

COUNT LÁSZLÓ SZÉCHÉNYI

*Visions of Utopia*

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**Visions of Utopia**  
*by* Count László Széchenyi

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WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY:

**U T O P I A**

*"A place in which there is sociopolitical perfection"*



## PROLOGUE

### VISIONS OF UTOPIA

Don't we all, from time to time, revel in the beauty of our dreams when they are shrouded in a barely visible mist of joy, love, and eternal happiness which we know can exist only in that untouchable realm of our imagination?

Yet some dreams have a way of impressing themselves on our minds as if they were indeed founded on the rock-solid ground of reality. We hear the voices, feel the sweet fragrance of the early spring, smell the soft aroma of the budding rose; we live the fears, the love, the triumphs or defeats of a real moment in life. Is such a dream truly a dream, or is it a subconscious manifestation of a longed-for life-experience which resides deeply hidden in the innermost reaches of our soul?

Haven't we all, at one time or another, let our imagination carry us away unto a higher level of living where we would be free of the day-to-day worries of the human experience, feeling only the purest joy, the contentedness and well being we so deeply desire?

We tend to force ourselves back to reality because in our well conditioned, orderly, rational minds, we know fully well that such a level exists only in the unreal world of the most hidden realms of our being. We never give up wanting to reach it though; we see it as our private Heaven.

Yet, that deeply desired objective probably has a unique definition for every one of us. Some see it as an eternal goal, something always to be striving for, but probably never to reach. Others may be searching for it all their lives, not really being able to define what it is they are seeking. For yet someone else it might represent the highest peak of an existence, a peak once known, but long abandoned because of the inevitable forces of gravity.

One person's Heaven might, indeed, be the other's Hell.

Yet we cherish this eternal objective, because without it, life would indeed be a long empty road. It is only human nature to always strive for the next higher

platform, because deep down we never cease to believe that our real happiness must be on the level just ahead!

Fate is merciful in hiding the contents of the future from us. Otherwise we might despair, we might succumb to the many trials, setbacks, the suffering we experience as we struggle along the long climb to that peak of our imagination, to that place which we long for, to that place which only we can define: our own, personal ..... UTOPIA!

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## PARADISE

### 1.

The icy wind howled through the bending branches of the big white birch tree, void of the golden leaves now, which, it seemed, lit up its majestic crown only yesterday.

The tall double French windows were tightly closed, the heavy brown satin curtains drawn so they would only let in a minute ray of the gray early morning light. Yet the wind penetrated through with a menacing sound causing alarm in the half-awake mind of the boy who hung on to the last remaining shreds of a pleasant dream.

"Morning to ya, young sire. Now don't you dare get out from under that blanket... the death of a cold ya'll catch... with that nasty wind blowing like it wants to chase the devil out of hell... and so early it is this year... just when we're getting ready for the big celebration on November 14th... oops, I almost let the cat out of the bag... with your birthday coming up in a day or two... and all that fuss over what your favorite cake is, and just how you like your fried chicken and french fries... but I shouldn't be tellin'ya all this should I... old windbag that I am..." And so she chatted on while dumping a shovel full of red-hot embers into the cast-iron door of the shiny, brown-tiled wood burning stove in the corner.

I loved old Marcy. She was always good for a little chat to find out the best-held secrets of the household and she was never short of words when describing just exactly who said what to whom. And she didn't make any secrets out of her opinions either, what with "That thickhead of a kitchen maid carrying on with the young butler right under the nose of chief cook and her not even noticing that she peeled the potatoes right down to the thickness of a chicken finger. Serves her right when she was caught. Potatoes don't grow on trees, you know!"

Marcy was the children's maid, old in my eyes then, but with sort of an ageless, wrinkled but lively face, full of vitality, with sparkling eyes which never missed a thing. Her graying hair was usually smoothed back in a neat flat wave, culminating in a tight braided bun on the back of her head. Marcy wore long dark dresses which almost reached the floor but made her look taller than her somewhat bent back would have allowed. She was never stingy with a benevolent smile, showing her not so straight and not so white teeth. She cleaned our rooms, looked after our clothing, mended our socks. She went to bed early. We rarely saw her after dinner.

But she never failed to show up at 7:00 in the morning with those hot embers to put under the crackling pine logs so that a half hour later I could safely risk crawling out from under the heavy down blanket and avoid "catching my death of a cold." I always wondered how early she must have gotten up to produce hot embers by 7:00, and when I asked her once she said: "Now don't you fret over stuff like that. A sad day it would be when old Marcy didn't have the strength to build a little fire to keep her young sire warm... you just go on and do your studyin' and leave the embers to me."

The winter of 1938 settled upon the great house like the fur of a giant polar bear, but I loved the snow, the pure whiteness, the quiet, the magic of it all. Nothing could be better than putting on one's snow suit, heavy boots, the fur gloves, and the pointed, red-tousled woolen cap which my mother knitted for me the year before.

We all had the same light blue snow suits; my oldest sister Marie-Antoinette whom we called Etti, (rhymes with "Betty") my brother Francis, called by the Hungarian diminutive of that name: Ferko, my younger sister Kornelia, nicknamed Lia ("Leeah") and me. Etti rarely joined us anymore, because she considered herself "too old for these kids' games" and spent most of her time studying and reading. Etti had straight dark hair which she wore down to her shoulders, neatly combed with straight bangs across her forehead. Her deep blue eyes, which most of us inherited from our father, had a most kind, friendly look, and her thin lips radiated an outgoing smile that quickly attracted everyone who met her. Her somewhat square shaped face reflected a quiet beauty and conveyed a calm, and good-hearted nature. At age 13, she held the position of the first-born in our family with quiet, natural dignity. Etti was my favorite sister, ever since I could remember.

