

Edward Prime-Stevenson

*Imre:
A Memorandum*

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PREFATORY.

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My dear Mayne:

In these pages I give you a chapter out of my life... an episode that at first seemed impossible to write even to you. It has lengthened under my hand, as autobiography is likely to do. My apology is that in setting forth absolute truth in which we ourselves are concerned so deeply, the perspectives, and what painters call the values, are not easily maintained. But I hope not to be tedious to the reader for whom, especially, I have laid open as mysterious and profoundly personal an incident.

You know why it has been written at all for you. Now that it lies before me, finished, I do not feel so dubious of what may be thought of its utterly sincere course as I did when I began to put it on paper. And as you have more than once urged me to write something concerning just that topic which is the mainspring of my pages I have asked myself whether, instead of some impersonal essay, I would not do best to give over to your editorial hand all that is here?—as something for other men than for you and me only? Do with it, therefore, as you please. As speaking out to any other human heart that is throbbing on in rebellion against the ignorances, the narrow psychologic conventions, the false social ethics of our epoch—too many men's hearts must do so!—as offered in a hope that some perplexed and solitary soul may grow a little calmer, may feel itself a little less

alone in our world of mysteries—so do I give this record to you, to use it as you will. Take it as from Imre and from me.

As regards the actual narrative, I may say to you here that the dialogue is kept, word for word, faithfully as it passed, in all the more significant passages; and that the correspondence is literally translated.

I do not know what may be the exact shade of even your sympathetic judgment, as you lay down the manuscript, read. But, for myself, I put by my pen after the last lines were written, with two lines of Platen in my mind that had often recurred to me during the progress of my record: as a hope, a trust, a conviction:

"Ist's möglich ein Geschöpf in der Natur zu sein,
Und stets und wiederum auf falscher Spur zu sein?"

Or, as the question of the poet can be put into English:

"Can one created be—of Nature part—
And ever, ever trace a track that's false?"

No... I do not believe it!
Faithfully yours,

Oswald.

Velencze,

19—

... "You have spoken of homosexuality, that profound problem in human nature of old or of to-day; noble or ignoble; outspoken or masked; never to be repressed by religions nor philosophies nor laws; which more and more is

demanding the thought of all modern civilizations, however unwillingly accorded it..... Its diverse aspects bewilder me... Homosexuality is a symphony running through a marvellous range of psychic keys, with many high and heroic (one may say divine) harmonies; but constantly relapsing to base and fantastic discords!... Is there really now, as ages ago, a sexual aristocracy of the male? A mystic and hellenic Brotherhood, a sort of super-virile man? A race with hearts never to be kindled by any woman; though, if once aglow, their strange fires can burn not less ardently and purely than ours? An *élite* in passion, conscious of a superior knowledge of Love, initiated into finer joys and pains than ours?—that looks down with pity and contempt on the millions of men wandering in the valleys of the sexual commonplace?"...

(Magyarból.)

I. **MASKS.**

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Like flash toward metal, magnet sped to iron,
A Something goes—a Current, mystic, strange—
From man to man, from human breast to breast:
Yet 'tis not Beauty, Virtue, Grace, not Truth
That binds nor shall unbind, that magic tie.

(GRILLPARZER)

It was about four o' clock that summer afternoon, that I sauntered across a street in the cheerful Hungarian city of

Szent-Istvánhely, and turned aimlessly into the café-garden of the Erzsébet-tér, where the usual vehement military-band concert was in progress. I looked about for a free table, at which to drink an iced-coffee, and to mind my own business for an hour or so. Not in a really cross-grained mood was I; but certainly dull, and preoccupied with perplexing affairs left loose in Vienna; and little inclined to observe persons and things for the mere pleasure of doing so.

