

# I

Anyone who has been to the part of our Alföld<sup>1</sup> beside the Tisza, or spent even a couple of days anywhere in it, can safely say that he knows the whole. As in the faces of certain families it's possible to detect individual differences only on closer inspection, so it is here with individual regions, and when the traveller whom sleep overcomes in his carriage on our sandy plains wakes a couple of hours later he'll only realise that he's progressed because the horses are sweating and the sun is lower in the sky. The general nature of the countryside, and indeed individual details of it, will remind him of as little as the middle of the sea does him that moves with swelling sails. The meadows extending into the distance, the unchanging nature of which is only relieved here and there by a sweep-well without a bucket, or a stork strolling round a half-dried-up marsh, the ill-kept plough-lands, the maize and wheat on which are protected, after God, only by the fact that to steal them would require an effort, here and there an isolated farmstead where shaggy *kuvaszes* proclaim by their barks the sanctity of the property, and where the hay- and straw-ricks left from the previous year allude to the owner's very great thriftiness or very few cattle – these the traveller could see when he closed his eyes and can see when he opens them again. The very church towers which, when he last looked round, stood like pointed columns on the distant edge of the plain have, it seems, travelled with him, or at least there's as little difference between them and those that he can see now as between the village that he was then approaching and the place (it might be a town) towards which his horses are now trotting. And when he learns from his driver that he has slept from noon till six in the evening and has advanced several miles he's amazed at the miracle. It's a well known fact that nothing has more effect on our mood than the character of those whose company we keep, and therefore it's natural that, just as the law student, on appointment as *táblabíró*,<sup>2</sup> forgets or repents of his youthful excesses in Máramaros, so the Tisza too finally acquires the character of the region – through which it travels by sinuous

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1 'Lowland' – the 'Great Plain' of central Hungary.

2 In pre-1848 county administration, an official appointed and accredited by the *főispán*'s office (therefore in effect by the crown) to preside over committees and especially act as judge in county courts of law. Rather like the English Recorder, but the term won't be translated.

ways – and, with the exception of those instances when it loses patience because of immoderate goading, or is forced unjustly from its bed by some planning authority, even in its floods it retains that measured and dignified sloth which nothing that takes its course in this wide world can display apart from the ruminations of the committee appointed to deal with it and cases in progress at Hungarian law: so that even those floods, the seasons of which we know and the extent of which is marked on our maps, we may term excesses as little as we may the tendency of men of standing in official positions to become thoroughly intoxicated at installations, elections or weddings. When the time of the flood is over the waters, having come soundlessly, depart without a murmur, and the light brown Tisza flows calmly on between its low banks like the best citizen of our country (for how many are there among our great men that dispense their treasures only on their fatherland!),<sup>3</sup> and so it's the most fortunate of the great rivers of Europe, as it's the only one with the liberty of which no one interferes, and it alone can say with noble self-awareness that it has remained entirely as God created it.

Somewhere on the Alföld beside the Tisza, then – that I may at last turn to my tale – in a county which we shall call Taksony County, on the nearer or farther side of the river, close to the bank, where it bends in a great S, not far from where three birch-trees stand on a sandy hillock some two fathoms high (note that particularly, reader, since there isn't a hillock for miles around, least of all one on which trees stand, and by this symbol the scene of our tale may most easily be found) lies the hamlet of Tiszarét, property of the Réty family since it was first occupied by the Magyars, as the lawyer of this clan, the worthy Jónás Macskaházy, is at all times ready to confirm with documents reliable and at the same time fabricated, if, that is to say, he should encounter anyone in Taksony County so bold as to cast doubts on the Asiatic origins<sup>4</sup> of the Réty family.

The Rétycs are among the wealthiest of families. Their sons are born *táblabírócs*. As the late father of the present head of the family once said, with noble pride: not a single one of them has died in whom the County

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3 The river rises in northern Transylvania and joins the Danube to the east of Újvidék/Novi Sad, both of which areas – now in Romania and Serbia respectively – were in Hungary at the time of writing. Also true at the time of writing is that no attempt had yet been made to regulate the Tisza and prevent the considerable flooding for which it was noted.