Ferko, the second-born of our family of seven, was a good looking rascal, if I've ever seen one. About a year younger than Etti, he was nevertheless the first-born son in the family, and that carried a lot of weight in those days. His wavy

blond hair crowned a narrow face full of mischief, but his piercing blue eyes, topped by blond eyebrows, could create a deep look that befuddled most everyone, especially the female of the species. He was an artist in more ways than one; wrote poetry at an early age, produced many kinds of clever carvings using wood or even peach pits as the basis for small brooches, rings, and so forth. His narrow lips bore an easy-going smile when he turned on the charm, but they could also take on a rather serious smirky expression when he was contemplating some serious subject. He loved horse-back riding, hunting, and all kinds of gymnastics. As a result, he proudly showed off biceps and leg muscles of considerable size for his age and rarely missed an opportunity to let everyone see his abilities on the rings or the parallel bars. I respected him, although there was a certain resentment in me towards the older brother who was always miles ahead of everything I ever did. Etti and Ferko spent the school year at my grandmother Christa's house in the Great Plains of Hungary, so I only saw them during summer vacations and religious holidays like Christmas and Easter.

Lia was born about two and a half years before me. Because she was the nearest to me in age, she was also my closest companion, playmate, self-appointed leader and unwitting antagonist. She had our mother's gray-green eyes, offset by long brown eyelashes and eyebrows. When upset, she could look down her longish, straight nose at you with a stern expression, pressing her thin lips together until they were almost white. Her smile was, however, brightened by a set of gleaming white teeth and her pretty face was framed by beautiful, brown, naturally curly hair. She was rather tall and lean of stature, very agile in sports, and always full of radiating energy. Strong-willed, she rarely hesitated when it came to making any kind of decision. Lia was a natural leader. She loved to take over whenever the slightest occasion presented itself for her to air her opinions. She would tolerate very little opposition. Her vitality, her drive and willful character gave all of us plenty to do. There weren't too many dull moments with Lia around.

The snow was wet and so we immediately started to throw snowballs at each other, but having tired of that after a while we rolled some balls in the snow and watched them with glee as they began to grow. With each roll the ball would get thicker, heavier, until it was almost impossible to move. Just the perfect size to form the basis of a snowman. The next ball would be carefully rolled to be small, light enough to lift up on the first one. Lia and Ferko would pat the joint between them to make sure of a nice smooth surface. I got busy rolling the third ball and, of course, made it too big so that we couldn't lift it.

"You knuckle head! You can't do anything right, but since you're just a baby, I guess it's O.K.," Lia sneered at me. She never missed an opportunity to let me know of her superior position, being older and bigger. She felt absolutely in

charge. I let it go because it wasn't worth getting into a fight, and I really wanted to finish building the snowman.

Pretty soon we had him looking like he was supposed to, round, fat and ready to have his face developed into the work of art which I knew it would be when we finished. But what to use now? Again, Lia took the lead, and she said: "Let's go ask Cook if she has something we can use".

And so we trotted over to the other side of the great house and knocked on the sub-basement window which opened from the huge kitchen to the back park. Our cook opened it and greeted us with a smile:

"And who do I have to thank for the honor of this visit? You can't be hungry again. I just sent you your breakfast a little while ago."

"No, no," we said both at the same time. "We just need something to put into the face of our snowman... what do you think we should use?"

"Well now, we may be able to think of something there... how about two pieces of wood-coal for his eyes, a nice carrot for his nose, a slice of a red apple for his mouth and... let's see now, yeah, he needs ears too doesn't he? What if I give you some orange peels? You can bend them into shape, I'm sure."

"That's wonderful! Oh you are an angel Aunt Ilonka." I said, and Lia chimed in, "Yes, but we need something to make his coat buttons with."

"Now I think two or three little potatoes might do just fine" said Aunt Ilonka, and with that we took off to complete the most beautiful snowman anyone could possibly imagine.

We loved Aunt Ilonka not only for her cooking art, but as a person because she radiated kindness and understanding toward us children. She was a bit heavy-set, like all good cooks, and wore the customary dark, full-length, pleated skirts of the time. She combed her hair straight back, and tied it in a big knot held in place by a thick comb in the back. I remember her dark eyes, always smiling when she looked at me, and her soft voice as she offered me the best tidbits from her magic pots and pans. The long white or blue apron was a standard part of her dress. Only on Sundays would I see her without it when she would appear in church all decked out in her colorful, traditional Hungarian folk costume, her head covered by a heavy silk scarf tied under her chin.

Aunt Ilonka's husband was my father's chief butler. We called him Uncle Gyuri (sounds like "Jury") because "Uncle" and "Aunt" in Hungarian is used by

the young to address anyone of the older generation and it expresses due respect for one's elders. Uncle Gyuri, like Aunt Ilonka, was always kind to us children. They were always ready to help and encourage us in our myriad little projects. In our eyes, Aunt Ilonka was the world's best cook, and Uncle Gyuri knew absolutely everything about anything you could ever ask him. He had a marvelous sense of humor too, once I asked him where the macaroni tree was, since my father had told me that macaronis grow on trees, and he said without a second's hesitation: "Why, it's right down there behind the chicken coop; the big tree with the long thin leaves hanging down all the way to the ground." Which was, of course, a big old weeping willow tree under which we played all the time, pretending that its branches formed a huge tent.

