

Orczy Emmuska Orczy Baroness

A Bride of the Plains



Emmuska Orczy
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CHAPTER I

"God bless them all! they are good lads."

It was now close on eight o'clock and more than two hours ago since first the dawn broke over that low-lying horizon line which seems so far away, and tinged the vast immensity of the plain first with grey and then with mauve and pale-toned emerald, with rose and carmine and crimson and blood-red, until the sun – triumphant and glorious at last – woke the sunflowers from their sleep, gilded every tiny blade of grass and every sprig of rosemary, and caused every head of stately maize to quiver with delight at the warmth of his kiss.

The plain stretched its limitless expanse as far as human eye can reach – a sea of tall straight stems, with waves of brilliant green and plume-crowned crests shimmering like foam in the sunlight.

As far as human eye can see! – and further, much further still! – the sea of maize, countless upright stems, hundreds of thousands of emerald green sheaths crowned with flaxen tendrils like a maiden's hair; down on the ground – a carpet for the feet of the majestic corn – hundreds and thousands of orange-coloured pumpkins turning their huge shiny carcasses to the ripening rays of the sun, and all around in fantastic lines, rows of tall sunflowers, a blaze of amber, with thick velvety hearts laden with seed.

And all of it stretching out apparently to infinity beyond that horizon line which is still hidden by a silvery haze, impalpable womb that cradles the life-giving heat.

Stately stems of maize – countless as the pebbles on a beach, as the specks of foam upon the crest of a wave, limitless as the sea and like the sea mutable, ever-changing, restless – bending to every breath of the summer breeze, full of strange, sweet sounds, of moanings and of sighs, as the emerald sheaths tremble in the wind, or down below the bright yellow carcasses of the pumpkins crack and shiver in the growing heat.

An ocean of tall maize and gaily-coloured pumpkins as far as the eye can reach, and long, dividing lines of amber-coloured sunflowers, vivid and riotous, flaunting their crude colouring in the glowing sunlight.

Here and there the dull, dark green of hemp breaks the unvarying stretches of maize, and far away there is a tanya (cottage) with a group of stunted acacias near it, and a well whose tall, gaunt arm stretches weirdly up to the sky, whilst to the south the sluggish Maros winds its slow course lazily toward the parent stream.

An ocean of maize and of pumpkins and of sunflowers, with here and there the tall, crested stems of hemp, and above it the sky – blue and already glowing through the filmy mist which every minute grows more ethereal and more impalpable as veil upon veil of heat-holding vapours are drawn from before its face.

A beautiful morning in mid-September, and yet in all this vast immensity of fertile land and ripening fruit there is no sign of human toil, no sound of beast or creaking waggon, no sign of human life around that distant tanya.

The tiny lizard in his comfortable position on the summit of a gigantic pumpkin can continue his matutinal sleep in peace; the stork can continue undisturbed his preparations for his impending

long voyage over seas. Man has not yet thought to break by travail or by song the peaceful silence of the plain.

And yet the village lies not very far away, close to the Maros; the small, low, hemp-thatched houses scarcely peep above the sea of tall-stemmed maize, only the white-washed tower of the church with its red-painted roof stands out clear and abrupt against the sky.

And now the sharp, cracked sound of the Elevation bell breaks the silence of the summer's morning. The good Pater Bonifácus is saying Mass; he, at any rate, is astir and busy with his day's work and obligations. Surely it is strange that at so late an hour in mid-September, with the maize waiting to be gathered in, the population of Marosfalva should still be absent from the fields.

Hej! But stranger, what would you! Such a day is this fourteenth of September.

What? You did not know it? The fourteenth of September, the ugliest, blackest, most God-forsaken day in the whole year!

You did not know? You cannot guess? Then what kind of a stranger are you if you do not know that on this hideous fourteenth of September all the finest lads of Marosfalva and the villages around are taken away by the abominable government? Away for three years to be made into soldiers, to drill and to march, to carry guns and bayonets, to obey words of command that they don't understand, to be packed off from place to place – from Arad to Bistricz, from Kecskemét to Nagyvárád, aye? and as far as Bosnia too – wherever that may be!

Yes, kind Sir! the lads of Marosfalva and of Fekete, of Kender and of Görcz, are taken away just like that, in batches every year, packed into one of those detestable railways like so many heads of cattle and separated from their mothers, their sisters, their sweethearts, all because a hateful government for which the people of Marosfalva do not care one brass fillér, has so decreed it.

Mind you, it is the same in all the other villages, and in every town in Hungary – so at least we have been given to understand – but we have nothing to do with other villages or with the towns: they do just as the good God wills them to do. It is our lads – the lads of Marosfalva and Kender and Fekete and Görcz – who have to be packed off in train-loads to-day and taken away from us for three years.

Three years! Why, the lad is a mere child when he goes – one-and-twenty on his last birthday, bless him! – still wanting a mother's care of his stomach and his clothes, and a father's heavy stick across his back from time to time to keep him from drink and too much love-making.

Three years! When he comes back he is a man, has notions of his own, has seen the world and cares no more about his native village and the narrow cottage where he used to run in and out bare-footed, bare-chested, bare-headed and comfortably dirty from head to foot.

Three years! And what are the chances that he come back at all? Bosnia? Where in the world is that? And if you are a soldier, why then you go to war, you get shot at, killed may be, or at any rate maimed. Three years! You may never come back! And when you do you are not the same youngster whom your mother kissed, your father whacked, and your sweetheart wept over.

Three years! Nay, but 'tis a lifetime. Mother is old, she may never see her son again. Girls are vain and fickle, they will turn their thoughts in other directions – there are the men who have done their military service, who have paid their toll to the abominable government up at Budapest and who are therefore free to court and free to marry.

Aye! Aye! That's how it is. They must go through with it, though they hate it all – every moment of it. They hate to be packed into railway carriages like so many dried heads of maize in a barn, they hate to wear the heavy cloth clothes, the hard boots, the leather pouches and belts. My God, how they hate it!

And the rude alien sergeant, with his "Vorwärts!" and "Marsch!" and "Rechts" and "Links" – I ask you in the name of the Holy Virgin what kind of gibberish is that?

But they must all go! – all those, at least, who are whole and sound in body. Bless them! They are sound enough when they go! It is when they come back!.

Yes! They must all go, those who are sound in eyes and wind and limb, and it is very difficult to cheat the commission who come to take our lads away. There was Benkó, for instance; he starved himself for three months this summer, hoping to reduce his chest measurements by a few needful centimètres; but it was no use. The doctor who examined him said that with regular food and plenty of exercise he would soon put on more flesh, and he would get both for the next three years. And János – you remember? – he chopped off one of his toes – thinking that would get him off those hated three years of service; but it seems there is a new decree by which the lads need not be possessed of all ten toes in order to serve the hateful government.

No, no! It is no use trying to get out of it. They measure you, and bang your chest and your back, they look at your eyes and make you open your mouth to look at your teeth, but anyhow they take you away for three years.

They make you swear that you will faithfully serve your country and your King during that time, that you will obey your superiors, and follow your leader wherever he may command, over land and by water. By water! I ask you! When there was Albert and Jenő who could not bear even the sight of water; they would not have gone in a boat on the Maros if you had offered them a gold piece each! How could they swear that they would follow some fool of a German officer on water?

They could not swear that. They knew they could not do it. But they were clapped in prison like common malefactors and treated like brigands and thieves until they did swear. And after that – well! they had once to cross the Theiss in a ferry-boat – they were made to do it!

Oh, no! Nothing happened to them then, but Albert came back after his three years' service, with two of his front teeth gone, and we all know that Jenő now is little better than an idiot.

So now you know, stranger, why we at Marosfalva call the fourteenth day of September the very blackest in the whole calendar, and why at eight o'clock in the morning nobody is at work in the fields.

For the fourteenth day being such a black one, we must all make the most of the few hours that come before it. At nine o'clock of that miserable morning the packing of our lads into the train will commence, but until then they are making merry, bless them! They are true Hungarians, you know! They will dance, and they will sing, they will listen to gipsy music and kiss the girls so long as there is breath in their body, so long as they are free to do it.

At nine o'clock to-day they cease to be free men, they are under the orders of corporals and sergeants and officers who will command them to go "Vorwärts" and "Rechts" and "Links" and all that God-forsaken gibberish, and put them in irons and on bread and water if they do not obey. But yesterday, on the thirteenth of September that is, they were still free to do as they liked: they could dance and sing and get drunk as much as they chose.

So the big barn that belongs to Ignác Goldstein, the Jew, is thrown open for a night's dancing and music and jollification. At five o'clock in the afternoon the gipsies tuned up; there was a supper which lasted many hours, after which the dancing began. The first csárdás was struck up at eight o'clock last evening, the last one is being danced now at eight o'clock in the morning, while the whole plain lies in silence under the shimmering sky, and while Pater Bonifácius reads his mass all alone in the little church, and prays fervently for the lads who are going away to-day for three years: away from his care and his tender, paternal attention, away from their homes, their weeping mothers and sorrowing sweethearts.

God bless them all! They are good lads, but weak, impulsive, easily led toward good or evil. They are dancing now, when they should be praying, but God bless them all! They are good lads!

CHAPTER II

"Money won't buy everything."

Inside the barn the guttering candles were burning low. No one thought of blowing them out, so they were just left to smoke and to smoulder, and to help render the atmosphere even more stifling than it otherwise would have been.

The heat has become almost unbearable – unbearable, that is, to anyone not wholly intent on pleasure to the exclusion of every other sensation, every other consciousness. The barn built of huge pine logs, straw-thatched and rafted, is filled to overflowing with people – men, women, even children – all bent upon one great, all-absorbing object – that object, forgetfulness.

The indifferent, the stolid, may call it what he will, but it is the common wish to forget that has brought all these people – young and old – together in Ignác Goldstein's barn this night – the desire to forget that hideous, fateful fourteenth of September which comes with such heartrending regularity year after year – the desire to forget that the lads, the flower of the neighbouring villages, are going away to-day.. for three years? – nay! very likely for ever! – three years! and all packed up like cattle in a railway truck! and put under the orders of some brutal sergeant who is not Hungarian, and can only say "Vorwärts!" or "Marsch!" and is backed in his arbitrary commands by the whole weight of government, King and country.

For three years! – and there is always war going on somewhere – and that awful Bosnia! wherever it may be – lads from Hungarian villages go there sound in body and in limb and come back bent with ague, halt, lame or blind.

Three years! More like for ever!

And therefore the whole population of Marosfalva and of the villages round spends its last happy four-and-twenty hours in trying to forget that nine o'clock of the fourteenth day of September is approaching with sure and giant strides; everyone has a wish to forget; the parents and grandparents, the sisters, the sweethearts, the lads themselves! The future is so hideous, let the joy of the present kill all thoughts of those coming three years.

Marosfalva is the rallying-point, where this final annual jollification takes place. They all come over on the thirteenth from Fekete and Görcz, and Kender, in order to dance and to sing at Marosfalva in the barn which belongs to Ignác Goldstein the Jew. Marosfalva boasts of a railway station and it is from here that at nine o'clock in the morning the lads will be entrained; so all day on the thirteenth there has been a pilgrimage along the cross-roads from the outlying villages and hamlets round Marosfalva – a stream of men and women and young children all determined to forget for a few hours the coming separation of the morrow; by five o'clock in the afternoon all those had assembled who had meant to come and dancing in the barn had begun.

Ignác Goldstein's barn has always been the setting in which the final drama of the happy year is acted. After that night spent there in dancing and music and merry-making, down goes the curtain on the comedy of life and the tragedy of tears begins.

