

THE BOOKBINDER OF HORT

LEOPOLD VON SACHER-MASOCH

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From Jewish Tales, published by A.C. McClurg & Co.

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Looking abroad from the table-land of Escsed, over the Hungarian plain that stretches from the foot of Mount Matra to Szolnok, and finally merges into the horizon where the silver thread of the Theiss winds its way, the eye is attracted by a smiling section of country whose vineyards and cornfields gleam brightly in the sun. This fair spot is neither a park nor grove nor pleasant woodland, but the imposing village of Hort, its pretty white houses half concealed by a wealth of trees and shrubbery.

In this village lived a Jewish bookbinder, Simcha Kalimann, a wit and bel esprit, the oracle of the entire province, the living chronicle of his times and people.

Reviewing in reverie the procession of events in his own life, Kalimann could see, as in a mirror, the phases through which his co-religionists in Hungary had passed in their efforts toward liberty. He had lived during that dark period when the Jew dared claim no rights among his fellow-countrymen. He had suffered evil, he had endured disgrace, and the storehouse of his memory held many a tragi-comic picture of the days that were no more. But he had also lived in times when the spirit of tolerance took possession of men's minds, and he had been swept along on that tidal movement inaugurated by Count Szechenyi, the greatest of Hungarians, through his celebrated book, *Light*.

The revolution of 1848 brought about the new Hungarian Constitution, and put an end to feudal government. *Light* penetrated into the darksome streets of the Ghetto, and through the windows opened to receive the Messiah, a saviour entered proclaiming liberty and equality to the downtrodden and oppressed.

Crushed and forsaken, as all Israel was, it gratefully responded to this message of universal brotherhood.

The Hungarian Jew had found a country, and from that moment he had thrown aside his native timidity, and found the strength to display his patriotism with an ardor and enthusiasm worthy of the cause. Thousands quitted the Ghettos, and gathered around the tricolored flag. Among the warm-hearted soldiers was Simcha Kalimann. He followed Kossuth as a simple honved (volunteer), and fought at Kapolna, Vaitzen, and Temesvar.

High hopes and golden dreams were succeeded by despondency and disillusion; then supervened years of impatient waiting, a standing with folded arms when so much remained to be done, a time of despair, of restless suffering. But the Jew had acquired his franchise, and gratefully he remembered those to whom he owed this priceless blessing.

When the Austro-Hungarian Convention gave Hungary her king and constitution, the hearts of the people of the Ghetto beat high. This time, however, liberty did not make her entry with clang of arms and beat of drum, peace and reconciliation were her handmaidens, and progress followed in her footsteps.

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It was at this epoch in Hungary's history that Israelites began to speak the language of the country, and to accept Hungarian names. To her credit be it said that no such shameful sale was made as disgraced the time of Joseph II., when surnames were sold, according to their attractiveness or desirability, to the highest bidder.

Consequently, as a high-sounding name cost no more than a simple one, Kalimann chose the most imposing he could find, and, his country's hero in mind, called himself Sandor Hunyadi. This historic title revived, as it were, his latent patriotism, and, digging his gun and cartridge-box from their hiding-place in the garden where he had carefully buried them after the capitulation of Vilagos, he proudly hung these trophies of his prowess over his bed, and rejoiced in the memories of his martial exploits.

Liberty and religious peace held equal sway. Reciprocal kindness and toleration spread light where darkness had been, and scattered the shadows of prejudice.

Hunyadi, or Kalimann, was regarded in Hort as a freethinker. This was scarcely just; he was pious, and strictly discharged his religious observances, emancipating himself at the same time from those distinctions in dress and customs which he deemed neither in accordance with Mosaic law nor with his ideas of progress.

He followed the observance of wearing his hat while at synagogue, but during no other religious ceremony; troubled himself but little regarding the dietary laws; dressed as his Christian neighbor did; and strictly prohibited any superstitious practices in his house. He even permitted his wife to let her hair grow, a bold innovation.

His appearance was by no means suggestive of the hero. Short, thin, and insignificant-looking, with hair that frizzled beyond all thought of disentanglement, a tanned and freckled skin, flaxen moustache, and gray eyes that blinked continuously, Kalimann had truly no cause for vanity. Besides, he was excessively near-sighted, and as his large spectacles were taken from their red case only when he read or worked, it not unfrequently happened that when he took his walk abroad he would mistake a tall post for the chief magistrate of the county, and salute it with his most respectful bow; or, with a composure born of self-complacency, it would be his misfortune to pass by Madame Barkany, his best customer, with a vacant stare, under the impression that the fair apparition was linen hung to bleach in the sun.