Servants were, in those days, an absolute necessity. To manage a big manor house like ours would have been quite impossible without them. My parents owned not only the house, but a sizable estate of agricultural land and forests around it. It was, indeed, a big business and needed many people to make it function as the self-sufficient, productive agricultural entity that it was. The products of the estate naturally found their way into the country's economy, and the estate, as numerous others like it, provided the basis for the country's prosperity and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors. Hungary was a major exporter of agricultural products. My father was the top manager of the agricultural and forestry business, whereas my mother had the full responsibility of managing the household and raising the children. She was also very active in many activities promoting the status and social welfare of everyone who worked on the estate. We had two butlers whose main job was to assist my father by taking care of his clothing, rooms, schedule, etc. But they were also in charge of the meal service and general supervision of the maids and kitchen help. Aunt Ilonka, the cook, was totally in charge of the kitchen, and in those days that meant an awful lot of manual work. There were very few kitchen utensils and gadgets. Most everything was done by hand. Butter, cheese, jams, and bread were all hand made at home. Only staples like sugar and salt were purchased in town. There were three kitchen maids helping Aunt Ilonka in preparing all the food and in keeping the kitchen spick and span.

I liked Uncle Gyuri best when he served the meals in the formal dining room in his elegant red and blue livery with the gold buttons and stiff collar. His white gloves were always impeccable as he offered the trays of food to each of us individually. Always from the left, and he was so patient when I couldn't quite pick up the piece of roast I wanted, or couldn't get the mashed potatoes off the sticky silver spoon. When I wasn't quite sure whether I was allowed to take the juiciest piece of meat, I would just watch the motion of the tray, if it moved up and down ever so slightly I knew it was O.K., the grown-ups weren't looking, but if it moved left-right just a bit, I'd better behave!

In those days it was quite customary to provide those servants who were closest to the noble family with liveries and uniforms usually reflecting the colors of the family's coat of arms or ancestral crest. The Széchenyi family's colors were red and blue. These were worn by butlers, coachmen and stable-boys, especially on those occasions when guests and relatives were invited to the estate at the time of the great hunts or holidays.

Uncle Gyuri looked particularly impressive when he wore his livery. The colors were accentuated by his smoothly combed, short-cut snow-white hair framing his serious, roundish face. He had small, somewhat slanted eyes which seemed to move back and forth very quickly, taking in every detail of his surroundings. He moved silently, efficiently, courteously. His voice was deep and he used it at low key with us or with my parents, but he could be quite forceful when he took over the leading role of any activity where the other servants were involved. He wasn't a tall man, rather stocky and strong, exerting power and strength where needed, and possessing a surprising gentility when dealing with children or animals. He was our family's oldest and most loyal servant, having served my father since his childhood.

His daughter, Juci, (Yootsie) became my mother's personal maid when she finished her schooling and was old enough to start working. That was, of course, a privileged position among the servants because she not only took care of my mother's rooms, clothing, etc., but she was also an assistant when it came to planning and executing the many tasks of the household. It took quite a bit of planning and management to assure the constant availability of sufficient food, linen, cleaning materials, fuel for heating, drinking water, dishes, utensils; not to mention scheduling the maintenance and cleaning work which had to be done constantly to keep the manor in tip-top shape. Juci was young, strong, and she had dark hair, done up in a more modern hairdo, indulging even in an occasional permanent wave setting administered by the only beauty shop in town. She was the spit and image of her father, having the same small sharp eyes and roundish face along with a stocky figure, full of energy. Juci always wore colorful, neat, modern dresses but covered them with a spotless white apron with lace around the edges, which was, after all, a well deserved adornment of her position.

I remember the big day when Juci married a tall, slender young man named Zoli (Zowly). He looked so somber with his narrow, bony face, bulging round eyes, long, narrow nose and thin, hard-set lips. He moved a bit awkwardly, too. One had the feeling that his long legs somehow got in the way when he tried to advance. But Juci looked very happy, and that was the most important thing. We had way too much to eat during the typical Hungarian peasant wedding feast which lasted three solid days. There was a lot of dancing, singing, and merriment.

Even my father came to wish the young couple well, and to say a few words to the gathered family and friends. My mother spent quite a bit of time at the festivities, having helped Aunt Ilonka considerably with the planning and preparations. Our parents' participation in a servant-family's feast was quite exceptional in those times, another example of how they tried to make everyone feel that our estate was one unit, where everyone had his or her position and function, but a solid entity just the same. The servants and workers really appreciated this and showed it through their loyalty to our family. It was a fun time.

Since Uncle Gyuri really needed an assistant, Zoli was put in training as a butler's helper. Secretly, we kids had loads of fun watching him blundering his way through a difficult meal service when we had guests. He was always so embarrassed and never quite sure of what to do. Even my father, who never said anything bad about anyone, admitted that Zoli wasn't exactly the brightest person in the world.

