

MURDER IN THE MOUNTAINS

Translated by PATRICK THURSFIELD
from Miklós Bánffy's novel *Megszámláltattál* ["They were counted..."]

Tanger,
Morocco

Miklós Bánffy's Transylvanian Trilogy was originally published by Erdélyi Szépmíves Céh at Kolozsvár. The three volumes, *Megszámláltattál* (1934), "*...és hijjával találtattál*" (1937) and *Darabokra szaggattatol* (1940) have now been translated into English by Patrick Thursfield and Katalin Bánffy-Jelen, the author's daughter, under the titles of "*They were counted...*", "*They were found wanting...*", and "*They were divided...*". One of the principal sub plots concerns the efforts of the trilogy's hero, one Count Bálint Abády (who, like Bánffy himself, was both a wealthy Transylvanian landowner and high profile politician) to alleviate the lot of a group of Roumanian peasants living in the mountains of the Kalotaszeg. Abády succeeds in his mission only in the third book of the trilogy, but the following extracts from *They were counted...* relate how the interest of the Hungarian aristocrat was aroused by what was happening in a remote province where the Abády forest holdings were situated.

Megszámláltattál... was republished in Budapest by Helikon Kiadó in 1982 and the whole trilogy in the autumn of 1993.

These extracts begin when Bálint Abády has gone to visit his forests for the first time. He is 26 and the year is 1904.....



The camp was well situated, with a low stone wall forming a semi-circle under an outcrop of rock. In the centre a pillar made of a tree trunk supported a roof thickly covered by fir boughs. Below, beds of more fir boughs neatly tied together were ready for the rugs that would be thrown over them. Firewood, long dry branches, had been laid against the entire length of the stone wall. When lit these would have to be fed all night so that those inside the shelter would not freeze to death...

Darkness fell and Zutor handed out the bread, bacon and onions that were to be their evening meal. The men, knowing their station in life, settled near the fire a little distant from the place accorded to the master; and when Zutor gave out the large tin cups generously filled with brandy, they all drank noisily, with much clearing of throats, thereby following the custom of the mountains and showing their appreciation that so little water had been added to the spirit.

Bálint soon got into his sleeping bag and almost at once fell into a deep sleep, due partly to his tiredness but also to the fact that everyone slept well in the sharp mountain air. At about eleven, however, he woke up, conscious that around the campfire his party was entertaining visitors. Three men had joined the group, as is the custom in the mountains where men will walk three hours and more if they see a campfire where they can come and talk the night away exchanging news and discussing their problems.

As everyone thought that the *mariasza* was asleep, they talked freely without restraint. They spoke in Roumanian, and one of the visitors, an old shrivelled man squatting on his haunches, who was facing Bálint, was recounting a long and mournful tale of injustice concerning a house, money, lambs, loans and interest, and cheese. The words '*domnu no tar*' occurred frequently and there was some reference to the Roumanian priest at Gyurkuca. Even more frequently he repeated a name, Rusz Pántyilimon, and each time he did so he spat contemptuously into the fire.

Bálint raised himself onto his elbow trying to hear what was being said, but even though he could remember a few words of Roumanian from his childhood, he could not grasp the details of the old man's tale of woe. He understood, all the same, that the others commiserated with him and nodded their heads in sympathy.

At one moment Zsukucsó got up from where he was sitting to stir the dying embers of the fire with his axe-handle. When all was arranged to his satisfaction, he threw some new dry branches onto the top and, as the flames sprang up, he noticed that Bálint was awake. Quickly he turned away and said something to the others who fell silent.

Two days later Bálint Abády and his companions were on their way home...

The valley was narrow but so thickly wooded that no view of the other side was possible from the road until they came to a place where the strong winds had cut a wide swathe in the forest. On the opposite side of the valley a few small peasant houses could be seen and, about a quarter of a mile above them, a square stone house with a roof of tiles rather than the stone shingles usual in the mountains. The windows were heavily barred and the plot of land on which the house stood was surrounded by high stone walls now almost submerged by snow drifts. Even from across the valley Bálint could hear the barking of three ferocious guard-dogs.