Kalimann worked alone with a little apprentice named Hersch, whom he had indentured far more from charity than necessity, since the worthy bookbinder felt within him that love for his art which would have enabled him to bind the entire literature of Europe with no greater aid than his good right arm. He was a conscientious, faithful workman, and, as a rule, his entire days were spent in his shop; when necessity demanded he would toil on late into the night by the light of a tallow candle, or an ill-smelling lamp.

His work was his pride; reading his delight. If a single dark spot clouded the surface of this simple honest life, that shadow fell from the portly form of Mrs. Rachel Kalimann, or Rose Hunyadi, as it was that lady's pleasure now to be called. It would be unjust, however, to the handsome woman, whose buxom proportions served, as it were, to give weight to the establishment, to say that her faults were of a serious nature; she was, at the most, insensible to her husband's intellectual aspirations, which she termed, with more vigor than the occasion demanded, stuff and nonsense.

Quotations from the Talmud and the Scriptures were equally impotent to quell the torrent of the worthy woman's eloquence when she felt that the occasion demanded her timely interference; in vain Kalimann supported his side of the question by citing from the book of Job: The gold and the crystal cannot equal it, and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of pearls; for the price of wisdom is above rubies. [Footnote: See Job xxviii. 17, 18.]

Rose would retort curtly: What can I buy with your wisdom? Will it give me wherewith to eat and to drink, and to clothe myself? No! Very well then, what is the good of it?

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The learned bookbinder would, as a rule, sigh and silently abandon the argument when it had reached this stage, but at times his composure would break down under the strain imposed on it. Disputes and quarrels would ensue, but in the end Kalimann would capitulate, his conjugal love overcoming his anger and resentment.

Occasionally, however, he would endeavor to escape his wife's vigilance, and take refuge in a remote corner with one of his treasured volumes. On one of these secret evenings she surprised him in the poultry house, at his side a small lantern shedding a doubtful light upon a fine edition of Hamlet on his lap. Rose read him a long lecture, and commanded him to retire at once. The good man obeyed, but carried Hamlet to bed with him, turning once more to his Shakespeare for refreshment and sweet content. He had scarcely read half a page, when his spouse rose in all her majesty and blew out the candle.

Kalimann was desperate, and yet resistance would have been unwise. Sadly resigned, he turned his head upon the pillow, and soon snored in unison with Hersch. A half-hour of profound silence, then the culprit rose, and making sure that his wife was sleeping the sleep of the just, he cautiously took his book and spectacles, glided out of doors, and sitting upon the old moss-grown bench in front of the house, continued the tragedy of the Danish prince by the light of the moon.

Yes, he loved his books with passion and tenderness; but not having means wherewith to buy them, he read every book that was entrusted to him to bind. Not being the collector of the volumes in his workshop, chance alone being responsible for the heterogeneous display, to-day a sentimental love-tale, to-morrow a medical treatise, the next day a theological work, it followed that the poor little bookbinder's head was filled with as confused a mass of lore, religious and profane, as ever cast in its lot in the sum of human knowledge. The more a book pleased him, the longer did the owner have to wait for it; and it was only after repeated insistence that the coveted volume was placed in the rightful possessor's hands.

Naturally, Kalimann's prices varied according to the work required, or the cost of material; but when it came to the question of ornamental finishing or decorative impressions, his customer's orders were totally ignored, and he it was who decided upon the finishing according to the subject or the value of the work.

When he carried the books back to his customers, he would always tie them up carefully in a large colored handkerchief, and, while unwrapping them, would embrace the opportunity of expressing his views upon their contents; at times, however, he regarded the open assertion of his opinion as dangerous, and could not be induced to pass judgment. On these occasions he never failed to say with a sorrowful shake of the head, While we are living we may not speak, when we are dead it is too late!

There lived in Hort at this time a wealthy and pretty widow, Mrs. Zoe Barkany by name, originally Sarah Samuel. From her, Kalimann would get his novels and classical literature; these he bound in pale blues and greens and brilliant scarlets, ornamenting them with a golden lyre, surmounted with an arrow-pierced heart. He worked upon these bindings con amore, and, transported by his love of the aesthetic, would occasionally give vent to his enthusiasm, and venture observations bordering upon the chivalrous. In each and every heroine of the plays and romances he devoured, he could see the captivating face and figure of Mrs. Barkany.