One day the telephone rang way down at the other end of the long corridor in the North Wing (there was only that one telephone in the house at that time). After many rings we heard heavy footsteps approaching down the corridor; finally a gentle knock on my father's smoking room door. "Come in" father said, and the door opened slowly, Zoli came in, bowed, turned to gently close the door, then bowed again, and announced:

"Sir, I respectfully report that the telephone is ringing..."

It was most difficult not to burst out laughing, but my father's stern look in our direction kept us quiet. He just said: "Thank you Zoli, please pick it up and ask who is calling." I was always amazed at my father's perfect self control. It just wouldn't do to ever let people see one's true feelings in a situation like that. He did, however, allow himself a broad grin after Zoli departed.

2.

My father was the kindest person I'd ever met. His generous heart reached out towards anyone who approached him, but he was, of course, attached most closely to my mother and all of us children. He was brought up as a perfect gentleman and that meant total respect for the individual, regardless of economic, racial or social standing. He treated his mother with particular respect because he staunchly believed in due respect to one's elders. His absolute courtesy and love towards our mother was contagious. His adoration of all his children glowed in his deep sky-blue eyes. He demanded absolute respect from us, but never had to say so, because we learned by his example. I don't remember him ever having raised his voice with any of us children when our behavior was less than acceptable. His piercing eyes would fix on us and he would explain in a kind but firm voice that the right way was in a different direction.

One day Lia and I got into a real knock-down, drag-out battle about who was going to ride which bike, both having preferred the new one, of course, and we were late getting to lunch looking like two roosters with plucked feathers after a viscous cock-fight. My father just looked at us with his intense blue eyes, and said:

"Now what was this all about?"

And when we told him, completely out of breath, both talking at the same time, he said in a quiet but serious tone of voice:

"I don't want you to ever fight like this again. Nobody wins. Just pick two helms of grass, one shorter than the other, and one of you hide one in each hand. The other then has to choose one of your hands, and if it contains the long grass, that person can ride the new bike first."

He was a striking figure in his gala Hungarian nobleman's uniform, with the tight, dark blue velvet pants folded into a pair of shiny narrow riding boots with silver spurs on the heels; the rose-colored embroidered silk jacket with the gold buttons starting from the high, tight collar, going straight down the entire front; the heavy black leather belt studded with semi-precious stones; the dark velvet cape with its gold braided edgings; the heavy fur cap adorned with a long, white, eagle feather held in place by a large ruby, set in a round wreath; and best of all, the long crescent-shaped saber, dangling from the belt in its black leather and silver scabbard, decorated with fine etched motifs. The white gloves were, more often than not, just held in his hands, more for decoration than for any use. But it

was all topped off by the elaborate silk scarf, worn around the high collar, tied in a big bow, decorating half of his chest.

He wore this only on very special and festive occasions, such as weddings of relatives or functions of the State. We adored the photograph which showed him wearing the uniform, a tall dashing young man, his dark hair combed straight back, his narrow face set in somber lines, but his eyes, framed by rather thick dark eyebrows, and his sensitive mouth radiating great pride and happiness; and at his side a lovely young bride, our mother, in her heavy, white lace wedding dress. We kidded him sometimes about his rather pronounced, round nose, but he retorted with good-natured humor, and a bit of wisdom: "Yes, you are right, but I can smell a rotten egg from a mile."

At home he always dressed very elegantly. He would not go out of the house without a tie and a jacket, even on the hottest summer days. He had suits for many occasions and invariably wore the one best fitted for the moment. He told us that a neat appearance demanded respect and, in turn, showed respect to those one dealt with. He always wore a hat which he would lift in greeting to anyone he met during the day. His favorite working outfit was a khaki colored light suit with green velvet edges around the collar and lapels, pants tucked into a pair of green socks just below the knees, brown leather shoes, and a green tie sporting hand stitched images of some kind of game; pheasants one day, deer the next, etc. He was an impressive figure. Everyone loved him.

Father's smoking salon was our favorite place after meals with its heavy, most comfortable, brown leather furniture, the big fireplace with its carved dark oak-wood frame and mantle, the heavy oak paneling which contained a series of large built-in pictures. They were all lovely charcoal drawings of forest scenes by the well known artist of hunting scenes, Riedinger; the great deer proudly carrying their heavy antlers and the does and kids lying about in the underbrush.

This room was situated at the end of the long corridor leading in from the main entrance hall of the manor. Entering the hall through the main gate, one faced a stairway to the second floor as well as a huge fireplace carved in dark wood, a perfect match with the paneling which continued all around the hall. I loved to look at the antique leather case on the mantelpiece of the fireplace. It contained a pair of long barreled old fashioned pistols with their small, oval shaped, silver gunpowder containers, and the manually operated striking hammer. They looked like something straight out of the old pirate books I used to read, and I let my imagination fly whenever I looked at them and dared to secretly touch their long, smooth barrels.

But my favorite was the huge dark bronze tiger with its immense mouth wide open, showing a scary set of viciously sharp teeth as it held its prey to the ground with one powerful paw. The tiger greeted everyone who entered the hall, standing there on a large, wood-carved chest at the foot of the great stairs.

The lower half of the corridor's walls was also paneled in dark wood. The upper half was heavily decorated with hunting trophies, mainly stuffed heads of the elk-like Carpathian deer with their stately antlers sticking up towards the ceiling. Their dark, glass eyes seemed to follow everyone passing under them.