4 The Hungarians are in origin a nomadic people from Central Asia who arrived in the region in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

didn't mourn its *alispán*<sup>5</sup> (after their deaths, one hopes); and so it's natural if individual rays of the brilliance that has surrounded that family have also flooded the hamlet of Tiszarét and charmed its region – according to the statement of the County engineer, who surveyed it and found nothing out of true other than the aforementioned hillock – into a veritable paradise.

The very extensive English park, the trees of which, planted in the sandy soil almost thirty years ago now, have grown to an incredible height; the big lake, the waters of which have in fact subsided somewhat, but the little of which that remains is a finer green than the lawn itself, while the latter, especially on rainy days, is sandier than the paths which, although supplied with ever more fresh soil, have at times been, to the gardener's surprise, considered by strangers to be muddy; the magnificent mansion, its domed roof adorned by golden balls, on the porch of which the *alispán* is accustomed to smoke his pipe of an afternoon while a whole host of petitioners kick their heels outside the Gothic portal; the great courtyard, with the stables to the right, the great greenhouse to the left, and next to it the several storeys of the chicken coops, not to mention the magnificent midden here, extending to almost half the height of the stables – everything bears the marks of luxury and magnificence; and when, especially as one goes out of the gate, one suddenly finds oneself on a causeway which leads from the house straight to the seat of the County and has been built for the sake of this one house alone – one has the feeling that one is in the vicinity of *alispáns*.

Everything that the Réty's have built is of a monumental character, and if, in the public memory, one of its principal distinguishing features is that it has been built at public expense, that again is one of those facts of which, like the family's ancient nobility in Taksony County, no one is in any doubt, and of which, even if a number find fault, the wise majority approve in accordance with the just opinion that, as the proverb has it, one hand washes the other, and in this case no one could state that by that operation – which has continued for so long a time between the Réty's and the tax-payers of the County – the hands of the *alispáns* have become clean.

But as, in the course of this tale, I shall have the opportunity to acquaint my readers with the Réty residence and all the beauties and conveniences of the hamlet of Tiszarét, permit me for now to walk down the street all the way to the open country, to the hillock that I have men-

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5 Until 1950 the highest-ranking elected official in a Hungarian county.

tioned, which stands some quarter of a *méröld* from the village and is called *Törökdomb*, Turk's Hill; and even if there weren't three trees on it, it would be worth visiting all the same, because on completely clear days – such as that on which our tale begins – from its summit the top of the hill of Tokaj can be seen like a blue hayrick.

The warm rays of the October sun were pouring their light upon the broad acres of Tiszarét. There was not a cloud in the sky to mar its deep blue; as far as the eye could see there wasn't a cart to envelop the green of the land in a cloud of dust, and only the sound of a thousand lark-songs that filled the heaven, the distant lowing of the village cattle as they grazed, and here and there an occasional worker, as he strolled homeward singing, scythe on shoulder, broke the solemn silence in which the sun sank toward the horizon. On the hillock, from where the view extends to the forest of St-Vilmos, and if we look beyond the acacias surrounding the houses of Tiszarét we can follow the course of the Tisza for miles, two men were sitting side by side, immersed in the view of the countryside, or perhaps in such thoughts as involuntarily seize the heart of man at the sight of landscapes frequently seen, and call to mind memories of days long past. There is a feeling somewhat akin to nostalgia that rises in the human breast when one has passed one's prime, and which beckons one approaching the end of his career to the finer days of childhood; the narrower the circle to which our age confines us, the less we seem to have done or experienced that is really worthy of memory: we look all the more kindly on the age when at least our expectations were glorious, and in so doing see that if not among the chosen, then at least among the called is where we too have belonged. And there is really nothing at which we should wonder if the men that we find here on the hillock, having spent their lives in an Alföld village, sometimes sigh as they look around in their old age at the place of their lengthy toil because they remember how at one time life extended around them too like a spreading plain on which the eye encountered no obstacle, and they had been able to go only to such a little part of that broad expanse! because here too there had stood previously unsuspected frontier hills beyond which they were unable to extend their working lives. But be that as it may, thoughts that are often the master rather than the property of him that they fill don't belong in the province of the historian, and so without disturbing our new friends in their comfortable reverie I shall merely undertake to acquaint my reader with their persons.