Entering the fair widow's garden one morning, and discovering her seated on a rustic bench, dressed in white, a guitar in her hand, he exclaimed, with a reverential bow: Ah, mon Dieu, there sits Princess Eboli! (the heroine in Don Carlos"). Another time seeing her in a morning gown of Turkish stuff, he declared she must be sitting for the picture of Rebecca in Ivanhoe. In short, Mrs. Barkany very soon learned to anticipate her bookbinder's speeches, and would say, with a pretty smile: Well, am I Esmeralda to-day? or, I wager that I am reminding you of the Duchess; tell me, am I right or not?

Binding works on jurisprudence for the notary, he developed his philosophy of law; returning some volumes to the village doctor, he surprised that worthy by launching forth with enthusiasm into a disquisition on medicine;

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and dropping in one fine day at Professor Gambert's, the pensioned schoolmaster, he proved himself no mean adversary in a discussion upon natural history. He invariably approached a subject with a refreshing originality, and on one occasion maintained with an obstinacy born of conviction that the reason Moses had prohibited the Jews from eating pork was because he had discovered the trichina.

Simcha Kalimann had taken upon himself the office of censor in his village, as may be seen by the following incident. The widow had given him a richly illustrated German edition of *Nana* to bind. At dusk one evening he discovered his apprentice crouched in a corner by the window, evidently intensely amused over the illustrations. He quietly seized the culprit by the hair, shook him as he would a puppy, and then, putting on his spectacles, began inspecting the volume himself. At first he shook his head, then took off his glasses and rubbed them as though they were playing him some prank, and finally closed the book with an expression of profound disgust.

Mrs. Barkany awaited the return of her *Nana* with unruffled patience; finally she despatched her cook Gutel with an order for the book. Kalimann was ready with his excuses, and after a fortnight's delay the widow found her way into the workshop, and began suing for the book in person.

I want my copy of 'Nana,' she began.

Nana? Kalimann went on with his work.

You have not bound it yet?

No, madame.

But when am I to have it? You are not to have that book at all.

What! You talk absurdly.

We merit trust, the Count will own;
For nothing's left of flesh or bone,

quoted Kalimann from Schiller's ballad *The Forge*. As for 'Nana,' I've simply pushed it in the stove.

Kalimann, this is going too far.

It is not a book for a Jewish woman to own.

The widow flushed indignantly, but would not yield the victory to her adversary.

If you have burned my book you must give me an equivalent.

With pleasure, replied the bookbinder, and taking down a picture from the wall, he begged her acceptance of it. It represented a scene from Schiller's *Song of the Bell*, a fair young woman, surrounded by her children, seated on the balcony of her house. As title to the picture were printed these lines:

The house spreadeth out,
And in it presides
The chaste gentle housewife,
The mother of children;
And ruleth metely

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The household discreetly.

Our bookbinder had a reverential admiration for all scholars, poets, or artists, irrespective of race or creed. Awaiting the widow in her library one day, his attention was attracted by an engraving representing Schiller at Carlsbad seated upon an ass. His eyes filled with tears at the sight. A man like that, he exclaimed, riding upon an ass! While ordinary people like Baron Fay or Mr. de Mariassy ride about proudly on horses.

Later on it occurred to him that Balaam too was mounted on an ass, and he derived a measure of consolation from the thought that Schiller was a prophet as well. Would it be venturesome to say that in Kalimann there was the stuff for poet or prophet?

In addition to his trade, our bookbinder carried on another pursuit which was quite lucrative in its way, and one universally well established among all Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Kalimann was Cupid's secretary: in other words, he wrote love-letters for those who could neither read nor write. The opportunity thus vouchsafed his native tendency toward sentiment helped not only to swell the hearts of his clients with gratitude, but also to swell his own slender income. Thus it was that the fire of his poetic genius was enkindled, and thus it was he became the Petrarch of Hort.

One day Gutel Wolfner, Mrs. Barkany's cook, came to him with the request that he would write a letter for her to a friend at Gyongos.

Well, well, little one, said the scribe, so Love's arrow has reached you at last!

Heaven preserve me! cried the girl, he is not named Love, but Mendel Sucher, and he has never drawn a bow in his life.

Gutel now gave the bookbinder a general idea of the letter she wished written, and inquired the price.

That will not depend upon the length of the epistle, he replied, but upon its quality. Thereupon he read aloud to her his tariff.