A small set of stairs at the end of the corridor led into the "Smoking Salon". This room was also decorated heavily with trophies, such as the smaller pointed antlers of the common Roe deer, some stuffed heads of the beautiful Hungarian pheasant and the Auerhahn of the Austrian Alps. Each trophy had an inscription of the date and place it came from. We kids often laughed at a name below some lovely black, hook-like antlers of the Austrian Gamsbock: FUSCHL AM SEE. What a funny sounding name!

The big Orion radio in the corner always played soft classical music or Viennese waltzes. Father sat smoking his cigarettes, reading the newspaper, and Mother always knitted, crocheted, or did some kind of needle work. She often didn't even have to look at her work when she knitted and would look at us while she talked, peering out from under her rather thick glasses. She was short-sighted but never missed a thing that she wanted to see. One day I gave Lia a good swift kick in the shin under the table when she beat me at a game, and mother immediately pounced upon me: "You stop that now, fair is fair, if someone wins he or she deserves it, you just have to learn to live with that."

We read books, played cards, and when we were much younger, we played hide-and-seek under the huge round table which occupied the entire middle of the room. It provided the best hiding place with its heavy coffee-and-cream colored cover hanging all the way down to the floor.

My father loved his little cup of strong black coffee after lunch, and Mother cooked it just right in the red brass Turkish coffee maker, over a small petroleum flame. The smell of it, mixed with my father's light cigarette smoke, had a special meaning to us; it was the best, most peaceful moment of the day.

Around 2:30 my mother would say: "All right, kids, go now to do your homework, and then go outside for a little while to get some fresh air."

There was no doubt that our mother was in charge of our activities. She let Nanny take care of us most of the time, but she was always there, participating in

any important decision, giving direction, and keeping abreast of everything we did. She was very loving, very fair, and quick with praise when we did well. On the other hand, she would not mince words when she was less than pleased with our performance. When we really wanted something very badly, our strategy was always to approach our father first, in strict confidence, of course, and only when he already agreed did we build up the courage to try to get it past our mother.

We would say: "Mommy, could we please ride out to the lake tomorrow before noon, so that we could cook lunch on the beach; Daddy said he would meet us there."

More often than not she saw right through little tricks like these, but sometimes they worked and then we felt terribly proud of ourselves.

She used to wear elegant, but simple dresses. Not too much jewelry, just a few favorite pieces. It was a family custom that every grown-up would wear a gold ring with two diamonds and a ruby in between them. Mother was never without it, in addition to her wedding ring, of course. Father had one too. Her kind face was perfectly framed by her light brown hair, neatly coifed in the particular style of the day. She had naturally curly hair, so she didn't have to spend too much time with hairdressers. Her smiling, green eyes, sharp nose and thin red lips conveyed a winning look, and her tall forehead, with a rather straight hairline, added to the lively intelligence emanating from her entire being. Mother was very sharp, quick witted, very well educated and her strong character demanded and received unrelenting obedience. Her love and understanding of music was ample evidence of the sensitive depth and richness of her soul. She played the piano marvelously and provided organ music in church as well. We loved her dearly, but with due respect.

When I did something bad, she handed out punishments very swiftly, and although she always demanded an apology, she said: "You are forgiven, but the punishment stands." And there was no way to get her off that decision.

My mother, among other things, was also a certified teacher. Lia and I had a real school bench installed in our rooms, the lid of which could be opened up to provide ample space for all our books, pencils and paper. Every morning precisely at 9:15 my mother appeared in our quarters and she conducted class until noon. Lia, of course, was two grades above me, but our mother was marvelous in keeping one occupied writing or reading quietly, while she was busy with the other. The mornings went fast. She always gave us a good deal of homework to be done in the afternoon. Only at the end of the school year did we have to go to the village school for a final examination. This was always torture for me, especially since it was customary to ask the students a lot of questions verbally rather than in writing.

One had to stand up in front of all those strange kids and actually answer aloud. Most embarrassing!

After lunch and our noon-time break, on our way to our rooms, we would have to cross the Great Salon with its tall French windows that reached from the floor almost to the top of the two story high room. The center window was really a door that opened to the great terrace, overlooking the front park and the wide open lane, which stretched away from the house through the gleaming white birch forest with its thick scotch-broom underbrush.

This was the most beautiful room in the house. On one side stood a group of Louis XIV furniture, covered with a light material of a lovely floral design, around a long mahogany coffee table. The great black piano was on the other side, with two more seating arrangements towards the back of the room. There was my mother's tall glass memento cabinet, which displayed a collection of small porcelain animal families of all kinds. We loved to stop there on the way through to take another glance at our favorites. I adored the little zebra family; Lia always swooned over the light gray, angora kittens and their lovely, lazy mother.

Large paintings of some of our ancestors adorned the walls, and a tall, elaborate, gold framed mirror let you see yourself from all over the room. Facing the great windows on the opposite side were three oval shaped windows which opened from the upstairs guest corridor into the grand Salon. This provided light to the corridor, but it also gave a wonderful opportunity, when you were up there, to look down into the room and observe everything that was going on below.

On our way to the children's wing, we had to cross our parents' quarters as well. The great bedroom with its heavy velvet-covered four poster and my mother's make-up table, on which we liked to look at the many silver framed pictures of the family. She also had the most gorgeous set of glass containers for various toiletries, each with an elaborate silver cover with the family coat-of-arms and the nine pointed crown etched into it. The thick Persian rug was a delight under our feet, and we often stopped to look at its delicate designs and beautiful symmetry.

