-of-door life too long to be easily deceived in such matters, and he took advantage of the next little wayside inn to buy more bread and get another draught of cool water to help him on his way.

[Pg 25]

By the time he reached the hill his strength was failing fast, and it was all that he could do to drag himself up past Robert-Charles's palace to the high-perched castle.

When at last he had been admitted and had given the letter into the governor's own hands, he dropped down in a fainting fit, and was carried off to the stables.

He was not long in coming to himself, however, and as soon as he was sufficiently recovered he had a feast "fit for a king," as he said; though he steadily refused to touch a drop of the wine which was brought to him.

The whole time he was eating he kept his eyes fixed on the beautiful horses, wondering which one he should have to ride; and more than once he sent an urgent message to the governor, begging him to let him have the answer to the letter which he was to take to Buda.

"All in good time," said the governor placidly. "He shall be called presently, tell him, when it is time for him to start."

[Pg 26]

So Miska had nothing for it but to rest in the stable, which was pleasant enough; for where is the Hungarian, old or young, who does not love a horse? Moreover, he was very tired after his long tramp, and presently, in spite of his impatience to be off, he fell into a doze.

He was still dozing comfortably when the sound of a horn roused him.

There was a rush to the castle-gate, and when it was opened, a young man, plainly dressed and alone, rode into the courtyard, where the governor hastened to greet him with affectionate respect. For the newcomer, the horseman whose acquaintance we made outside Mr. Samson's castle, was no other than King Matthias himself.

"Has my messenger, the beggar boy, arrived?" he asked briskly.

"He is yonder in the stable," said the governor; "he has only just come in, very faint, and he is urging me to give him a horse already."

"He is here?" said the king in surprise. "Impossible! I came at a good pace myself, and set out hardly half an hour after him. Call him here."

In a few moments the lad was standing in the presence of the great king, though he was far enough from guessing whom he was talking with.

[Pg 27]

"It is you, the horseman?" said Miska. "Well, it is not my fault that I am still here. I have been

urging Mr. Governor enough, I can tell you. I might have been ever so long on my way by this time, and they haven't yet changed my rags or given me a horse."

"Have you had a good feed?"

"Yes, I have; but I did not dare drink any wine."

"Why not, gossip?"

"That's a foolish question," returned the lad calmly, while the governor turned pale at his audacity. "Why, sir, because it is six months since I had any, and it would go to my head; and a tipsy messenger is like a clerk without hands—they both pipe the same tune."

"Good," said the king, amused. "Then didn't you stop anywhere on the way? You could hardly lift your feet when you started, and you see I had not much faith in you, and came after you."

"Well," said the lad, looking boldly up at Matthias, "to be sure you are a strong-built chap, and I believe you could swallow Mr. Governor here if you were angry; but if your eyes had been starting out of your head with hunger as mine were, I believe you would have been sitting in some *csárda* [wayside inn] till now. Stop anywhere? The idea of such a thing! As if any one who had business needing haste entrusted to him would think of stopping to rest!"

[Pg 28]

"Listen, Miska," said the king. "Would you like to be something better than you are now?"

"Hja!" said the beggar, "I might soon be that certainly, for at present I am not worth even so much as a Jew's harp."

"Let us hear, gossip; what would you like to be?"

"Like? Well, really, sir, I have never given it a thought. Hm! what I should like to be? But then, could it be now—at once?"

"That depends upon the extent of your wishes; for you might wish to be governor of Visegrád, and in that case the answer would be, 'Hold in your greyhounds' [don't be in too much hurry]."

"I shouldn't care to be governor, to sit here by a good fire keeping myself warm—though, to be sure, it would be well enough sometimes, especially in winter, when one has such fine clothes as mine, which just let the wind in where they should keep it out; but I should like to be something like that stick on the castle clock which is always moving backwards and forwards—something that is always on the move."

[Pg 29]

"Always on the move!" laughed the king. "Well then, gossip, I'll take you for my courier; and if you like, you need not keep still a moment."

"I don't mind!" said Miska joyously. "Then I will be a courier."

"You will get tired of it, boy. But tell me one thing: do you know anything?"

Miska fixed his large eyes on the king.

"Anything?" he asked, hurt and flushing. "Really, sir, when I come to consider—thunder!—it seems to me as if I knew just nothing at all!"

"Then do you wish to learn?"

"Go to school?" asked Miska; "I don't wish that at all."

"There is no need for that," said the king; "we will find some other way. Those who want to learn, can learn without going to school. You will learn to write and read, which is only play after all to any one who does not wish to remain a dunce. Do you understand?"

"I don't mind," said Miska.

"Well, then," said the king, turning to the governor, "let him be clothed, and then you can present him."

Thereupon the king withdrew to his own apartments, where some of the great nobles were already waiting for him in one of the saloons, and were not a little surprised to see him appear travel-stained and dusty, but in the most lively spirits.

[Pg 30]

An hour later Miska had had a bath, and had donned a clean shirt and the becoming livery worn by the royal pages of the second rank.

The change in his attire had completely metamorphosed him, and now, as he stood before the king, the latter was more than ever struck by his face.

"Listen," said he, fixing his keen eyes attentively on the beggar. "You have been well fed, and you have been fresh clothed from top to toe. Now, I don't want you to go to Buda; for you see I am here, and have seen the governor myself. But you remember what I said to you outside Mr. Samson's castle? Well, that shall be the first piece of work you do. I will give you six months, and if you can get inside and bring me word what goes on there, I'll make a man of you. You shall have money to buy anything you may want, and a leather knapsack with linen and all you will want for the journey—for you will have to go on foot. You shall have a horse some day, never fear, if you turn out as I expect; but it would only be in your way now. Well, what do you say?"

[Pg 31]

The lad knew now that he was in the presence of the king, and Matthias thought all the more highly of him for the way in which he received his dangerous commission. He made no hasty promises, but evidently weighed his words before he spoke.

"Mr. King," said he (for 'Mr.' is used in Hungary in speaking to any one of whatever degree, and people say 'Mr. Duke' or 'Mr. Bishop,' as they do in French)—"Mr. King, God preserve Your Highness, and give you a thousand times as much as you have given to a poor boy like me. I vow"—and here the beggar raised his right hand—"I vow that I will do all I can; and if God keeps me in health and strength, and preserves my senses, I hope to bring Your Highness news of Mr. Samson six months hence, in Buda."

"That's enough," said the king. "Meantime I too shall see what I can do. I shall give Mr. Samson the chance of mending his ways if he will. God be with you on your journey, Miska."

Then putting his hand on the boy's shoulder, he said kindly, "Good-bye, then, till we meet in Buda."

[Pg 32]

CHAPTER III.

"TOUCH ME AT YOUR PERIL!"

King Matthias had been elected to the throne of Hungary in 1457, when he was at most but eighteen years old. But if any of the great nobles fancied that they were going to do just as they liked with him because he was so young, they soon found themselves very much mistaken.

He speedily dismissed the governor who had been appointed to look after him and the kingdom for the first five years; and having once taken the reins into his own hands, held them firmly as long as he lived.

And he had no easy, idle life of it: for what with the Turks and other enemies, he was very frequently, almost constantly, at war with external foes; and there was also very much to be done to bring things into order within the kingdom. He was by no means satisfied to let things go on as they had been doing. He wanted his people to be educated and cultivated; for he was highly educated himself, and delighted to surround himself with learned men and distinguished artists.

[Pg 33]

He wanted to have a grand library, a large university, and a learned society of scholars in Buda, that Hungary might take her place among the other nations of Europe in the matter of learning. But he wanted also to improve the condition of trade, arts, and manufactures; and, regardless of expense, he sent to foreign lands, especially Italy, for master-craftsmen to come and train the apprentices, whenever he saw that they needed better teaching than was to be had just then from their fellow-countrymen.

Clocks were by no means common articles at this time in other lands, and the first clock that kept good time in England is said to have been that set up at Hampton Court many years later—that is, in 1530. But in the reign of Matthias, clocks made their appearance on many of the castle towers in Hungary; and, thanks to the king's encouragement and the energetic measures he took, it was not long before Hungarian craftsmen became so famous that the Grand Duke of Moscow asked to have goldsmiths, gun-founders, land-surveyors, miners, architects, and others sent to him from Hungary.

But where is the use of arts, crafts, and manufactures—how indeed can they flourish—where there is a dearth of food?

[Pg 34]

What with enemies without and enemies within, there were extensive districts in some parts of Hungary, and among them some of the royal domains, which were little better than wildernesses when the king came to the throne. Villages had been burned down, the inhabitants driven away, and the land left desolate in many parts; and in order to tempt the people back, and induce others to come and settle in these deserted spots, the king caused it to be proclaimed at the fairs that land might be had rent-free by those who would undertake to cultivate it, and that for a certain number of years they should be exempt from taxes of all sorts.

The king did all he could to induce the great landed nobles to follow his example in these matters, and to pay more heed to the cultivation of their property, and to the peasants who laboured for them, than they had been in the habit of doing.

One day, so the story goes, he invited a number of distinguished nobles to dine with him in one of the northerly counties, and when the meal was ended he distributed among them a number of pick-axes and spades, and taking one himself, called on them to join him in clearing away the underwood and digging up the ground.

[Pg 35]

The active young king, who was well accustomed to exert himself, worked away energetically; but the well-fed, self-indulgent lords almost melted away, the labour made them so hot, and very soon they were completely exhausted.

"That's enough, my friends," said the king, observing the state they were in. "Now we know a little of what it costs the peasants to produce that which we waste in idleness while they live in poverty. They are human beings like ourselves, yet we often treat them worse than we do our horses and dogs."

The spot where Matthias read his nobles this wholesome lesson is still pointed out in Gömör.

But indeed some of them needed sharper teaching than this, and Matthias did not scruple to give it them.

Where was the use of the peasant's ploughing and sowing his fields or planting and tending his orchards and vineyards, where was the use of trying to encourage trade and manufactures, when at any moment the farmer, merchant, peddler, might be set upon and robbed of all his hard-earned goods? Yet so it was; for in some parts of the country, especially in the north, there were robber-knights and freebooting nobles, chiefly Bohemians, who had been invited into the country during the civil wars, and now, finding their occupation gone, had built themselves strongholds among the mountains, from which they issued forth to plunder and rob and often to murder travellers, traders, farmers, and any one they could lay hands on. Yet these same robbers were many of them men of noble birth, and there were some who were not ashamed to make their appearance in the courts of law, and to help in bringing smaller thieves and robbers to justice.

[Pg 36]

Now King Matthias was so true a lover of justice that his name has become a proverb, and when he died there was a general sigh and exclamation, "Matthias is dead! justice is fled!" It was not likely, therefore, that he was going to tolerate robbers merely because they were nobles; and after giving them fair warning—for he would be just even to them—he destroyed their castles, and hung a few of them on their own towers by way of example to the rest, who did not fail to profit by it and amend their ways: so that by the end of his reign travellers could pass from one end of the kingdom to the other in perfect safety, and the peasants could gather in their crops without fear of having them taken from them by violence.