The kiosque-garden was somewhat crowded. At a table, a few steps away, sat only one person; a young Hungarian officer in the pale blue-and-fawn of a lieutenant of the well-known A— Infantry Regiment. He was not reading, though at his hand lay one or two journals. Nor did he appear to be bestowing any great amount of attention on the chattering around him, in that distinctively Szent-Istvánhely manner which ignores any kind of outdoor musical entertainment as a thing to be listened-to. An open letter was lying beside him, on a chair; but he was not heeding that. I turned his way; we exchanged the usual sacramental saluts, in which attention I met the glance, by no means welcoming, of a pair of peculiarly brilliant but not shadowless hazel eyes; and I sat down for my coffee. I remember that I had a swift, general impression that my neighbour was of no ordinary beauty of physique and elegance of bearing, even in a land where such matters are normal details of personality. And somehow it was also borne in upon me promptly that his mood was rather like mine. But this was a vague concern. What was Hecuba to me?—or Priam, or Helen, or Helenus, or anybody else, when for the moment I was so out of tune with life!

Presently, however, the band began playing (with amazing calmness from any Hungarian wind-orchestra) Roth's graceful "Frau Réclame" Waltz, then a novelty, of which trifle I happen to be fond. Becoming interested in the leader, I wanted to know his name. I looked across the table at my vis-à-vis. He was pocketing the letter. With a word of apology, which turned his face to me, I put the inquiry. I met again the look, this time full, and no longer unfriendly, of as winning and sincere a countenance, a face that was withal strikingly a temperamental face, as ever is bent toward friend or stranger. And it was a Magyar voice, that characteristically seductive thing in the seductive race, which answered my query; a voice slow and low, yet so distinct, and with just that vibrant thrill lurking in it which instantly says something to a listener's heart, merely as a sound, if he be susceptible to speaking-voices. A few commonplaces followed between us, as to the band, the programme, the weather—each interlocutor, for no reason that he could afterward explain, any more than can one explain thousands of such attitudes of mind during casual first meetings—taking a sort of involuntary account of the other. The commonplaces became more real exchanges of individual ideas. Evidently, this Magyar fellow-idler, in the Erzsébet-tér café, was in a social frame of mind, after all. As for myself, indifference to the world in general and to my surroundings in particular, dissipated and were forgot, my disgruntled and egotistical humour went to the limbo of all unwholesomenesses, under the charm of that musical accent, and in the frank sunlight of those manly, limpid eyes. There was soon a regular dialogue in course, between

this stranger and me. From music (that open road to all sorts of mutualities on short acquaintanceships) and an art of which my neighbour showed that he knew much and felt even more than he expressed—from music, we passed to one or another aesthetic question; to literature, to social life, to human relationships, to human emotions. And thus, more and more, by unobserved advances, we came onward to our own two lives and beings. The only interruptions, as that long and clear afternoon lengthened about us, occurred when some military or civil acquaintance of my incognito passed him, and gave a greeting. I spoke of my birth-land, to which I was nowadays so much a stranger. I sketched some of the long and rather goal-less wanderings, almost always alone, that I had made in Central Europe and the Nearer East—his country growing, little by little, my special haunt. I found myself charting-out to him what things I liked and what things I anything but liked, in this world where most of us must be satisfied to wish for considerably more than we receive. And in return, without any more questions from me than I had from him—each of us carried along by that irresistible undercurrent of human intercourse that is indeed, the Italian *simpatia*, by the quick confidence that one's instinct assures him is neither lightly-bestowed, after all, nor lightly-taken—did I begin, during even those first hours of our coming-together, to know no small part of the inner individuality of Imre von N..., *hadnagy* (Lieutenant) in the A... Honvéd Regiment, stationed during some years in Szent-Istvánhely.

