

The Tower Room

Arthur Elck

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There were many wonderful things that aroused our childish fantasy, when Balint Orzo and I were boys, but none so much as the old tower that stands a few feet from the castle, shadowy and mysterious. It is an old, curious, square tower, and at the brink of its notched edge there is a shingled helmet which was erected by one of the late Orzos.

There is many and many a legend told about this old tower. A rumor exists that it has a secret chamber into which none is permitted to enter, except the head of the family. Some great secret is concealed in the tower-room, and when the first-born son of the Orzo family becomes of age his father takes him there and reveals it. And the effect of the revelation is such that every young man who enters that room comes out with gray hair.

As to what the secret might be, there was much conjecturing. One legend had it that once some Orzo imprisoned his enemies in the tower and starved them until the unfortunates ate each other in their crazed suffering.

According to another story Kelemen Orzo ordered his faithless wife Krisztina Olaszi to be plastered into the wall of the room. Every night since, sobbing is heard from the tower.

Another runs that every hundred years a child with a dog's face is born in the Orzo family and that this little monster has to perish in the tower-room, so as to hide the disgrace of the family.

Another conjecture was that once the notorious Menyhart Orzo, who was supreme under King Rudolph in the castle, played a game of checkers with his neighbor, Boldizsar Zomolnoky. They commenced to play on a Monday and continued the game and drank all week until Sunday morning dawned upon them. Then Menyhart Orzo's confessor came and pleaded with the gamblers. He begged them to stop the game on the holy day of Sunday, when all true Christians are in church praising the Lord. But Menyhart, bringing his fist down on the table in such rage that all the wine glasses and bottles danced, cried: "And if we have to sit here till the world comes to an end, we won't stop till we have finished this game!"

Scarcely had he uttered his vow when, somewhere from the earth, or from the wall, a thundering voice was heard promising to take him at his word—that they would continue playing till the end of the world. And ever since, the checkers are heard rattling, and the two damned souls are still playing the game in the tower-room.

When we were boys, the secret did not give us any rest, and we were always discussing and plotting as to how we could discover it. We made at least a hundred various plans, but all failed. It was an impossibility to get into the tower, because of a heavy iron-barred oaken door. The windows were too high to be reached. We had to satisfy ourselves with throwing a well-aimed stone, which hit the room through the window. Such an achievement was somewhat of a success, for oftentimes we drove out an alarmed flock of birds.

One day I decided that the best way would be to find out the secret of the tower from Balint's father himself. "He is the head of the family," I thought, "and if any light is to be had on the mystery, it is through him." But Balint didn't like the idea of approaching the old man; he knew his father's temper.

However, once he ventured the question, but he was sorry for it afterwards, for the older Orzo flew into a passion, and scolded and raged, ending by telling him that he must not listen to such nursery-tales; that the tower was moldering and decaying with age; that the floor timbers and staircase were so infirm that it would fall to pieces should anyone approach it; and that this was why no one could gain admittance.

For a long time afterwards neither of us spoke of it.

But curiosity was incessantly working within us, and one evening Balint solemnly vowed to me that as soon as he became of age and had looked into the room, he would call for me, should I be even at the end of the world, and would let me into the secret. In order to make it more solemn, we called this a "blood-contract."

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With this vow we parted. My parents sent me to college; Balint had a private tutor and was kept at home in the castle. After that we only met at vacation time.

Eight years passed before I saw the Orzo home again. At Balint's urgent, sudden invitation I had hurriedly journeyed back to my rocky fatherland.

I had scarcely stepped on the wide stone stairway leading from the terrace in the front of the castle, when someone shouted that the honorable master was near! He came galloping in on a foaming horse. I looked at him and started, as if I had seen a ghost, for this thin, tall rider was the perfect resemblance of his father. The same knotty hair and bearded head, the same densely furrowed face, the same deep, calm, gray eyes. And his hair and beard were almost as white as his father's!

He came galloping through the gate, pulled the bridle with a sudden jerk, and the next moment was on the paving; then with one bound he reached the terrace, and had me in his strong arms. With wild eagerness he showed me into the castle and at the same time kept talking and questioning me without ceasing. Then he thrust me into my room and declared that he gave me fifteen minutes—no more—to dress.

The time had not even expired, when he came, like a whirlwind, embraced me again and carried me into the dining-room. There chandeliers and lamps were already lit; the table was elaborately decorated, and bore plenty of wine.

At the meal he spoke again. Nervously jerking out his words, he was continually questioning me on one subject and then another, without waiting for the answer. He laughed often and harshly. When we came to the drinking, he winked to the servants, and immediately five Czigany musicians entered the room. Balint noticed the astonishment on my face, and half evasively said:

"I have sent to Iglo for them in honor of you. Let the music sound, and the wine flow; who knows when we will see each other again?"

He put his face into his palm. The Czigany played old Magyar songs. Balint glanced at me now and then, and filled the glasses; we clinked them together, but he always seemed to be worried.

It was dawning. The soft sound of a church bell rose to us. Balint put his hand on my shoulder and bent to my ear.

"Do you know how my father died?" he asked in a husky voice. "He killed himself."

I looked at him with amazement; I wanted to speak, but he shook his head, and grasped my hand.

