

The Betyár's Tale

Kigyó and Teher were lying on the moss under the leafy branches of an oak-tree and cursing the world in general and the local Mayor in particular.

The two of them, young fellows of about thirty, belonged to that caste in Magyar society which rejoices in the resounding title of *betyár*, which denotes a herdsman or a good-for-nothing, an artful dodger in general.

Kigyó and Teher were swineherds in the first place and good-for-nothings and artful dodgers in the second; *betyárs* of the first rank, the kind that can be parted from their short pipes only when they have been up to some mischief and have landed themselves in jail, where they also have to exchange their breeches and jackets for the grey garb of the convict.

Just now, they were having a good curse, an activity that occupies at least a third of the lives of this rare breed of men.

Kigyó had just finished cursing the Mayor's grandfather when Teher remembered that he hadn't cursed the Mayor's aunt.

Whereupon Kigyó in his turn consigned the Mayor's aunt's mother to the nether regions but then, so that everyone should be remembered in proper form, they took cognisance of the fact that none of the Mayor's relatives was alive and so Kigyó pronounced solemnly: '*Mindt öröké, amen*' (For ever and ever, Amen).

All around them, in the oak-grove, the communal herd of the village of Talom was dotted about, grazing, squealing and grunting. Some were rootling in the ground for acorns and here and there a piglet scampered and pigs wallowed in the lazily flowing stream, revelling in the chance to cool their thick skins in the black mud after they had been baked in the blazing heat of the sunny day.

All the colours of the porcine rainbow were represented here, from the pink tints of the smooth-skinned breeds to the curly-haired black ones. Pigs, boars, sows and piglets; boars that grunted angrily as they thrust the others away with their tusks, fat sows that grunted lovingly as, at every time of asking, they satisfied the demands of greedily

sucking piglets.

And around them ran two dogs of the breed that is used for watching over these useful animals and originated in the distant past from a cross between dogs and wolves.

With their running and barking and baring of teeth, they kept the whole great herd in order, so that the two herdsman could lie under their tree in peace without needing to reach for the long whips they had left lying about on the moss.

Teher did nevertheless pick up his whip on one occasion, when one of the Mayor's little pigs ran by. He raised the whip and brought it down again across its back, so that it ran off squealing to look for acorns somewhere else.

Having thus vented his spleen on the Mayor's property, Teher made himself comfortable in the moss once again, emitted a puff of smoke from his lips and as he watched it slowly drifting away on the windless air, pronounced magisterially: 'And what sort of man is the Mayor in any case? A drunk, no better than a drunk! And a man like that is trying to stop me marrying Františka Homlóková!'

Kigyó, his partner, looked solemn and said: 'Tell me the story again.'

'Well, it was this way. Františka and I have been going together for two years. I go and visit them every so often. As you know, I show great respect to Homlók's pigs and guide them to all the best spots.

'Old Homlók didn't raise any objection. He always said: "All right, lad, so you're just a betyár: so what? I was just a betyár once. But I knew what was what. I used to fatten up the animals they gave me as payment and sell them at a profit. My pigs sold well. In the capital they still remember Homlók's pigs to this day. Now and then I would steal one and put it down to bears and wolves. With the money I got for them, I would buy young pigs and bring them on and sell them again for a good price. I sweated for twenty years and finally I'd amassed such a pile that Birka the farmer let his daughter marry a betyár. So why shouldn't I let my daughter marry you? Just carry on the good work."

'So it was all going swimmingly. Till the day before yesterday when, after we had driven the herd home and you'd gone off for a glass of wine, I went as usual to visit the Homlóks.

'There in the parlour sat old Homlók and opposite him, Mayor Nárva.

'They were so deep in conversation that they didn't see me. I went

over to the fireplace in the corner, sat down and listened.

"My son Ferencz," said the Mayor, "is sweet on your Františka."

"There's no future in that, friend," replied Homlók, "Because I've already . . ."

"They say, Homlók, that you're going to let your daughter marry some layabout of a betyár."

"I was about to jump up, but then I thought: 'Let's see what old Homlók will answer to that.'"

"So I listen and I hear: 'Birka let his daughter marry some layabout of a betyár, Mayor; me, in fact.'"

"The Mayor was stopped in his tracks. "You weren't any ordinary betyár. But Teher, well, that's another kettle of fish. Nobody knows whose son he is. A gypsy's, they say. His mother wasn't respectable; she was in service in a nobleman's house. She died as she lived: drank till she'd drunk herself to death . . ."

"Mayor," I heard Homlók say, "let's let the dead lie quiet in their graves. You ruined a woman once, in Farád. The child died and you couldn't make an honest woman of the girl from Farád because you were already married when it happened. We all of us like a little drink and it was God who made the wine but the way you drink is just not Christian."

"So you're going to let that good-for-nothing Teher have your daughter?"

"I reckon so."

"Do you know that Teher's a thief? It's not all that long since a sow went missing . . ."

"I know, I've been a betyár myself."