"What on earth is that strange building?" asked Bálint. Zutor replied:

"It belongs to a man called Rusz Pántyilimon. He decided to move out here."

Bálint remembered the name and looked at the house with renewed interest.

"Why did he build such a fortress?"

"Well your Lordship, I can't really say... but perhaps he is afraid... of the people."

"Afraid? For what reason?"

"Why, because... well, he's afraid, that's all."

Bálint would have none of these evasions and ordered Zutor to tell the truth. The story was this. Rusz, a Roumanian, had been a school teacher somewhere in Erdőhát and there had been some trouble which cost him his job. Some people said he had tried to corrupt small boys. To get completely away, he had come up here to the mountains in the Retyicel country where his mother had been born. Soon he set up as a money-lender... and now he was a rich man.

"How did he start if he had no money?"

"People say it was the popa who provided the money, and they split the profits!"

"And the popa? Where did he get the money?"

Zutor hesitated again. Then he replied:

"Well, your Lordship... people say that he's an agent of the 'Unita* Bank and funded by them."

Bálint tried to remember the snatches of conversation he had heard round the campfire.

"Does Notary Simó have anything to do with all this?"

Honey Zutor looked around to see if they were overheard. Krisán Györgye and young Stefan were some distance ahead clearing their way of fallen branches and the others were still far behind them with the pack horses. Sure that no-one could hear what he was saying the forester went on:

"People do say that the notary's mixed up in it. They say that he writes the loan contracts... and that what he reads out of them is not what is written on the paper!... that's what they say... But your Lordship, you can't believe everything you hear... these are ignorant foolish people!" He seemed to regret that he had gone so far because he quickly added: "Your Lordship ordered me to relate what people say... it's not me who says all this. I don't believe a word of it... no... not a word!"

Bálint understood Honey's fears and, shaking his head at him, said reassuringly:

"Don't worry! Nothing you have said will go any further!"

Some months later Abády, having found out much more about the dishonesty and peculations of his forest manager Nyiressy, who had never been properly supervised during the long years of Abády's minority, and of the rascally notary Gaston Simó, returned to the mountains...

On Bálint's last day he returned to camp in the evening to discover four men waiting to see him. They, too, came from the Retyice district but their little settlement, Pejkoja by name, had been built some six or seven kilometres from the village in a remote corner on the northern boundary of the Abády properties. They had come to see Count Abády. The news that the *mariasza* had

refused to enter the *domnu* director's house, despite the fact that the great judge and the all-powerful notary had been there, had spread through the mountains like wildfire. It was everywhere told that this was not all but that the Lord had also interrupted the great man's feast, removed two of the *gyorniks* who were serving them and then, to their great shame, had camped barely five hundred paces away. This fascinating and important news had, naturally, become much embellished during the retelling. It was related with great relish how the "*Grôfu*" - the Count - had publicly upbraided the hated notary and turned his back on the judge. What sort of mighty nobleman could he be, they asked themselves, who would dare act like this with such powerful and important people? And they told how even the arrogant notary himself had risen at dawn and, despite the manner in which he had been insulted the night before, waited outside his tent until the *mariasza* should awake. Not only this, but when the Count had emerged from his tent the notary had humbled himself in full sight of all the others. Oh! it must be a mighty Lord indeed who could perform such wonders!