"Do you remember my father?" he asked me. Of course; while I looked at him it seemed as if his father were standing before me. The very fibrous, skinny figure, the muscles and flesh seeming peeled off. Even through his coat arm I felt the naked, unveiled nerves.

"I always admired and honored my father, but we were never true intimates; I knew that he loved me, but I felt as if it was not for my own sake; as if he loved something in my soul that was strange to me. I never saw him smile; sometimes he was so harsh that I was afraid of him; at another time he was unmanageable.

"I did not understand him, but the older I became the better did I feel that there was a sad secret germinating in the bottom of his soul, where it grew like a spreading tree, the branches of which crept up to the castle and covered the walls, little by little overshadowed the sunlight, absorbed the air, and darkened everyone's heart. I gritted my teeth in vain; I could not work; I could not start to accomplish anything. I struggled with hundreds and hundreds of determinations; to-day I prepared for this or that; tomorrow for something else; ambition pressed me within; I could not make up my mind. Behind every resolution I made, I noticed my father's countenance, like a note of interrogation. The old fables that we heard together in our childhood were renewed in my memory. Little by little the thought grew within me, like a fixed delusion, that my father's fatal secret was locked up in the tower room. After that I lived by the calendar and dwelt on the passing of time on the clock. And when the sun that shone on me when I was born arose the twenty-fourth time, I pressed my hand on my heart and entered my father's room—this very room.

"Father,' I said, 'I became of age to-day, everything may be opened before me, and I am at liberty to know everything.' Father looked at me and pondered over this.

"Oh, yes!' he whispered, 'this is the day.'

"I may know everything now,' continued I; 'I am not afraid of any secrets. In the name of our family tradition, I beg of you, please open the tower-room.'

"Father raised his hand, as if he wanted to make me become silent. His face was as white as a ghost.

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"'Very well,' he murmured, 'I will open the tower-room for you.'

"And then he pulled off his coat, tore his shirt on his breast, and pointed to his heart.

"'Here is the tower-room, my boy!' did he whisper in a husky voice. 'Here is the tower-room, and within our family secret. Do you see it?'

"That is all he said, but when I looked at him I immediately perceived the secret; everything was clear before me and I had a presentiment that something was nearing its end, something about to break.

"Father walked up and down; and then he stopped and pointed to this picture; to this very picture.

"'Did you ever thoroughly look at your ancestors? They are all from the Orzos. If you scrutinize their faces you will recognize in them your father, yourself, and your grandfather; and if you ever read their documents, which were left to us—there they are in the box—then you will know that they are just the same material as we are. Their way of thinking was the same as ours and so were their desires, their wills, their lives, and deaths. We had among them soldiers, clergymen, scientists, but not even one great, celebrated man, although their talent, their strength almost tore them asunder.

"'In every one of them the family curse took root: not one of them could be a great man, neither my father nor yours.'

"Then I felt as if something horrible was coming from his lips. My breath almost ceased. Father did not finish what he was going to say, but stopped and listened for a minute.

"'I was my father's only hope,' he went on after a while; 'I too was born talented and prepared for great things, but the Orzos' destiny overtook me, and you see now what became of me. I looked into the tower-room. You know what it contains? You know what the name of our secret is? He who saw this secret lost faith in himself. For him it would have been better not to have come into this world at all. But I loved to live and did not want to abandon all my hopes. I married your mother; she consoled me until you were born, and then I regained my delight in life. I knew what I had to keep before my eyes to bring up my son to be such a man as his father could not be.

"'I acquiesced when you left for the foreign countries; then your letters came. I made a special study of every sentence and of every word of it, for I did not want to trust my reason. I thought the first time that the fault was in me; that I saw unnecessary phantoms. But it wasn't so, for what I read out of your words was our destiny, the curse of the Orzos; from the way of your thinking, I found out that everything is in vain; you too turned your head backward, you too looked into yourself and noticed there the thing that makes the perceiver sterile forever. You did not even notice what you have done; you could not grasp it with your reason, but the poison is already within you.'

"'It cannot be, father!' I broke out, terrified.

"But he sadly shook his head. 'I am old; I cannot believe in anything now. I wish you were right, and would never come to know what I know. God bless you, my son; it is getting late, and I am getting tired.'

"It struck me that he was trying to cover his disbelief with sarcasm. Both of us were without sleep that night. At dawn there was silence in his room. I bitterly thought, 'When will I go to rest?' When I went into his room in the morning he was lying in his bed. All was over. He had taken poison, and written his farewell on a piece of paper. His last wish was that no one should ever know under what circumstances he died."

Balint left off speaking and gazed with outstretched eyes toward the window in the darkness. I slowly went to him and put my hand upon his shoulder. He started at my touch.

"I more than once thought of the woman who could be the mother of my son. How many times have I been tempted to fulfill my father's last wish! But at such a time it has always come to my mind that I too might have such a son, who would cast into his father's teeth that he was a coward and a selfish man; that he sacrificed a life for his illusive hopes.

"No! I won't do it. I won't do it. I am the last of the Orzos. With me this damned family will die out. My fathers were cowards and rascals. I do not want anybody to curse my memory."

I kissed Balint's wet forehead; I knew that this was the last time I would see him. The next day I left the castle, and the day after, his death was made public. He committed suicide, like his father. He was the last Orzo, and I turned about the coat of arms above his head.