"And I'm sure you know that Teher is the village council's swineherd and I can have him thrown out of his job?"

"I know that too, but a betyár can always get by."

"So the Mayor went off in a huff and when he had gone I came out of the corner and said: 'Homlók, I heard all that. - You're going to let me have Františka, then?'"

"Yes I am," answered Homlók, "but only after you've taken revenge on the Mayor: for yourself, for me and for the whole race of betyárs." What do you think of that, Kigyó?"

'You could set fire to his farm,' suggested Kigyó, 'lie in wait for him and stick him with a knife good and proper.'

Teher shook his head. 'Can't do that . . . it would be a sin,' he said, calmly puffing out a wreath of smoke, and as he lay there, he began to

whistle and his whistling eventually turned into song.

He sang one of those betyár songs about a tavern out in the depths of the *puszta* and about a woman not quite past her youth who kept the tavern and had a pretty niece. And a betyár fell in love with the niece and she took the girl far out into the *puszta* in the winter-time and left her there to die, for she grudged her the handsome betyár.

And when he heard this, he rode to the tavern and thrust a dagger into the tavern-keeper's heart.

Kigyó joined in and finished with a crack of his whip.

The shadows of the trees in the oak-grove were lengthening. The wood was growing dark with the dusk of evening. It was time now to drive the herd home and they whistled to the dogs, got up and shouted: 'Hey, hey! Hoy, hoy!'

A lively movement arose among the animals. Those that were rolling about in the grass and the mud got up and joined the others.

The dogs ran round them and made them collect together in a group.

'Hoy, hoy!' The herdsmen cracked their whips, sending an echo like a gun-shot through the forest: 'Bang!'

And slowly, the herd got under way.

It was one of Mayor Nárva's unlovely characteristics that he would stay outside the door of a room he had just left to hear whether anyone said anything about him. He hung about this time as well, after he had parted from Homlók, and heard, to his astonishment, the voices of Teher speaking and the old man answering: 'I'll give you Františka, but only after you've taken revenge on the Mayor: for yourself, for me and for the whole race of betyárs.'

Half dead with fright, he barely managed to get home - and then he shut himself away in his parlour. He was so scared he forgot about smoking and did not once dip into his wine-jug. He would not reply to anyone's questions and went to bed, but could not get to sleep.

His fear of Teher's revenge renewed in his mind the memory of old tales about the betyárs of the Húngarian *puszta* who, in olden days, had stuck the Lord of the Manor on a spit and roasted him.

Over and over again, his thoughts turned to the savagery of those people. Next day, he pulled himself together and went to see the village notary and ask his advice.

The notary, a very young person who had only recently completed

his studies in the city and who was now thrust straight out from the urban bustle, performing the monotonous duties of his office here, received the frightened Mayor most amiably.

He kept a good slivovic which he used to take the edge off his village solitude and after the fifth glass, the wretched Mayor had come to himself a little and began to explain the purpose of his visit.

'I'm very unhappy, Your Worship, because I could wake up tomorrow and find my throat cut.'

'Well, in that case,' was the smiling observation of the notary, 'you wouldn't wake up.'

'There's more than one way, Your Worship, that I could be killed. I could be strangled, drowned, hung, shot or disembowelled. It's horrible!'

The Mayor wiped the sweat from his brow with his shirt-sleeve, which did duty for him as a handkerchief.

'This is wild talk, my friend.'

'Now, Your Worship, you see me sitting here in front of you alive and in an hour's time, maybe, someone will find my dead body. God knows what is going to happen to me.'

'But who is it, my friend?'

'The betyár, Your Worship.'

The notary frowned. He was well aware that these people were not to be trifled with.

'And he threatened you?'

'Oh no, Teher hasn't threatened me personally up to now.'

And the Mayor told the story of his visit to Homlók.

'He'll revenge himself on me, I know for certain he will. And a betyár's revenge is a terrible thing. Oh, why did my Ferencz send me to Homlók?' lamented the Mayor. 'I can see that my days are numbered.'

The notary scratched his head in perplexity. 'What about locking Teher up?'

'God forbid, Your Worship; that would only end in a nasty death.'

'Suppose I go and talk to him?'

'I'll give the priest two gulden to pray for you while you're there.'

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, the notary had to smile. 'I doubt whether he'll touch me. I'll go straight away. Where have they got the herd?'

'In Mérges* Valley.'

* 'Poison' (J. H.)

The notary set off on the instant, with the thanks of the Mayor in his ears.

On leaving the village, he climbed a little hill. Then he followed the path down to the oak-grove and the nearer he came to Mérges Valley, the more his courage ebbed. The brisk pace changed into a leisurely stroll. He lit a cigarette and proceeded slowly in the direction from which the barking of dogs and the grunting of pigs could be heard.

Today, as yesterday, Kigyó and Teher were lying in the shade of the oak-tree. Kigyó was snoring, stretched comfortably out on the loose earth, and Teher was smoking his pipe as he pondered his revenge.

Such was their disposition when the notary came upon them, and stood irresolutely under the oak-tree.