A man's appearance is part of his destiny. The face with which we step into society gives rise now to sympathy, now to alienation, and as in

England the day on which it is to be eaten is written on the turtle's back, so on the faces of many, unaware of it though they themselves may be, their end is plainly inscribed; perhaps my readers, after my sketchy description, will look at my characters with greater interest as I introduce them on the Turk's Hill, and I shall merely say succinctly that they have met Jónás Tengelyi, notary of Tiszarét, and Boldizsár Vándory, Calvinist pastor of that village.

What I said previously about the effect of our appearance on the course of our lives no longer actually applies to these men; their faces are no more going to open or close the doors of fortune before them. We can see from their grizzled locks that they have reached that time of life when, however comfortless the bed made by fate may be, there is nothing to be done but to lie down and wait for sleep; but if the judge of human nature finds no opportunity for prophecy in the faces of these men, what he can read of the past in their features is all the more, and all the more interesting, while time – which always leaves its stamp on the human face as on the coinage of kings – has perhaps never left behind more recognisable traces than on the honest faces of these two, simply because it may never have exercised its influence on nobler material.

Every aristocracy has marks which distinguish its members from the crowd. Here long finger-nails, there a tattooed face; in one country, as in Turkey, green clothing, in another, as in Venice, black; in some places a button on the hat, in another a ribbon in the buttonhole, a weapon at the side, or, as was the case with the Persians of old, a stick carried with an apple on it, tassels on their horses or a peacock feather on themselves. Who could enumerate the long list of those signs and privileges each of which arouses desires, jealousies and hatreds, and which, if they elevate men beyond the natural state – that is, as a savant friend of mine is accustomed to say: if they develop from wild animals to domesticated – from the moment of birth until their last hour sets them apart one from another, and which in some places, where civilisation has advanced further still, reminds the passer-by at the gibbet: he that hangs there hadn't only been a thief but also ignoble. Nature too has its nobility, and it too gives its nobles marks by which its chosen can be recognised among the crowd, however much our godless age may rant about equality. I don't mean that nature can attain its goals as perfectly as can our nation-states. Nature has never extended its powers of ennoblement in the way that among the Chinese one's deceased ancestors, or elsewhere one's posterity yet unborn, may be elevated to the nobility at a stroke; as regards distinguishing signs, only our higher civilisation has attained

such perfection in these details that we can perceive the rank of every individual more clearly before they descend from their carriage than after talking with them. There are, however, cases in which natural nobility reveals itself by clear indications in a number of individuals, and anyone, for example, that has once seen Jónás Tengelyi, the village notary, will no doubt acknowledge that in respect of him my statement is correct, in explanation of which I see it as further necessary to mention that, as he is a nobleman<sup>6</sup> of ancient stock, in the present case nature is assisted by custom.

If you came to Tiszarét to change horses, drove past the notary's neat house, and happened to meet Tengelyi, dressed in his old-fashioned but trim caftan, the ringing tones in which we usually address those of a lower order – as if we considered that nature had bestowed on them fewer ears than on ourselves – softened involuntarily. In his presence the military commissioner didn't invoke his saints and the *szolgabíró*<sup>7</sup> himself – to which, incredible though it seems, I could call eye-witnesses – would doff his hat, which he was never seen to do before other notaries (perhaps in order to seem taller or so as not to expose the weakest part of his body to the evil influence of the air), although on such occasions, lest his status be impaired, he was always at pains to explain this extraordinary deference by the unusual warmth or the need to straighten his hair. Tengelyi must have been about fifty years of age, and the thinning locks, which had long turned to grey, and the deep furrows which time had ploughed on his forehead made him appear even older. But as the rugged bark and gnarled branches of the oak speak of centuries, while if you look upwards the bright green of its foliage hints only at spring and proclaims the abundant life-force in the ancient tree, so, if you looked at the gleaming eye beneath that wrinkled brow, and after the grey locks considered the tall, manly bearing, you were convinced that you stood before one of those whom time had hardened rather than broken, and who, in the long battle of life, had, like colours in the midst of the fray, merely been stripped of their decoration.

