THE WELL OF TRENČÍN

By JOACHIM von SCHALSCHA-EHRENFELD

The following short story takes our readers to the Slovakia of the early fourteenth century when, under their wise King Matthias, the Slovaks reached the peak of their medieval history.

The same Carpathian Mountains which the Slovaks had then to defend against the Turks are now being fortified again, this time against the onslaught of the Red Army.—K.M.

WHEN Matthias Štúr—the legendary Kral Matthus Trenčianski of the Slovaks—had audaciously proclaimed himself King of Slovakia, the Turkish viceroy at Belgrade sent messengers to him to offer him an alliance. But the King did not wish to maintain his rule over a Christian country with the aid of the infidels and rejected the offer. In a rapid change of feeling the Turk decided to wage war on him, hoping quickly to conquer the young state, which was not yet properly organized and protected, indeed, not even recognized by its neighbors. In this way he intended to drive a deep wedge into the borderlands of the Christians between the sea and the great plains.

The King occupied the passes, sent out requests for aid to his neighbors, although without much hope, and kept his army in readiness, while small groups of his bold horsemen watched huge dust clouds rising over the plains of Hungary, dust clouds which indicated the approach of the hostile army.

The limestone rocks and needles on the ridges of the deep-green Carpathian Mountains glowed in the light of the sinking sun like countless pieces of rose-quartz, shining like distant lights into the foothills and the wide, silvery plain, while the shadows of the chasms drew sparse black contours in the smooth line of the summits. A troop of horsemen lay encamped between the last spurs of the mountain forest. Holding their horses by the reins, the men were staring out into the barren land where nothing seemed bold enough to stand up except the poles of a draw-well on the distant rim between heaven and earth. At their feet a cart track wound its way toward the forest land, and what were almost the last troops of the Turkish army were hurrying along it to catch up with the main body.

The horsemen were craning their necks and listening, half incredulously, to what the gipsy was saying who squatted beside their leader. “It is true, my lord,” he repeated, “you can hang me if I lie! In the sedan chair there, among the horsemen, is the young wife of the great Pasha of Belgrade. He has only this one wife, my lord, so help me God; he discharged all the women of his harem when Fatme came to him. She is beautiful, more beautiful even than the gipsy girls. She is not a Turk, she is from a distant tribe in the sand deserts. His warriors grumbled when he took her along on this campaign, but they hold their breath when they have seen the flower of the East; for the women of the desert do not wear the veil of the Turkish women!”

Ondrey, the leader, smiled at the swarthy man’s fervor. “Come and see me at Trenčín, Morre, there your news will be rewarded according to what it is worth. Now hold your tongue and leave.”

The horsemen mounted and moved cautiously through the trees toward the spot where the little troop surrounding the sedan would soon reach the forest. The leader counted his men and those of the opponent and calculated the distance to the next group of soldiers which could just be made out in the failing light. They stopped in the bushes close by the side of the road. “We’ll assemble again at the foot of the Snake Mountain. As soon as I have the woman in my saddle, scatter into the woods.”

Rapid hoof beats were approaching; the wild, flickering light of a few torches shone on the lacquered roof of the sedan, sparkled on the spears and armor of the bodyguards,
The scream of a falcon, and silently the Slovak horsemen broke cover, ran down the Turks and cut a path to the sedan chair. Three, four Turks rolled among the hoofs, the front horse of the sedan sank to its knees, dead. The torches went out, except for one, fizzling on the ground, but it did not become any darker. The red glow reflected from fifty blades, straight, heavy Christian swords and curved Turkish scimitars.