[Pg 37]

At the time when our story begins, the war against the robbers was being carried on with great energy, and the king's generals were busily engaged in storming their strongholds.

But like many another monarch who has had the welfare of his people at heart, Matthias was very fond of going about among them and seeing for himself, with his own eyes, what was the real state of affairs and what were their needs and wrongs. More than once on these secret expeditions it had happened to him to come across men of humble birth, whom, like Miska the beggar boy, he fancied capable of being turned to valuable account, and took accordingly into his service. And his shrewd eye seldom deceived him.

Did not Paul Kinizsi the giant, for instance, turn out to be one of his most famous generals? And yet he was only a miller's boy to begin with—a miller's boy, but an uncommonly strong one; for when the king first saw him, he was holding a millstone in one hand and cutting it with the other—a proof of strength which made the king think he was wasted on the mill, and would be a valuable acquisition to the army, as he certainly proved to be.

[Pg 38]

Something more and better than mere brute strength had attracted him in Miska, and had induced him to send the boy on his hazardous mission to Mr. Jason Samson.

Nothing, of course, had been heard of him since he started, and now, sundry other robbers having been disposed of or reduced to order, it was Mr. Samson's turn.

But being an uncommon character himself, Matthias was attracted by anything uncommon and out of the way in other people. He was fond, too, of unravelling mysteries, and therefore, much as he hated lawlessness and robbery, and greatly as he was exasperated by some of Mr. Samson's secret doings, nevertheless the man appeared by all accounts to be such a very strange, remarkable being that the king's curiosity was whetted, and after himself paying a secret visit to the eccentric "Cube," as he called the odd-looking castle, he resolved to try what mild measures would do, before proceeding to extremities.

Whether Miska had succeeded in getting into the robber's nest or not the king had no means of finding out, but his first step was to have a summons nailed up in the middle of all the four sides of the grim castle. It ran as follows:—

[Pg 39]

"All good to you from God, Mr. Jason Samson!

"Present yourself in Buda on the third day of the coming year, and give an account of your stewardship.

"MATTHIAS, the King."

The men charged with affixing this to the castle walls withdrew when their work was done without having seen any one. But some one or other had seen and read the summons; for when they returned the next morning, it had been torn down, and in its place, also affixed to the four sides, appeared these words:—

"*Some other time.*"

A week after this bold answer another summons was put up. This time it was:—

"*Surrender.*"

The day following the answer appeared:—

"Not yet."

About a week after this last reply, a company of soldiers, under the command of General Zokoli, surrounded the ill-omened castle, which stood out grey and silent against the rose-coloured mists which ushered in the sunrise.

The general had given orders for the scaling-ladders to be put up, when all at once a huge raven-black banner rose up from the centre of the building with a shining death's-head displayed upon it, and beneath this the words:—

[Pg 40]

"Touch me at your peril!"

Zokoli ordered the assault to be sounded, and soon the brave soldiers, always accustomed to be victorious wherever they went, might have been seen climbing the ladders on one side of the "Cube." As soon as they reached the top of the wall, which was also the ridge of the roof, it turned on a hinge, or rather sprang open like a trap-door, as if it had been touched by a conjuring rod, and disclosed to their astonished eyes the gaping mouths of three rows of guns ranged close together.

Now came a blast, loud and deep, like the sound of some giant trumpet or organ-pipe, and then what appeared like a long fiery serpent darted from one corner of the building to the other, and was followed the next moment by the thundering roar of a couple of thousand guns.

There was one loud, terrible cry, and when the cloud of smoke cleared away, a couple of hundred men were to be seen lying dead and maimed round about the castle.

The king had given Zokoli strict orders to spare his men as much as possible. He ordered one more assault on the same side therefore, thinking that the defenders would not have had time to reload their guns. But again a couple of hundred of the besiegers fell a useless sacrifice to the experiment; and unwilling to waste any more lives, General Zokoli retired, completely baffled and much mortified, to report what had happened. And then the king's anger blazed forth, and he exclaimed,—

[Pg 41]

"Wait, and I'll teach you, Samson!"

[Pg 42]

CHAPTER IV. IN THE ROBBER'S NEST.

Great men—especially the very few who are great even in their night-shirts, as the saying is, which was the case with King Matthias, if it ever was with any one—great men are, by their very natures, strongly attached to their own ideas and opinions. It is not easy to shake them when once they have made up their minds about a matter; for truly great men are not given to hasty judgments. They are firm in their convictions, but they have some reason to be so.

Now the king had a sort of instinct or power of reading character, and he felt convinced that the beggar boy whom he had come across so strangely would either succeed in getting into the castle, or would never be heard of again. He had firm faith in him.

There were a good many matters, as we have seen, requiring his attention in Hungary just then, and therefore, though he was extremely angry with Samson for his contemptuous behaviour, he decided to put off punishing him for a time. He felt that, after General Zokoli's discomfiture, it would be wisest not to take any further steps against the clever robber until he could be certain of success; and he resolved on all accounts therefore to wait until Miska made his appearance, or at least until the six months had expired.

[Pg 43]

Of course there were some who believed that Miska would never be seen again. The king had taken a fancy to him, that was all; but he was only a beggar boy, when all was said and done, and most likely he had sold his new clothes to the first Jew he came across, and was in rags again by this time!

When three months, four months, five months, passed away without bringing any news, those who knew anything about the matter shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads more than ever.

But one fine morning, just six months after Miska had left Visegrád, and when every one but the king had given him up, it was announced that a stranger had arrived in Buda, giving no name, but saying that he had been entrusted with special business by the king, and could not give account of it to any one else. The king's whims were so well known at the court that the stranger was admitted without difficulty, and was ushered into the king's presence forthwith. Matthias was alone, and at once recognized his man, who stepped into the room, looking very spruce, and as sound as an acorn.

[Pg 44]

"It's you, Miska! You have brought good news; I can see it in your eye. You're a man—speak!"

Miska bowed, and when he had a little recovered himself—for there was something about the king which was rather awe-inspiring in spite of his good nature—he drew a deep breath and said,
—

"I have been there, Mr. King—in the castle with Mr. Samson—and I know all about it!"

"Let us hear," said the king, with delighted and eager curiosity. "But, little brother, try and tell your tale in an orderly way. First say how you got into the castle, and then tell me what you saw and heard. Be bold, my friend, and speak without reserve."

"Mr. King," began the ex-beggar, "I knew I should never get in by asking, and it might be the worse for me into the bargain; besides, there was neither door nor window, nor any one to speak to. 'Well,' I thought to myself, 'I shall never get in this way; I must keep watch and find out about those Jews. They get in somehow, though they never get out again—so people say.'" [Pg 45]

"Right!" said the king; "go on."

"Well, Mr. King, I waited about there for ten weeks. I spied about all round the castle, and often went hungry; for I had no time to get food, though, thanks to you, I had the means. But it was all to no purpose. At last I began to think that perhaps Mr. Samson was dead, and that Your Highness would soon be thinking that I had eaten and drunk up my money and gone off. I was sitting on the trunk of a tree just outside the wood, but not very far from the castle, one evening, and I was feeling rather downcast about it all, when I fancied I saw two people coming. They were not coming *from* the castle, it is true, but were creeping through the thicket. 'Ho, ho!' I thought to myself. 'Now, Miska, have your wits about you! Suppose these night-birds should be on their way to the castle.' But being one alone against two, I took out my two pistols and waited to see what might happen."

Miska now opened his dolmány, and showed a steel coat of mail which he wore beneath it. "I had got myself this," he said, tapping it with his finger, "for I thought it might save me from being mortally wounded if I should happen to get caught anywhere by Samson's men, and I bought two pistols besides." [Pg 46]

"You were wise," said the king.

"Well, it was not long before the men came quite close to me; but instead of going on towards the castle, they turned off in the direction of a little hollow. I had stood still till then, so that they should not notice me suddenly; and perhaps they would have gone on, if an abominable great long-eared owl which was just above my head had not begun its dismal evening song at that moment. They were just within about four steps of me when she gave a long, melancholy hoot, and one of the two men looked up and caught sight of me at once. The next moment he lifted his cap to me as humbly 'as if he could not count up to three.' His companion, too, turned and looked about carefully, and I fancied I caught a glimpse of the glitter of a knife. So I just drew out one of my pistols and said coolly, 'See what I have got for you.'"

"Eh! what?" exclaimed Matthias in surprise.

"Why, of course, Your Highness; for I thought it would be much better to be beforehand with them."

The king laughed.

"Well, and I think, Mr. King, that I did not reckon amiss: for by doing as I did, I made them suppose that I was a highwayman, and just as bad as themselves—supposing they belonged to the castle; and besides that, it gave me an opportunity of finding out whom I had to do with." [Pg 47]

"Go on," said the king; "this is very interesting. Let us hear more."

"Well, things might have gone very crooked," proceeded Miska; "for I had no sooner given the alarm than they were both down on me at once as quick as lightning, and I felt two daggers strike my mail coat."

"Fortunately for me I was quite prepared, and I did not lose my presence of mind. I fired one pistol just as they fell upon me, but of course I did not hit either of them. But my armour had done me good service; for the two fellows were disconcerted when they found that their daggers had touched metal, and I had time to jump on one side and point my second pistol at them."

"There was a little pause; my men had not given up their designs upon me, as it seemed, but were consulting, I suppose, how to escape the second charge of peas, and they seemed to mean to separate and come on me from both sides at once. 'But,' thought I, 'if you have, so have I—wits, I mean—and as from all I had heard of Samson's rascally associates I was quite sure that I had found my gentlemen, I took advantage of the short pause, and cried out,—

"'May seventy-seven thousand thunderbolts strike you! Hear what I have to say, and don't rush upon a fellow like mad dogs!

"'I am wanting to come across Mr. Samson; I am tired of living on my own bread, and I should like to enter his service. If you belong to the castle, it would be better for you to take me to him, instead of attacking me; for I am not in the least afraid of you—and, what's more, a couple of chaps like you won't outwit me.'"

"As soon as I had said my say with all possible speed, but in a firm rough voice, one of the scamps looked me all over from top to toe, as if he were going to buy me of a broker. The man was a sturdy, stout-limbed fellow, and as black as the darkest gipsy; and standing only a span from the muzzle of my pistol, without winking an eyelid, he said,—

"Who are you, and what do you want with Mr. Samson? If you have come to spy, you may say your last prayer, for you won't see the sun again.'

"The man said this in such a soft, drawing voice, and so deliberately, that it suddenly struck me he was imbecile; for I had my finger on the trigger all the time, and one touch would have stretched him on the ground. However, I won't deny that his cool composure made me shudder a little. [Pg 49]

"I answered as coolly as I could, 'I want to enter his service, sir, for I fancy he is a fine brave man; and a fellow like me, who cares nothing for his life, might be useful to him.'

"My man kept his eye upon my every movement. At last he said,—

"I don't know who you are yet.'

"I hesitated half a moment, for I did not want to tell him my real name, and then I said they called me Alpár János, that I was an orphan, and that until now I had made a poor living by doing just anything that came to hand—which was true enough.