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6 In the Hungary of the time it is important to distinguish between *aristocrat* and *noble*. The aristocrat, like his English counterpart, had a heritable title – baron, count or duke – whereas the ‘common nobility’ had no such title but was the equivalent of the ancient freeman class – distinguished from the servile class by the possession of a *dog-skin* or letters patent of nobility, and exercising certain privileges. The status was heritable, but the common nobility were in appearance not always clearly distinguishable from the peasantry, and might follow menial occupations.

7 See note 13 below.

The man sitting at Tengelyi's side as he fixed his eyes on the ever bluer hill of Tokaj was studying the seed heads of a couple of flowers – he appeared somewhat older, and the mild expression on his regular features seemed to contrast with the serious sternness that you have observed on Tengelyi's. If on the latter's interesting face you noticed the imprint of long struggles, which time hadn't yet concealed, and while the darkling fire of his eyes hinted that though the passions in his bosom were dormant it wouldn't be impossible for them to be rekindled, Vándory's cheeks smiled before you in undisturbed calm, like the sky on which passing danger has left no trace. In the former you saw the fighter, the man who, sensing the injustice of fate, didn't allow himself to be overcome and struggled without hope but courageously, like the champion who fights on only in order that he may not have to surrender. With Vándory the priestly robe was unnecessary for you to realise that you were faced with one of those whom God has sent to this earth as his vicars, to be the consolation of their suffering fellow men, and if the sight of the former aroused in you the doleful thought that you had once more met with an honest man that had not achieved happiness in the world, from the face of the latter there smiled upon you the consoling conviction that not only did the particular sufferings of virtue walk the earth, but so too did its peculiar delights that pass all understanding.

At last Vándory put down his flowers and broke the silence in which the friends had been sitting side by side for almost half an hour.

“A penny for your thoughts, my friend.”

“I was thinking of all sorts of things,” replied Tengelyi; “of my school-days, of Heidelberg, of the time when I was a law student. Do you still remember Heidelberg, my friend? It's been a good while since we saw it, close on thirty years since I left the university, but now and then I come up onto this hillock and see the top of Tokaj hill, and the beloved town appears in my memory; the green hills, the vineyards, the magnificent ruins that rise above, and if I compare it with the monotony of our region I could weep for the huge injustice of a fate that has given human beings a plain like this to live on.”

“You're disparaging our beloved region once again,” said Vándory with a smile, seizing his friend's hand, “isn't this meadow here as green as any in the world? The river which winds its way there between waving grasses, the darkness of yonder forest, the distant church towers, the hill of Tokaj – isn't it all lovely? If you won't look up to the sky, and are forgetting that its pure blue and the rays of the declining sun are equally

beautiful everywhere, it's you that are unjust, my friend, you refuse to recognise and enjoy the gifts that your fortune brings."

"You're the greatest of optimists!" Tengelyi interrupted him with a laugh. "Isn't it sufficient that there is no man whose good qualities you can't enumerate, if you extend your protection even to the region of Tiszarét? Really, I'm beginning to think that God Himself, with all His omnipotence, wouldn't be able to create anything in which you wouldn't find something very good."

"And am I any the worse or less fortunate for being content with the wise dispensations of God?" said Vándory, and smiled. "And because I look for as much good as possible on this plain and in those people among whom I live? The region, which inspires admiration by its splendour, is for the most part poor, if you consider it in detail; and you'll find the same in close acquaintance with so-called great men. The plain, the boring flatness of which wearies the eye, on closer examination displays such fertility, so many points of beauty, that you almost forget how poor the whole is seen to be. From the stars on high to the bowels of the earth, where gold branches out along hidden veins, there's nothing in which one mightn't take delight; why then shouldn't we seek those treasures that are hidden from us? Why shouldn't we choose a position from which the most beautiful view lies before our eyes?"