Ondrey cut down the leader of the Turks and tore the curtain from the sedan. The last torch flared up and, as if bewitched, he stared into the eyes of the woman. He slowly dropped his sword; he understood the enthusiasm of the gipsy, he understood the Pasha, he only could not understand why he did not fall off his horse to kiss the hands lifted avertingly against him. The light went out, and the clank and thud of the skirmish continued in the darkness. Now Ondrey threw his sword into the face of the nearest Turk, forced his horse close to the sedan, felt the warm, trembling body of the woman in his hands, a moment later against his breast, and tore away into the forest. His men held up the Turks for another instant or two; then they detached themselves and galloped off in all directions, just as Turkish reinforcements appeared from both sides. They found an empty, broken sedan chair, dead men, and groaning horses; they took up the pursuit of the Slovaks with torches and cries, but try riding at night through a forest you do not know!

The horse had carried the two along a steep slope, climbing through the cliffs and cautiously feeling its way along precipices. It had followed the tortuous trails made by wild animals, trotted across clearings and along narrow paths known only to huntsmen, stag, and bear. And now it was walking along a small road in a quiet valley, eager and alert. For the man in the saddle and the woman did not know where they were and paid no attention either to the path or to the silent mountains which bore the sky upon their shoulders.

In Fatme a world had collapsed; seas were raging where mountains had hitherto lain in stony tranquillity. At first, fear had seized her and alarm, for imprisonment was a hard fate, separated from the husband she loved; and she felt pain and anger at the rough hand that had torn her from the sedan as if she were a slave. But all that had faded before the radiant face of the man whose saddle she was sharing. Did he not like Ali, the hero, fall upon his guards, the best men of the army to whom the Pasha had entrusted his most precious possession? She had met viziers and pashas dressed in silk, gold, and pearls; this man wore a simple cuirass, yet he was a great person.

Not until the horse stood still did they become aware of their surroundings. The red glow shining through the trees was not the dawn: it was the torches of Turkish horsemen. Ondrey made the horse climb up the slope; they hid behind branches and watched the enemy pass by below. What clanked down there was her freedom and his death. The slightest sound from her would have been enough. Apprehensively he covered her mouth with his hand. She freed herself vigorously, but she remained silent; he saw her enigmatic smile. The clapping of the hoofs, the light of the torches, disappeared in the forest.

Toward morning they were high up in the mountains. The woman in her silk robes shuddered in the dewy air and from the coldness of his iron. He wrapped his riding cloak around her. She loosened a necklace of green stones from her neck and wrapped it twice around his left wrist.
THE following night half a score of dishevelled horsemen stopped at the mountain castle of Trenčín. While the bondmen disappeared into the stables and gate rooms, Ondrey led a slender cloaked figure to King Matthias, his uncle. The latter listened to Ondrey's report and silently regarded the woman, who timidly nestled up to the wolfskin covering the chair. Her eyes hung on Ondrey's mouth and, although she did not understand a word of his language, her heart throbbed when he told of the adventures of the night. "That is how I took her prisoner," Ondrey concluded. "Give me leave till tomorrow, and I shall take her to my castle above the Vladnitz valley." The King raised his hand: "In two hours you shall ride—not to the Vladnitz castle. Your bootsy is good, very good. Perhaps worth more than you know now and I—suspect. But she is not yours."

"Not mine?" Ondrey burst out, "I lifted her out of the sedan, I killed the leader—"

"Nothing is yours except the glory of the bold deed. Your bootsy belongs to your people, as do you and your life. You have something that may save all, and you want to keep it for yourself?" Ondrey lowered his eyes before the King's glance. He made a helpless movement and looked at Fatme, he kissed her hands once, twice, and turned back to the King: "Command me, I shall ride." Ondrey left the room, bowing to the King, bowing to Fatme as to a noble stranger.

She looked after him with surprise. The King took her hand and led her to his queen and her women, in whose special care he placed her. Then, for a long time, he walked up and down in his tower room, deep in thought. Below, Ondrey's horse thundered across the bridge. The King had the com­mander of the castle called: "Tomorrow toward noon a Turkish delegation will arrive, I know. You will receive them, politely but curtly. Fifty heavily armed men at the gate, twenty in the hall." The com­mander, to whom the King's knowledge seemed weird, left hastily; and the King remained alone with his thoughts and the restless crackling of the torch.