"As far as I could see in the twilight, the man's face began to clear; he whispered a few words to his companion in a language I did not know, Slovak or Latin, then looked me over again from top to toe, and said,—

"Good! then you can come with us. We will show you the way in; it will be your own affair how you get out again, if you grow tired of scanty dinners.' [Pg 50]

"Here our conversation ended," said the lad; while the king, who had listened to his preface with lively interest, said, "Very good. So you got in. And now tell me what the castle is like inside."

And here perhaps it will be better to take the words out of Miska's mouth and describe in our own way what he saw.

The castle, as has been said, was built round the four sides of a square, and, as was often the case with old strongholds, a wide covered gallery, or corridor, ran along each side, surrounding the courtyard. There was not a sign of stables anywhere, for there was no way of getting horses in except by lowering them over the walls by a windlass. The ground-floor consisted of store-rooms and living-rooms; the keys of the former being always kept by the master, who allowed none but the most trusty persons to go into them, for they contained valuable goods of every sort and kind. Mr. Samson regularly visited these vaults, on the fifteenth of every month at midnight, when he was accompanied by twelve Jews. But how these latter got in, where they came from, and where they went to, was known to no one but Mr. Samson himself. The men looked like merchants, and he gave stuffs and ornaments, in certain quantities and of certain values, to each. Then he took them into a large empty room lighted by a four-cornered lamp which hung from the ceiling, and here for a couple of hours they were all busy counting money at a stone table. This was packed into various bags, and when Mr. Samson had given a purse to each of his agents, the Jews took their departure amid a shower of compliments, and in what appeared to be a very well satisfied frame of mind, Mr. Samson escorting them and showing them the way. But whither they went, and why, and how, and by what way—that heaven alone could tell. [Pg 51]

In the upper story of the castle there were some fine, cheerful, and well-lighted rooms; which is not a little surprising, for their windows all looked into the covered gallery, and from that into the courtyard. However, this may be explained to some extent by the fact that the windows of these upper rooms were wide and lofty, the walls were painted snow-white, and were covered with some sort of varnish which doubled the light.

The furniture was in accordance with the taste of the day, and chosen rather for its good wearing qualities than for comfort; but the bright colours produced a pleasing and cheerful effect on the whole. [Pg 52]

Mr. Samson kept an entire half of this story for the use of himself and his only relation, a young girl of fifteen named Esther, and an old woman who lived with her. Of the two other sides of the square, one was occupied by servants, the other was furnished but unused.

[Pg 53]

CHAPTER V. CAUGHT.

One is apt to fancy that strange, out-of-the-way characters must needs be striking and uncommon in their persons, and it is really quite startling to find them after all mere ordinary-looking, every-

day people.

Jason Samson, in spite of his remarkably eccentric conduct, was just one of these commonplace individuals to look at. It was himself, in fact, who had taken Miska into the castle; a man of middle size, neither stout nor thin, neither young nor old, but just middling in all respects. His features were such as we see over and over again, without having either our sympathies or interest in the least aroused. One can't call such persons either ill-looking or handsome, and their every-day characters inspire no feeling but that of utter indifference.

Mr. Samson was said, naturally enough, to be a man-hater. The walls of the Cube castle were twelve feet thick, and its inmates could see nothing either of their fellow-creatures or of God's beautiful world; for there was neither door to go in by nor window to look out of, and nothing whatever to be seen but the courtyard.

[Pg 54]

It was not a cheerful home certainly for the young girl whom Mr. Samson had some years previously brought to live there. He called her a relation of his, and she called him "uncle," but it did not at all follow that she was his niece; for it is the custom in Hungary, and considered only common politeness, for young people to address their elders as "uncles" and "aunts," whether related or not.

If Mr. Samson was commonplace in appearance, little Esther was very much the reverse. Without being regularly beautiful, there was a great charm about her, and she had a look of distinction which was entirely wanting in her guardian or jailer. Her clear, deep-blue eyes were full of life and animation, and the whole expression of her face told of a good heart. Add to this that she had a remarkably sweet and beautiful voice, and that, though untaught, she had a good ear for music, and was very fond of singing, and it will be understood that Esther was altogether not uninteresting. If she was not striking at first sight, yet the more one saw of her the more impressed and attracted one felt.

[Pg 55]

She was very much in awe of her "uncle," though she could not have said why, and though she had now lived with him some seven years, ever since the death of her parents indeed, when he had brought her away to the castle, with her attendant Euphrosyne, she being then a child of eight.

Esther was now fifteen, but she had as yet no idea that Mr. Samson was planning in his own mind to unite her more closely to himself by making her his wife, or she would have shrunk from him even more than she did now, though she knew nothing against him, and he could never be said to have ill-treated her in any way except that he kept her a close prisoner. Perhaps he thought that, considering her age, she had liberty enough; for she was free to go from one room to another, and she could walk up and down the gallery and in the courtyard.

But though she had grown accustomed to the life now, there were times, especially when the sun shone down for a short hour or two into the dull courtyard, in spring and summer, when the girl would look up with longing eyes to the blue sky and wonder what the world looked like outside the four grey walls. Sometimes she would see a bird fly past overhead, or watch a lark soaring up into the air, singing as it went. Then the past would come back to her, and she would remember a time when she had run about the green fields, and had spent long days in the garden; when she had gathered wild flowers and wood-strawberries, and had heard the birds sing.

[Pg 56]

It made her a little sad to think of it all, and for a time she felt as if she were in a cage, and wondered whether she was to spend all her life in it; but she was blessed with a cheerful disposition, and on the whole she was not unhappy. She made occupation for herself in one way and another: she sewed, she embroidered, she netted; she read the two or three books she had over and over again, and she even wrote a little. When one day Mr. Samson brought her a harp from his hoard of treasures, she was delighted indeed: and having soon managed to teach herself how to play on it, she spent many a happy evening singing such songs as she had picked up or invented for herself.

Mr. Samson liked to hear the full, clear young voice singing in the gallery, though he seldom took any apparent notice of the singer. In his way perhaps he would have missed Esther a little if she had been taken from him; but he was not a kindly or affectionate personage, and the girl had no one to care for but Euphrosyne, a rather tiresome, foolish old woman, who often tried her patience a good deal with her whims and fidgets. Esther, however, was very patient with her, and clung to her simply because there was no one else to cling to.

[Pg 57]

Mr. Samson had given them three rooms in a distant corner of the gloomy building, where they were quite out of the way of everybody; and Esther's rooms being the two inner ones, she could never leave them without the knowledge and permission of the old woman, through whose room she had to pass.

There was no doubt that Mr. Samson carried on an extensive business of a peculiar kind. He was very secret about it, and what with his armed garrison, and the odd way in which the castle was built, as if to stand a siege, there seemed good reason to suspect that his valuable goods and rich merchandise were collected from the whole length and breadth of Hungary, and were, in fact, gathered from every country-house and peddler's pack and bundle which he could find means to plunder. Not that Samson ever resorted to violence if he could possibly help it—quite the contrary; and though he was reckoned among the most powerful robber-knights of the time, he was really more thief than robber, and did also a great deal in a quiet way by lending money at very high interest.

[Pg 58]

He would steal out of the castle on foot, disguised now as a beggar and now as a Jew; and his followers were never to be seen anywhere together in any number. They lounged along singly, at a considerable distance one from the other, and they took care not to excite suspicion in any way.

They had nothing in the way of weapons but a couple of short, sharp daggers, which they kept carefully concealed, and never used except in cases of extreme necessity, and in secret places, such as deep ravines or woods; but when they did have recourse to them, they used them with bold determination and deadly certainty. No one ever escaped from the clutches of these accursed robbers, and no one therefore could ever betray them. They managed, too, to conceal all traces of their deeds of blood, so that though there were rumours and suspicions, the guilt was not brought home to them. People who met them saw but one, or at most two, at a time, looking as meek and mild "as if they could not count up to three," as the saying is.

Mr. Samson himself rarely went out quite alone. There were always one or two men in whom he placed especial confidence, and one or other of these always accompanied him. [Pg 59]

And now Miska shall take up his narrative again.

"I was not badly off in the castle," said he. "I was bent on winning Mr. Samson's confidence above everything, and I succeeded, because I strove to enter into all his thoughts. I was not too humble and deferential, but I put myself in his place, and showed great interest in all the work that went on inside, which was chiefly keeping guard and cleaning arms.

"Mr. Samson went away once every fortnight; and I fancy the Jews came twice while I was there, for Mr. Samson twice shut all the doors carefully, which he did not do at other times. I must say I should have liked to join him in his secret adventures; but much as he seemed to trust me, I had no chance of doing so.

"I had been in the castle about a fortnight, I suppose, when one night the bell rang in my little room. There was a bell to every hole in the castle, and the bell-pulls all hung in a long row along two sides of one of Mr. Samson's rooms.

"I got up at once and went to him, and found him lying in an arm-chair, wearing a flowing indoor robe.

"'Alpár János,' said he, 'I have to leave the castle to-morrow; you will stay here. Keep an eye on the people, and when I come back tell me minutely all that has happened during my absence. I believe you are faithful to me; and if you continue to please me, I will double your wages.' [Pg 60]

"I received his orders respectfully, as usual; but after a short pause I said, 'I would much rather you should take me with you, for I think you would find me more useful outside than here, where there is nothing I can do.'

"'I want a faithful man more here than outside,' said Mr. Samson. 'Your turn will come presently; meantime obey all the governor's orders as if I were here myself. And now you can go. Everybody will notice my absence to-morrow, but for all that don't you say a word about it to any one—that is one of my laws.'

"'I will obey you, sir,' I said, and then I went back to my quarters.

"The governor, a gloomy-looking, stout fellow, who could hardly be more than four-and-twenty, and was called simply Kálmán, had taken a great liking to me, for I always showed him more respect, if possible, than I did to Mr. Samson himself."

"You were wise there," interposed the king. "The smaller the man, the more respect he claims." [Pg 61]

"And," continued Miska, "this stood me in good stead; for while Mr. Samson was away we lived better, and now and then the governor sent me a draught of good wine."

"Ah, I see," said the king; "nothing much out of the ordinary way—rumour has said more than was true. But did you become acquainted with little Esther?"

"The young lady came out into the gallery more often while Mr. Samson was away. Sometimes she would walk up and down there till late in the evening, and she would bring out her harp and sing to it. She was so gentle and kind that I spoke to her one day and asked her to listen to a song of mine; I had made the verses and invented the tune myself."

"Oh!" laughed the king; "then you are a poet too, are you, Miska?"

"Only a sort of 'willow-tree verse-maker,'^[6] Mr. King. But pretty Miss Esther listened to it very kindly—and what is more, she wrote it down—and after that she spoke to me every evening, and asked me many questions about Buda and Your Highness; and I told her long stories of all that I had seen in the woods and fields. She wanted to hear about the trees and flowers and birds, which she remembered; and one evening, when no one was within hearing, I told her how I had met Your Highness, and how you had sent me to Visegrád, and all I had seen there, and how you promised me a horse. I had to tell her that story so often that I think she knows every step of the way. I did not tell her that Your Highness had sent me to get into the castle, for walls have ears. But one evening she stopped singing suddenly and asked me what I had come there for. So first I said, 'To be one of Mr. Samson's servants;' and then I said in a whisper, 'To set you free.' [Pg 62]

[6] Hedge-poet.