- 1st. A friendly letter10 kreutzers
- 2d. A kind and well-intentioned letter.15
- 3d. A tender letter 20
- 4th. A touching letter30
- 5th. A letter that goes straight to the
heart 1/2 florin

Very good; a friendly letter will do well enough this time, said the girl, as she deposited her ten kreutzers on the table.

I will write a kind and well-intentioned letter for you for the same price as a friendly one, said Kalimann, gallantly.

Mendel Sucher received the missive the following day, and as his scholarship was as limited as Gutel's, he forthwith sought out Saul Wahl, a lawyer's clerk at Gyongos, likewise a member of the same erotic profession as the bookbinder of Hort. Wahl read Kalimann's letter to the smiling recipient with such pathos that Mendel was completely overcome. Placing twenty kreutzers on the table, the happy swain begged the clerk to write as finely turned a letter to Gutel as the one she had sent him.

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Saul, who had at a glance recognized Kalimann's calligraphy, said to himself: It will go hard with me but I will show the bookbinder that they know how to write letters at Gyongos, and can also quote from the classic authors.

He at once wrote Gutel a missive so thickly interlarded with quotations from the Song of Solomon, from Goethe, Petofi, Heine, and Chateaubriand, that when Kalimann read the billet-doux to the blushing girl her head was quite turned.

The bookbinder himself scratched his head and muttered: This Saul is a man of letters; his style is vigorous! Who would have thought it?

The correspondence between Gutel and Mendel, or rather between Kalimann and Saul, flourished for some time. If Kalimann addressed Mendel as my cherished friend, my turtle dove, Saul on his side would intersperse throughout his letters such expressions as your gazelle-like eyes, your fairy form, your crimson lips, your voice rivalling the music of the celestial spheres.

Kalimann's friendly letter was followed by those of the tender and touching variety, and finally Gutel decided upon sacrificing her half florin and sending one that would go straight to the heart. To make assurance doubly sure she supplemented her silver piece by a bottle of wine. Her amanuensis poured out a glass, emptied it at a draught, smacked his lips, and began to write. Suddenly, however, he stopped, and turning to the girl, said: Do you know, Gutel, that wine of yours was a happy inspiration, but the great poet Hafiz was not alone inspired by the spirit of wine, he placed a great virtue upon the crimson lips of pretty girls.

Gutel was not slow to understand.

As I have given you a half florin and a bottle of wine, she said, in a shamefaced way, wiping her mouth with the corner of her apron the while, I see no reason why I should not add a touch of my lips as well. So saying she gave the happy bookbinder a hearty kiss. The consequence of all this was that the pen flew over the paper, and when Kalimann read the letter for Gutel's approval the tender-hearted girl burst into tears of emotion.

As for Mendel, when Saul read him this letter going straight to the heart, he could contain himself no longer; rushing from the house he flew to the factory where he worked, and asked his employer, Mr. Schonberg, to permit him to quit his service.

What is the matter with you? cried Schonberg. Why do you wish to leave? Do you want more wages?

No, no, Mr. Schonberg, that is not the reason. But but I can stay no longer here at Gyongos, I must go to Hort.

To Hort? What is the reason of that?

For reply the dazed fellow held out the letter for him to read. Schonberg glanced over it, and smiled. This Kalimann, he murmured, is a deuce of a fellow. The world has lost a novelist in him. But let me see how I can arrange matters. Mendel, he continued, turning to the open-mouthed lover, you shall stay here, and you shall marry your Gutel. I will give you two or three rooms in the factory for your housekeeping, and Mrs. Barkany will give the girl her trousseau. How does that strike you?

Mendel beamed. He would have thrown himself on his employer's neck, but resisted the impulse, and, instead, brushed the back of his hand across his eyes. Schonberg gave him a day's holiday, and the happy fellow lost no time in making his way to Hort, and subsequently into the arms of his inamorata. Mrs. Barkany gave Gutel the trousseau, and the marriage took place at harvest-time.

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At one end of the table, in the seat of honor next to the rabbi, sat the bookbinder of Hort. All had been his work, and, truth to tell, this was not the first happy couple he had been the means of bringing together.

When it was his turn to deliver a toast in honor of the bride and groom, he rose, filled his glass, and holding it in his hand, declaimed from his favorite poet Schiller, and with an enthusiasm worthy the occasion:

Honor to women! round Life they are wreathing
Roses, the fragrance of Heaven sweet-breathing!