All this news had reached the men of Pejkoja within twenty-four hours, and at once the men of the village met together to discuss what they should do, for they were all in great trouble. The problem was this: the money-lender Ruzs Pántyilimon had taken the village to court and sent the bailiffs to collect a debt he claimed from them. If they did not pay up, all they possessed would be sold at public auction. Everyone in the village had a share in this debt, which had somehow inexplicably grown to an astronomical sum from of a simple loan of 200 crowns made to two villagers four years earlier. The story was this: the two men had borrowed 200 crowns but, simple, illiterate peasants that they were, somehow they had signed for 400. In six months the sum had increased to 700 crowns and, as the debt grew and grew, the other villagers had come forward to give their guarantees for its repayment, for everything they owned was held in common and was so entered into the land registry - 67 Hungarian acres of grazing land, 16 houses and a small saw-mill. All of the village families therefore were forced to band together to defend their community inheritance, and this is why they were all now involved. By the time Bálint came to the mountains, the money lender was claiming some 3,000 crowns. To repay such a sum would mean that everything they owned would have to be sold and all the families made homeless. And all this for a paltry loan of 200 crowns. It was the grossest injustice.

For five days the men of the village met and talked and finally decided to do what the village elder, Juon Lung aluj Maftye advised. This man, now well over sixty years of age, had known well Bálint's maternal grandfather, the elder Count Tamás, and for many years had managed all the communal property of the village, always going to Dénestornya for advice as Count

Abády, to whom they had formerly owed allegiance as serfs, still took a fatherly interest in everyone who lived and worked on his properties. Besides he was also the county court judge. Old Juon Maftye therefore proposed that they should now go to the young *mariasza*, ask for his help and tell him of their complaints, for there was no doubt that, just like his grandfather before him, he was a mighty man who would do what was right. After much discussion this proposal was accepted, though by no means unanimously. There were those among them who merely complained, without themselves offering a solution; there were others who were swayed by the much respected head man and who put their faith in an approach to the young count; and there were those who declared that this was not the right way to go about it and that the only final solution was to be found 'one night'! What was to be done on that night was not specified, but everyone understood what was meant by that little phrase - "*lanoptye*" - namely that "one night" people should go to Rusz Pántyilimon's house... but what they should do there - burn the records, beat the rascal to death or merely give him a good scare - was never said. Such things were better not discussed. After all the talk, however, they took Juon Maftye's advice, and it was agreed that the old man himself, with two others should seek out the *mariasza* at his camp and tell him of their troubles. The other two men who went with him were Nikolaj Lung, who was nicknamed 'Cselmnyik' - Tiny - because he was so huge, and the head man's grandson, Kula, who had somehow hustled himself a little education. The latter was scarcely more than a boy, but he came along not only to help his grandfather but also because he had met the *mariasza* on his visit the previous February. On their way to Bálint's camp they had been joined by a fourth man, who was ironically called 'Turturika' - Little Dove. It was he who had so strongly urged "*la noptye*". Bálint found these four men seated round the camp-fire when he returned from his tour of inspection with Honey. He at once asked them when they had supped and offered them slices of bacon and draughts of mountain brandy and invited them to come to his tent, which stood a little way apart from the *gyorniks'* shelter. He did this because they would be able to speak more freely away from the men who came from other districts. Bálint made one exception: he told Honey to be present, not only because the men of Pejkoja respected him but also because Bálint, though his Roumanian had greatly improved, felt it would be better to have someone with him who could translate if necessary.

The old man presented the villager's case. He spoke at length, but cogently with much detail and, after Bálint had posed several questions and received their answers, Maftye explained exactly what they wanted him to do. In short, the petition to the lord was that he should intervene, summon the wicked money-lender and forbid him to do any further harm to the respectable people of Pejkoja. In exchange they offered the sum of 800 crowns to Rusz to settle

the debt. This great sum they had managed to scrape up but further they could not go, not now or ever. Bálint tried in vain to explain that in these times he no longer possessed such powers as they attributed to him and that there was no way he could force Pántyilimon to do anything he did not wish. The old man did not believe him. For him the *mariasza* was all-powerful, and if he did not do something, it was because he did not wish it. The *Excellenciasza* Abády, his grandfather, said the old man with dignity, would not have let them down; he would have stood by them in their trouble! Bálint was touched by their faith and in the end agreed that he would do what he could. In saying this he was swayed by the fact that the Little Dove who had hitherto remained silent, suddenly broke into the discussions saying angrily:

"Didn't I tell you all this would be no use? There's only one answer - *la noptye...V*"

"What an evil face that man has," thought Bálint, looking hard at the bearded Turturika, "I certainly wouldn't like to be at his mercy!"