"Ah, Jancsi, if you only could!' she said. 'How lovely it would be! But you can't; nobody can.'

"So then I told her not to be afraid, for I would somehow; and if I couldn't, some one else would, I knew—meaning Your Highness, of course."

"And pray what did the old lady say to your talking to her charge in this way?"

"O Mr. King, she was my very good mistress; I managed to get into her good graces. And there's no denying it, Your Highness, when Mr. Samson went away for the third time, Miss Esther herself told me to be very attentive to the old woman. And it answered perfectly, for she asked me all sorts of things and put all confidence in me; and the governor often chaffed me about it, and said that Mrs. Euphrosyne and I would be making a match of it. Miss Esther often said how happy we might be if we could escape from Mr. Samson and the gloomy castle, and I promised, Your Highness, when Mrs. Euphrosyne was not listening."

[Pg 63]

"Well, Miska, and I promise too. Miss Esther shall be let out when I get in," said the king. "But now listen. Have you told me all that I want to know about the interior of the castle?"

"Ah," said Miska, "who could find out all its secrets? Mr. Samson said more than once: 'Woe to him who tries to take it, for it will cost the lives of thousands, and he will never get in after all.' And it was as he said: when they assaulted the castle, Mr. Samson did not so much as leave his room, but sat there as quiet as you please. What went on up above in the roof I don't know, for others were sent up and I was not. I only heard the firing, and saw them bringing the gunpowder out in small casks through a trap-door. More than once, too, I heard him say that he had only to pull a string and the castle and everything in it would be blown up. And I saw the red string, too, which would have done it: it could not be reached except by means of a ladder, and it was in Mr. Samson's own sleeping-room."

[Pg 64]

"Then you saw them raise the black standard?"

"To be sure; and they did it as easily as if they were lifting a stick."

"But tell me, how did you get out?" asked the king, cutting him short.

"I did that only five days ago," said Miska. "Mr. Samson called me at last one evening and said,—

"'Miska, I am satisfied with you; you will go with me to-night, at midnight. There will be only the two of us; have you the courage?'

"'I have,' I answered.

"'See,' Mr. Samson went on, taking a couple of daggers out of a table-drawer, 'I will make you a present of these; they are the only arms you will have. Be ready, and when I ring at midnight make haste and come to me.'

"I haven't much more to tell you, Mr. King. He led me through several vaults till we came to a door which led into an underground passage, and this ended in a cave, which I took good note of, so that I could find it again; and when we had passed through it and reached the open air, my spirits rose. We went on through a thick wood, Mr. Samson taking the lead. The night was dark and stormy. I kept him talking all the while, and tried to enliven him with all sorts of jokes; and he actually called me a very sly dog, and laughed himself as if he enjoyed them."

[Pg 65]

"We had been going on about a couple of hours, when Mr. Samson said we had reached our destination, and that before long a rich Jew would be passing by, and that he had a well-filled money-bag which we were to take away from him. He warned me to be careful, and not to use my dagger unless he called out.

"I suppose Mr. Samson had heard of the rich Jew's coming from his Jew friends, who frequently came to the castle without any one's knowing anything about it—so I heard from Kálmán—and by secret ways which he had told them of.

"The moon shone out through the thick trees for a moment, and I saw that Mr. Samson was standing near a footpath, and facing a narrow opening in the wood, about three steps away from me.

"Presently I fancied that I heard footsteps, and Mr. Samson whispered, 'Come here behind me, quietly, that they may not hear you.'

"In a short time I saw a dark shadow moving towards us. Mr. Samson stood like a lynx, stiff and motionless, with his eyes fixed on the approaching Jew."

[Pg 66]

"'Now,' thought I, 'now or never!' and I drew out a rope-noose which I had kept carefully hidden under my dolmány. The next moment I had thrown it over Mr. Samson's shoulders, and so successfully that his two arms were pinioned to his body, and he was helpless in a moment.

"'Traitor!' roared Mr. Samson, and in a moment he gave a stab backwards with his dagger in spite of his pinioned arm, and he did it so cleverly too that it went about three inches deep into me. Fortunately it struck my thigh-bone, or there would have been an end of me.

"The pain was sharp, but in spite of that I pulled the noose tighter, and then I suddenly tripped him up with my foot, and threw him down.

"'Here! here!' I cried hurriedly, holding the robber fast. 'Come here, gossip Jew; there is nothing

to fear.' For when Mr. Samson roared out, his victim, the Jew, had stopped still, with his feet glued to the ground. But when I cried out that I was the king's man and had caught a thief, he came forward—in a frightened, reluctant way though; and he would not have come at all but that I called to him not to turn back, for if he did, probably before he had got away Mr. Samson's robbers would have come up, as they were lying in wait for him as well as we, and knew that he had a bag full of money."

[Pg 67]

"But what do you mean?" cried the king. "You took Mr. Samson prisoner?"

"To be sure I did," said Miska, "and I have given him up to Mr. General Rozgonyi;^[7] and the Jew came along with me."

[7] The king had made Sebastian Rozgonyi Captain of Upper Hungary.

[Pg 68]

CHAPTER VI.

I AM THE KING'S PAGE!

Soon after the conversation recorded in the last chapter, Miska was sent back again to Visegrád to take his place, and learn his duties as king's page; and the king had bidden him be diligent and learn all that he could, promising to do something more for him as soon as he could read and write.

As to what had been done with Mr. Samson, and whether his little friend Miss Esther had been released from captivity, he heard nothing, though he often thought and wondered and wished; and if he had dared, he would have asked to be allowed to go back to the castle and show her that he had not forgotten his promise.

Before setting out for Buda, he had shown his friend the Jew the secret way in and out of the castle; and as Mr. Samson had the keys of the various gates upon him, the king's soldiers would of course have no difficulty in getting in and surprising the garrison at any time. If only he had been a soldier, he might have gone with them; and even without being a soldier, he might have gone with them to act as guide, if only the king had thought of it. He had not dared to venture back after his capture of Mr. Samson, for fear he should not be allowed to get out again and give his report to the king; and now no doubt the Jew, who did not care anything at all about it, would be sent in his place. Well, it did not much matter after all, so long as Miss Esther were set free, and that the king had promised she should be.

[Pg 69]

So now Miska was in Visegrád again, not a little proud of his smart livery, and greatly enjoying his comfortable quarters after the rough, hard life which he had led. But these, after all, were very secondary matters; the great thing was that he was in the king's service, and must do all that lay in his power to please him.

"I am page to King Matthias," said he to himself over and over again. "The king called me his 'little brother' and 'gossip,' and the king will be ashamed if his gossip is a donkey and does not know the A B C. Ah, you just wait, gossip-king! for I will distinguish myself. I will make you open your eyes and your mouth too!"

[Pg 70]

Miska was a gay-tempered fellow, as lively as gunpowder, and it was vain to expect from him the sober, plodding diligence which belongs to calmer and tamer natures.

If the truth must be told, Miska did not care very greatly about his reading and writing for their own sakes. He did his best with them to please the king, but he was glad enough when his time for study was over for the day, and enjoyed the few hours he was able to spend in the riding-school much more than he did the daily appearance of his wearisome teacher, who came as true to his time as the most obstinate of fevers.

When the king's riding-master clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Michael, you are a man! 'Raven' or 'Swan' carried you well to-day, and couldn't manage to throw you," he was pleased indeed; but he was much more glad when his teacher said, "Come, Mr. Michael, I declare you are getting on like pepper! If you go on like this, I shall come to you for a lesson in a couple of months' time."

Miska could read, and write a very fair hand, before he knew where he was; but though writing rather amused him, he took no pleasure or interest in the books in which he learned to read. It always cost him a struggle to keep his temper during lesson-time, and occasionally he felt such an irresistible inclination to go to sleep, that his teacher was obliged to rouse him by a friendly twitch or two.

[Pg 71]

There were some Italian servants in the stable-yard here, very lively fellows, whose sprightliness Miska found so attractive that he was quite vexed at being shut out from their society. They were constantly laughing and in good spirits; but when Miska wanted to join in the laugh, they would say in broken Hungarian, "How could they tell all over again what it was they were laughing at so

much?" "You learn Italian, *mio caro*, and then you can laugh with us."

"Good!" thought Miska. "If these whipper-snappers, whose mouths are always pinched up like funnels, can learn a few words of Hungarian, I'll soon learn their language. Why," reasoned Miska, "I was only a year old when I began to learn Hungarian, and they say I could talk like a magpie by the time I was two; and now—when I am eighteen, and have got a little down shading my upper lip—can't I learn Italian, when these whipper-snappers could talk it when they were three years old?"

Miska's reasoning was somewhat peculiar, but it was not altogether amiss after all. He began by asking his friends what to call the objects about him; and his good memory served him so well that in a short time he knew the names of most of the implements and different sorts of work which he had to do with. [Pg 72]

Six months passed away; but Matthias had a good many other and more important matters to think of than the beggar lad, and he had not once been in Visegrád since Miska had been there.

"So much the better," thought Miska; "he will come some time, and then I shall know all the more. If only there were not this learning! But it is no good; it has got to be. And yet why? A little page like me is as wise as an owl if he can read and write, and what does he want with more? I can read and write too.—Hm," he thought to himself, "the man who invented writing—what the thunderbolt did he invent it for? What good could it do him? Well, it made him able to read books."

And then presently he muttered, "Donkey! If the king were to hear that now! Well, to be sure, as if there *were* any books when nobody could write! Then they invented it that they might write—that is more reasonable; but what is the use of writing when a man does not know how to write books?" [Pg 73]

Miska battered his brains in vain to try to make out why it was necessary for him to learn to read, and what good his wisdom would do him.

One day the governor put a book in his hands. "Here," said he, "little brother Michael, you know how to read now, and the king's reader is ill. Suppose you were to try and get his place; it would be a fine thing for you."

"Reader!" said Miska. "Do I want his place? What should I gain by it? It would be a great deal better if I could go out hunting sometimes; my eyes see green when the horns are sounded, and here I have to be 'selling acorns.'" [8]

[8] Sticking at home.

"That will come, too, in time, Michael," said the governor; "but now give your attention to this book. There are some very fine stories in it, and I should like, when His Highness the King comes, to have some one who can read well and intelligently to him; for His Highness says that I read like a Slovak clerk, and yet none of my family were ever Slovaks, or ever lived on *kása*." [9]

[9] *Kása*, the chief food of the Slovak peasants, is made of millet or potatoes boiled in milk.

What was to be done? At first Michael read the book with reluctance, and merely because he was obliged to do so; but later on he became more and more interested. Presently he felt as if at last he knew what was the good of writing and reading. [Pg 74]

When he had read the book to the end, he actually asked for another; and at last, whenever he had any spare time, he crept away and seated himself in one of the pretty arbours of the castle garden, and read as hard as if he were to be paid for it.