"That is, if we're able to do that."

"We are so able," replied Vándory, gently pressing his friend's hand. "Believe me, we are, we're all born optimists, you and I and everyone else. God has made his creatures for happiness, and as, according to Holy Scripture, hell and heaven were peopled from paradise, so all suffering and pleasure are the work not of our nature but of our free will."

"What of our experience?" interposed Tengelyi.

"That only proves what we wish it to prove," said Vándory. "Anyone that can discover the good side of the present will come upon plenty in the past too that will confirm him in his cheerful view of life. Anyone that looks on the river of life with a cheerful face will see a cheerful face smiling back from its smooth mirror, and everywhere on earth pleasure will re-echo from the groves if you have sent pleasurable sounds towards them."

"I see that I can't get the better of you," Tengelyi laughed. "I hope that Macskaházy's canonised in the near future and that you'll appear for the angels and testify that never was a man a greater cause of virtue, since everyone that didn't give him a hiding won a very great victory over themselves; and that very hare which those young gentlemen have put

up,” said he, pointing with a finger to the west, where in the distance a number of riders were approaching at the gallop with their greyhounds, “if it asks you, will receive the answer that a hare can have no finer death than to be hunted down. Because when you remind your faithful on Sundays of their salvation, and of everything for which they owe gratitude to Providence,” he added with a wry smile, “your task isn’t much easier.”

“That’s a vulgar entertainment, unworthy of man,” said Vándory, turning his full attention to the hunters, who were making for the Turk’s Hill. “I can’t conceive of how civilised men take pleasure in it.”

“Can’t you? and yet you can’t prevent its attracting your attention,” said Tengelyi, “and you watch the unequal contest with interest.”

There will be few among my readers who, if only in their youth, haven’t enjoyed the delights of coursing. The first hare that he catches leaves as indelible an impression on a man as his first love-affair, and indeed, there are those who can hardly tell which of the two memories is the more pleasant. The weak women, however, who dignify this rustic tale with their attention have surely heard detailed accounts of the delights of coursing from much dearer lips – so that on this occasion I can safely omit the heroic feats of Szellő and Czigány,<sup>8</sup> how many twists and turns the hare made, how it finally doubled back and was then caught by the last and slowest greyhound.

The hare had at last been caught, the company of coursers dismounted and petted the hounds as they lay around panting, and Tengelyi cast a wistful eye at the hunters as he sighed: “Ah, my friend, ah, these are happy men!”

“For my own part,” Vándory repeated, “I can’t conceive what pleasure civilised men can find in so uncouth a pastime.”

“I believe you, my friend,” said Tengelyi with a smile, “we can seldom understand the woes of others, and more rarely still their pleasures; but all in all, how much more mindless is this than the other pleasures that we find in testing our imagined strength. Anyone that feels the goal that he has set himself approaching moment by moment as he watches it, and is finally able to attain it, is a happy man; whether it be the catching of a hare or the conquest of a world that he has set himself, the feeling’s the same. The only difference lies in the ways that spectator and performer see things.”

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8 ‘Breeze’ and ‘Gypsy’, names of greyhounds.

“And the cruelty,” said Vándory. “Doesn’t it occur to you how the poor animal suffers, how unequal the contest is, all those horses and hounds in pursuit of a single terrified hare! It’s little short of disgusting.”

“The inequality of the contest,” Tengelyi sighed. “It’s true, but where in the great struggling world can you actually find equal forces opposed? The English factory-owner versus his employee, the American plantation-owner versus his slave, is there in any part of this world a more equal contest between rich and poor than what you have just seen? And as you consider the things that happen around you every day don’t you realise that the Roman emperor who killed unarmed slaves in the circus for his amusement, however great the disgust with which we speak his name today, had more followers than any other of his kind that has come down to us in the history books? Oh, believe me, my friend, the cruellest of gentlemanly amusements isn’t coursing: there are some in which the prey hasn’t, like this hare, lived on its pursuer’s crops, and couldn’t run from the cruelty.”