In the end everyone went to sleep and long before dawn the men from Pejkoja had disappeared back into the forest from which they had come.

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Abády broke camp at first light and, long before the bells of the little wooden church at Retyice had rung their midday peal, Bálint's party had arrived at the foot of the mountains on whose lower slopes the village had been built. They rode slowly through the village until they reached the last house. This was the fortress-like building that Bálint had seen from the other side of the valley on his previous visit. It stood completely isolated far away from the others. Bálint's little caravan stopped outside a massive oak door, which clearly led into a courtyard in front of the main building. Bálint waited a little behind the others while the *gyorniks*, led by Krisán Györgye, hurried up to the front door and started knocking fiercely. From inside could be heard the furious barking of the three guard-dogs, and they set up such a clamour that even Krisán had to bellow at the top of his voice if anyone was to hear him. Krisán stayed at the door, hammering hard against the great oak beams and shouting as if his lungs would burst. Inside the house and compound nothing stirred except the dogs. It was as if they alone inhabited the house. Nothing else moved. The veranda of the house, which was visible from the road, was deserted and there was no sign of life behind the iron grills covering all the windows. "Perhaps this Rusz isn't at home!" said Bálint to Krisán. At this moment, above the cruel line of broken glass protecting the top of the great stone outer wall there appeared the head of a young boy.

"What do you want?" he asked timidly.

"The *mariasza* wants to see *Domnu* Rusz. Open the doors for his Lordship or I'll break them down," shouted Krisán Györgye, and he swung his great axe above his head and let out a stream of curses.

The boy had disappeared, and in a few seconds one of the doors was opened. Bálint rode in while the dogs were kept at bay by the *gyorniks'* long staves and by the stones hurled at them. As soon as Bálint reached the foot of the steps leading up to the entrance of the house, a tall, narrow-shouldered man appeared on the veranda. Abády looked him over carefully. The man's face was completely hairless and covered in wrinkles like that of an old woman. He had tiny eyes and his hair was longer than was then usual. He wore a grey suit of city clothes with the tails of his shirt hanging loose from under his jacket, which gave him a surprisingly broad-hipped look. At the sight of Abády he started bowing obsequiously and wringing his hands. "So this is the wicked and terrible monster feared by everyone!" thought Bálint. "So this is Rusz Pántyilimon!"

"Why are you here? What do you want of me?" asked Rusz in a frightened voice.

"Rusz Pántyilimon!" said Bálint sternly, "I wish to speak with you!"

He dismounted and, going up the steps, was nervously shown by Rusz into a living-room, which opened off one end of the veranda. Rusz kept turning as they went, looking back suspiciously at the grim faces of the mountain men that formed Baunt's band *oigyorniks*. Honey sat down on the top step and the others remained below. When Rusz saw this he realised that all was well as long as Honey stayed where he was. Then he followed Bálint nervously indoors. The men in the forecourt were still discussing the Pejkoja affair, just as they had been the previous night and all through that morning's trek. Once again there was no general agreement. Zsukució and the two younger *gyorniks* believed that, although no-one stood a chance against Rusz as long as he was supported by the *domnu notar* and the *parintye* - the popa - they still hoped for a miracle if the *mariasza* should intervene. Krisán Györgye, himself a violent man, held that *la noptye* was the only practicable solution; while Juanye Vomului remained silent. He, as a well-to-do and respectable man, had been unwise enough the previous evening to suggest that those who incurred debts ought to be man enough to settle them. This had caused such an uproar that he had shut his mouth and hardly opened it since.