If Miska had been like many another lad, he would have seen pretty well the whole of his career by this time. There was nothing more to be done; for a page who can read and write, and swallows books as eagerly as a pelican does fish, already knows more than enough for his position. For these things are often rather a hindrance to his riding and other duties, and it is not his business to give an account of the books he reads, but of the work entrusted to him to do. The governor trusted all sorts of things to Miska, however.

"Eh," Miska began to think to himself, "I am not cut out for a page now. These second-rank pages are really not much better than grooms, and the governor still expects me to clean the king's two favourite horses. Why, I'm sure I know as much as Galeotti himself by this time, and I can speak Italian too." [Pg 75]

But still the king did not come, and Miska went on learning; for ever since he had taken to reading books, his mind had begun to grow and had gone on growing, and he saw a good many things in a very different light now from what he had done formerly. Now, indeed, if the king asked him again, he could say that he should like to be something better than he was.

For a long time he went on racking his brains trying to make up his mind what he should do; and at last one day, when he had faithfully done all his duties, he sat down and wrote a letter to the king as follows:—

"MR. KING, YOUR HIGHNESS,—I can read and write, and I can jabber Italian too, when necessary.

"Please, Your Highness, to have the horses in my charge brought to Buda; for I'm sure you never rode such—they have improved so in my hands.

"May God bless you! Come some time to Visegrád, and let me kiss your hands and feet.—Your poor, humble servant,

TORNAY MICHAEL.

"*P.S.*—Brave Mr. King, if Your Highness could find a place for me in the Black Legion, I would thank you indeed, and you would not regret it either."

[Pg 76]

When King Matthias read this letter, he laughed aloud, well pleased.

"See," said he, showing the letter to those who were standing near him. "This was a ragged beggar lad—perhaps by this time I should have had to have him hanged. As it is, I have gained a man in him.—Zokoly," said he to the young knight who was just then with him, "fetch the boy here; and if he is up to the mark, put him into a coat of mail and then bring him to me. But I will answer his letter first, for he might abuse my father and mother for my bad manners if I were to leave it unnoticed."

The king wrote as follows:—

"All good to you from God, Miska. As you can read and write, I meant to make a preceptor of you, good boy; but if you wish to join the Black Legion instead, no matter. Mount one of the horses you have had charge of, and lead the other hither. Mind what you are about, and don't get drunk.—Your well-wisher,

"KING MATTHIAS."

No first fiddle, no Palatine even, in all this wide world could think himself a greater man than Michael did when the king's letter, written with his own hand, was given to him.

[Pg 77]

He threw himself into the governor's arms in a transport of joy, and then, when he had made himself clean and tidy and put on his best clothes—well, then, there was no keeping him. He would neither eat nor drink, and in a little while he was off, riding one of the horses and leading the other; and as he went he said, "God keep King Matthias!" repeating the words over and over again. "Let him only get into some great trouble one day, just to let me show that there is a grateful heart under this smart dolmány."

When Zokoly presented the lad to the king clad in the stern, manly garb of the Black Legion—wearing, that is to say, a network coat of black mail, with a heavy sword by his side, and a round helmet on his head—Matthias was quite surprised.

The king, as has been said, possessed the rare gift of being able to read men, and seldom made a mistake in his choice of those whom he took into his service. And now as he cast a searching glance at the boy's noble countenance, and noticed the open, honourable expression of his piercing eyes, and above all the broad forehead which was so full of promise, the great king—for great he was, though not yet at the pinnacle of his greatness—the great king felt almost ashamed to see the lad standing before him in the garb of a common soldier, as if he were merely one of the ordinary rank and file. The jest with which he had been about to receive him died away unuttered on his lips. But he welcomed his man good-naturedly, and said,—

[Pg 78]

"Michael Tornay, from this day forth you are ennobled. I will give you the parchment to-morrow, and I will make a landed proprietor of you."

The lad believed in King Matthias as if he had been some altogether superior being; he was ardently, passionately attached to him, but he said nothing.

To tell the truth, he felt more confused than grateful; for the new-made noble, the private of the Black Legion, had just so much delicacy of feeling that he was much more flattered by the king's treating him seriously than he would have been by jests and teasing.

For the moment he could not get out a word. There was a mist before his eyes; and after a long pause—for the king himself was touched by the effect of his words—the young man came to himself, and dropping upon one knee said, "Your Highness has made a man of me, and I trust in God that you will never, never repent it!" Few and simple words, but the king was so well pleased with them, and so confirmed in his previous opinion, that at that moment he would have dared to trust the boy with the command of the castle of Visegrád.

[Pg 79]

A week later, after a battle in which Michael had taken part, Matthias made the boy an officer in the famous Black or Death Legion—so called from the colour of its armour and the skull-like shape of its helmets—which was under the command of the king himself.

[Pg 80]

CHAPTER VII. SENT TO PRISON.

It would be interesting, no doubt, if we could follow Michael's career step by step; but the next two years of his life must be passed over very briefly.

It was true that the king had made a man of him, and already Tornay was a marked personage—a man whose name was often in people's mouths, and well known in the army as a rising young general.

There was plenty of work for the Black Legion in those days; for the Turks were perpetually invading the southern provinces, and the Hungarians were left to fight them almost single-handed—though, as the king reminded Louis the Eleventh of France, "Hungary was fighting for all Christendom," as she had been doing for many a long year past.

Michael had distinguished himself more than once for his courage, and for a daring which amounted at times to actual foolhardiness, and now he had outdone his previous exploits by the gallant rescue from extreme peril of General Rozgonyi. [Pg 81]

The general was cut off from his men, and absolutely alone in the midst of a band of Turks, when Michael made a bold dash into their midst, scattering them right and left, and succeeded in extricating himself and Rozgonyi from their clutches.

It was a bold exploit and a rash one—madly rash, indeed—but it was successful; and as Michael rode back to his men, wounded, but not seriously so, he was received with loud applause; and perhaps, if the truth must be told, he felt himself something of a hero.

But the king, who had watched him with much anxiety, was considerably provoked; and when the battle was over, he summoned him to his tent, where Michael found him sitting alone and looking very much more grave than was his wont.

He raised his eyes when Michael entered, but his voice sounded stern, and instead of saying "thou" to him as he usually did, he addressed him quite formally.

"Mr. Tornay," said he, "you have been behaving like a madman, like a common soldier whose horse has such a hard mouth that he can't control it; or—you must have been pouring more wine down your throat than you ought to have done." [Pg 82]

King Matthias had a great horror of drunkards, and did his best to stop all excessive drinking in the army and elsewhere.

But Michael was utterly taken aback. He had been a good deal flattered and complimented, and had quite expected that the king was going to thank him for saving the general's life, or at least would show that he was well pleased with him, and give him a few of those words of approval which he valued above everything. To be received in this way was rather crushing.

"Sir—Your Highness," he stammered, in great surprise, "I was only doing my duty."

"That is precisely the very thing you were not doing," said the king with some warmth, his large dark eyes flashing as he spoke. "You are a general; you were in command, and you left your troops in the lurch, as St. Paul left the Wallachians.^[10] You rushed among the Turkish spahis entirely alone, and to what, as far as you could tell, was certain death, like a man who was weary of his life, his king, and his duty. You ought to be ashamed of yourself; and understand that what may be meritorious in a private is worse than cowardice in the officers." [Pg 83]

[10] A common saying. St. Paul is supposed to have lost patience with them.

Tornay was so thunderstruck that he could not find words to defend himself.

"Speak!" said Matthias, in a tone of displeasure. "We wish to hear what you have to say in your defence; it is not our custom to punish any one without hearing him."

"Sir—Your Highness," said Tornay, with gentle deference, but with the manner of one who has an easy conscience, "I did not think I was guilty of cowardice in going to the rescue of one of your best generals!"

"God be thanked that you were successful!" said the king, "but it is more than you had any right to expect. The fact is that it was vanity which led you to risk your head in an experiment which was not merely hazardous, but so desperate that there was hardly the remotest reasonable hope of success; and vanity under such circumstances is cowardice. I honour courage; as for insane foolhardiness, it belongs not to the knight but to the highwayman."

Tornay listened abashed, and though much hurt he felt that Matthias was right.

"I should have a great mind to punish you," the king went on, "but that one of my best generals owes his life to your folly, so for his sake I pardon you." [Pg 84]

"What can I do?" said the young man in a low voice—"what can I do to regain Your Highness's favour? I can't live if I know that Your Highness is angry with me—me who owe everything, all that I am, to you."

"Always be on your guard, my little brother," said the king; and now, seeing how distressed he was, and wishing to comfort him, he spoke in the kind, pleasant voice which won all hearts. "Do only what you can give a right and satisfactory reason for, and then you will never miss the mark."

So Michael went back to his quarters comforted, and promising himself to lay the king's simple advice well to heart.

There was a grand banquet at the court that night, and many of the great nobles were present; but Miska did not venture to show himself, though when once the king had given a reprimand and made the delinquent understand what he thought of his conduct, his anger was over and done with, and he spoke in his usual kindly way again. Miska thought, however, that by thus punishing himself he should soften him.

[Pg 85]

After all, as he reflected, the king was right: it was the thought of making a soldier's name for himself which had led him to run into such obvious danger. And yet he had a reason to give for what he had done—a good reason too, he had thought; for he had considered that his life belonged to the king, who had given him his career and all that made his life of any importance. And so he had resolved with himself never to trouble his head about risk and danger, when he had an opportunity of proving his fidelity to the king.

But now, as he turned over in his mind the advice which the king had given him, he began to see things a little differently.

"My life belongs to the king, it is true," thought he, "and I must be ready to sacrifice it whenever there is any reason to do so; but just *because* my life is the king's, I have no right to throw it away."

From that time Tornay tried to make himself more and more useful to the king, by learning all that he could of his profession.

The courage of a private was not enough—it was not what was wanted of him, now that he was an officer in command; and he felt that the courage which made a man strive to acquire the knowledge necessary to those in his own position—generals and commanders, that is to say—was courage of a higher, nobler sort than that which led to deeds of mere daring. Of course the courage of the private was also needful—quite indispensable, indeed, in every soldier, officer or not, who must always be ready to sacrifice his life if need be; but he strove to acquire besides the cool courage which does not let itself be carried away by excitement, which can listen to the sound of the trumpets and the din of battle without being intoxicated, which remains calm and collected, retains its presence of mind, and is capable of seeing and hearing, and, above all, of thinking for others, even when the issue looks most doubtful.

[Pg 86]

For a general has to remember that he is not merely an individual; he is that, of course, but he is a great deal more—he is the head of a body which depends upon him for guidance. He must not play only his own game, or be thinking only or chiefly of the bold, brave deeds he can do on his own account; he must practise the most stern self-restraint. And he must not think of gratifying his own vanity or desire of distinguishing himself; he must think of those under his command—he must be unselfish.

[Pg 87]

Hitherto, Michael's one thought when he went into battle had been the enemy, and how much damage he could do him. He had eyes for nothing else, and he was eager to give proof of his own personal valour; but now he began to accustom himself to resist this consuming thirst for action, and to restrain his longing to rush madly into the fight, for he was learning that he must not think only of himself.