THE Turks arrived, and after long negotiations a strange treaty was signed at Trenčín, a treaty in which there was no mention of gold, territory, or military aid, but as a result of which a Turkish agha and ten horsemen were given quarters in the castle. With them came slaves, tools, and a master from Germany who knew the art of drilling wells. For the King, aware that gold and arms are transient and that treaties are made to be broken by the stronger, had devised a plan which left the precious pawn in his hand as long as possible. The Pasha was to have a well drilled in the castle on the mountain; up to its completion, however, Fatme was to remain under the care of the King. In this way the King and his country were safe from the Turks for many years, and later he would be strong enough to protect it himself: for with the means available in those days it was regarded as almost impossible to carry out this project. Meanwhile he undertook to keep the woman in strict seclusion.

The paving of the inner court was torn up, earth began to pile up, and soon the picks were striking against the hard limestone. A windlass was erected over the shaft and a bucket made its first journey down on a clattering chain. Only at rare intervals was it pulled up filled with stones. The rock was hard, and the slaves took their time. The agha and the warriors guarding the slaves had their eyes more on the windows and gates, on everything happening in the court and on the stairs. The rock was hard and, when the slaves appeared on the surface in the evenings to be locked up in the Turks' house, their trip through the air had grown only a few chain links longer.

The King saw this with a smile; but he also saw how the fat agha, chatting sociably with everybody and finding out important little details about the castle and its life, showed an interest in many other things the King did not care for. And one evening, when the agha was trying to discover how many yards of rope were needed to get to the ground from the rear wall, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. "Ah, oh, beau­tiful—just going for a walk," he stammered, taken by surprise. "The air of Trenčín does not seem to agree with you, O Agha, your gait is unsteady and you are confusing forbidden walls and paths with your guard's room. You had better ask to be relieved before your illness grows worse and costs you your life."

THE fat man disappeared a few days later, and when the new agha reported for duty the King looked into a noble face with burning eyes that matched the clothes of a subordinate officer as poorly as did his careful language. But courtesy forbade questions, and the King's suspicion
could find no fault with him except that he speeded up the work in a most unwelcome manner. The agha spoke with no one, drove off the gaping people with a gesture showing that he was accustomed to being obeyed, asked no questions, and did nothing he was not permitted to do. Yet there was something peculiar about this lean man with the slender hands and arrogant lips. Did got the Turks bow lower, did they not follow his orders more quickly than would have seemed necessary with a man of his rank? Did not a courier from the Pasha arrive every month with heavy bags filled with parchments, which the messenger spread before the agha in convolutions lasting through the night, filling pages at his dictation with curly Arabic signs, to gallop off southward again at the following dawn?

Many riddles were spun around the Turk, and his predilection for the building of the well was not the least among them. It was not only that during the day he drove the slaves till they were frantic: even at night he sat on the rocks beside the shaft, looking across the top of the wall to the mountain ridges which stood like a frozen wave in the moonlight, and twanged a few cords on the three-stringed tambur. And one night he sang a song in the language of the great desert, which nobody in the castle understood beside him, except the woman, who leaned against the bars of her window with a fluttering heart.

"Beautiful is the flower of the Sirhan,
Like the gazelle
Fleeing gracefully before the rider
Like a palm swaying in the desert wind
Her curls swing across her breasts,
In which her heart beats:
O Lord of my tent,
O my husband!
Faithful is the dove of the Sirhan,
She knows her hero
Surrounded by a thousand enemies,
And she does not glance at the young man
Who radiantly gallops off
On his swift charger.
Her foot moves lightly
Over the green meadows in the valley
And yet it does not leave the path
Trodden by the hoofs of her camel
In the sand.
Beautiful is the flower of the Sirhan and faithful."

Ceaselessly the chisels picked away in the shaft, the chain screeched, the windlass turned under unwilling fists. No one stopped to watch any more when the slaves were raised from the shaft in the evening, standing with their feet in the bucket and clinging to the chain with their arms, when they stretched their backs and took deep gulps of the good, cool air. Many of them, however, came up as limp bundles, tied to the bucket, and were quietly carried away. For the air was bad down there, and the speed of the work made the heart race and throb in wild leaps. But for every one who perished, another man slid down the following daybreak.