The room that Bálint was ushered into was small and airless. Bálint sat down at once on a bench above which hung a holy icon and took out his notes. Speaking deliberately and dispassionately he went through the history of the affair as it had been reported to him by the village people. He then told Rusz of their offer - "...which" he said firmly, "...I find fair and reasonable!"

Standing in front of him and shifting his weight restlessly from one long spindly leg to the other, Pántyilimon listened to what Bálint had to say. At the

same time he moved his head like a horse with the habit of 'weaving*. It was not clear whether this was the result of panic, fright or excitement, or whether it was a habitual nervous tic. When Bálint had finished, he hesitated a few seconds before replying and, when he did so, seemed to have difficulty in getting out the words, "Can't be done, please; can't be done!" "Can't? Very well then, we must think of something else!" said Bálint, forcing as much menace as he could into his tone. "I shall hire a lawyer and fight you myself. I shall make the case my own. According to the law you have no right, no right at all, to the sum you are claiming. You are limited to receiving back the original loan plus 8% annual interest - not a penny more. I shall instruct my lawyers to insist that your behaviour to these people constitutes a criminal offence, which, you may like to know, carries a penalty of two years' imprisonment!"

"Can't be done, please; can't be done!" was all that Rusz managed to get out as he stood squirming in front of Bálint.

"Yes, it can be done! What you are doing is no less than a felony - extorting between three and four hundred percent! How could you?"

"Please! It isn't all true, and it isn't only me. Please! I too have to pay dear to get money... it's very expensive!"

"And from whom do you get it, may I ask?"

The former teacher was still weaving about, but now there was a hint of a smile buried in his wrinkled face. He did not answer the question but went on,

"Expensive money, very expensive... and much losses, very much... his Lordship not know how it is on mountain. Land register book is never in order, many men there only in grandfather's name still. People here like that; one day here, one day not here. They go away and I see no more, never. Money not paid, man gone. Cannot do anything. I pay, I lose much money... I have to... much loss, always loss..." and he went on in his broken Hungarian repeating the same feeble arguments and reiterating that it wasn't his money, and that as he only had a tiny profit from the whole affair there was nothing he could do.

"Well, then, go to your principals! Let them relent!" interrupted Bálint.

"Can't be done, please; can't be done!"

"All right then, but I warn you of two things. The first warning is both for you and for your charming associates; I shall prosecute this case as if it were my own. The second is for you alone. Since I have come to the mountains, I have found out how desperate these people are and how much they hate you. It is my duty to warn you of this. From now on you hold your fate in your own hands!"

Pántyilimon shrugged his shoulders: "I know, please, bad people, bad people... bad... bad..."

Bálint left the room while the money-lender stood aside bowing and wringing his hands. He descended the steps rapidly, jumped onto his horse and road swiftly away followed by Honey and the *gyorniks*. The huge oak entrance gates swung shut behind them, and the dogs could still be heard barking as they rode swiftly down the hill, through the village, and back to their road.

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On the train back to Kolozsvár Bálint thought over the whole affair and found himself more and more annoyed by the part that he had allowed himself to play. He had done it again. Once more he had become personally involved.

He should never have promised his help to the men of Pejkoja, but weakly he had allowed himself to be carried away by the old man's talk of his grandfather and by his fear of what the evil-faced Turturika might do if they all decided upon *la noptye*. And now he had gotten right into the middle of their fight with the money-lender, and what had begun as disinterested mediation had ended in personal involvement. Now, if he did not succeed in winning the case for the people of Pejkoja, his own prestige would suffer in the eyes of the mountain people. The case would not be easy. He never doubted the identity of Ruzs's silent anonymous partners. These were obviously the Roumanian priest from Gyurkuca and the notary Gaszton Simó. Between them they would not miss a trick, however dishonest, to see that Ruzs was exonerated. In their own world they wielded great power, and they had the unutterable advantage of being always there, on the spot where they could frighten people and put pressure on them in a hundred different ways. Whereas he, Bálint, could only occasionally come among them. During his rare visits they put their trust in him, but if he were not there what would happen...? Obviously he would have to find a lawyer who was not only prepared to accept the case but who would himself be trusted by the people of the mountain.