When the army was drawn up in battle array, fronting the enemy and all ready for action, the young soldier would begin to ask himself what he should do if the king were presently to give orders, as he might some day, that he, Michael, was to take the chief command and lead the army to battle.

And then his blood would boil, his eyes would flash, and he felt an almost irresistible longing to dash forward and do some valiant deed. But now he controlled and recovered himself, and repeating to himself the king's words, would say, "Now, Mihály, how could you do such a thing? what reason could you give for it?"

He began to scrutinize the ranks of the enemy in a much more scientific way, reminding himself that he was not now a private, or even a subaltern officer, in the Black Legion, but a general, whose duty it was to think, not of bold ventures, but of sober plans. This gave quite another turn to his mind, and he felt how much higher and fairer a thing it was to think of others and direct others, and to keep one's presence of mind intact and one's blood cool, when youthful zeal made others lose their heads.

[Pg 88]

So thinking to himself one day, as he and the men under his command stood facing the enemy, waiting for the signal to advance, he was keeping his eyes upon the opposite ranks, when all at once he observed something that till now had escaped his notice.

"The enemy is remarkably weak in the left wing yonder," he reflected, "and there is a long marsh just in front; I don't think I should be afraid of being attacked from that quarter. If I were in command," he went on, "I would order one division to advance in that direction and outflank the enemy. This would throw him into confusion. Then I would send part of the cavalry forward, and while the enemy's attention was engaged by the sudden attack on his wing, I would fall upon his centre with my whole force."

"Really," the young officer said to himself, "I should like to tell His Highness what I think."

[Pg 89]

Michael scribbled something in pencil upon a scrap of paper, and sent one of the Black Knights off with it to the king, who was inspecting the ranks, and was now riding down the left wing of the army, surrounded by a brilliant staff, himself more simply attired than any of those about him.

The king read over the crooked lines with not a little astonishment, and for a moment his face flamed.

Then he cried out in lively tones, "Upon my word, advice is becoming from a twenty-years-old general! This man will be somebody one of these days."

Then on the margin of the paper he wrote just these two words—"Do it!"

The battle was over and won, and a fortnight later Tornay Mihály was one of the king's lieutenant-generals.

Matthias had by this time grown extremely fond of the young man. Michael was always so vigilantly on the alert, so blindly devoted to him, and so quick in his ways, that the king had no misgivings about any commission which he entrusted to him. It was certain to be done, and done well. But this was not all. He was pleased, too, with the young man's evident gratitude and nobility of character—though not as much surprised as some others, who fancied that such things were not to be looked for in a beggar lad; for the king could read faces, and he had long since made up his mind about Michael.

[Pg 90]

In those days there were two bastions on the walls of the castle of Buda, towards Zugliget. They were used as magazines, but in case of a siege—which at that time Buda had little cause to dread—they would be garrisoned with soldiers, and were therefore already provided with guns.

These two bastions, one of which remains, though in an altered form, to the present day, were about a couple of fathoms apart; and now the king gave orders that both were to be set in order and made fit for dwelling-houses.

There was no opening on three of the sides, with the exception of some small windows high up, which let in the light, but would give the intended inmates no outlook; but on the fourth side, where the bastions faced each other, there were four long, narrow windows in each, guarded by strong iron bars.

The king was just now staying in Buda, and had given Michael command of part of the castle garrison; and he was so well satisfied with the way in which he discharged his duties, that hardly a week passed without his giving him some fresh mark of his favour.

[Pg 91]

As for Michael's passionate attachment to the king, it increased daily; every hint from him was a command, and he was always on the watch to try to interpret his wishes before they were put into words.

One morning he was summoned to the king's presence.

"Michael," said the king, in a good-humoured tone, "I am angry with you, and I am going to punish you."

"How have I been so unfortunate as to deserve the anger of the best of kings and masters?" asked the young man.

"Well, what do you think?" Matthias went on, laughing. "Am I very angry, and am I going to pass a severe sentence?"

"Mr. King," answered Tornay, who saw at once that Matthias was in high good-humour, "I think Your Highness has got hold of your anger by the small end this time, and perhaps you won't go quite so far as to have my head cut off."

"Your head may possibly be allowed to remain in its accustomed place," said the king jestingly. "However, it is not necessary that you should know which part of your person I have sentenced to punishment; it is enough, gossip, that you are to expiate your offence, and that to begin with I am going to send you to prison."

[Pg 92]

"Perhaps Your Highness is going to entrust me with the command of some abandoned wooden castle?"^[11] said Michael.

[11] Many small castles of wood and stone had been built in the north by the Bohemian freebooters already mentioned.

"No," said the king; "you have not found it out this time. I have got other quarters for you."

"Very well, as Your Highness wills; but you won't get much good out of me if I am in prison."

"Listen. You can see the two bastions yonder on the Mount St. Gellert side of the castle. I have had them put in order, and you are to live in one of them."

Tornay listened, but he could not make it out at all. He saw the two bastions sure enough, and as they did not now look at all gloomy or prison-like, he was not alarmed at the idea of living in one

of them; but he could not by any means conceive what the king's object could be.

"You are surprised," said the king, "aren't you? But the prison is tolerable enough. You will have four small rooms; and as for the look-out, well, I think you will be content with it; and then you will be your own jailer, so you need have no fear as to the strictness of the discipline. In a word, you are to move into your new quarters this very day."

[Pg 93]

Tornay retired; but on his way he racked his brains to discover why the king could want him to move into the bastion. What reason could he have? If he was his own jailer, and could go in and out as he pleased, it was not a prison, simply different quarters, and better, at all events, than those he had had before; for he had been living in a very poor apartment of the castle, looking into a by-street.

"Well," thought he, "what do I know as to the king's motives? Who can ever tell what he has in his head? He wishes me to live there—good! then that's enough, and there I will live."

So Tornay took possession of one of the bastions facing Pesth, and was very well satisfied indeed with his new quarters, which the king had had plainly but comfortably enough furnished. Perhaps the king had placed him there only as an excuse for making him more presents.

[Pg 94]

CHAPTER VIII. THE BEGGAR BOY'S SONG.

Michael found himself very well off in his new quarters; and as nothing happened to explain the king's whim, he was confirmed in his belief that its only object was to make him more comfortable.

He was very punctual in attending to all his duties, and inspected the garrison very frequently, but he spent a good many of his spare hours in reading and study. For the king liked men of learning and cultivation, and Michael was bent upon pleasing him in these matters if he could.

Being in Buda, with a little time on his hands, gave him a capital opportunity of improving himself; for he had become acquainted with the king's great friend the librarian Galeotti, and through him he now made acquaintance with the famous library which Matthias was then forming under the direction of Galeotti and his fellow-worker Ugoletti.

[Pg 95]

The library was in the castle, and consisted of two great halls, in which, by the end of his life, the king had collected above fifty thousand volumes. He was constantly buying up valuable manuscripts in Italy, Constantinople, and Asia; and he kept a number of men constantly employed in copying—four in Florence and thirty in Buda.

The manuscripts were many of them beautifully illuminated and adorned with tasteful initials and pictures, and frequently with likenesses of the king and his wife, so that they were valuable as works of art.

The art of printing, too, had been lately introduced, and the printing-press was kept constantly at work adding to the contents of the polished cedar-wood book-shelves, which were protected by silken, gold-embroidered curtains: for Matthias treated his books royally and as if he loved them.

Besides books, the two halls contained three hundred statues, some ancient and some modern; and in the vestibule were astronomical and mathematical instruments, with a large celestial globe in the centre supported by two genii.

Michael had abundant opportunities of study, and knew that he could not please the king better than by availing himself of them. The Italian which he had learned from the grooms at Visegrád he now found most useful, as it enabled him to talk to the various artists, sculptors, musicians, and other distinguished men from Italy, whom the king loved to have about him.

[Pg 96]

The two librarians of course he knew well; then there was the great painter Filippo Lippi, and the Florentine architect Averulino, by whom the royal palaces both in Buda and Visegrád were beautified and enlarged. Carbo of Ferrara was writing a dialogue, in which he sang the praises of King Matthias; Galeotti was busy with a book of entertaining stories, full of anecdotes and sayings of the king, to which Michael certainly might have contributed much that was interesting; Bonfinius of Ascoli, reader to the queen, was engaged upon his History of Hungary; and various Hungarian authors were composing their chronicles and writing legends and poetry in Latin—that being still the language of the learned throughout Europe.

From the windows of his "prison" Michael had no view, as has been said, except of the other bastion, which was not particularly interesting, as it was uninhabited, so that he was not tempted to waste any time in looking out of the window. But he had only to go into the palace gardens when he wanted to get away from his books and rest his eyes and brain; and these covered a great deal of ground, extending indeed as far as to the neighbouring hills, then still covered with forests, where the king, who was an ardent sportsman, often went hunting.

[Pg 97]

Michael was sitting in the window one morning to eat his breakfast, when he chanced to look across to the opposite window, and saw, to his great surprise, that there was some one there, or at least he fancied that he saw some one, but the glimpse was so momentary that he could not be sure.

When one has nothing at all to look at, very small trifles become quite important; and the idea that he might have, or be going to have, neighbours was quite exciting. Certainly the king had said something about it, but hitherto he had seen no one.

In a fit of curiosity, Michael opened the window and looked out from time to time while he went on with his meal. Once he thought he saw some one flit past it again; but he had to hurry off to his military duties before he could make out whether the rooms were really occupied or not.

[Pg 98]

When he came back, the very first thing he did was to go up to the window again; and at last his curiosity was gratified, at least to some extent, for two persons were there—two women, one seated at a little embroidery-frame, and the other standing over her, looking at her work. Their faces were hidden from him at first, but from their dress and figures he could see that one was elderly and the other quite young. Presently the younger one raised her head from her work and looked up, and from the momentary glance which he had of her features, Michael fancied that he had seen her before somewhere or other. He could not for the moment think where it could have been, for it was the merest glimpse he had of her face before she looked down again.

He must not be so rude as to watch; but he could not resist an occasional glance as long as they were there. In another quarter of an hour, however, both figures had disappeared, and Michael saw no more of them. But the discovery that he had neighbours was quite exciting, and he was so much interested that he shook his head with some impatience when he found the window deserted in the afternoon. Till this event occurred, Michael had been in the habit of spending as short a time as possible within doors, and was most eager to mount his horse as soon as ever he had finished the work which he had set himself for the day. But now he was so consumed with curiosity that he actually kept his steed waiting a whole quarter of an hour later than usual, while he watched for the reappearance of the ladies.

[Pg 99]

But it was all to no purpose. For a moment he caught sight of a white hand raised, either to fasten the window or to point to something, but the next instant this too had disappeared. He was on the watch again when he returned home, taking care, however, to stand or sit where he could not be seen; and the next day and the next it was the same. He spent so much time in watching, indeed, that he got quite angry with himself at last; and then he would go out riding, and come back quite vexed and out of sorts.

"Bother it all!" he thought to himself; "of course I shall see her again sooner or later if she is there."