Since five o'clock in the afternoon the young people have been dancing – waltzing, polkaing, dancing the csárdás – mostly the csárdás, the dance of the nation, of the people, the most exhilarating, most entrancing, most voluptuous dance that feet of man have ever trod. The girls and lads are indefatigable, the slow and languorous Lassu (slow movement) alternates with the mad, merry csárdás, they twirl and twist, advance, retreat, separate and reunite in a mad, intoxicating whirl. Small booted feet stamp on the rough wooden floor, sending up clouds of dust. What matter if the air becomes more and more stifling? There are tears and sighs to be stifled too.

"Ho, there, *czigány!* Play up! Faster! Faster! 'Tis not a funeral dirge you are playing."

The gipsy musicians, hot and perspiring, have blown and scraped and banged for fifteen solid hours; no one would ever think of suggesting that a gipsy needed rest; the clarinetist, it is true, rolled off his seat at one time, and had to be well shaken ere he could blow again, but the leader – as good a leader, mind you, as could be found in the kingdom – had only paused when the dancers were exhausted, or when bite and sup were placed before him. There they were, perched up on a rough platform made up of packing-cases borrowed from the station-master; the *czimbalom* player in the centre, his fat, brown hands wield the tiny clappers with unerring precision, up and down the strings, with that soft, lingering tone which partakes of the *clavecins* and the harp alike. At the back the double-bass, lean and dark, with jet-black eyes that stare stolidly at his leader.

There is a second fiddle, and the fat clarinetist and, of course, the leader – he whose match could not be found in the kingdom. He stands on the very edge of the rough platform, his fiddle under his chin, and he stoops well forward, so that his hands and instrument almost touch the foremost of the dancing pairs.

They – the dancers – crowd closely round the gipsy band, for so must the *csárdás* be danced, as near the musicians as possible, as close together as the wide, sweeping petticoats of the girls will allow.

Such petticoats! One on the top of the other, ten or a dozen or more, and all of different colour: the girls are proud of these petticoats – the number of them is a sign of prosperity; and now as they dance and swing from the hips these petticoats fly out, caught by the currents of air until they look like gargantuan showers of vividly-coloured petals shaken by giant hands.

Above the petticoats the girls' waists look slim in the dark, tight-fitting corslet, above which again rises the rich, olive-tinted breast and throat; full white sleeves of linen crown the bare, ruddy arms, and ribbons of national colours – red, white and green – float from the shoulders and the waist.

The smooth, thick hair is closely plaited, from the crown of the head in two long, tight plaits; it is drawn rigidly away from the forehead, giving that quaint, hard finish to the round, merry face which is so characteristic of the Asiatic ancestry.

Each one of them a little picture which seems to have stepped straight out of a Velasquez canvas, the bell-shaped skirt, the stiff corslet, the straight, tight hair and round eyes full of vitality.

The men wear their linen shirt and full trousers with fringed, embroidered ends, the leather waistcoat and broad belt covered with metal bosses and wrought with bright-coloured woollen threads. They get very excited in the mazes of the dance, they shout to the gipsies to play faster and ever faster; each holds his partner tightly round the slim waist and swings her round and round, till she stumbles, giddy and almost faint in his arms.

And round the dancers in a semicircle the spectators stand in a dense crowd – the older folk and the girls who have not secured partners – they watch and watch, indefatigable like the dancers, untiring like the musicians. And behind this semicircle, in the dark corners of the barn, the children foot it too, with the same ardour, the same excitement as their elders.

The last *csárdás* of this memorable night! It is eight o'clock now, and through the apertures in the log wall the brilliant light of this late summer's morning enters triumphant and crude.

Andor is dancing with Elsa – pretty, fair-haired Elsa, the daughter of old Kapus Benkó,¹ an old reprobate, if ever there was one. Such a handsome couple they look. Is it not a shame that Andor must go to-day – for three years, perhaps for ever?

The tears that have struggled up to Elsa's tender blue eyes, despite her will to keep them back, add to the charm of her engaging personality, they help to soften the somewhat serious expression of her young face. Her cheeks are glowing with the excitement of the dance, her graceful figure bends to the pressure of Andor's arm around her waist.

¹ In Hungary the surname precedes the Christian name.

Ten or a dozen cotton petticoats are tied round that slim waist of hers, no two of a like colour, and as she twists and twirls in Andor's arms the petticoats fly out, till she looks like a huge flower of many hues with superposed corollas, blue, green, pink and yellow, beneath which her small feet shod in boots of brilliant leather look like two crimson stamens.

The tight-fitting corslet bodice and the full, white sleeves of the shift make her figure appear peculiarly slim and girlish, and her bare throat and shoulders are smooth and warmly tinted like some luscious fruit.

No wonder that Andor feels this dance, this movement, the music, the girl's sweet, quick breath, going to his head like wine. Elsa was always pretty, always dainty and gentle, but now she is excited, tearful at the coming parting, and by all the saints a more exquisite woman never came out of Paradise!

The semicircle of spectators composed of older folk draws closer round the dancers, but the other couples remain comparatively unheeded. It is Elsa and Andor whom everyone is watching.

He is tall and broad-shouldered, with the supple limbs of a young stag, and the mad, irresponsible movements of a colt. His dark eyes shine like two stars out of his sun-burnt face; his muscular arms encircle Elsa's fine waist with a grip that is almost masterful. The wide sleeves of his linen shirt flutter above his shoulders till they look like wings and he like some messenger of the gods come to carry this exquisite prey off from the earth.

"What a well-matched couple!" murmur the older women as they watch.

"Elsa will be the beauty of the village within the next year, mark what I say!" added a kindly old soul, turning to her neighbour – a slatternly, ill-kempt, middle-aged woman, who was casting looks on Andor and Elsa that were none too kind.

"Hm!" retorted the latter, with sour mien, "then 'tis as well that that good-for-nothing will be safely out of the way."

"I would not call Andor good-for-nothing, Irma néni,"² said one of the men who stood close by, "he has not had much chance to do anything for himself yet.."

"And he never will," snapped the woman, with a click of her thin jaws, "I know the sort – always going to do wonderful things in a future which never comes. Well! at any rate while he is a soldier they will teach him that he is no better than other lads that come from the same village, and not even as good, seeing that he has never any money in his wallet."

"Andor will be rich some day," suggested the kindly old soul who had first spoken, "don't you forget it, Irma néni."

"I have no special wish to remember it, my good Kati," retorted Irma dryly.

"I thought," murmured the other, "seeing that Andor has really courted Elsa this summer that.. perhaps."

"My daughter has plenty of admirers," said Irma, in her bitter-toned, snappish way, "and has no reason to wait for one who only may be rich some day."

"Bah! Lakatos Pál cannot live for ever. Andor will have every fillér of his money when he dies, and Pál will cut up very well."

"Lakatos Pál is a youngish man – not fifty, I imagine," concluded Irma with a sneer. "He may live another thirty years, and Elsa would be an old woman herself by then."

The other woman said nothing more after that. It was no use arguing the point. Irma was the wife of old Kapus – both of them as shiftless, thriftless, ill-conditioned a pair as ever stole the daylight from God in order to waste it in idleness. How they came to be blessed with such a pretty, winning daughter as Elsa an all too-indulgent God only knew.

² Aunt Irma – the words aunt (*néni*) and uncle (*bácsi*) are used indiscriminately in Hungary when addressing elderly people, and do not necessarily imply any relationship.

What, however, was well known throughout the village was that as Kapus and his wife never had a crown to bless themselves with, and had never saved enough to earn a rest for themselves in their old age, they had long ago determined that their daughter should be the means of bringing prosperity to them as soon as she was old enough for the marriage-market.

Elsa was beautiful! Thank the good God for that! Kapus had never saved enough to give her a marriage-portion either, and had she been ugly, or only moderately pretty, it would have been practically impossible to find a husband for her. But if she became the beauty of Marosfalva – as indeed she was already – there would be plenty of rich men who would be willing to waive the question of the marriage-portion for the sake of the glory of having captured the loveliest matrimonial prize in the whole countryside.

"Leave Irma néni alone, mother," said the man who had first taken up the cudgels in favour of Andor; "we all know that she has very ambitious views for Elsa. Please God she may not be disappointed."

From more than one group of spectators came similar or other comments on pretty Elsa and her partner. The general consensus of opinion seemed to be that it was as well Andor was going away for three years. Old Kapus and his wife would never allow their daughter to marry a man with pockets as empty as their own, and it was no use waiting for dead men's shoes. Lakatos Pál, the rich uncle, from whom Andor was bound to inherit some day, was little past the prime of life. Until he died how would Andor and a penniless wife contrive to live? For Lakatos Pál was a miser and hoarded his money – moreover, he was a confirmed bachelor and woman-hater; he would do nothing for Andor if the young man chose to marry.

Ah, well! it was a pity! for a better-looking, better-matched pair could not be found in the whole county of Arad.

"Lucky for you, Béla, that Andor goes off to-day for three years," said a tall, handsome girl to her neighbour; "you would not have had much chance with Elsa otherwise."

The man beside her made no immediate reply; he was standing with legs wide apart, his hands buried in the pockets of his trousers. At the girl's words, which were accompanied by a provocative glance from her large, dark eyes, he merely shrugged his wide shoulders, and jingled some money in his pockets.

The girl laughed.

"Money won't buy everything, you know, my good Béla," she said.

"It will buy most things," he retorted.

"The consent of Irma néni, for instance," she suggested.

"And a girl's willingness to exchange the squalor of a mud hut for comfort, luxury, civilization."

Unlike most of the young men here to-night, who wore the characteristic costume of the countryside – full, white linen shirt and trousers, broad leather belt, embossed and embroidered and high leather boots, Béla was dressed in a town suit of dark-coloured cloth, cut by a provincial tailor from Arad. He was short of stature, though broad-shouldered and firmly knit, but his face was singularly ugly, owing to the terrible misfortune which had befallen him when he lost his left eye. The scar and hollow which were now where the eye had once been gave the whole face a sinister expression, which was further accentuated by the irregular line of the eyebrows and the sneer which habitually hovered round the full, hard lips.

Béla was not good to look on; and this is a serious defect in a young man in Hungary, but he was well endowed with other attributes which made him very attractive to the girls. He had a fine and lucrative position, seeing that he was his Lordship's bailiff, and had an excellent salary, a good house and piece of land of his own, as well as the means of adding considerably to his income, since his lordship left him to conclude many a bargain over corn and plums, and horses and pigs. Erös Béla was rich and influential. He lived in a stone-built house, which had a garden round it,

and at least five rooms inside, with a separate kitchen and a separate living-room, therefore he was a very eligible young man and one greatly favoured by mothers of penniless girls; nor did the latter look askance on Béla despite the fact that he had only one eye and that never a pleasant word escaped his lips.

Even now he was looking on at the dancing with a heavy scowl upon his face. The girl near him – she with the dark, Oriental eyes and the thin, hooked nose, Klara Goldstein the Jewess – gave him a nudge with her brown, pointed elbow.

"I wouldn't let Andor see the temper you are in, my friend," she said, with a sarcastic little laugh; "we don't want any broken bones before the train goes off this morning."

"There will be broken bones if he does not look out," muttered the other between his teeth, as he drew a tightly clenched fist from his pocket.

"Bah! why should you care?" retorted Klara, who seemed to take an impish delight in teasing the young man, "you are not in love with Elsa, are you?"

"What is it to you?" growled Béla surlily.

"Nothing," she replied, "only that we have always been friends, you and I – eh, Béla?"