Bálint thought for a long time until at last inspiration came to him: Aurél Timisán. He was the perfect candidate; he was a lawyer and a Roumanian who sat in parliament to defend the interests of his fellow Roumanians. The peasants would respect him and do as he said, and he might even be able to influence the popa himself. Of all people surely Aurél Timisán had more chance than any of settling this affair properly - maybe even without taking it to court. He was generally known to be an honest man. Bálint congratulated himself and decided to visit him as soon as possible, telling himself that the old radical was sure to agree to help, for it was entirely a question of protecting impoverished Roumanians. After several telephone calls in the morning Bálint managed to make an appointment to see Timisán in the early afternoon. The

old man received him in his smoking room. "This is an honour indeed!" said Timisan with an ironic smile under his huge white moustaches. "His lordship dares to visit me, who spent a year in the prison at Vác! See! There is proof, on the wall behind you!" and he pointed to a large photograph in a heavy frame which portrayed a group of eight men. Bálint's host was easily recognised from the great sweep of his moustaches, though of course they were then still black. Bálint asked about the others and was told that they were all his fellow defendants in the famous 'Memorandum' trial. "And who is this?" asked Abády, pointing to a man seated at the centre of the group who had not been identified by the lawyer. "Ah" said Timisan, "he was the governor of the prison. He was very good to us and so we - at least that's how we put it then - decided to pay him this honour!"

The two men sat down facing each other in large armchairs upholstered in that Paisley-printed velveteen that was then all the vogue in well-to-do middle-class homes. "I did not come to continue our last discussion," said Bálint, "but I should be grateful, Mr. Deputy, for your advice and help in a legal dispute in which I am interested. It concerns the welfare of a group of Roumanian peasants, and therefore I am hoping that you will be interested." He then took out his notes and told the whole story, ending up with Rusz's rejection of the offer made by the men of Pejkoja. He added that expense was no object and that he, Bálint, would guarantee to see the matter through to the end.

Timisan heard him out in silence. Then he looked up; but instead of asking any question pertinent to the story Bálint had related, he asked,

"Tell me, why does your Lordship mind what happens to these people?"

Bálint was so surprised that for a moment he did not know what to say. It was so much a part of his nature, and upbringing, that he should do what he could to protect those in need that he was unable, at such short notice, to put his motives into words. At last he said:

"It's so appallingly unjust! This sort of thing should not be allowed! I understand, Mr. Deputy, that you advise the Unitá Bank, which, through the popa Timbus, supplies this Rusz with the money he lends out. Surely if the bank gets to know how their funds are being misused, they'll issue a warning so that the money-lenders will be forced to give up this sort of extortion, and we'll be able to rescue their unfortunate victims!" Timisan explained, rather as if he were giving a public lecture, that the bank was only concerned to receive regularly the interest on the money that it lent out. If their loans were correctly amortised, what was done with the money was not their affair. Timisan spoke for some time, coolly and professionally.

"But, Mr. Deputy, doesn't it shame you personally when you hear of cases like this? These are your own people and they are being ruined. You represent them in parliament, you speak about their 'rights'. Surely you will defend them?"

"That is politics."

"Politics? Politics have nothing to do with this. Here we have some poor mountain people who need help!"