He was standing in his usual place again one evening, when he saw two shadows move away from the opposite window in the most tantalizing manner, and he felt so hopeful that he sat down to watch at his ease. If tobacco had been known in those days, no doubt he would have lighted his pipe or a cigar; but as it was not, he had nothing to console himself with, and could only sit and "look for King David and his harp" in the moon, as the saying is.

[Pg 100]

All at once he fancied that he really did hear him playing his harp in his silver palace. There were sounds of some sort—soft, sweet sounds, which came floating towards him on the air; and he thought to himself that he had surely heard the plaintive melody with its vibrating chords somewhere before.

"To be sure! I have got it!" he said to himself. "I know now *where!* But, of course, others might know the air.—Eh! what's that, though?" he exclaimed, as a sweet, young, bell-like voice now began to accompany the instrument, and he heard one of the very songs which he had himself composed in the days which now seemed so long ago.

That Miska the beggar boy should be a popular poet will astonish no one who knows how many of the popular songs of Hungary have had their origin in the humble cottages of the peasantry, in the course of past centuries. Every village has its poet, who is also frequently a musical composer as well. He sings his songs at the village merry-makings to airs of his own invention, and the gipsies, who are always present on such occasions to play for the dancers, accompany him on their fiddles. If they take a fancy to the air, they will remember it, and invent variations to it, and in this way it will be preserved and become part of their stock.

[Pg 101]

"One life, one God,
One home, one love,"

sang Michael's opposite neighbour, in a voice of great beauty and sweetness.

"It's Esther! it must be Esther!" cried the young man, starting to his feet in great excitement. "Esther!" he said, and a flush mounted to his face; "but here, *here*, actually here, opposite me? Impossible! I must see her and make sure. No one could know that song, though, but herself; I made it for her, and no one else ever had it, at least from me."

Often and often Michael had wondered what had become of his little friend and the other inhabitants of the castle; but whenever he had ventured to hint an inquiry as to Mr. Samson's fate, or had tried to find out anything about the rest, the king had turned the subject, and avoided

giving him any direct answer. Of course it was out of the question to press the matter, so that he had known positively nothing of what had happened ever since the eventful night when he had left the castle. But though his life had been a very busy one, and many fresh new interests had come into it, he had never forgotten the one pleasant acquaintance whom he had made in Mr. Samson's grim castle. He walked across towards the window now full of eagerness; but the singer, whose voice he thought he recognized, was sitting in such a provoking way that he could not see her face, and he had been careful to manage so that she should not see him either. Presently he stopped, with his foot on the window-sill, and then took another step forward, which apparently startled the singer, for the song ceased abruptly, and a rather frightened face looked up at him.

[Pg 102]

"It is you!" cried the young officer, in impetuous delight; and "Is it you?" said the girl, more quietly, but with a flush of pleasure.

"Well, did ever one see!" exclaimed a sharp voice behind Esther. "Jancsi! [Johnnie!] how ever did you get here?"

"It is I indeed, my little demoiselle," said Michael, in the utmost surprise. "But I am quite bewildered. How did you come here?"

"Did not you know that the king had sent for me here to Buda?"

[Pg 103]

"The king!" said the young man, and a shadow crossed his face; "when? what for?—and have you seen the king?"

"Three questions at once," said Esther, laughing. "Well, really I don't know anything more than that we came here under the escort of an old gentleman whom I don't know; and the king quartered us here, where we have been now three days, but I have not yet seen His Highness. God bless him! for I am as free here, and as happy," she went on, blushing still more, "as if I had been born again. But come in; why do you stand there in the window? We are neighbours, you know, as we used to be, and neighbours ought to be on good terms with one another."

Michael felt as if he were dreaming, but naturally he did not wait to be asked twice; and the old woman, who had shown a marked liking for him before while he was in Samson's castle, welcomed him now with the greatest cordiality.

"Why, Jancsi, stay a bit," said she, "and let me look at you! Why, what a smart lad you have turned into, to be sure! What fine buttons you have on your dolmány! and—well, I declare, you have a watch too! 'Your lentils must have sold' uncommonly well in the time; and just tell us now how you came to 'climb the cucumber-tree' so quickly, will you?"^[12]

[Pg 104]

[12] To "sell one's lentils well" and to "climb the cucumber-tree" mean to get on in the world and make one's fortune quickly.

"Ah, auntie, that would take a long time to tell; but we'll have it another time. All I can tell you now is that I owe everything to the good king, and I would go through the fire for him; for my whole life, every moment of it, belongs to him."

Then in a few words he told them his history since the time when he had left the castle with Samson, and had so given Esther some hope of release.

"It is strange," said Esther thoughtfully, "that the king should have put us here opposite one another, and should have had these gloomy bastions put in order and made so habitable just for us."

"Very," said Michael. "I am surprised myself, and I don't understand it, especially as the king asked me yesterday, laughing, whether I had yet made acquaintance with my neighbour? But what is the good of troubling one's head about it? I am heartily glad, anyway; and you, Esther, are you pleased too? tell me."

The girl blushed a little, and giving Michael her hand, said: "Why shouldn't I be glad? I am sure I could not have come across a better neighbour, and it is to you most certainly that I owe my freedom."

[Pg 105]

The young officer sighed. "Indirectly, yes," he said; and then in a lower tone he added, "And the king might have entrusted you to my charge; I might have had the pleasure of bringing you here. However, when I had captured Mr. Samson, before I came back to the king, I showed the way in and out of the castle to the Jew whom Mr. Samson had intended to relieve of his pack, so it was easy enough then to get in and take possession."

"Of course," said Esther, "it did not need any very great valour to steal in at midnight and seize the place."

"And what has become of Mr. Samson? the king has never told me a word more about him."

"What has become of him? I should think he was safe in one of the king's prisons."

"Dear Esther, do tell me what happened; I am burning to know how it all came about."

"Well, when a few weeks had passed and Mr. Samson did not come home, we all began to think that something had happened to him, and that he had perished for good and all. And then one midnight we heard a great noise of shouting and the clash of arms, and then Mr. Rozgonyi came

[Pg 106]

and mentioned your name, and I let him into my room. For I was so frightened, not knowing what was going on, that I had treble-bolted the door and put the bar up; but when I heard your name, of course I knew it was all right, and I opened it at once."

"And what of the castle?"

"Mr. Rozgonyi did not allow much time for questions. He just said that he had brought some stone-masons with him; and apparently they had come to pull down and not to build, at least in the first place, for he wound up by saying that the king was going to have the stones used to build a church and monastery in the nearest village. There would be enough for three, I should think!"

"And did Miss Esther ever think of the poor beggar boy?"

"To be sure! But I thought more of the valiant Alpári János [John], who was so brave as to come into Mr. Samson's hiding-place, and then so clever as to get the wicked tyrant into his hands. But, Sir Knight, I felt afraid of you too, and I must confess that I am rather afraid of you still. For—you are certainly very clever at pretending and making believe to be what you are not; and when one finds it all out, how is one to believe anything you may say?"

[Pg 107]

"Good Esther!" said Michael, looking a little shamefaced, "but didn't I keep my promise to you? I said you should be released, and you were."

"True," admitted Esther.

"And if I acted the part of a dissembler with Mr. Samson, I was not my own master, you know; I belonged to the king, and was obeying his orders, not following my own fancies and wishes. But as regards yourself, I have never dissembled at all, from the time when first I began to make your acquaintance, and it rests with you to put my sincerity to the test."

"How do you mean? But I see we have been chattering away a long time.—Euphrosyne, light the candles.—And you, sir, must go, if you please; we have talked enough for to-day."

But though Esther dismissed him now, no day passed after this without his coming to see her; and both she and Euphrosyne seemed to be always glad to see him and to listen to all he had to tell them, first about his own life and adventures, and the king whom he was never tired of extolling, and then about the day's incidents, his work and his studies, and what was going on in Buda; for they lived very quietly, and saw and heard but little of the outside world. Often, too, Esther would bring out her harp and play and sing. Her voice had gained in power and richness during the past two or three years, and she had had some teaching from one of the king's musicians; but nothing pleased Michael so well as to hear her sing the favourite old songs which he remembered of old, except—to hear her sing his own.

[Pg 108]

[Pg 109]

CHAPTER IX. THE KING'S WHIM.

Things had been going on very pleasantly for some weeks, and Michael and his attractive little neighbour had been growing more and more intimate with each other, when one evening, on entering the room as usual, he saw at once that something was amiss; for Esther's bright face was quite overclouded, and her blue eyes looked troubled.

But Euphrosyne was mounting guard over her young mistress as she always did, and Michael's anxious but cautious inquiries met with evasive answers, or passed unnoticed.

How he wished the old woman would find something to look after in the kitchen or elsewhere—anything to get rid of her, if but for a few minutes!

The conversation was less animated than usual this evening: Esther seemed to find a difficulty in talking and she said positively that she could not sing; and Michael was becoming quite uneasy and almost inclined to take his departure, when—whether she felt that she was not wanted or not—something or other made Euphrosyne discover, or perhaps pretend to discover, that she had something to attend to in another room.

[Pg 110]

Such a thing had never happened before, and Michael seized his opportunity, blessing her in his heart for leaving them to themselves, but fearing she would be back before he had said what he wanted to say.

"Now, Esther," he said persuasively, seating himself on the divan by her side—"now, Esther, tell me what has happened. What is troubling you? you look so sad and out of spirits. What is the matter? I am sure there is something."

"My friend," answered Esther, "I *am* sad, for I am to leave Buda."

"Why? where are you going?" cried Michael.

"I don't know," said the girl—"I don't know! There! read what he says." And she handed Michael a letter.

"The king's writing!" he exclaimed; and then he read with a beating heart:—

"MY LITTLE SISTER^[13] ESTHER,—Your parents came of distinguished ancestry. You are an orphan; Mr. Samson got possession of all that belonged to you, and since he has paid the penalty of his crimes, his property has come into our treasury. We have lately heard from Munkács that he has died a natural death, and we are willing to restore a portion of his possessions to you, if you on your part are willing to give your hand to one of our 'Supreme Counts,'^[14] a man of very ancient family. If you cannot make up your mind to this, my little sister, then you must go away from here; for your frequent meetings with Mr. Tornay—whose head I will wash for him!—have attracted attention, and will make you talked about.

[Pg 111]

"MATTHIAS."

[13] "Little sister" and "little brother" are usual forms of addressing the young.

[14] *Fő-ispán*, the head and administrator of a county, not a hereditary count.

Michael let the letter drop from his hand in dismay, and then exclaimed passionately, "Why, the king placed me here; and, besides, he asked me himself whether I had made acquaintance with my neighbour."

"True," said Esther sadly, "and I told His Highness so myself; but he gave me quite a scolding for letting you come and see me so often."

"What!" cried Michael, surprised and even startled; "the king has been here?"

[Pg 112]

"He has indeed," said Esther, the tears springing to her eyes. "Yesterday, while you were out riding the beautiful cream-coloured horse with the green silk trappings, the king came. I had never seen him before, but as he closed the door behind him, I knew in a moment that it was the king and no one else. I felt it somehow, I don't know how."

"And what did he say? was he in a good humour?"

"Good? not by any means. He looked at me as fiercely as if I were going to do him I don't know what injury, and yet I pray for him every day, and have never sinned against him so much as in thought."