And she turned her large, lustrous eyes upon him, peering at him through her long black lashes. She was a handsome girl, of course, and she knew it – knew how to use her eyes, and make the men forget that she was only a Jewess, a thing to be played with but despised – no better than a gipsy wench, not for a Hungarian peasant to look upon as an equal, to think of as a possible mate.

Béla, whose blood was hot in him, what with the wine which he had drunk and the jealous temper which was raging in his brain, was nevertheless sober enough not to meet the languorous glances which the handsome Jewess bestowed so freely upon him.

"We are still friends – are we not, Béla?" she reiterated slowly.

"Of course – why not?" he grunted, "what has our friendship to do with Andor and Elsa?"

"Only this: that I don't like to see a friend of mine make a fool of himself over a girl who does not care one hairpin for him."

Béla smothered a curse.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Everyone knows that Elsa is over head and ears in love with Andor, and just won't look at anyone else."

"Oho!" he sneered, "everyone knows that, do they? Well! you can tell that busy-body everyone from me that before the year is out Kapus Elsa will be tokened to me, and that when Andor comes back from having marched and drilled and paced the barrack-yard he will find that Kapus Elsa is Kapus no longer, but Erös, the wife of Erös Béla, the mother of his first-born. To this I have made up my mind, and when I make up my mind to anything, neither God nor the devil dares to stand in my way."

"Hush! hush! in Heaven's name," she protested quickly, "the neighbours will hear you."

He shrugged his shoulders, and murmured something very uncomplimentary anent the ultimate destination of those neighbours.

Some of them certainly had heard what he said, for he had not been at pains to lower his voice. His riches and his position had made him something of an oracle in Marosfalva, and he held all the peasantry in such contempt that he cared little what everyone thought of him. He therefore remained indifferent and sulky now whilst many glances of good-humoured mockery were levelled upon him.

No one, of course, thought any the worse of Erös Béla for desiring the beauty of the village for himself – he was rich and could marry whom he pleased, and that he should loudly and openly proclaim his determination to possess himself of the beautiful prize was only in accordance with the impulsive, hot-headed, somewhat bombastic temperament of the Magyars themselves.

Fortunately those chiefly concerned in Erös Béla's loudly spoken determination had heard nothing of the colloquy between him and the Jewess. The wild, loud music of the csárdás, their own gyrations and excitement, shut them out entirely from their surroundings.

Their stamping, tripping, twirling feet had carried them into another world altogether; Ignác Goldstein's barn had become a fairy bower, they themselves were spirits living in that realm of bliss; there was no longer any impending separation, no military service, no blank and desolate three years! Andor, his arm tightly clasped round Elsa's waist, his head bowed till his lips touched her bare shoulder, contrived to whisper magic words in her ear.

Magic words? – simple, commonplace words, spoken by myriads of men before and since into myriads of willing ears, in every tongue this earth hath ever known. But to Elsa it seemed as if the Magyar tongue had never before sounded so exquisite! To her the words were magic because they wrought a miracle in her. She had been a girl – a child ere those words were spoken. She liked Andor, she liked her father and her mother, little Emma over the way, Mari néni, who was always kind. She had loved them all, been pleased when she saw them, glad to give them an affectionate kiss.

But now, since that last csárdás had begun, a strange and mysterious current had gone from Andor's arm right through her heart; something had happened, which caused her cheeks to glow with a fire other than that produced by the heat of the dance and made her own hands tremble when they rested on Andor's shoulder. And there was that in his look which made her eyes burn and fill with tears.

"You are beautiful, Elsa! I love you!"

She could not answer him, of course; how could she, when she felt that her throat was choked with sobs? Yet she felt so happy, so happy that never since the day of her first communion, when Pater Bonifácus had blessed her and assured her that her soul was as white as that of an angel – never since then had she known such perfect, such absolute happiness. She could not speak, she almost thought once that she was going to faint, so strange was the thrill of joy which went right through her when Andor's lips rested for one brief, sweet moment upon her shoulder.

And now the lights are burning low, the gipsies scrape their fiddles with a kind of wild enthusiasm, which pervades them just as much as the dancers. Round and round in a mad twirl now, the men hold the girls with both hands by the waist, the girls put a hand on each of their partner's shoulders; thus they spin round and round, petticoats flying, booted feet stamping the ground.

The young faces are all hot and streaming, quick breaths come in short, panting gasps from these young chests. The spectators join in the excitement, the men stamp and clap their heels to the rhythm of the dance, the women beat their hands one against the other to that same wild, syncopated measure. Old men grasp middle-aged women round the waist; smiling, self-deprecatingly they too begin to tread; Hej! 'Tis not so long ago we were young too, and that wild Hungarian csárdás fires the blood until it glows afresh.

Everyone moves, every body sways, it is impossible to keep quite still while that intoxicating rhythm fills the air.

Only Klara the Jewess stands by, stolid and immovable; the Magyar blood is not in her, hers is the languorous Oriental blood, the supple, sinuous movements of the Levant. She watches this bacchanalian whirligig with a sneer upon her thin, red lips. Beside her Erös Béla too is still, the scowl has darkened on his face, his one eye leers across the group of twirling dancers to that one couple close to the musicians' platform.

In the noise that goes on around him he cannot, of course, hear the words which Andor speaks, but he sees the movements of the young man's lips, and the blush which deepens over Elsa's face. That one eye of his, keener than any pair of eyes, has seen the furtive kiss, quick and glowing, which grazed the girl's bare shoulder, and noted the quiver which went right through the young, slender body and the look that shot through the quickly-veiled blue eyes.

He was only a peasant, a rough son of the soil, whose temperament was hot with passion and whose temper had never known a curb. He had never realized until this moment how beautiful Elsa was, and how madly he loved her. For he called the jealous rage within by the sacred name of love, and love to a Magyar peasant is his whole existence, the pivot round which he frames his life, his thoughts of the present, his dreams of the future.

The soil and the woman! – they are his passions, his desires, his religion – to own a bit of land – of Hungarian land – and the woman whom he loves. Those two possessions will satisfy him – beyond these there is nothing worth having – a plough, of course – a hut wherein to sleep – an ox or two, perhaps – a cow – a horse.

But the soil and the woman on whom he has fixed his love – we'll call it love.. he certainly calls it so – those two possessions make the Hungarian peasant more contented than any king or millionaire of Western civilization.

Erös Béla had the land. His father left him a dozen kataszter (land measure about two and three-quarter acres) or so; Elsa was the woman whom he loved, and the only question was who – he or Andor – would be strong enough to gain the object of his desire.

CHAPTER III

"You will wait for me?"

But now it is all over, the final bar of the csárdás has been played, the last measure trodden. From the railway station far away the sharp clang of a bell has announced the doleful fact that in half an hour the train will start for Arad, thence to Brassó, where the recruits will be enrolled, ticketed, docketed like so many heads of cattle – mostly unwilling – made to do service for their country.

In half an hour the train starts, and there is so much still to say that has been left unsaid, so many kisses to exchange, so many promises, protestations, oaths.

The mothers, fearful and fussy, look for their sons in among the crowd like hens in search of their chicks; their wizened faces are hard and wrinkled like winter apples, they carry huge baskets on their arms, over-filled with the last delicacies which their fond, toil-worn hands will prepare for the beloved son for the next three years: – a piece of smoked bacon, a loaf of rye bread, a cake of maize-flour.

The lads themselves – excited after the dance, and not quite as clear-headed as they were before that last cask of Hungarian wine was tapped in Ignác Goldstein's cellar – feel the intoxication of the departure now, the quick good-byes, the women's tears. A latent spirit of adventure smothers their sorrow at leaving home.

The gipsies have struck up a melancholy Magyar folksong; the crowd breaks up in isolated groups, mothers and fathers with their sons whisper in the dark corners of the barn. The father who did his service thirty years ago gives sundry good advice – no rebellion, quiet obedience, no use complaining or grumbling, the three years are quickly over. The mother begs her darling not to give way to drink, and not to get entangled with one of the hussies in the towns; women and wine, the two besetting temptations that assail the Magyar peasant – let the darling boy resist both for his sorrowing mother's sake.

But the lad only listens with half an ear, his dark eyes roam around the barn in search of the sweetheart; he wants one more protestation of love from her lips, one final oath of fidelity.

Andor has neither father to admonish him, nor mother to pray over him; the rich uncle Lakatos Pál, with whom he has lived hitherto, does not care enough about him to hang weeping round his neck.

And Elsa has given her father and mother the slip, and joined Andor outside the barn.

Her blue eyes – tired after fifteen hours of pleasure – blink in the glare of the brilliant sun. Andor puts his arm round her waist and she, closing her aching eyes, allows him to lead her away.

And now they are wandering down the great dusty high road, beneath the sparse shade of the stunted acacias that border it. They feel neither heat, nor dust, and say but little as they walk. From behind them, muffled by louder sounds, come the sweet, sad strains of the Magyar love-song, "Csak egy kis lány van a világon."

"There is but one girl in all the world,
And she is my own white dove.
Oh! How great must God's love be for me!
That He thought of giving you to me."

"Elsa, you will wait for me?" asked Andor, with deep, passionate anxiety at last.

"I will wait for you, Andor," replied the girl simply, "if the good God will give me the strength."

"The strength, Elsa, will be in yourself," he urged, "if only you love me as I love you."

"Three years is such a long time!" she sighed.

"I will count the weeks that separate us, Elsa – the days – the hours – "

"I, too, will be counting them."

"When I come back I will at once talk with Pali bácsi – he is getting tired of managing his property – I know that at times lately he has felt that he needed a rest, and that he means to ask me to see to everything for him. He will give me that nice little house on the Fekete Road, and the mill to look after. We can get married at once, Elsa – when I come back."

He talked on somewhat ramblingly, at times incoherently. It was easy to see that he was trying to cheat sorrow, to appear cheerful and hopeful, because he saw that Elsa was quite ready to give way to tears. It was so hard to walk out of fairyland just when she had entered it, and found it more beautiful than anything else in life. The paths looked so smooth and so inviting, and fairy forms beckoned to her from afar; it all would have been so easy, if only the good God had willed it so. She thought of the many sins which – in her innocent life – she had committed, and for which Pater Bonifácus had given her absolution; perhaps if she had been better – been more affectionate with her mother, more forbearing with her father, the good God would have allowed her to have this happiness in full which now appeared so shadowy.

She fell to wishing that Andor had not been quite so fine and quite so strong, that his chest had been narrower, or his eyesight less keen. Womanlike, she felt that she would have loved him just as much and more, if he were less vigorous, less powerful; and in that case the wicked government would not want him; he could stay at home and help Pali bácsi to look after his lands and his mills, and she could marry him before the spring.

Then the pressure of his arm round her waist recalled her to herself; she turned and met his glowing, compelling eyes, she felt that wonderful vitality in him which made him what he was, strong in body and strong in soul; his love was strong because his body was strong, as was his soul, his spirit and his limbs, and she no longer wished him to be weak and delicate, for then it would no longer be Andor – the Andor whom she loved.

The clang of the distant bell chased away Elsa's last hovering dreams. Andor did not hear it; he was pressing the girl closer and closer to him, unmindful of his surroundings, unmindful that he was on the high road, and that frequently ox-carts went by laden with people, and that passers-by were hurrying now toward the railway station.

True that no one took any notice of this young man and maid; everyone was either too much absorbed in the business of the morning, or too much accustomed to these final scenes of farewell and tenderness ere the lads went off for their three years' service, to throw more than a cursory glance on these two.