There was also the big bathroom with its long gleaming white tub, towel-covered chaise lounge, my mother's toilette table and mirror, and a row of white closets containing all my mothers dresses. My mother's own, small reception room was next to the bathroom, furnished entirely with white, French furniture, surrounding the white marble baroque fireplace in the corner. I always enjoyed the special coziness of that room; the light blue floral design of the chairs and settees and the matching curtains on the tall French windows.

My father's dressing room was next to that, lined with tall brown wooden closets containing all his suits. There was a full length mirror on the wall, in addition to a small, mirrored toilette table containing shaving gear, combs, etc. Uncle Gyuri kept my father's suits in perfect condition, hanging them in soldierly order, arranged by color, sorted for the four seasons of the year. I loved to look at the matching neckties and Uncle Gyuri would show me which ones would be the perfect match with which suit.

A set of stairs led down to the children's wing from our parents' rooms. My two older sisters lived in the first room which was decorated mostly with white materials with large, flowery patterns. They had beds which were exactly alike with a white curtain stretching above the pillows up to a crown-like wooden frame, high near the ceiling.

### 3.

As we entered the next room, Annie would sit there in her large, red velvet-covered armchair, mending our clothes, knitting, or sometimes writing letters at her big, white desk. She always wore a white gown over her dress, a round silver wristwatch with a black leather band on which I learned the meaning of time, and almost no jewelry, except maybe a little necklace with a colorful stone dangling from it. Her dark brown hair was always neatly combed back. Her face was of a light reddish hue, round with a rather large straight nose, and lips that hardly ever lacked a smile. She looked at you with her green eyes with such intensity, that you had the feeling that she would look right through you. And often she did. She was a perfect example of how a children's nanny should look in a decent, civilized world.

Annie liked to eat. She was, let's face it, rather big. But that didn't bother us a bit. As a matter of fact, she could outrun Lia and me any time we lined up for a friendly race around the flower beds in the park.

Annie was from Austria. She spoke German to me ever since I could remember. It was perfectly natural that I talked in German to her and Hungarian to everyone else. I grew up speaking two languages at the same time and didn't even realize it. Later, when I started school, Annie gave me reading and writing lessons in German, and tried to hammer some grammar into me, although I didn't feel I needed it, because I knew perfectly well how to say everything in German anyway. I even learned to read and write the old German Gothic characters from her, and that was not easy, completely different from the Roman characters we used in Hungarian.

It was the custom in all noble houses of the time to have governesses from Western European countries take care of the children so that they would learn at least two or three languages by the time they grew up. As a child, one learns languages just by hearing them, without ever thinking about it. And, of course, it wasn't just the languages which were considered important, but also the cultural differences one learned with them. Europe's geography and its multi-national environment made it imperative that the educated nobility be able to converse in several of the major languages besides Hungarian, which was a very old and interesting tongue, but of rather limited use outside Hungary's borders.

Annie raised me from day one. She also raised Etti, Ferko, and Lia before me. She was my surrogate mother, maybe even closer to me than my real mother at

that time. I felt that she was the source of all my knowledge. She was always right, always kind, always patient. She was the most tolerant person in the world, except when I got into some loud argument or even a fight with Lia. Annie would suddenly get up from her armchair in her room and we could hear her heavy footsteps approaching very rapidly with a certain determination that spelled trouble every time. She would not tolerate fighting. We would be separated, each sent to our own rooms, and forced to stay there until we calmed down. She never spanked any of us. There was no need for it. A look, and a stern word from her was enough.

She was always good for a game, a race, an excursion into the woods, to the lake, a snowball fight, or a walk to the stables to see the animals. She fully participated in everything we did. We didn't know it then, but she was the most dedicated children's nanny there ever was. She was a first-rate child psychologist, only one didn't call it that in those days. She always had praise when we did well, and would always be encouraging when we were doing less than well. She rarely scolded us. She would only show the right way, quietly, lovingly, with endless patience.

Annie used to go to the kitchen through the long dark corridor of the basement around 10 o'clock in the morning to pick up a little snack. And one day Lia had the bright idea that we should hide in a dark corner of the hallway and jump out screaming when Annie approached. It was a delight to watch her shriek in fright. But then she said: "Children, don't frighten people. It can be dangerous. People can die of fright".

Of course, we didn't believe it and repeated the same prank several times. One day it was particularly dark down there, and we jumped out of a different doorway this time .. and Annie fell to the floor with a shriek... and didn't move. We giggled and laughed, but when she didn't get up, we started to apologize. Lia even went as far as saying: "Annie, I promise I won't do it again"... but that didn't help either. She still didn't move. Now it was our turn to get frightened. We pulled at her arm, begged her to wake up, but she just stayed there on the floor perfectly motionless.

We started to get really frightened. Lia began to cry, and I couldn't hold back the tears anymore either until we were both blaring away good and loud so that the kitchen maids and Aunt Ilonka came running out to see what was the matter. They got scared too: "My God, what happened to your nanny?... children, how did she fall?" And they started to shake her and finally rolled her over on her back.