"Strange!" said Michael. "And this count! The whirlwind take him and all his ancient family pedigree away together! Do you know this count? And is there any count in all the wide world who loves you as well as I do?"

"You?" said Esther, lifting her tearful eyes; "but you see you never told me you did."

"I *have* told you!" said Michael, impetuously seizing Esther's hand and covering it with kisses; "every word I have uttered has told you so, ever since I first saw you. Ah! you might have understood me, because—I was once a beggar boy, how could I speak more plainly? I have no family pedigree, and I shall never be a Supreme Count," he finished gloomily.

[Pg 113]

"Is it true?" said Esther, blushing very prettily, but looking several shades less melancholy than before.

"Why shouldn't it be true, my star? Of course it is true! Don't you believe me?" said Michael, drawing her to himself. "But I am the son of poor parents, only a beggar boy, and that abominable count, hang him! may—what was I going to say?—well, anyhow, may the grasshoppers fall upon him!"

"Michael," said Esther, a little shyly, "if you do love me—but understand well, I mean *really* love me, really and truly—well then, I will just confess that I love you too, with all my heart, truly, as my life. You are more to me than all the counts in the world, for you are my Supreme Count; and even if you can't point to a line of ancestors, what does it signify? Somebody has to make a beginning, and you are making your own name; surely that is a great deal more than merely inheriting it! Besides, your family pedigree is as long as any one's in the world after all; for it reaches back to old Father Adam, and no one can go further."

At that moment Euphrosyne reappeared with the lights; but Michael cared little for her, now that he had found out what he wanted to know. Esther cared for him; what else could possibly matter?

[Pg 114]

"I must go to the king," said Michael. "He has always been most gracious to me, and why should he want to crush me now, after being the making of me? Why should he make my heart bitter, when it beats true to him and to my love? Don't be sad, my star. I will see him to-morrow, and tell him everything. He is so good, so kind, and so just! and it wouldn't be just to take you away from me, after bringing you here and letting us learn to know one another. If I only knew which count it was! but there are more than fifty. There is not one of them, though, that found you out in Mr. Samson's castle, and you never sang any of their songs, did you now? *Did* any one ever make songs for you but me?"

"No one! I don't know any count, unless the old gentleman who escorted us was one, and I hardly spoke to him."

But just then they were interrupted, for the door opened, and one of the royal pages stepped in.

"I have been looking for you in your quarters, lieutenant-general," said he; "and as I did not find you at home, it is a good thing you are here. See, this is from the king; please to read it." And he handed a note to Michael, who turned deadly pale as he took it and read as follows:—

[Pg 115]

"I wish you all good.

"So you have become very well acquainted indeed with your neighbours! and we suspect that you have spent more time tied to their apron-strings than in exercising the garrison. We shall therefore give you something to do.

"We shall expect you to be at Visegrád by eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, and we will there give you our orders. Be prepared for three months' absence from Buda.

"You will not see your neighbour again; she is to be the bride of Aggtelky Mihály, one of our best-beloved and most trusty counts. God be with us.^[15]

"MATTHIAS."

[15] Equivalent to our "adieu."

The note was written in the most formally polite style. There was no "gossip" or "little brother," there was not even a "thou" in it—nothing from beginning to end but "your grace," answering indeed to our "you," but a good deal more chilling to those accustomed to the friendly "thee" and "thou."

[Pg 116]

Michael smothered his wrath as best he could, feeling how much he owed to the king, and that it would be the blackest ingratitude to show passion and resentment because he now crossed his will.

"I will obey His Highness's commands," said he to the page, who at once withdrew.

Then he embraced Esther, and said with a heavy sigh, "All is not lost yet. The king is good, and—God is better. Keep up your heart."

The next morning the young lieutenant-general was at Visegrád by the appointed time, and went at once to the governor, who told him that the king had arrived a couple of hours previously, very irritable and out of humour, as it seemed.

"What can have happened to His Highness?" asked Michael, grieved to hear of the king's ill-humour, and fearing not only that his petition would come at a most unfortunate time, but that the king would not perhaps let him have speech of him at all.

"Eh!" said the governor, "who knows what our good king has to worry him? There's trouble enough in the country just now, that's certain, and he has both his hands full. But I am sure I am not afraid of him; and as for those who vex him, may they suffer for it as they deserve!"

[Pg 117]

A long hour passed, and still the king did not send for Michael, though the governor had lost no time in announcing his arrival. But at last, after he had waited what to him seemed a very long time, the summons came. The page who brought it looked grave, but beyond that his face betrayed nothing, and Michael hastened with a beating heart into the presence of the master whom he adored, but now, perhaps for the first time in his life, feared to meet.

When he entered the beautiful, well-lighted room, whose painted windows looked out upon the Danube, he found King Matthias seated near an open window, in an arm-chair covered with yellow velvet, and looking more gloomy than he had ever seen him before. He was very plainly, almost carelessly, attired, and near him was his favourite scholar, the librarian Galeotti, who also looked melancholy and stood gazing at vacancy, as if he were trying to peer into the future.

"Is it you?" said Matthias coldly; "you have kept me waiting a long time."

[Pg 118]

"Mr. King," answered Michael, "I have been here for the past two hours, as you commanded."

"Ah! true, I was forgetting; of course they announced you. Are you prepared for a long journey?"

"A soldier is ready to march without much preparation," said Michael, with a great want of his usual alacrity. "I am ready to receive your Highness's orders."

"Good," said the king. "You will start for Vienna in an hour's time then, with Mr. Galeotti here. He is going on a mission for me to the Emperor Friedrich; and until my friend has completed his business, which may perhaps take six months, you are not to leave him."

Michael said nothing.

"Well?" the king went on, in a tone of impatient annoyance. "Perhaps you don't fancy such an errand; you would prefer, no doubt, to be sent against Axamith,^[16] who has effected a lodgment again in the north, as we hear, and is thieving and plundering like a swarm of grasshoppers."

[16] One of the Bohemian freebooters.

"Why should I deny it?" said Michael humbly, well knowing that the king liked the truth even when he was angry. "If Your Highness were disposed to send me on active service somewhere, I *should* prefer it. But wherever you please to order me, I shall go with a good will; for my life belongs to my king."

[Pg 119]

"Hm!" said Matthias, fixing his searching eyes upon the speaker; "may be so, but just at present your tongue does not speak the thoughts of your heart."

"Sir! Your Highness!"

"Highness' I may be, but 'gracious' I am not to-day, am I, Mr. Michael Tornay? You have yourself to thank for it, for you have been putting bad wood on the fire,^[17] and you have been going very near what is forbidden fruit."

[17] That is, you have been up to mischief.

"Forbidden fruit?" said Michael, exceedingly cast down by the king's cold treatment of him.

"It is true I did not distinctly forbid it you, but I could not suppose you would take fire so quickly."

Michael said nothing, and the king went on,—

"Don't deny it, for I know everything. You have fallen in love with Esther. It is just fortunate that the girl has more sense than you, and does not trust your fine words."

[Pg 120]

"I humbly beg your pardon," said Michael, unwilling to let the opportunity slip, "I believe, on the contrary, Your Highness, that Esther—"

"Esther is going to marry Aggtelky Mihály, the Supreme Count," said the king decidedly; "and now that you know this, it will be as well for you to give up thinking of her. To make it easier for you, and to impress it upon your mind, it will not be amiss for you to spend a few months away from Buda."

"Your Highness," Michael began again in an imploring tone.

"Enough!" said the king in a stern voice. "Now both follow me to the castle chapel. You will receive your instructions after service, and then—to Vienna!"

Michael was in the utmost consternation, but he did not venture another word. It was so strange to see the gay, good-natured king thus unlike himself, that he thought he must either be ill, or must have had very bad news from somewhere, or—was it possible?—that some one had been trying to set him against himself, by telling malicious tales. His rapid advancement, and the favour which the king showed him, had, he knew, excited some envy and jealousy. Had some secret enemy then been at work?

[Pg 121]

But then King Matthias was not given to listening to tales, and if he had heard anything to Michael's discredit, he would have told him of it plainly, and given him the opportunity of clearing himself.

He glanced interrogatively at Galeotti; but the Italian merely shrugged his shoulders to express his entire bewilderment. They were walking behind the king now, towards the chapel, which they found dressed with lovely flowers as if for a festival; but Michael was so engrossed in his own thoughts, so sore at heart, and so hurt by what he felt to be the just king's injustice, that he had no attention to spare for anything else.

They took their places; the shrill tones of a bell were heard, and the service began and proceeded quietly to its close.

The king rose up, and was about to leave the chapel, when he stopped short, saying, "So—I was forgetting! Another little ceremony takes place here to-day, of course. Follow me."

With that he turned towards the vestry, Michael following him with listless steps.

[Pg 122]

The door was opened by some one within; but Michael's eyes were bent upon the ground, and he saw nothing but the marble floor, until Galeotti twitched him by the sleeve and made him look up. Then he saw what filled him first with amazement and next with passionate indignation.

For there before him, like a beautiful dream, stood Esther—*his* Esther as he felt her to be, in spite of kings and counts—*his* Esther, robed in white, with a bridal wreath on her head, and looking as fair and pure as a dove!

Michael turned almost as white as the bride's dress. He had been brought to Visegrád to see her married to the count! That was his first collected thought. Could the king, the master whom he had so loved—*could* he be so cruel, so heartlessly cruel?

For a moment or two Michael was so torn in pieces between his love for Esther and his love and reverence for the king, that he felt as if he were losing his senses, and might say or do something outrageous.

The king stopped and turned towards him, as if he were about to speak; but Michael did not notice it, for his eyes were fixed upon the bride, and he was trying to master himself.

[Pg 123]

"Mr. Michael Tornay!"

Michael started at the sound of the king's voice, and looked at him mechanically.

Matthias held in his hand a heavy gold case, with a piece of parchment from which hung a large seal. The clouds had vanished from his face as if by magic, and he was apparently quite himself again, for he looked as bright and pleasant as possible.

"Mr. Michael Tornay," he said in a gay tone, which completed Michael's bewilderment, "you have answered all our expectations. If we have been the making of you, you have given us complete satisfaction in return. You have won our heart by your faithful affection, your valour, and your love and devotion to your country. And now, see, we herewith endow you with an estate for which we have chosen the name of Aggtelky, from one of the properties included in it. We also entrust you with the administration of the county of Szathmár; and that you may not be lonely, and find the time hang heavy on your hands, we propose to give you this naughty little daughter of Eve to torment you.

"What have you to say to this? Will it suit you better than going to Vienna, little brother—eh? Ah! I thought so," as Michael and his bride fell upon their knees, unable for the moment to utter a word. "Then, if the bride is pleased to accept you after all, Mr. Supreme Count Michael Aggtelky, the wedding shall take place at once."

[Pg 124]

THE END

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Transcriber's Note: The following typographical errors present in the original text have been corrected.

In Chapter I, a period was added after "To be sure".

In Chapter IV, a period was added after "better to be beforehand with them".

The name Zokoli/Zokoly is spelled inconsistently in the original text.

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