"I love you, Elsa, my dove, my rose," Andor reiterated over and over again; "you will wait for my return, will you not?"

"I will wait, Andor," replied the girl through her sobs.

"The thought of you will lighten my nights, and bring sunshine to my dreary days. Every morning and every evening when I say my prayers, I shall ask my guardian angel to fly over to yours, and to tell him to whisper in your ear that I love you beyond all else on earth."

"We must part now, Andor," she said earnestly, "the second bell has gone long ago."

"Not yet, Elsa, not yet," he pleaded; "just walk as far as that next acacia tree. There no one will see us, and I want one more kiss before I go."

She never thought to resist him, since her own heart was at one with his wish, and he was going away so soon and for so long. So they walked as far as the next acacia tree, and there he took her in his arms and kissed her on the cheeks, the eyes, the lips.

"God alone knows, Elsa," he said, and now his own voice was choked with sobs, "what it means to me to leave you. You are the one woman in the world for me, and I will thank the good God on my knees every day of my life for the priceless blessing of your love."

After that they walked back hand in hand. They had wandered far, and in a quarter of an hour the train would be starting. It meant a week in prison in Arad for any recruit to miss the train, and Andor did mean to be brave and straight, and to avoid prison during the three years.

The gipsy musicians had carried their instruments over to the railway station; here they had ensconced themselves in full view of the train and were playing one after the other the favourite songs of those who were going away.

When Andor and Elsa reached the station the crowd in and around it was dense, noisy and full of animation and colour. A large batch of recruits who had come by the same train from more distant villages had alighted at Marosfalva and joined in the bustle and the singing. They had got over the pang of departure from home half an hour or an hour ago; they had already left the weeping mothers and sweethearts behind, so now they set to with a will in true Hungarian fashion to drown regrets and stifle unmanly tears by singing their favourite songs at the top of their rough voices, and ogling those girls of Marosfalva who happened to be unattached.

The captain in command, with his lieutenant, was pacing up and down the station platform. He now gave a command to a couple of sergeants, and the entraining began. Helter-skelter now, for it was no use losing a good seat whilst indulging in a final kiss or tear. There was a general stampede for the carriages and trucks; the recruits on ahead, behind them the trail of women, the mothers with their dark handkerchiefs tied round their heads, the girls with pale, tear-stained faces, their petticoats of many colours swinging round their shapely hips as they run, the fathers, the brothers.

Here comes Pater Bonifácus, who has finished saying his mass just in time to see the last of his lads. He has tucked his soutane well up under his sash, and he is running across the platform, his rubicund, kindly face streaming with excitement.

"Pater! Pater! Here!"

A score of voices cry to him from different carriages, and he hurries on, grasping each rough, hot hand as it is extended out to him.

"Bless you, my children," he cries, and the large, red cotton handkerchief wanders surreptitiously from his nose to his eyes. "Bless you and keep you."

"Be good lads," he admonishes earnestly, "remember your confession and the holy sacraments! No drinking!"

"Oh, Pater!" comes in protesting accents all around him.

"Well! not more than is good for you. Abstinence on Fridays – a regular confession and holy communion and holy mass on Sundays will help to keep you straight before the good God."

There's the last bell! Clang! clang! In two minutes comes the horn, and then we are off. The gipsies are playing the saddest of sad songs, it seems as if one's heartstrings were being wrenched out of one's body.

"There is but one girl in all the world!"

For each lad only one girl! – and she is there at the foot of the carriage-steps, a corner of her ribbon or handkerchief or cotton petticoat stuffed into her mouth, to keep her from bursting into sobs. The mothers now are dry-eyed and silent. They look with dull, unseeing gaze on this railway train, the engine, the carriages, which will take their lads away from them. Many have climbed up on the steps of the carriages, hanging on to the handrails, so as to be near the lads as long as possible. Their position is a perilous one, the sergeants as well as the railway officials have to take hold of them by the waist and to drag them forcibly down to the ground before they will give way.

It is the mothers who are the most obstinate. They cling to the handrails, to the steps, even to the wheels – there will be a fearful accident if they are not driven off by force. And they will

yield only to force; guards and porters take hold of them by the waist and drag them away from their perilous positions.

They fight with stolid obstinacy; they will hang on to the train – they are the mothers, you see! – and yet from where they are they cannot always see their sons, herded in with forty or fifty other lads in a truck, some standing, some squatting on the ground, or on the provision baskets. But if you cannot see your son, it is always something to be on the step of the train which is about to take him away.

The lads are all singing now at the top of their voices, but down below on the platforms there is but little noise; the mothers do not speak, because they are fighting for places on the steps of the railway-carriages, where the boys are; they press their lips tightly together, and when a guard or a porter comes to drag them away they just hit out with their elbows – stolidly, silently.

The fathers and the other older men stand about in groups, leaning on their sticks, talking in whispers, recounting former experiences of entraining, or recruiting, of those abominable three years; and the young girls – the sweethearts, the sisters, the friends – dare not speak for fear they should break down and help to unman the lads.

Andor, by dint of fighting and obstinacy, has kept his place in the door of one of the carriages; he sits on the floor, with his feet down on the step below, and refuses to quit his position for anyone. Several lads from the rear have tried to throw him out or to drag him in, but Andor is mightily strong – you cannot move him if he be not so minded.

Elsa, sitting on the step lower down, is resting her elbow on his knee. There is no thought of hiding their love for one another; let the whole village know it, or the whole countryside, they do not care; they are not going to deprive themselves of these last few minutes – these heaven-born seconds, whilst their hands can still meet, their eyes can speak the words which their lips no longer dare frame.

"I love you!"

"You will wait for me?"

In those few words lies all the consolation for the present, all the hope of the future. With these words engraved upon heart and memory they can afford to look more serenely upon these blank and dreary three years.

It was as well to have spoken them; as well to have actually put into words what they had already known in their hearts long ago. Now they can afford to wait, and Andor will do it with confidence, he is a man and he is free. He viewed the future as a master views his slave; the future is his to do with what he likes, to mould, to shape in accordance with his will.

The land which must one day be his, and Elsa his already! Andor almost fell to wishing that the train would start quickly – so many seconds would have been lived of those three intervening years.

Elsa tries to look as full of hope as he does; she is only a woman, and the future is not hers to make at will. She is not the conqueror, the lord and king of her own destiny; there are so many difficulties in the path of her life which she would like to forget at this moment, so as not to embitter the happiness which has come to her; there is her shiftless mother and vagabond father, there is the pressure of poverty and filial duty – it is easy for Andor – he is a man!

"You will wait for me, Elsa?" Andor asks for the twentieth time, and for the twentieth time her lips murmur an assent, even though her heart is heavy with foreboding.

There goes the horn!

"Elsa, my love, one more kiss," cries Andor, as he presses her closely, ever more closely to his heart. "God bless you, my rose! You *will* wait for me?"

The engine gives a shrill whistle. All the men now – realizing the danger – drag their women-folk away from the slowly-revolving wheels. The gipsy musicians strike up the first spirited bars

of the Rákóczy March, as with much puffing and ponderous creakings and groanings the heavily-laden train with its human freight steams away from the little station.

"My son! my son!"

"Benkó! my son!"

"János!"

"Endre!"

A few heartrending cries as each revolution of the wheels takes the lads a little further away from their homes.

"Elsa, you will wait for me?" comes as a final, appealing cry from Andor.

He stands in the door of the carriage, which he holds wide open, and through a mist of tears which he no longer tries to suppress he sees Elsa standing there, quite still – a small image of beauty and of sorrow. The sun glints upon her hair, it shines and sparkles like living gold; her hands are clasped tightly together, and with her full, many-hued petticoats round her slim waist and tiny red-shod feet she looks like a flower.

The crowd below moves alongside of the train – for the first minute or so they all keep up with it, close to the carriage at the door of which can still be seen the head of son or brother or sweetheart. But now the engine puts on more speed, the wheels revolve more quickly – some of the crowd fall away, unable to run so fast.

Only the mothers try to keep up – the old women, some of them bare-footed, stolid, looking straight before them – hardly looking at the train, just running.. alongside the train first of all, then they must needs fall back – but still they run along the metals, even though the train moves away so quickly now that soon even a mother could not distinguish her son's head, like a black pin-point leaning out of the carriage window.

So they run: – one or two women run thus for over a kilomètre, they run long after the train has disappeared from view.

But Elsa stood quite still. She did not try to run after the train.

Through the noise of the puffing engine, the final cries of farewell, through all the noise and the bustle, Andor's cry rose above all, his final appeal to her to be true:

"Elsa! you will wait for me?"

CHAPTER IV

"Now that he is dead."

Stranger, if you should ever be driving on the main road between Szeged and Arad, tell your driver to pull up at the village of Marosfalva; its one broad street runs inland at right angles from the road; you will then have on your right two or three bits of meadowland overshadowed by willow trees, which slope down to the Maros; beyond the Maros lies the great plain – the fields of maize and pumpkin, of hemp and sunflower. And who knows what lies beyond the fields?

But on your left will be the village of Marosfalva with the wayside inn and public bar, kept by Ignác Goldstein, standing prominently at the corner immediately facing you. Two pollarded acacias are planted near the door of the inn, above the lintel of which a painted board scribbled over with irregular lettering invites the traveller to enter. A wooden verandah, with tumble-down roof and worm-eaten supporting beams, runs along two sides of the house, and from the roof hang a number of gaily-coloured and decorated earthenware pots and jars.

The open space in front of the inn and the whole of the length of the one street of Marosfalva are very dusty and dry in the summer, in the autumn and spring they are a sea and river of mud, and in the winter the snow hides the deep, frozen crevasses; but place and street are as God made them, and it is not man's place to interfere. To begin with, the cattle and geese and pigs must all pass this way on their way to the water, so of course it is impossible to do anything with the ground even if one were so minded.

The inn is the only house in Marosfalva which boldly faces the street, all the others seem to be looking at it over their shoulders, the front of one house facing the back of its neighbour, with a bit of garden or yard between, and so on, the whole kilometre length of the street.

But each house has its wooden verandah, which shields the living rooms against the glare of the sun in summer, and shelters them from snow and rain in winter. These wooden verandahs are in a greater or lesser state of repair and smartness, and under the roof of every verandah hang rows of the same quaintly-decorated and picturesque earthenware jars.

Round every house, too, there are groups of gay sunflowers and of dull green hemp, and the roofs, thatched with maize-stalks, are ornamented along the top with wooden carvings which stand out clear and fantastic against the intense blue of the sky.

Then, stranger, if you should alight at the top of the street and did wander slowly down its dusty length, you will presently see it widen out just in front of the church. It stands well there, doesn't it? – at one end of this open place, with its flat, whitewashed façade and tower – red-roofed and crowned with a metal cross that glints in the sun – the whole building so like in shape to a large white hen, with head erect and crimson comb and wings spread out flat to the ground.

The presbytery is close by – you cannot miss it. It is a one-storied house, with a row of green-shuttered windows along the front and at the side a low gate which leads to a small garden at the back, and over which appears a vista of brilliant perennials and a stiff row of purple asters.

There is the tiny school-house, too, which in the late summer is made very gay in front with vividly coloured dahlias – an orgy of yellow and brick-red, of magenta and orange.

If your driver has come along with you down the street, he will point out to you the house of Barna Jenő – mayor of the Commune of Marosfalva – a personage of vast consideration in the village – a consideration which he shares with Hóhér Aladár, who is the village justice of the peace, and with Erös Béla, who is my lord the Count's bailiff.