"That too!" the old deputy smiled, "Just so!" He paused again and thought for a moment before going on: "Your Lordship is full of goodwill and you honour me with your visit. You will understand that I am not often honoured by visits from Hungarian noblemen!" He laughed dryly, then went on: "...and because of this I shall give your Lordship an explanation. Centuries ago this country was conquered by the swords of your ancestors and so the great Hungarian-owned estates were formed. In these days we have to find other means of getting what we want. We need a wealthy middle class and up until now this class does not exist. Most of the Roumanian intellectuals like myself are the sons of poor Roumanian priests who were the only ones among us to be properly educated. Do you see that picture? It is of my father who was dean of Páncélsah." He pointed to the wall where, over the souvenir of the prison at Vác, there hung an almost lifesize portrait in oils of a venerable popa with a huge beard: it looked as if it had been copied from a photograph. Timisán went on:

"We are all equal, and we have no means. We have therefore decided that, no matter how, we must create a wealthy middle class. And that is what we are doing. Our bank furnishes the original funds and, apart from other businesses, it lends money to certain people we believe can be trusted firstly to build up their own fortunes and then to use those fortunes for political purposes. Naturally these people have to deal with - you would say exploit - poor Roumanian peasants and that is only natural because they have no-one else to exploit! Were there no victims when your marauding ancestors over-ran our country? Well, it's the same today, but the difference is that you did it on horseback and wearing coats of mail! So much for glory! Hail to the conquering hero! Perhaps it was all more picturesque in those days, more decorative, more 'noble'!" and he gave an ironic note to the word 'noble*' before laughing wryly. "But we are more modest. We are modern people, simple and grey and not decorative at all!" The cold cruel glint that had lit up his eyes as he spoke now faded. "I have never said anything like this to anyone before - and you won't hear it from any-one else. If any of your Hungarians raised the matter, we'd deny it, naturally; but then you are not likely to, for Hungarians only think in political terms!"

Timisán laughed again. It was not a pleasant sound. Then he said:

"Your Lordship will understand from what I have said that I can be of no help to you and, if you will forgive the presumption, I would advise your Lordship not to bother with such matters!"

Bálint rose from his chair and shook hands automatically. He was perturbed and upset by what he had just heard. Now the old man spoke again, his voice full of compassion, fatherly, concerned as if he himself were moved.

"I tell you all this because I am an old man with much experience. And I am filled with pity for your goodwill... which is so very rare..." He walked to the door to show Bálint out.

"Thank you for your visit," he said.

...Up in the mountains it had been snowing hard for two days. Almasko was already blanketed in snow, as was the whole Kalotaszeg district. The wolves started to appear. As soon as this became known to Honey, he cut up some goat meat and poisoned it with strychnine, threaded the pieces on lengths of wire and going to the edge of the forests, tied them to low boughs of pine and juniper. He covered the whole region and making sure that it was placed wherever the presence of wolves had been reported, in the woods beside the waterfall in the district of Sztenyisara and in the country around Pejkoja; everywhere that the wolves were known to gather. That night, his work finished, Honey returned to his forester's hut in Scind.

That night, too, a band of silent men left their houses in Pejkoja. They were all dressed alike, in felt jackets, rough peasant's boots and black sheepskin hats. Each man, as always, carried an axe and a long wooden staff. One of them also carried something else, something that hung on long wires, red and chunky, like an outsize bouquet held upside down. Without making a sound they moved quickly with sure movements of men used to the ways of the forest through the heavily falling snow.

Although it was pitch dark and the paths were covered, they found their way unerringly. For a long time they walked down to the valley of the Szaka and then up onto the crest of the mountain on the far side. Finally they left the forests and emerged by the peak below which Bálint's caravan had formed on leaving Ruzs Pántyilimon's house. Now they only had a hundred yards or so to go.

The leader of the band, Turturika, called back:

"Moy Kula!" he said softly. "Go ahead with the meat and throw it in. If the dogs make no noise, rattle the door so that they can hear you. Mind you chuck the meat about so that they all get some!"