Teher prodded Kigyó and they both sat up.

'Good Day,' the notary greeted them, when he had approached as far as their outstretched feet.

'Good Day,' they answered casually.

Ill at ease in this atmosphere, the young notary began a conversation: 'You've found a nice place to lie in, I see.'

The dogs were leaping round him like mad things. Kigyó drove them off with his whip and lay down on the ground again.

'Not so terribly hot today,' the notary went on.

'You're right there,' said Teher. 'It isn't all that hot.'

The notary plucked up courage. 'I've come, friends, on the Mayor's behalf.'

Teher didn't say a word. Reassured by this, the community notary went on: 'The Mayor has found out by chance that his conversation with Homlók has been misunderstood. I've come to tell you in his name that when he said what he said it was just a sudden burst of irritation . . . under the influence, so to speak.'

'So that old soak's afraid of me, is he?' asked the young betyár, jumping up.

The question was put so directly that the notary could not but answer: 'Yes.'

'That's all right, then.'

'What am I to tell the Mayor?'

'Why, that everything's all right.' Teher's eyes flashed as he lay down under the tree again.

The notary went away reassured, but when he later reported the result of his mission to the Mayor, Nárva shook with despair on his

bench. 'When a betyár says that everything's fine, it means he's going to do what he's decided to do. Nothing can save me, Your Worship.'

When Teher told Homlók about the notary's visit that evening, old Homlók said calmly: 'But that doesn't mean you're not to take your revenge, my boy.'

'I'll get my revenge, Homlók,' said the betyár.

Summer went by, autumn passed, winter arrived and the whole countryside round about was covered in snow. In his little cottage on the edge of the village, Teher brooded on his revenge. Outside, the frost was glittering everywhere, but the fire of vengeance burned bright in Teher's heart. It warmed him as much as if he had put any number of logs in the fire that crackled in his hearth.

The Mayor meanwhile was petrified with fear. He felt like a condemned man who does not know when the executioner will come for him. If you slander a betyár, you can expect no mercy from him.

One winter's day, the Mayor went into town to make his will. He had put it off for a long time, but now at last . . .

And at the same moment as he arrived in the town, Teher entered it from the other side. During those days, he had not let the Mayor out of his sight.

Shrovetide was approaching. He needed to take his revenge and then get married. What form his revenge would take, he did not know, but he had sworn that it would be something brutal.

He missed the Mayor in town. In his annoyance, he went off to a tavern and did not leave it till evening, not long after the Mayor had set off for home.

Nárva had changed his mind about making his will, for no sooner had he entered the town than the warmth that emanated from a certain tavern proved so irresistible that he had gone in to warm up his frozen bones with a jar of wine. But once inside the tavern, he didn't stop at just one jug. He drank till evening and then emerged as night was falling over the snow-covered countryside.

Over towards the east, where his home village lay, it was already growing dark. The winter's night was coming steadily closer and closer from that side, while from the west a snowstorm was sweeping eastwards.

The befuddled Mayor was in no fit state to find his way. The wine

and the snow weighed his feet down.

His heavy fur coat became heavier still as the snow fell without interruption.

It settled on his moustache, melting in his warm breath and freezing into icicles under the lash of the freezing wind.

All around, there was nothing but snow and more snow, growing deeper and deeper and making it so very hard to walk.

His feet slithered in the soft snow and suddenly, he had fallen.

He tried to get up and managed to do so, but there was a sudden gust of wind and it was as if, from somewhere out there, a terrible fatigue had come upon him. Nárva fell face down into a pile of drifted snow.

The snow on his boots melted and as with his moustache, a skin of ice wrapped itself round his kneecaps.

He was unable to get up. He became dimly aware that he was freezing to death. Suddenly, it seemed to him that it was not winter; it was spring and he had lain down in the warmth of the sun on the edge of a wood . . .

And then someone was shaking him and lifting him and holding him to stop him falling. 'Come on, stir yourself, you old drunkard!'

'Leave me in peace,' grunted the Mayor, making an attempt to lie down in the snow again.

'I ought to leave you here to freeze,' growled a familiar voice, 'but I'm not going to.'

Strong hands grasped the Mayor under the armpits; the man was marching him off to his village.

He heard the cursing of whoever was carrying him and then fell asleep . . . He didn't wake up till he was home, wrapped up in his feather-bed.

'What happened?' he asked in astonishment.

'You lay down in the snow. Teher found you and brought you home,' replied his son Ferencz, putting a bottle of slivovic to his lips.

When the young betyár came back from the Mayor's house and told Homlók what had happened, old Homlók, the former betyár, could not hold back the tears.

'You waited long enough for your revenge,' he said, 'and it came. You youngsters are better men than us old ones. In your place, I would have left him lying there . . . But for all that, you're not getting Františka . . .'

And that is the betyár's tale.

And I swear that all the betyárs, the swineherds of the Badačon heights, be they *kondás* or *kanasz*,* behave in just this way.

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* Magyar words, both meaning 'swineherd'.