Then lower down, beyond the church, is the big barn belonging to Ignác Goldstein, where on special occasions, as well as on fine Sunday afternoons, the young folk meet for their simple-hearted, innocent amusements – for their dancing, their singing and their courtships, and further on still are the houses of the poorer peasants – of men like Kapus Benkó who has never saved a fillér and until lately, when he was stricken down with illness, had to work as a day labourer for wage, instead of owning a bit of land of his own and planting it up for his own enjoyment. Here the houses are much smaller and squalid-looking: they have no verandahs – only a narrow door and tiny, diminutive windows which are not made to open and shut. The pieces of ground around them are also planted, like the others, with hemp and with sunflowers, but even these look less majestic, less prosperous than those which surround the houses higher up the streets; their brown heads are smaller, more sparsely laden with the good oil-bearing seeds, and the stems of the hemp do not look as if they ever would make a thatch.

The street itself is wide and a regular heat-trap in summer: in the autumn and the spring it is ankle-deep in mud, and of course in the winter it is buried in snow. But in the late summer it is at its best, one or two heavy showers of rain have laid the dust, and the sunflowers and dahlias round the little school-house and by the presbytery are very gay – such a note of crude and vivid colour which even puts the decorated jars to shame.

Also the sun has lost some of its unbearable heat; after four o'clock in the afternoon it is pleasant to sit or stand outside one's house for a bit of gossip with a neighbour. The brown-legged, black-eyed children, coolly clad in loose white shifts, bare-footed and bare-headed, can play outside now; the little girls, with bright-coloured kerchiefs tied round their heads, and pink or blue petticoats round their waists, vie with the dahlias in hue.

On Sunday afternoons it is cool enough to dance in Ignác Goldstein's barn. The black day in the calendar – the fourteenth of September – has come and gone, and the lads have gone with it: except for the weeping mothers and sweethearts the ordinary village life has resumed its peaceful course. But then, there are every year a few weeping mothers and sweethearts in Marosfalva or Kender or Görcz, just as there is everywhere else: the lads have to go and do their military service as soon as they come of age.

And then others come back about this time, those who have completed their three years, and they must be made welcome with dancing and music – the things which a Hungarian peasant loves best in all the world.

And as the days are still long and the evenings warm there are the strolls hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm – after the dancing – up the village street as far as the slowly-flowing Maros. One or two of the lads who have come home after three years have found their sweethearts waiting for them – but only one or two. Three years is a long, long time! Girls cannot afford to wait for husbands while their youth and good looks fly away so quickly. And the lads, too, are fickle; some of them have apparently forgotten amongst the more showy, more lively beauties of garrison towns, the doe-eyed girl to whom they had promised faith. They are ready, as soon as they come back, for new courtships, fresh love-making, another girl – with blue eyes this time, and fair hair instead of brown.

Then, of course, there are those who never will come back. That awful, mysterious place called Bosnia has swallowed them up. There was fighting, it seems, in Bosnia, and many were killed: two lads from Marosfalva, one from Fekete and two from Kender.

Bosnia must belong to the Crown of Hungary – whatever that may mean – the politicians say so, anyhow, and in order that the Crown of Hungary should have what rightly belongs to it the lads from our villages have to fight and get killed.

"Is that just, I ask you?" so the mothers argue.

The sweethearts weep for awhile and then cast about for fresh fish out of the waters of Life. Sometimes there are mistakes: lads who have been reported killed turn up at the village on the appointed day, either hale and hearty or maimed and crippled. In either case they are welcome.

But at times the mistake is the other way: no black report has come; the mothers, the fathers, the sweethearts, expect the young soldier home – he does not come. The others return on a given day – they arrive by train – Laczi or Benkó or Pál is not amongst them. Where is he? Well! they were not all in the same regiment; they have seen little or nothing of one another during these three years.

The anxious mothers rush to Barna Jenő – the mayor – and he drafts a letter of inquiry which is duly sent off to the proper authorities at Budapest. In the course of time – not very promptly – the reply comes. A letter of condolence, curtly worded: the name of Laczi or Benkó or Pál, as the case may be, was inadvertently omitted from the list of killed after the skirmish near Banialuka.

Sometimes also the young soldier having received his discharge, does not care to return to his native village: he has lost his taste for pigs and geese, for digging and sowing; he has had a glimpse of life and wants to see some more; the emigration agents at Budapest are active and persuasive. "America is a land of gold," they say; "no further trouble but to stoop and pick up the gold just where it lies."

And the lad listens and ponders. He will not go home, for he is afraid that his mother's tears will deter him from his purpose: he follows the advice of the emigration agent, expends his last fillér, sells his spare shirt and takes passage at Fiume on a big ship which conveys him to the land of riches.

Oh! Those lads who go away like that come back sure enough! Broken in health and spirits, dying of that relentless and mysterious disease called "homesickness," they drift back after a few years to their villages, having amassed a little money perhaps, but having lost that vitality, that love of life and of enjoyment which is the characteristic of these sons of Hungary – the land of warmth and of sunshine, of generous wines and luscious corn.

And Erös Béla, walking arm-in-arm with Kapus Elsa on that warm Sunday afternoon, had talked much of Andor and of his untoward fate.

The two young people had met outside the church after Benediction, they had strolled down as far as the Maros and back again into the village.

The warm late September sunshine shed a golden glow upon the thatched roofs of the cottages and made every bright-coloured pot that hung under the verandahs gleam with many-hued and dazzling reflections. It touched the red roof of the little church with an additional coat of glittering crimson and caused the metal cross upon the spire to throw out vivid sparks of light.

The festive air of a Sunday afternoon hung upon the village street, men and maids walked by arm-in-arm, the girls in their finery with cotton petticoats swinging out, and high-heeled boots clinking as they walked, the men with round felt hats tilted rakishly over one eye, their bronzed faces suffused in smiles, the song never for long absent from their lips.

From the top of the street a flock of geese in charge of a diminutive maiden of ten was slowly waddling down toward the stream, shaking their grey and white feathers under the hot kiss of the sun, and behind them, in slow majesty, a herd of cows and oxen – snow-white, with graceful, tall horns, lyre-shaped and slender – ambled lazily along.

Elsa and Béla had paused outside the house of Hóhér Aladár – who was the village justice of the peace and husband to Ilona, Béla's only sister.

A mightily rich man was Hóhér Aladár, and Ilona was noted for being the most thrifty housewife in a country where most housewives are thrifty, and for being a model cook in a land where good cooks abound.

Her house was a pattern of orderliness and cleanliness: always immaculately whitewashed outside and the little shutters painted a vivid green, it literally shone with dazzling brightness on these hot summer afternoons. The woodwork of the verandah was elaborately carved, the pots that hung from the roof had not a chip or crack in them.

No wonder that Erös Béla was proud of these housewifely qualities in his only sister, and that he loved to make a display of them before his fiancée whose own mother was so sadly lacking in them.

Now he pushed open the front door and stood aside to allow Elsa to enter, and as she did so the sweet scent of rosemary and lavender greeted her nostrils; she looked round her with unfeigned appreciation, and a little sigh – hardly of envy but wholly wistful – escaped her lips. The room was small and rafted and low, but little light came through the two small windows, built one on each side of the front door, but even in the dim light the furniture shone with polish, and the wooden floor bore every sign of persistent and vigorous scrubbing. There was a cloth of coloured linen upon the centre table, beautifully woven in a chess-board pattern of red and blue by Ilona's deft hands. The pewter and copper cooking utensils on and about the huge earthenware stove were resplendently bright, and the carved oak dower-chest – with open lid – displayed a dazzling wealth of snow-white linen – hand-woven and hand-embroidered – towels, sheets, pillow-cases, all lying in beautiful bundles, neatly tied with red ribbons and bows.

Again Elsa sighed – in that quaint, wistful little way of hers. If her mother had been as thrifty and as orderly as Ilona, then mayhap her own marriage with Erös Béla need never have come about. She could have mourned for Andor quietly by herself, and the necessity of a wealthy son-in-law would probably never have presented itself before her mother's mind.

But now she followed Ilona into the best bedroom, the sanctum sanctorum of every Hungarian peasant home – the room that bears most distinctly the impress of the housewifely character that presides over it. And as Elsa stood upon the threshold of her future sister-in-law's precious domain, she forgot her momentary sadness in the hope of a brighter future, when she, too, would make her new home orderly and sweet-scented, with beautifully-polished furniture and floors radiant with cleanliness. The thought of what her own best bedroom would be like delighted her fancy. It was a lovely room, for Béla's house was larger by far than his sister's, the rooms were wider and more lofty, and the windows had large, clear panes of glass in them. She would have two beautiful bedsteads in the room, and the bedspreads would be piled up to the ceiling with down pillows and duvets covered in scarlet twill; she would have two beautiful spreads of crochet-work, a washstand with marble top, and white crockery, and there would be a stencilling of rose garlands on the colour-washed walls.

So now her habitual little sigh was not quite so wistful as it had been before; the future need not after all be quite so black as she sometimes feared, and surely the good God would be kind to her in her married life, seeing that she obeyed His commandment and honoured her mother by doing what her mother wished.

Ilona in the best bedroom was busy as usual with duster and brush. She did not altogether approve of Béla's choice of a wife, and her greetings of Elsa were always of a luke-warm character, and were usually accompanied by lengthy lectures on housewifery and the general management of a kitchen.

Elsa always listened deferentially to these lectures, with eyes downcast and an attitude of meekness; but in her own heart she was thankful that her future home would lie some distance out of the village and that Ilona would probably have but little time to walk out there very often.

In the meanwhile, however, she hated these Sunday afternoon visits, with their attendant homilies from Ilona first, then from Aladár – who was self-important and dictatorial, and finally from Béla, who was invariably disagreeable and sarcastic whenever he saw his sister and his fiancée together.

Fortunately, to-day Béla had said that she need not stay more than a few minutes.

"We'll just pay our respects to Ilona and Aladár," he had said pompously, "and take another walk before the sun goes down."

And Elsa – taking him at his word – had made but a meteoric appearance in her future sister-in-law's cottage – a hasty greeting, a brief peck on Ilona's two cheeks, and one on Aladár's bristly face, then the inevitable homily; and as soon as Ilona paused in the latter, in order to draw breath, Elsa gave her another peck, by way of farewell, explained hastily that her mother was waiting for her, and fled incontinently from the rigid atmosphere of the best bedroom.

Béla and his brother-in-law had started on politics, and it took a little time before Elsa succeeded in persuading him to have that nice walk with her before the sun went down. But now they were out again in the sunshine at last, and Elsa was once more able to breathe freely and with an infinity of relief.

"I wonder," said Béla dryly, "if you are really taking in all the good advice which Ilona so kindly gives you from time to time. You can't do better than model yourself on her. She is a pattern wife and makes Aladár perfectly happy. I wonder," he reiterated, with something of a sneer, "if you will learn from her, or if your mother's influence will remain with you for ever?"

Then, as with her accustomed gentleness she chose to remain silent, rather than resent his sneer, he added curtly:

"If you want to make me happy and comfortable you will follow Ilona's advice in all things."

"I will do my best, Béla," she said quietly.

Then for some reason which the young man himself could not perhaps have explained he once more started talking about Andor.

"It was very hard on him," he said, with a shrug of his wide shoulders, "to die just when he was on the point of getting his discharge."

And after an almost imperceptible moment of hesitation he added with studied indifference: "Of course, all that talk of his being still alive is sheer nonsense. I have done everything that lay in my power to find out if there was the slightest foundation for the rumour, but now I – like all sensible people – am satisfied that Andor is really dead."