Young Kula, for it was he that had carried the poisoned bouquet, went ahead. He had agreed to do that for the others, but only that, and only because he knew that he must. After he had gone only a few steps, he was swallowed up in the falling snow. The rest of them remained where they were, leaning on their long sticks like shepherds on watch. Soon, though slightly muffled by the curtain of snow, they could hear the dogs barking. The first sounds seemed to come from further away down the hill but then the barking came from nearer

at hand, probably from the upper corner of the fortress-like compound - it was the sound of dogs fighting over something. Kula came back and joined the men who had been waiting. Soon the barking stopped; but the men from Pejkoja did not move. They waited for a long time, for the people of the mountain are patient. They had to wait, so time did not matter. After an hour had gone by, Turturika gave a few brief orders and they started off downhill. Two men with axes went to the door while the others went to that part of the wall nearest the mountain, threw a felt jacket over the jagged broken glass that was fixed along the top, and climbed in.

The next day the enquiries started. Gaszton Simó came to the village and, instead of bringing the usual two gendarmes, he came accompanied by four of them, all heavily armed. This was unheard-of and caused much comment in the village.

The great oaken doors were still intact, locked and barred. The house too seemed untouched until one saw that smoke was seeping out of the windows darkening the walls above with black smears of soot, and that part of the roof had caved in where the flames in the living room had caught the beams above. The falling snow had nearly extinguished the fire, but it still smouldered inside where Ruzs Pántyilimon lay dead upon the floor of his room. Here everything had been smashed into small pieces and everything that could burn had been set alight. Obviously petrol had been poured everywhere, and there remained intact only one corner of the letter tray among the ashes of burnt papers and the icon on the wall in front of which the little oil lamp still glowed protected, no doubt, by the gusts of snow that had blown in through the broken windows. All this was quickly ascertained by the notary's inspection. Also the fact that the dogs - two of whom still had pieces of wire in their mouths - had been poisoned by strychnine. That was all; nothing else. The pretty little servant boy, Ruzs's slave, who had run down the hill to the village and hidden in the mill as soon as the men had entered the house, could tell them nothing. He had heard a noise. He had looked out and seen some men. It was dark and the men were dark too. He saw that there were some more outside the gate so he had climbed the wall and fled. His hands had been badly cut by the glass and he had run bleeding profusely, as fast as he could and as far as he could.

That was all he knew.

"Whom did you see?"

"I don't know!"

"Didn't you recognise anyone?"

"Nobody!"

"How were they dressed?"

"I don't know!"

No matter how hard they tried or how much they threatened the lad, they could get nothing else out of him. Of course it was true that he was still shaking with fright, and it was always possible that even if he knew more he would never dare admit it.

"What time did all this happen?"

"I don't know... it was night."

"All right. Early at night... or late at night?"

"I don't know. It was night. *La noptyel!*"

Later at the inquest nothing more was discovered. Many people were summoned and questioned, for many people had been heard to utter threats against the hated money-lender. Every man who owed money to Rusz was a suspect and naturally this included all the men of Pejkoja. But no-one knew anything, no-one confessed or admitted to even hearing anything. That night everyone had been at home, everyone had been asleep. The story was always the same. They were morose and sullen, shrugging their shoulders. They knew nothing; they had all been at home in their beds, asleep. No-one even tried telling lies or making up complicated alibis by which they might have been trapped. "It was snowing. I was at home, asleep...!"

Nothing was ever discovered.

*

It was not until a month later that Abády heard the news, reported to him in a letter from Honey. Honey had been summoned for questioning. They wanted to know where he had hung the meat that was to poison the wolves. He told them in exact detail. It is true that no poisoned meat was found near Pejkoja but then it wasn't found anywhere. It could have fallen into the snow and been long covered or it could have been dragged away and eaten somewhere else. One or two dead wolves were found, the corpses of others were no doubt deep under the snow. The only person who had been with Honey and who also knew where the meat had been placed was the forest guard, Tódor Páven. He was also questioned but he had returned with Honey afterwards and had spent the rest of the night with him in Scrint. Neither of them had moved from there until the next day when Rusz was already dead. Honey vouched for Tódor and Tódor vouched for Honey, who wrote all this to his master knowing that he would be interested in everything that affected the people in the mountains.

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