Annie slowly opened her eyes, looked around as if she didn't know where she was and sitting up slowly, said: "I saw this beautiful, peaceful place...there

was light... and someone calling me. Only I said I can't come, I have to stay and take care of my children... and so I guess I'm back." We never scared her again.

Lia was usually the leader of things. We had lots of fun together, but I did resent her being able to do everything better than I could, and being allowed to do fun things long before I was allowed to. She already rode on her bicycle for quite a while before I finally got one, and then she used to laugh at me while I tried to learn how to ride. Annie started to teach me, but she got winded running after me, holding the bike so I wouldn't fall. We didn't have training wheels in those days, so after a while, when I insisted on wanting to learn quickly, Uncle Vince was enlisted to help.

He held on to the seat and kept telling me to look far ahead and not to worry about falling and he would push the little bike, running after it at a good speed. I remember his panting and huffing, he wasn't all that young anymore either... but he kept telling me to pedal harder. I yelled at him: "don't let go of me please, I'll break my neck" but he just kept running and said nothing, until one day I realized that he wasn't even holding the seat anymore.

I said: "You're cheating, I'm going to crash, I'll break a leg for sure" but he told me to keep looking ahead and just keep going. I was extremely proud when I was finally able to yell at Lia: "Hah, you see, I can do it too!"

Uncle Vince was another favorite of mine. He had a great drooping mustache, a ruddy face, kindly eyes, a deep, booming voice and he usually wore a small rimmed black hat. And he was strong. He was in charge of the firewood for the entire manor house. And believe me, that was no joke of a job. There was no central heating in those days, so each room had to be heated separately. During the summer I loved to watch the great ox carts, loaded with big tree trunks, arrive at the wood barn behind the stables. The men would roll the heavy trunks off the carts with a great banging noise and pile them up outside the barn.

When there was a huge mountain of them, the big, tractor-driven circular saw would be brought up and installed by the barn door, and Uncle Vince would work all day with the help of a young boy, sawing the trunks into smaller pieces with that beautiful whining, zinging noise of the saw. The sawdust piled up on the ground, and they saved it to be used as bedding for the animals.

Uncle Vince would work throughout the warmer seasons to actually fill the entire barn all the way to the top with chopped wood which he would split with expert blows of the great ax, swung down with his bulging brown muscles. I never got tired of watching him, and he showed me where to hit the wood so that it would split just right. "You have to avoid the branches in the log. They're mean,

they can break your arm!" he said, and I knew that those branches were the arms of the tree, putting up a last defense before the wood was split to be burned for ever.

And when the cold weather came it was Uncle Vince's daily job to carry baskets full of chopped fire logs into every room of the great house. He would fill an ox-cart at the barn, drive it to the servants' entrance, and then unload it into his long basket which he would swing up on his back. He walked up and down the stairs with his heavy load, distributing the wood in small, neat piles at every stove. A fire had to be burning all day in the tile stove of each room which was used. There were 35 rooms in the house, and although we didn't heat them all during the winter, Uncle Vince was a very hard working man.

I often wondered how he knew how much firewood was needed for the winter. Indeed, the barn was always empty by spring, and during some particularly cold winters, it had to be re-filled in mid February. It was a good thing my father owned a thousand acres of forest, otherwise we would surely have frozen to death.

Uncle Vince lived with his family in a one story building which contained a number of separate apartments. Situated right behind the stables, it was only a five minute walk from the manor house. Whereas Uncle Gyuri, his family, and the other maids all had their own rooms in the lower level of the manor house, the other servants who worked mainly outside the manor were housed in the nearby apartments. Our coachman, Uncle Vendel (rhymes with "Vandal"), and one of my father's forest rangers, Uncle Horvath, as well as our gardener lived there with their respective families. Each family was allotted some stables, pigsties, and chicken-coops where they could raise their own livestock for food.

Uncle Horvath's wife, whom I simply called Aunt Horvath, was a special friend of mine. She was a good looking person, with the typically kind, roundish face of the Hungarian country woman. Hair worn in a braided bun at the back of her head, a face browned and wrinkled by many years of work in the sunny fields, and a kind expression, highlighted by the occasional wink in the corner of her eye. She was probably the best pastry cook I ever met, and I frequently made a point of riding my bike up and down right in front of her place. I could tell by the subtle aroma in the air what kind of pastry she was making that day, and when my keen nose detected the unmistakable fragrance of the "Brown Linzer", I would knock on her door, just to say hello, and ask about the well-being of their little black Dachs-hund.

She would let me into her kitchen, which, simply furnished, also served as a compact dining and living room. The walls neatly whitewashed, the wooden floor

scrubbed clean, a few pictures on the wall and the inevitable crucifix over a vase of wild flowers hung in one of the corners.

Having completed the introductory polite chit-chat, she would invariably say "Oh, young sire, you must be starving after all that hard pedaling I saw you do on your bicycle just now. May I offer you a taste of this little thing I just finished baking?" And she would gingerly place a plate in front of me piled high with the most gorgeous, Brown Linzer Torte I'd ever seen, cut up into neat diamond-shaped pieces. The aroma of that freshly baked crumbling cake, with the light topping of raspberry jam on top, was just too much. I would squeal with joy: "Oh, Aunt Horvath, you made my favorite again!"