Elsa was walking beside him, her hand resting lightly on his arm, as was fitting for a girl who was tokened and would be a bride within the week: she walked with head bent, her eyes fixed upon the ground. She made no immediate reply to her fiancé's self-satisfied peroration, and her silence appeared to annoy him, for he continued with some acerbity:

"Don't you care to hear what I did on Andor's behalf?"

"Indeed I do, Béla," she said gently, "it was good of you to worry about him – and you so busy already."

"I did what I could," he rejoined mollified. "Old Lakatos Pál has hankered after him so, though he cared little enough about Andor at one time. Andor was his only brother's only child, and I suppose Pali bácsi³ was suddenly struck with the idea that he really had no one to leave his hoardings to. He was always a fool and a lout. If Andor had lived it would have been all right. I think Pali bácsi was quite ready to do something really handsome for him. Now that Andor is dead he has no one; and when he dies his money all goes to the government. It is a pity," he added, with a shrug of the shoulders. "If a peasant of Marosfalva had it it would do good to the commune."

"I am sure if Andor had lived to enjoy it he would have spent it freely and done good with it to everyone around," she said quietly.

"He would have spent it freely, right enough," he retorted dryly, "but whether he would have done good to everyone around with it – I doubt me.. to Ignác Goldstein, perhaps."

"Béla, you must not say that," she broke in firmly; "you know that Andor never was a drunkard."

³ See footnote on p. 22.

"I never suggested that he was," retorted Béla, whose square, hard face had become a shade paler than before, "so there is no reason for my future wife to champion him quite so hotly as you always do."

"I only spoke the truth."

"If someone else spoke of me a hundred times more disparagingly than I ever do of Andor would you defend me as warmly, I wonder, as you do him?"

"Don't let us quarrel about Andor," she rejoined gently, "it does not seem right now that he is dead."

CHAPTER V

"Love will follow."

They had reached the small cottage where old Kapus and his wife and Elsa lived. It stood at the furthest end of the village, away from the main road, and the cool meadows beside the Maros, away from the church and the barn and all the brightest spots of Marosfalva. Built of laths and mud, it had long ago quarrelled with the whitewash which had originally covered it, and had forcibly ejected it, showing deep gaps and fissures in its walls; the pots and jars which hung from the overhanging thatch were all discoloured and broken, and the hemp which hung in bundles beside them looked uneven and dark in colour, obviously beaten with a slipshod, careless hand.

Such a contrast to the house of Hóhér Aladár – the rich justice of the peace and of Ilona his wife! Elsa knew and expected that the usual homily on the subject would not fail to be forthcoming as it did on every Sunday afternoon; she only wondered what particular form it would take to-day, whether Béla would sneer at her and her mother for the tumble-down look of the verandah, for the bad state of the hemp, or the coating of dirt upon the earthenware pots.

But it was the hemp to-day.

"Why don't you look after it, Elsa?" said Béla roughly, as he pointed to the tangled mass of stuff above him, "your mother ruins even the sparse crop which she has."

"I can't do everything," said Elsa, in that same gentle, even voice which held in its tones all the gamut of hopeless discouragement; "since father has been stricken he wants constant attention. Mother won't give it him, so I have to be at his beck and call. Then there is the washing."

"I know, I know," broke in Béla with a sneer, "you need not always remind me that my future wife – the bride of my lord the Count's own bailiff – does menial work for a village schoolmistress and a snuffy old priest!"

Elsa made no reply. She pushed open the door of the cottage and went in; Béla followed her, muttering between his teeth.

The interior of Kapus Benkó's home was as squalid, as forlorn looking as its approach; everywhere the hand of the thriftless housewife was painfully apparent, in the blackened crockery upon the hearth, in the dull, grimy look of the furniture – once so highly polished – in the tattered table-cloth, the stains upon the floor and the walls, but above all was it apparent in the dower-chest – that inalienable pride of every thrifty Hungarian housewife – the dower-chest, which in Ilona's cottage was such a marvel of polish outside, and so glittering in its rich contents of exquisite linen. But here it bore relentless if mute testimony to the shiftless, untidy, disorderly ways of the Kapus household. For instead of the neat piles of snow-white linen it was filled with rubbish – with husks of maize and mouldy cabbage-stalks, thrown in higgledy-piggledy with bundles of clothes and rags of every sort and kind.

It stood close to the stove, the smoke of which had long ago covered the wood with soot. The lid was thrown open and hung crooked upon a broken hinge.

When Elsa entered the cottage with Erös Béla her mother was busy with some cooking near the hearth, and smoke and the odour of *gulyás* (meat stew) filled the place. Close to the fire in an armchair of polished wood sat old Kapus Benkó, now a hopeless cripple. The fate which lies in wait in these hot countries for the dissolute and the drunkard had already overtaken him. He had had a stroke a couple of years ago, and then another last summer. Now he could not move hand or foot, his tongue refused him service, he could only see and hear and eat. Otherwise he was like a log: carried from his palliasse on which he slept at night to the armchair in which he sat all day.

Elsa's strong young arms carried him thus backwards and forwards, she ministered to him, nursed him, did what cheering she could to brighten his days that were an almost perpetual night.

At sight of Elsa his wrinkled face, which was so like that of a corpse, brightened visibly. She ran to him and said something in his ear which caused his dulled eyes to gleam with momentary pleasure.

"What did you bring Béla home with you for?" said the mother ungraciously, speaking to her daughter and rudely ignoring the young man, who had thrown his hat down and drawn one of the chairs close to the table. At Kapus Irma's inhospitable words he merely laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, Irma néni!" he said, "this is the last Sunday, anyhow, that you will be troubled with my presence. After Wednesday, as I shall have Elsa in my own home, I shall not need to come and visit here."

"No!" retorted Irma, with a snap of her lean jaws, "you will take good care to alienate her from her duty to her father and to her mother, won't you?"

Then, in answer to a further sneer from him, she added, more viciously: "You will teach her to be purse-proud like yourself – vain, and disdainful of her old home."

Béla's one eye – under the distorted brow – wandered with a sullen expression of contempt over every individual piece of furniture in the room.

"It's not a home to be proud of, anyway," he said dryly; "is it, Irma néni?"

"You chose your future wife out of it," retorted Irma; "and 'tis from here that you will have to fetch her on Wednesday, my friend."

She was always ready to quarrel with Béla, whose sneering ways she resented, all the more that she knew they were well-deserved. But her last words had apparently poured oil over the already troubled waters of the young man's wrath, for now his sullen expression vanished, and a light of satisfaction and of pride lit up his ungainly face:

"And I will fetch my future wife in a style befitting her new position, you may be sure of that," he said, and brought his clenched fist down upon the table with a crash, so that pots and pans rattled upon the hearth and started the paralytic from his torpor.

Then he threw his head back and began to talk still more arrogantly and defiantly than he had done hitherto.

"Forty-eight oxen," he said, "shall fetch her in six carts! Aye! even though she has not one stick of furniture wherewith to endow her future husband. Forty-eight oxen, I tell you, Irma néni! Never has there been such a procession seen in Marosfalva! But Erös Béla is the richest man in the Commune," he added, with an aggressive laugh, "and don't you forget it."

But the allusion to Elsa's poverty and his own riches had exasperated the old woman.

"With all your riches," she retorted, in her turn, with a sneer, "you had to court Elsa for many years before she accepted you."

"And probably she would not have accepted me at all if you had not bullied and worried her, and ordered her to say 'Yes' to me," he rejoined dryly.

"Children must obey their parents," she said, "it is the law of God."

"A law which you, for one, apply to your own advantage, eh, Irma néni?"

"Have you any cause for complaint?"

"Oh, no! Elsa's obedience has served me well. And though I dare say," he added, suddenly casting a sullen look upon the young girl, "she has not much love for me now, she will do her duty by me as my wife, and love will follow in the natural course of things."

Elsa had taken no part in this wordy warfare between her mother and her future husband. It seemed almost as if she had not heard a word of it. No doubt her ears were trained by now no longer to heed these squabbles. She had drawn a low stool close to the invalid's chair, and sitting near him with her hand resting on his knee, she was whispering and talking animatedly to him,

telling him all the gossip of the village, recounting to him every small event of the afternoon and of the morning: Pater Bonifácus' sermon, the behaviour of the choir boys, Patkós Emma's new kerchief; when the stock of gossip gave out she began to sing to him, in a low, sweet voice, one of those innumerable folk-songs so dear to every Hungarian peasant's heart.

Irma intercepted the look which Béla cast upon his fiancée. She, too, turned and looked at her daughter, and seeing her there, sitting at the feet of that miserable wreck of humanity whom she called "father!" ministering to him, for all the world like the angels around the dying saints, a swift look of pity softened for a moment the mother's hard and pinched face.

"You cannot expect the girl to have much love for you now," she said, once more turning a vicious glance upon her future son-in-law; "your mode of courtship was not very tender, you will admit."

"I don't believe in all that silly love-making," he rejoined roughly, "it is good enough for the loutish peasants of the *alföld* (lowlands); they are sentimental and stupid: an educated man does not make use of a lot of twaddle when he woos the woman of his choice."

"All men act very much in the same way when they are in love," said Irma sententiously. "But I don't believe that you are really in love with Elsa."

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed, a short, sarcastic, almost cruel laugh.

"Perhaps not," he said. "But I want her for my wife all the same."

"Only because she is the noted beauty of the countryside, and because half the village wanted her."

"Precisely," he said with a sneer; "there was a good deal of bidding for Elsa, eh, Irma néni? So you elected to give her to the highest bidder."

"You had been courting her longer than anybody," rejoined Irma, who this time chose to ignore his taunt.

"And I would have won her sooner – on my own – even without your help, if it had not been for that accursed Andor."

"Well! he is dead now, anyway. All doubts, I suppose, are at rest on that point."

"There are a few fools still left in the village who maintain that he will turn up some day."

"We all hope he will, because of Lakatos Pál. The poor man is fretting himself into his grave, since he has realized that when he dies his money and land must all go to the Government."

"He can sell his land and distribute his money while he lives," retorted Béla; "but you won't catch him doing that – the old miser."

"Can't anything more be done? – about Andor, I mean."

"Of course not," he said impatiently; "everything that could be done has been done. It's no use going on having rows by post with the War Office about the proofs of a man's death who has been food for worms these past two years."

"Well! you know, Béla, people here are not satisfied about those proofs. I, for one, never held with those who would not believe in Andor's death; there are plenty of folk in the village – and Pater Bonifácus is one of them – who swear that he will come home one of these days – perhaps when Pali bácsi is dead. And then he would find himself the richest man in the Commune," she added, not without a point of malice, "richer even than you, my good Béla."

"Hold your tongue, you old fool!" broke in Béla savagely, as once more the sinister leer which hovered round his sightless eye was turned toward Elsa.

"Didn't I say that I, for one, never believed that rubbish?" retorted Irma sullenly; "and haven't I preached to her about it these past two years? But you needn't be afraid," she added, as she turned once more to her stewing-pot, "she didn't hear what I said. When she talks or sings to her father you might shoot off a cannon – she wouldn't hear it. You may say what you like just now, Béla, she'll not listen."

"Oho!" said Béla, even as a curious expression of obstinacy, not unmixed with cruelty, crept into his colourless face, "you seem to forget, Irma néni, that the rest of Elsa's life will have to be spent in listening to me. We'll soon see about that."

"Elsa!" he called peremptorily.