Day after day the agha stood beside the windlass, counting with impatient patience the turns that were necessary to bring the bucket up. Always his greedy eyes saw only gray limestone coming up, without a trace of dampness in it. Hour after hour his eyes sought out the shadow at the barred window; then the creases around his mouth became deeper, the movement of his hands more hasty.

Fatme, too, was counting the buckets, and her heart swayed between desire and will, like the top of a fir tree in the mountain wind; for as different as the tree top and the root are the emotions of a woman and a man. Now she trembled with fear to hear the cries of joy of the slaves in the well, to see a dripping bucket hoisted by the chain; then she felt that she must leave, that she could no longer stand it at the castle; and yet it was bliss to her to look at the people in the courtyard who were so alike and so dissimilar to him whose horse had carried her one night. Then again she desired only to return to the white city across the two rivers or to the distant deserts, so that she might never see him again—and stood at the window, waiting for the hour when he should cross the courtyard. Her eyes shone, while her mouth whispered bitter words: "Beautiful is the dove of the Sirhan and faithful."
ONDREY rarely came to Trenčín, he avoided the place where he knew the woman he loved to be. Like a badly tamed hawk he sat in his little castle above the Vladičina valley, and only the adventure of a bear hunt could entice him from his tower. There was no lack of those in the Tatra Mountains, so that his step was as swift, his hand as sure as ever, when he crossed the court on this day.

He stopped beside the agha, rested his hand on a beam of the windlass, and measured the depth. A bracelet of green stones slipped out of his sleeve on to the back of his hand; he pushed it back and left. He did not notice the Turk beside him turn pale and clutch his dagger. The agha followed him with a look that made the blood freeze in the veins of the old supervisor. And the supervisor was, by Allah, accustomed to everything a long life during wild times had to offer.

Ondrey, however, noticed nothing, rode off to the Vladičina castle, and did not return. No one, not his horsemen, not herdsman nor charcoal burners, not the bears nor the stags, the eagles, the fir trees or the white waters of the Vladičina stream, which leaps down from the flower garden of the Križna slope, could tell where he had gone. The King had inquiries and searches made, and ordered his officers to keep a watch on the roads and borders; but too manifold in dress and origin were those who moved along the roads for the soldiers to be able positively to recognize one of them.

This occurred during the fifth year of the construction of the well. Nothing had changed: the screeching windlass still stood over the shaft, the agha still stood beside it with the same regularity with which the sun rises in the east. Only the row of silent mounds at the foot of the hill had become longer, very long, and the hair over the King's forehead had grown grayer. Heavily he felt the loss of his nephew, who was to have been the heir of all his work and hopes.

"For whom am I exerting myself?" Matthias thought, as he looked one autumn morning from his tower across the misty country. His right hand lay heavily on a pile of coarse papers: here the German towns of the Zips region promised men and arms, the prince of Transylvania sealed an alliance, gold was promised by the noble senate of San Marco if the war with Turkey should break out. He firmly grasped the crackling parchments: now the Turk could find water, if God so willed it.

Again the question arose: "For whom?" His eyes turned toward the town on the bank of the river; he did not love the townspeople, but he protected and looked after them, for they were needed for the country. The wooded mountains, from which the frugal castles of the nobility looked out, seemed to have moved closer in the silvery autumn mist, hemming in the plowed land; in the fields, peasants were moving about in their white clothes. Everywhere he could see the tiny white dots, carrying in the last of the harvest, crowding at the fringes of the forest, working at their huts and fences, and galloping around their herds. The answer to his question came from the country itself.