Lieutenant Imre's concrete story was an exceedingly simple matter. It was the everyday outline of the life of nine

young Magyar officers in ten. He was twenty-five; the only son of an old Transylvanian family; one poor now as never before, but evidently quite as proud as ever. He had had other notions, as a lad, of a calling. But the men of the N.... line had always been in the army, ever since the days of Szigetvár and the Field of Mohács. Soldiers, soldiers! always soldiers! So he had graduated at the Military Academy. Since then? Oh, mostly routine-life, routine work... a few professional journeyings in the provinces—no advancement and poor pay, in a country where an officer must live particularly like a gentleman; if too frequently only with the aid of confidential business-interviews with Jewish usurers. He sketched his happenings in the barracks or the ménage—and his own simple, social interests, when in Szent-Istvánhely. He did not live with his people, who were in too remote a quarter of the town for his duties. I could see that even if he were rather removed from daily contact with the family-affairs, the present home atmosphere was a depressing one, weighing much on his spirits. And no wonder! In the beginning of a brilliant career, the father had become blind and was now a pensioned officer, with a shattered, irritable mind as well as body, a burden to everyone about him. The mother had been a beauty and rich. Both her beauty and riches long ago had departed, and her health with them. Two sisters were dead, and two others had married officials in modest Government stations in distant cities. There were more decided shadows than lights in the picture. And there came to me, now and then, as it was sketched, certain inferences that made it a thought less promising. I guessed the speaker's own nervous distaste for

a profession arbitrarily bestowed on him. I caught his something too-passionate half-sigh for the more ideal daily existence, seen always through the dust of the dull highroad that often does not seem likely ever to lead one out into the open. I noticed traces of weakness in just the ordinary armour a man needs in making the most of his environment, or in holding-out against its tyrannies. I saw the irresolution, the doubts of the value of life's struggle, the sense of fatality as not only a hindrance but as excuse. Not in mere curiosity so much as in sympathy, I traced or divined such things; and then in looking at him, I partly understood why, at only about five-and-twenty, Lieutenant Imre von N.....'s forehead showed those three or four lines that were incongruous with as sunny a face. Still, I found enough of the lighter vein in his autobiography to relieve it wholesomely. So I set him down for the average-situated young Hungarian soldier, as to the material side of his life or the rest; blessed with a cheerful temperament and a good appetite, and plagued by no undue faculties of melancholy or introspection. And, by-the-by, merely to hear, to see, Imre von N.... laugh, was to forget that one's own mood a moment earlier had been grave enough. It might be, he had the charm of a child's most infectious mirth, and its current was irresistible.

Now, in remembering what was to come later for us two, I need record here only one incident, in itself slight, of that first afternoon's parliament. I have mentioned that Lieutenant Imre seemed to have his full share of acquaintances, at least of the comrade-class, in Szent Istvánhely. I came to the conclusion as the afternoon went

along, that he must be what is known as a distinctly "popular party". One man after another, by no means of only his particular regiment, would stop to chat with him as they entered and quit the garden, or would come over to exchange a bit of chaff with him. And in such of the meetings, came more or less—how shall I call it?—demonstrativeness, never unmanly, which is almost as racial to many Magyarak as to the Italians and Austrians. But afterwards I remembered, as a trait not so much noticed at the time, that Lieutenant Imre, did not seem to be at all a friend of such demeanour. For example, if the interlocutor laid a hand on Lieutenant Imre's shoulder, the Lieutenant quietly drew himself back a little. If a hand were put out, he did not see it at once, nor did he hold it long in the fraternal clasp. It was like a nervous habit of personal reserve; the subtlest sort of mannerism. Yet he was absolutely courteous, even cordial. His regimental friends appeared to meet him in no such merely perfunctory fashion as generally comes from the daily intercourse of the service, the army-world over. One brother-officer paused to reproach him sharply for not appearing at some affair or other at a friend's quarters, on the preceding evening—"when the very cat and dog missed you." Another comrade wanted to know why he kept "out of a fellow's way, no matter how hard one tries to see something of you." An elderly civilian remained several minutes at his side, to make sure that the young Herr Lieutenant would not forget to dine with the So-and-So family, at a birthday-fête, in course of next few days. Again,—"Seven weeks was I up there, in that d—d little hole in Calizien! And I wrote you long letters, three letters! Not a