Then, as indeed the girl appeared not to hear, but went on softly crooning and singing to the helpless invalid like a mother to its babe, the young man worked himself up into a passion of fury. The veins in his pale forehead and temples swelled up visibly, the glitter in his one eye became more cruel and more menacing, finally he brought his clenched fist once more crashing down upon the table, even while he rose to his feet, as if to give fuller meaning to his future marital authority.

"Elsa!" he shouted once more, hoarsely. "Elsa, do you hear what I say?"

CHAPTER VI

"I don't wish to marry; not yet."

The girl thus roughly apostrophized turned slowly round. She seemed neither hurt nor even surprised at the young man's exhibition of temper. In her blue eyes there was a strange look – one which had lately been habitual to her, but which neither her mother nor Béla were able to interpret: it was a look which conveyed the thought of resignation or indifference or both, but also one which was peculiarly lifeless, as of a soul who had touched the cold hand of despair.

Far be it from me to seek complexity in so simple a soul as was that of this young Hungarian peasant girl. Elsa Kapus had no thought of self-analysis; complicated sex and soul problems did not exist for her; she would never have dreamed of searching the deep-down emotions of her heart and of dragging them out for her mind to scrutinize. The morbid modern craze for intricate and composite emotions was not likely to reach an out-of-the-way Hungarian village that slept peacefully on the banks of the sluggish Maros, cradled in the immensity of the plain.

Elsa had loved Lakatos Andor – the handsome, ardent young lover whose impetuous courtship of her five years ago had carried her on the wings of Icarus to a region so full of brightness and of sunlight that it was no wonder that the wings – which had appeared god-like – turned out to be ephemeral and brittle after all, and that she was soon precipitated back and down into the ordinary sea of everyday life.

Elsa had never heard of Icarus, but she had felt herself soaring upwards on heavenly wings when Andor – his lips touching her neck – had whispered with passionate ardour: "Elsa, I love you!"

She had never heard of Icarus' fall, but she had experienced her own from the giddy heights of heavenly happiness, down to the depths of dull, aching despair. The fall had been very gradual – there had been nothing grand or heroic or soul-stirring about it: Andor had gone away, having told her that he loved her, and adjured her to wait for him. She had waited for three years, patiently, quietly, obstinately, despite the many and varied sieges laid to her heart and her imagination by the inflammable, eligible youth of the countryside. Elsa Kapus – the far-famed beauty of half the county, counted her suitors by the score. Patiently, quietly, obstinately she kept every suitor at bay – even though many were rich and some in high positions – even though her mother, with the same patience, the same quietude, and the same obstinacy worked hard to break her daughter's will.

But Andor was coming back. Andor had adjured her to wait for him: and Elsa was still young – just sixteen when Andor went away. She was in no hurry to get married.

No one, of course, guessed the reason of her obstinate refusal of all the best matrimonial prizes in the county. No one guessed her secret – the depth of her love for Andor – her promise to wait for him – her mother guessed it least of all. Everyone put her stubbornness down to conceit and to ambition, and no one thought any the worse of her on that account. When she refused young Barna – the mayor's eldest son, and Nagy Lajos, the rich pig merchant from Somsó, people shrugged their shoulders and said that mayhap Elsa wanted to marry a shopkeeper of Arad or even a young noble lord. Irma néni said nothing for the first year, and even for two. She saw Nagy Lajos go away, and young Barna court another girl. That was perhaps as it should be. Elsa was growing more beautiful every year – and there was a noble lord who owned a fine estate and a castle close by, who had taken lately to riding over on Sunday afternoons to Marosfalva, and paid marked attention to Elsa.

Noble lords had been known to marry peasant girls – at least in books, so Irma néni had been told, and, of course, one never knows! God's ways were wonderful sometimes.

But when two years had gone by, when a rich shopkeeper from Arad had come and courted and been refused, and when the noble lord had suddenly ceased his Sunday afternoon visits to Marosfalva, Irma became more anxious. She had a long and serious talk with her daughter, which led to no good.

To all her mother's wise counsels and sound arguments Elsa had opposed the simple statement of facts:

"I do not wish to marry, mother dear; not just yet."

This, of course, would never do. Irma realized that she had allowed her ambition for her daughter to run away with her common-sense. Elsa must have got some queer notion or other in her head; that intimacy with the schoolmistress – who came from Budapest and talked a vast amount of sentimental stuff which she had imbibed out of books – must be stopped at once, and Elsa be taken in hand by her own mother.

To aim high was quite one thing, but to let every chance, however splendid, slip through one's fingers was the work of a fool.

The work of taking Elsa in hand was thus promptly undertaken. Fate favoured the mother's intentions: old Kapus was stricken with paralysis, and Elsa had, from that hour forth, to spend most of her time with her father in the house, and immediately under her mother's eye.

Though young Barna was married by now, and the pig merchant, the noble lord and the rich shopkeeper all gone to seek a sweetheart elsewhere, there were still plenty of suitors dangling round the beauty of the country-side: in fact her well-known pride and aloofness had brought a surfeit of competitors in the lists. Foremost among these was Erös Béla, who was not only young and in a high position as my lord the Count's chief bailiff, but was also reputed to be the richest man for miles around.

Erös Béla had long ago made public his determination to win Elsa for wife, and he had carried his courtship unostentatiously but persistently all along, despite the many rivals in the field. Elsa never disliked him, she accepted his attentions just as she did those of everyone else. Periodically Béla would make a formal proposal of marriage, which Irma néni, in her own name and that of Elsa's paralytic father, invariably accepted. But to his sober and well-worded proposals Elsa gave the same replies that she gave to her more impetuous adorers.

"I don't want to marry. Not yet!"

When the work of taking Elsa in hand began in earnest, Irma used Erös Béla as her chief weapon of attack. He was very rich, young enough to marry, my lord the Count looked upon him as his right hand – moreover Béla had made Irma néni a solemn promise that if Elsa became his wife, his father and mother-in-law should receive that fine house in the Kender Road to live in, with a nice piece of garden, three cows and five pigs, and a little maid-of-all-work to wait upon them.

Backed with such a bargain, Béla's suit was bound to prosper.

And yet, for another whole year, Elsa was obstinate. Irma had to resort to sterner measures, and in a country like Hungary, where much of the patriarchal feeling toward parents still exists, a mother's stern measures become very drastic indeed. A child is a child while she is under her parents' roof. If she be forty she still owes implicit obedience, unbounded respect to them. If she fail in these, she becomes an unnatural creature, denounced to her friends as such, under a cloud of opprobrium before her tiny, circumscribed world.

Kapus Irma brought out the whole armoury of her parental authority, her parental power: and her methods could be severe when she chose. I will not say that she ill-treated the girl, though it was more than once that Elsa's right cheek and ear were crimson when the left were quite pale, and that often, on the hot Sundays in July and August, when the girls go in low-necked corsets and shifts to church, Elsa wrapped a kerchief over her shoulders – the neighbours said in order to hide the corrections dealt by Irma néni's vigorous hand. But it was morally that her mother's authority weighed most heavily upon the girl. Her commands became more defined, and presently

more peremptory. Elsa was soon placed in the terrible alternative of either being faithless to Andor or disobedient to her mother.

And it is characteristic of that part of the world that of the two sins thus in prospect, the latter seemed by far the more heinous.

Yet Andor was due back at the end of the summer. The fourteenth of September came and went and the new recruits went with it – another week, and those who had completed their three years would be coming home. Andor would, of course, be among them. There had come no adverse report about him, and no news during those three years is always counted to be good news. No letters or sign of life had come from him, but, then, many of the lads never wrote home while they did their three years, and Andor had no one to write to. He would not be allowed to write to Elsa, or, rather, Elsa would never be allowed to receive letters from him, and his uncle Lakatos Pál, the old miser, would only be furious with him for spending his few fillérs on note-paper and stamps. But Elsa had waited patiently during three years, knowing that though she had no news of him, he would not forget her. She never mistrusted him, she never doubted him.

She waited for him, and he did not return. At first, his non-appearance excited neither surprise nor comment in the village. Andor had no relations except his uncle Lakatos Pál, who did not care one brass fillér about him: there had been no one to count the years, the months, the days when he would return: there was only Elsa who cared, and she dared not say anything at first, for fear of making her mother angry.

But at the turn of the year Lakatos Pál became ill, and when he got worse and worse and the doctor seemed unable to do anything to make him well, he began to talk of his nephew, Andor.

That is to say, he bewailed the fact that his only brother's only child was dead, and that he – a poor sick man – had no one to look after him.

He first spoke of this to Pater Bonifácus, who was greatly shocked and upset to hear such casual news of Andor's death, and it was only bit by bit that he succeeded in dragging fuller particulars out of the sick man. It seems that when the lad's regiment was out in Bosnia there was an outbreak of cholera among the troops. Andor was one of those who succumbed. It had all occurred less than a month before his discharge was actually due, in fact these discharges had already been distributed to those who were sick, in the hope that the lads would elect to go home as soon as they could be moved, and thus relieve the Government of the burden and expense of their convalescence.

But Lakatos Andor had died in the hospital of Slovnitza. An official letter announcing his demise was sent to Lakatos Pál, his uncle and sole relative, but Lakatos only threw the letter into a drawer and said nothing about it to anybody.

It was nobody's business, he said. The Government would see to the lad's burial, no doubt, but some busy-bodies at Marosfalva might think that it was his – Lakatos' – duty to put up a stone or something to the memory of his nephew: and that sort of nonsense was very expensive.

So no one in Marosfalva knew that Andor had died of cholera in the hospital of Slovnitza until Lakatos Pál became sick, and in his loneliness spoke of the matter to Pater Bonifácus.

Then there was universal mourning in the village. Andor had always been very popular: good-looking, as merry as a skylark and a splendid dancer, he was always the life and soul of every entertainment. Girls who had flirted with him wept bitter tears, the mothers who thought how rich Andor would have been now that old Lakatos was sure to die very soon – sighed deep sighs of regret.

Many there were who never believed that Andor was dead. He was not the lad to die of cholera: he might break his neck one day – riding or driving – for he was always daring and reckless – but to lie sick of cholera and to die in a hospital? – no, no, that did not seem like Andor.

Presently it became known that the official letter – announcing the death – had not been quite in order; it was only a rumour – but the rumour quickly gained credence, it fitted in with popular sentiment. Pater Bonifácus himself, who had seen the letter, declared that the wording of it was

very curt and vague – much more curt and vague than such letters usually were. It seems that there were a great many cases of cholera in the isolation hospital at Slovnitza and lists were sent up daily from there to Budapest of new cases, of severe cases, of discharges and of deaths. In one of these lists Andor's name certainly did appear among the dead, and a brief note to that effect had been officially sent to Lakatos. But surely the news should have had confirmation!

Where was the lad buried?

Who was beside him when he died?

Where were the few trinkets which he possessed; his mother's wedding-ring which he always wore on his little finger?

Pater Bonifácus wrote to the War Office at Budapest asking for a reply to these three questions. He received none. Then he persuaded Barna Jenő – the mayor – to write an official document. The War Office up at Budapest sent an equally official document saying that they had no knowledge on those three points: Lakatos Andor was one of those whose names appeared on the list of deaths from cholera at Slovnitza, and that was quite sufficient proof to offer to any reasonable human being.

Pater Bonifácus sighed in bitter disappointment, Lakatos Pál continued to bemoan his loneliness until he succeeded in persuading himself that he had always loved Andor as his own son, and that the lad's supposed death would presently cause his own.

And the neighbours – especially the women – held on to the belief that Andor was not dead; they declared that he would return one day to enjoy the good-will of his rich uncle now, to marry a girl of Marosfalva, and to look forward to a goodly legacy from Pali bácsi by and by.