Vándory could only respond to these harsh words with a deep sigh, and if, perhaps, as an optimist he thought inwardly that Tengelyi was mistaken, he said nothing.

The hunt was over, and so Ákos Réty, who had seen our friends in the distance, came up to them on the Turk’s Hill with his fellow huntsmen, bade them a good evening, and so brought their conversation to an end.

If my gentle readers could see for themselves the company which gathered round the old pastor and the notary, I’m in no doubt that Ákos Réty and Kálmán Kislaky would attract their attention. Handsomer young men, it was said in Taksony County, weren’t to be seen in six counties around, and especially after the hunt, when their youthful faces were flushed and their dark locks, once they had doffed their little round caps, framed their foreheads even more handsomely in their disorder, and their upright figures showed to good effect in the blue coursing jackets – what female eye wouldn’t linger in delight on these young friends? Quite as many good things were to be read in their smooth, youthful faces as in the wrinkled cheeks of Tengelyi and Vándory, but etched in finer lines; the honest gaze of the eyes was warmer too.

As a Hungarian writer, I know my trade and am aware that in Hungary no one can compare with the *szolgabíró* in his own *járás*,<sup>9</sup> and shall turn my attention first of all to this official and his clerk,<sup>10</sup> who had followed Réty in the hunt and now to the Turk’s Hill.

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9 A ward, the area for which a *szolgabíró* has responsibility.

10 In Hungarian *esküdt* ‘sworn man’, the lay assistant of the *szolgabíró*.

According to our men of learning Scythian blood lives in Hungary.<sup>11</sup> There are times when we may be forgetful of this, and indeed, among those whose names offer the clearest evidence of their Asiatic origins we non-philologists sometimes think of quite different things.<sup>12</sup> Pál Nyúzó, however, *szolgabíró* of the *járás*, who had taken part in the hunt on his bay and was now lighting his pipe, stands before us as reassurance that the Scythian blood from which our race springs hasn't yet dried up in Hungary.

If I were writing for foreigners I would at this point insert a footnote with a neat article on the duties of the *szolgabíró*;<sup>13</sup> perhaps the fair sex, who spend so much of their lives in the company of *szolgabíró*s, don't even suspect all the weighty burdens that lie on the shoulders of their favourite dancing partners, and which it has taken a diligent writer two thick volumes to describe; as, however, all political aims are far from my tale let it suffice for me to inform those that are in ignorance that the office of *szolgabíró* is beyond all question the most onerous undertaken by anyone in this wide world, and the one beset with the most woes and the greatest fatigue. The *szolgabíró* is the maintainer of public order, defender of rich and poor, judge and father of his *járás*, without whose intervention no one can obtain justice, through whose hands pass every complaint from below and every order from above. He is the regulator of waterways, causes roads and bridges to be maintained, takes the part of the poor, is chief inspector of schools, head huntsman if wolves make an appearance, chief medical officer if plague looms, justice of the peace, ultimate authority concerning bills of exchange, inspector of criminal law, police-court magistrate, military commissioner for billeting soldiers, rural policeman, superintendent of hospitals – in brief, everything *in quo vivimus, movemur et sumus*.<sup>14</sup>

If one of the five or six hundred men in Hungary that bear this office fails, through negligence, to fulfil his obligations, thousands suffer. If one

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11 An erroneous belief, once held by some to account for the Asiatic origins of the Magyars.

12 The names of characters are frequently allegorical, derived so far from (*Tisza*)*rét* '(Tisza) meadow', *macskaház* 'cat-house', *vándor* 'wanderer' and *tengely* 'pivot'. *Nyúzó* means 'skinner'.

13 I *am* writing for foreigners, though, and must point out that the Hungarian term *bíró* doesn't always translate smoothly into its usual modern equivalent 'judge'. As here explained by Eötvös, the *szolgabíró* had responsibilities at least as much administrative as judicial in his *járás*.

14 . . . in which we live, move, and have our being. Acts 17:28.