The noise of the windlass, which had become part of daily life, turned his thoughts in another direction. The clergy had been remonstrating, pleading, threatening, his father confessor kept on bringing up the matter. The bishop had demanded that he renounce the treaty; he was not concerned with political considerations, all he knew was that it was a sin to tolerate such cruel slavery under his very eyes. Matthias looked across his country again. If it is a sin, he thought, I am willing to take it upon myself for you. Those poor fellows must die so that you may live. And every day longer is a precious gift.

Later, when he walked across the court and, after having been greeted by the agha with a deep bow, looked into the shaft, it took his eyes some time before they could make out the figures at the bottom as they were revealed and hidden again by the swaying bucket coming up by the seemingly endless chain. Beside the well stood a slave who had arrived the day before with one of the many groups of replacements constantly being sent by the Pasha. Knives and red-hot irons had left little in his face that could still be recognized as human, and he had been brought here to die in the well. For in addition to physical tortures the men in Belgrade knew also how to apply well-considered mental tortures to punish each one according to his merit. When the King approached, the slave felt the point of a dagger between his shoulder blades and heard a voice whisper: "You will die at the first word or first step!" Obediently he looked to the ground, smiled painfully, and
thought: "Not with a single glance will I divert him from his path and endanger the treaty protecting our country." The slave did not lift his head until he heard the well-known step move away; he saw the King disappear into the door leading to the tower. Then he stepped into the bucket and grasped the chain with both hands.

Before he sank down into the gray shaft, the slave sent up one more glance. A woman in love cannot be deceived; her eyes widened in terror, and she opened her mouth to say something. But her lips closed again; the agha had seen it and smiled. Henceforth the slaves remained in the well.

THE work went on with noisy machines, cracking whips, racing picks. More often now the buckets came to the top, but more and more often, too, was their load carried down the mountain path, and those who met the bearers looked aside. More and more furious and shrill grew the rhythm of the work, which only stopped for a few hours at night, more terrible with every hour, until, in a dazzling noon hour, a confused clamor arose, a roar shook the foundations of the buildings, and people emerged hastily from rooms and courts, running toward the well. King Matthias looked down from the window in the tower just as the agha lifted a slopping bucket from the chain, raised it high up for everyone to see, and slowly poured out its contents: "God is great!"

The Pasha granted all the slaves their freedom, so the agha announced, and would fill their hands with gold. Never before had the buckets moved up and down so quickly, never before had there been such willing hands at the windlass as now, when Turks, slaves, and people from the castle, freed of a terrible weight, stood side by side, laughing, and tore at the wheels. One after another the men, dripping wet, were hoisted up from the shaft, the last but two, the last but one, now the last one hung suspended by the chain in the shaft.

Fatme had looked at each one, as through all the days and nights she had looked with a beating heart at each one who came to the top. When she realized that the mutilated one would be the last, she did not take her eyes off the agha; for she knew the people of her country and her time. The agha stood among the rejoicing crowd, closest to the rim of the shaft, and was holding one of the freed men by the shoulder.

Now he waved at the last man hanging by the chain, leaned out too far over the side, swayed, and was pulled back just in time by many helpful hands. But a pile of broken rock lying beside the rim started to slip and fall, rumbling and cracking down the shaft.

Once more two men had to go down. After some hard work they brought up a few buckets of stone and a battered body. The agha asked the King's leave and galloped off with his horsemen into the sinking night.

A messenger at the gate of Trenčín: the Pasha asked for a safe-conduct for a hundred horsemen; he wished himself to take home the woman for whom his heart had been pining for so many years.

A few weeks later a colorful procession moved over the mountains. Cymbals and trumpets resounded, the crescents under the flowing horse tails rattled, the peasants timidly lined the way and stared at the gorgeous foreign horsemen from whom they were otherwise accustomed to hide in the forests and wilderness. The Pasha had sweets and silver coins tossed among the children in the villages.

