

INTRODUCTION

For many years I have been in the habit of dining at the Archduke Stephen restaurant with my much respected friend Count Károly Pongrácz, who is both a parliamentary deputy and a general. Often, in the long summer evenings, the two of us find ourselves alone at our usual table, lightly veiled in the smoke of our cigars: and when we have exhausted topics of current interest we gladly drift away from the present into the eventful, colourful past. At such times we are scarcely aware of each other; only of the past.

Now and again, over the course of many, many years, my friend would make some reference to Count István Pongrácz: his valiant deeds, his campaign against Beszterce, his whole eccentric being. Relatives would join us at the table, and they in turn contributed piecemeal to the outline of István Pongrácz. One day I realized that I myself had once met the count, that I had spoken to him face to face. It was then that he began to interest me as a theme for a story. I made many enquiries about him, and probed deeply to uncover the driving force within him. Those who knew him intimately all said the same thing:

"Count István had brains, but not many. He had ambition too, overmuch of that. He wanted to cut a figure at any cost, but he realized that he couldn't as an ordinary sensible man, so he tried to as a lunatic."

There is a lot of sense in this. In Hungary stupid and clever people alike want to hold the centre of the stage. There is tremendous competition. Count István chose a more fruitful field; he set himself up as a lunatic and in this

way he was allowed to go from strength to strength, unsurpassed by anyone.

The history of the Pongrácz family is full of mediaeval brilliance and splendour: Pongrácz of Szentmiklós, to whom princes paid tribute; Péter Pongrácz, handsomest of knight, object of a queen's unhappy love; Pál of the great broadsword, who reaped a harvest of Turkish heads; and to match these valiant forbears, as many stately, soft complexioned Pongrácz damsels, with their plumed hats and little golden slippers—later to become the mothers of great historical figures, and, later still, white-robed phantoms in the castles where they had once lived . . . The history of this family is like a bottomless lake. If you gaze into it too deeply you become dizzy, unless you have a strong head. Count István did not have a strong head, and he gazed very deeply indeed . . .

I decided that, in the same way as one cuts a waistcoat from a piece of cloth, I would take enough material from his life to make a short story. However, I had to obtain permission from the members of the family. For the story is still quite fresh; its hero is not yet dust. He is still sleeping his first sleep in the crypt at Varin, and the wreaths laid on his coffin at the funeral have not yet withered.

Those members of the family whom I approached gladly gave their permission; and when I asked whether I should disguise the hero of my tale under a pseudonym, the oldest surviving Pongrácz, Count Károly, remarked:

"Just leave him under his real name. If he were to rise from his grave now, he would be more pleased than anyone to see himself in print. He probably wanted something of the sort to happen anyway . . ."

Thus it is, by God's good will, that I am able to embark on what is really a story of the Middle Ages; even though some at least of the persons who took part in it are still alive today, at the end of the nineteenth century.