CHAPTER VII

"They are Jews and we are Hungarians."

But what of Elsa during this time? What of the sorrow, the alternating hope and despair of those weary, weary months? She did not say much, she hardly ever cried, but even her mother – hard and unemotional as she was – respected the girl's secret for awhile, after the news was brought into the cottage that Andor was really dead.

Erös Béla had brought the news, and Elsa, on hearing it thus blurted out in Béla's rough, cruel fashion, had turned deathly pale, ere she contrived to run out of the room and hide herself away in a corner, where she had cried till she had made herself sick and faint.

"Have you been blind all these years, Irma néni?" Erös Béla had said with his habitual sneer, when Irma threw up her bony hands in hopeless puzzlement at her daughter's behaviour. "Did you not know that Elsa has been in love with Andor all along?"

"No," said Irma in her quiet, matter-of-fact tone, "I did not know it. Did you?"

"Of course I did," he replied dryly; "but I have also known for the past six months that Andor was dead."

"You knew it?" exclaimed Irma with obvious incredulity.

"I have told you so, haven't I?" he retorted, "and I am not in the habit of lying."

"But how did you come to know it?"

"When he did not return last September I marvelled what had happened; I wonder no one else did. Then, when Lakatos Pál first became ill – long even before he confided in Pater Bonifácus – I made inquiries at the War Office and found out the truth."

"Whatever made you do that?" asked Irma, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Andor wasn't anything to you."

"Perhaps not," replied Béla curtly; "but, you see, I was afraid that Pali bácsi would die and that Andor would come back and find himself a rich man. I should have lost Elsa then, so I was in a hurry to know."

Irma once more shrugged her shoulders in her habitual careless, shiftless way – shelving, as it were, the whole responsibility of her life, her fate, and her daughter upon some other power than her own will. She cared nothing about these intrigues of Béla's or of anyone else; she only wanted Elsa to make a rich marriage, so that she – the mother – might have a happy, comfortable, above all leisurely, old age.

But she had enough common sense to see that Elsa laboured under the weight of a very great sorrow, and while the girl was in such a condition of grief it would be worse than useless to worry her with suggestions of matrimony. Girls had been known to do desperate things if they were overharassed, and Kapus Irma was no fool; she knew what she wanted, and her instinct, coupled with her greed and cupidity, showed her the best way to get it.

So she left Elsa severely alone for a time, left her to pursue her household duties, to look after her father, to wash and iron the finery of the more genteel inhabitants of Marosfalva – the schoolmistress' blouses, Pater Bonifácus' surplices. Erös Béla continued in his unemotional attentions to her – he was more sure of success than ever. His words of courtship were the drops of water that were ultimately destined to wear away a stone.

Elsa, lulled into security by her mother's placidity and Béla's apparent simple friendship, hardly was conscious of the precise moment when the siege against her passive resistance was once more resumed. It was all so gradual, so kind, so persuasive: and she had so little to look forward

to in the future. What did it matter what became of her? – whom she married or where her home would be? She saw more of Erös Béla than she did of anyone else, for Erös Béla was undoubtedly Irma's most favoured competitor. Elsa knew that he was of violent temperament, dictatorial and rough; she knew that he was fond of drink, and of the society of Klara Goldstein, the Jewess, but she really did not care.

She had kept her promise to Andor, she had waited for him until she knew that he never, never could come back; now she might as well obey her mother and put herself right with God, since she cared so little what became of her.

And the beauty of Marosfalva was tokened to Erös Béla in the spring of the following year, and presently it was given out that the wedding would take place on the feast of Holy Michael and All Angels at the end of September. Congratulations poured in upon the happy pair, rejoicings were held in every house of note in the village. Everyone was pleased at the marriage, pleased that the noted beauty would still have her home in Marosfalva, pleased that Erös Béla's wealth would all remain in the place.

And Elsa received these congratulations and attended these rejoicings with unvarying equanimity and cheerfulness. There was nothing morbid or self-centred in the girl's attitude. People who did not know – and no one really did – and who saw her at mass on Sundays or walking arm-in-arm with Béla in the afternoons would say that she was perfectly happy. Not a radiant bride certainly, not a typical Hungarian *menyecske* whose laughter echoes from end to end of the village, whose merry voice rings all the day, and whose pretty bare feet trot briskly up and down from her cottage to the river, or to the church, or to a neighbour's house, but an equable, contented bride, a fitting wife for a person of such high consideration as was Erös Béla.

Her manner to him was always equally pleasant, and though the young pair did not exchange very loving glances – at any rate not in public – yet they were never known to quarrel, which was really quite remarkable, seeing that Béla's temper had not improved of late.

He was giving way to drink more than he used to, and there were some ugly rumours about my lord the Count's dissatisfaction with his erstwhile highly-valued bailiff. Many people said that Béla would get his dismissal presently if he did not mend his ways; but then he very likely wouldn't care if he did get dismissed, he was a rich man and could give his full time to cultivating his own land.

This afternoon, while he was talking with Irma and sullenly watching his future wife, he appeared to be quite sober, until a moment ago when unreasoning rage seized hold of him and he shouted to Elsa in a rough and peremptory manner. After that, his face, which usually was quite pallid, became hotly flushed, and his one seeing eye had a restless, quivering look in it.

Nor did Elsa's placid gentleness help to cool his temper. When he shouted to her she turned and faced him, and said with a pleasant – if somewhat vague smile:

"Yes, Béla, what is it you want?"

"What is it I want?" he muttered, as he sank back into his chair, and resting his elbows on the table he buried his chin in his hands and looked across at the girl with a glowering and sullen look; "what is it I want?" he reiterated roughly. "I want to know what has been the matter with you these last two days?"

"Nothing has been the matter with me," she replied quietly, "nothing unusual, certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Because for the last two days you have been going about with a face on you fit for a funeral, rather than for a wedding. What is it? Let's have it."

"Nothing, Béla. What should it be?"

"I tell you there is something," he rejoined obstinately, "and what's more I can make a pretty shrewd guess what it is, eh?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said simply.

"I mean that the noted beauty of Marosfalva does me the honour of being jealous. Isn't that it, now? Oh! I know well enough, you needn't be ashamed of it, jealousy does your love for me credit, and flatters me, I assure you."

"I don't know what you mean, Béla," she reiterated more firmly. "I am neither jealous nor ashamed."

"Not ashamed?" he jeered. "Oho! look at your flaming cheeks! Irma néni, haven't you a mirror? Let her see how she is blushing."

"I don't see why she should be jealous," interposed Irma crossly, "nor why you should be for ever teasing her. I am sure she has no cause to be ashamed of anything, or of being jealous of anyone."

"But I tell you that she is jealous of Klara Goldstein!" he maintained.

"What nonsense!" protested the mother, while the blush quickly fled from the young girl's cheeks, leaving them clear and bloodless.

"I tell you she is," he persisted, with wrathful doggedness; "she has been sullen and moody these last two days, ever since I insisted that Klara Goldstein shall be asked to-morrow to the farewell banquet and the dance."

"Well, I didn't see myself why you wanted that Jewess to come," said Irma dryly.

"That's nobody's business," he retorted. "I pay for the entertainment, don't I?"

"You certainly do," she rejoined calmly. "We couldn't possibly afford to give Elsa her maiden's farewell, and if you didn't pay for the supper and the gipsies, and the hire of the schoolroom, why, then, you and Elsa would have to be married without a proper send-off, that's all."

"And a nice thing it would have been! Whoever heard of a girl on this side of the Maros being married without her farewell to maidenhood. I am paying for the supper and for everything because I want my bride's farewell to be finer and grander than anything that has ever been seen for many kilometres round. I have stinted nothing – begrudged nothing. I have given an ox, two pigs and a calf to be slaughtered for the occasion. I have given chickens and sausages and some of the finest flour the countryside can produce. As for the wine.. well! all I can say is that there is none better in my lord's own cellar. I have given all that willingly. I did it because I liked it. But," he added, and once again the look of self-satisfaction and sufficiency gave way to his more habitual sinister expression, "if I pay for the feast, I decide who shall be invited to eat it."

Irma apparently had nothing to say in response. She shrugged her shoulders and continued to stir the stew in her pot. Elsa said nothing either; obedient to the command of her future lord, she had faced him and listened to him attentively and respectfully all the while that he spoke, nor did her face betray anything of what went on within her soul, anything of its revolt or of its wounded pride, while the storm of wrath and of sneers thus passed unheeded over her head.

But Béla, having worked himself up into a fit of obstinate rage, was not content with Elsa's passive obedience. There had from the first crept into his half-educated but untutored and undisciplined mind the knowledge that though Elsa was tokened to him, though she was submissive, and gentle and even-tempered, her heart did not belong to him. He knew but little about love, believed in it still less: in that part of the world a good many men are still saturated with the Oriental conception of a woman's place in the world, and even in the innermost recesses of their mind with the Oriental disbelief in a woman's soul; but in common with all such men he had a burning desire to possess every aspiration and to know every thought of the woman whom he had chosen for his wife.

Therefore now, when in response to his rage and to his bombast Elsa had only silence for him – a silence which he knew must hide her real thoughts, he suddenly lost all sense of proportion and of prudence; for the moment he felt as if he could hate this woman whom he had wooed and won despite her resistance, and in the teeth of strenuous rivalry; he was seized with a purely savage

desire to wound her, to see her cry, to make her unhappy – anything, in fact, to rouse her from this irritating apathy.

"I suppose," he said at last, making a great effort to recover his outward self-control, "I suppose that you object to my asking Klara Goldstein to come to your farewell feast?"

Thus directly appealed to by her lover, Elsa gave a direct reply.

"Yes, I do," she said.

"May I ask why?"

"A girl's farewell on the eve of her wedding-day," she replied quietly, "is intended to be a farewell to her girl friends. Klara Goldstein was never a friend of mine."

"She belongs to this village, anyway, doesn't she?" he queried, still trying to speak calmly. He had risen to his feet and stood with squared shoulders, legs wide apart, and hands buried in the pockets of his tightly-fitting trousers. An ugly, ill-tempered, masterful man, who showed in every line of his attitude that he meant to be supreme lord in his own household.

"Klara Goldstein belongs to this village," he reiterated with forced suavity, "she is my friend, is she not?"

"She may be your friend, Béla," rejoined Elsa gently, "and she certainly belongs to this village; but she is not one of us. She is a Jewess, not a Hungarian, like we all are."

"What has her religion to do with it?" he retorted.

"It isn't her religion, Béla," persisted the girl, with obstinacy at least as firm as his own; "you know that quite well. Though it is an awful thing to think that they crucified our Lord."

"Well! that is a good long while ago," he sneered; "and in any case Klara and Ignác Goldstein had nothing to do with it."

"No, I know. Therefore I said that religion had nothing to do with it. I can't explain it exactly, Béla, but don't we all feel alike about that? Hungarians are Hungarians, and Jews are Jews, and there's no getting away from that. They are different to us, somehow. I can't say how, but they are different. They don't speak as we do, they don't think as we do, their Sunday is Saturday, and their New Year's day is in September. Jewesses can't dance the csárdás and Jews have a contempt for our gipsy music and our songs. They are Jews and we are Hungarians. It is altogether different."

He shrugged his shoulders, unable apparently to gainsay this unanswerable argument. After all, he too was a Hungarian, and proud of that fact, and like all Hungarians at heart, he had an unexplainable contempt for the Jews. But all the same, he was not going to give in to a woman in any kind of disagreement, least of all on a point on which he had set his heart. So now he shifted his ground back to his original dictum.

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