When he rode into the courtyard of Trenčín with his guard of honor, King Matthias passed his hand across his eyes in surprise; but he did not have time to follow his thought to its end. The Pasha demanded first to see the well, which was the symbol of unutterable bitterness and a supreme will. He leaned over the side, dipped his finger into the bucket that was hoisted up, regarded the shaft, the walls, and the people with an all-embracing glance. Only at the one window, which was in no way distinguished from the others, did his eye remain fixed for a few seconds longer. King Matthias saw this. "You have risked much—and suffered much," he said. "It is God's will," replied the Turk.

In the great hall of the castle, through whose wide-arched windows the eyes could see far into the land, the woman was handed over to the Pasha before the assembled nobles of the country. He went forward a few steps to meet her, took her hand, and said a few words which the others did not understand; but they all saw how the reflection of his smile brightened up the stony face of the woman.

As a sign of hospitality the Pasha accepted a goblet of water and found words to express
the hope that he might live in undisturbed peace with the mighty king of these heroes; he regretted—a shade too verbose—the cruel fate that had robbed this king and his country of their heir.

The King lowered his head. Of course, this was exactly the scene he had imagined in that night during the Turkish war when Ondrey had brought the woman who now stood in all the ravishing beauty of the Orient beside the Pasha of Belgrade. But he whom he had at that time imagined at the right of his throne, he was missing today. With a sigh, he raised his head and looked down upon his country. Yet with the un-failing instinct of a great judge of human nature, his ear was listening for the imperceptible ring of insincerity in the voice of the Turk, whose proud, martial features seemed to be the truest mirror of his thoughts.

In the dusk of evening, when the sounds of the fiery Turkish music lost themselves behind the hills, King Matthias stood on the Tower of Trenčín. In the west the slender red crescent of the setting new moon hung suspended in the sky. He regarded it, deep in thought. He knew that the coming spring would bring war.

**BOOK REVIEW**

Ancestor-Worship and Japanese Law, by Baron Nobushige Hozumi. (Tokyo, 1910, The Hokusaido Press, 205 pp., Yen 2.50.)

This work of Baron Hozumi, a lawyer of international fame at the beginning of this century, has been revised and republished by his son who, by means of this contribution to his own ancestor-worship, presents us with an interesting treatise on how much the cult—rather than the religion—of ancestor-worship has influenced public as well as private life in Japan. Whereas Confucianism was favorable to the growth of this custom, Buddhism—which is antagonistic to it—wisely adapted itself to the national practice, while the introduction of Western civilization had no influence on the beliefs of the people. The author arrives at the following conclusion:

"If mankind in their primitive stage had been entirely destitute of filial devotion or parental love, if their life had been the life of egoism and not of love and sympathy, the human race would have been extinct long ago, and this world would have become the world of wolves and tigers."

It is a pity that many Christians see in ancestor-worship an infringement of the first Commandment instead of the fulfillment of the fifth Commandment to honor one's parents; for, after all, the ancestral spirit is not regarded as having become a god but can well be compared to the Christian dogma of the immortal soul.

The unwritten law to keep special sanctum, even in the poorest homes, where the deceased members of the family are re"member"ed daily and venerated on regular dates gives the mortal being a greater feeling of immortality than our Western style of only remembering the departed ones in our hearts. Are they not also worth a corner in our houses and a minute of our devotion on certain anniversaries, all the more so as very few can arrange a pilgrimage to the graves of their parents, much less remember the birth dates of their grandparents.

It is surprising that the centripetal force of ancestor-worship, which draws distant relatives together and binds them into a community, should be so fully disregarded by all Western organizations, especially as it approaches so closely to the new German ideas of race and soil. Moreover, it would give the individual the consolation as well as an obligation in the realization that he is only a link in a long, long chain.

Such are the thoughts which arise in the mind of the reader of the book which, incidentally, was also cited by Professor Fujisawa during his lectures in Shanghai in 1913.—G. A. Voss.

**A Letter to the Editor**

Sir:

Nobody read with greater interest the article "The Russians in East Asia" which appeared in the May issue of "The XXth Century" than the members of the Russian community in Shanghai. It was felt, however, that the addition of several facts and names would round out and complete the picture which Colonel Nikolayev’s article gave.