I loved to sit at her kitchen table and watch the flies get caught in the round, bell-shaped glass trap with the open bottom and the high-edged plate under it, which contained a piece of sugar as the bait. It was the most entertaining show to watch while I devoured several pieces of the Linzer, and I asked Aunt Horvath: "Why can't these flies just crawl back out from under the glass bell through the open space around the plate?" to which she would simply say: "Because they're stupid, that's why, and thank God for it, or we would all be buried by flies."

Uncle Horvath was a heavy-set, jolly individual with a round body, a round face, and piercing round eyes. His face was mostly red, having been well tanned by the sun as well as by the internal effects of a considerable quantity of good beer and brandy consumed over the years. He was usually in a good mood, and I loved to listen to his stories about the mean, dangerous poachers he always seemed to be chasing as part of his duties as the chief forest ranger. He also helped my father in managing the forests, a very important part of the estate's productivity. He showed me which trees must be cut, where it was necessary to clear some trees so that the young ones could grow freely. And he would explain, patiently, what characteristics to look for in the various kinds of trees, the soil they needed and the time it would take to produce trees for valuable lumber, etc. And he would teach me with obvious pride and a compelling love of nature, all the living things one could look for on the forest floor.

Our forest seemed to be an endless supply of firewood, but my father explained that it was also a great source for building-logs which could be sold to the cities and towns. It was a beautifully cared for, planned forest. There were big areas of specific trees, an oak forest, a pine forest, a birch forest and every tree that was cut was immediately re-planted so that there were always large patches of young forest at various stages of growth.

On one particularly misty day in the fall Uncle Horvath came home carrying a rucksack full of lovely fresh mushrooms he picked in the woods. He had a

special one wrapped in a piece of paper, and I knew right away that this was going to be fun. Out came the most beautiful mushroom of them all, long white stem covered with the brightest red cap, which sported a whole bunch of little white polka-dots. Aunt Horvath stuck it in a candle holder, placed it on the shelf in the corner, sprinkled it with a bit of sugar, and we sat there, watching with glee as the flies swarmed to it immediately, only to fall off dead in no time at all. It was the most poisonous mushroom in our part of the world!



*GOLDEN ACRES 1931*



*FRONT VIEW*



*VIEW FROM THE MANOR INTO THE BIRCH FOREST*



*FATHER, MOTHER, LACI, LIA WITH DANY AND VIOLA*



*ETTI, LIA, LACI, FERKO WITH SNOWMAN, 1933*



*ETTI, ANNIE, FERKO, LIA AND LACI, 1935*

#### 4.

The flies were a constant part of our lives. You couldn't avoid them with all the stables nearby. Not just the big one where all our horses were kept, but the smaller ones where the servants raised their pigs, goats, chickens, ducks and geese. I grew up with all these animals and learned to value them from my earliest childhood on. They were not only fun to watch, but we learned at an early age that they provided the most delicious foods for the table. In my mother's poultry yard there were always some beautiful brown or white hens, wonderfully colored roosters walking around proudly, and often even a great turkey or two mixing with all the others. We always enjoyed observing the hens sitting on their roosts, until finally the lovely, fluffy little chickens would appear and find shelter under their mother's feathers. I didn't particularly like watching one of the kitchen maids catch a fat young chicken when they were more grown up, and with a swift movement of the wrist, cut its head clear off its neck. But that was part of life too, and it was easy to forget that part of it, when the golden brown fried chicken appeared on the big silver platter Uncle Gyuri carried around the dining room table.

One of the most interesting aspects of food production was the day when the decision was made to slaughter a pig for the winter. That always caused great excitement. It was a day to be looked forward to.

Early in the morning, around 5:30, the men would bring a huge fat hog on an ox-cart, from the large pigsties in my father's farm village and Uncle Gyuri, wrapped in a big blue apron, was ready with his long, shiny, sharp knife in front of the servants' entrance. He would sink that knife into the bottom of the poor hog's neck so fast that one couldn't even see it, and when he retrieved it, the blood would rush out into the big pan held under the hog, while the poor animal gave up its soul with a last loud shriek. I didn't like to watch that either, but it was educational, because any lesser person than Uncle Gyuri could have made the poor animal suffer. And that wouldn't do at all.

The hog is the only animal I know of that can be consumed in a great number of ways almost completely. There were very few parts of that hog by the end of the day which didn't wind up as the most lovely sausages, bacon, ham, head-cheese, or blood-wurst. It was a full day's work, at least ten people labored all day to complete the job by late evening.

I loved to watch them singe the fur off the hog's skin as the first operation of the morning. And then Uncle Gyuri started to dissect the animal with swift, sure

movements. He knew exactly where to cut, never to waste any piece of it. And pretty soon you could see great strips of fat come off and being cut up into handy pieces, to be smoked as the most delicious bacon.

The hams were prepared for smoking as well, all the best pieces of meat cut up and roasted or cooked to be preserved in fat for the winter. We had no refrigerator, only a great big ice-box which was filled with blocks of ice that had been prepared last winter, and stored deep in the ground covered with straw, under the thick low straw roof of the ice cave. The smaller pieces of meat were ground to be prepared for sausages, and the intestines were cleaned and washed to provide the skin for the sausages. The blood was cooked and spiced for the blood-wurst, rice was cooked and mixed with ground meat for the rice-sausage, but my favorite was always the spicy red one which contained only meat and flavorings, but was smoked to perfection.

You could smell the various aromas throughout the entire house. Annie used to take us to the kitchen window, knock on it, and call down to Aunt Ilonka in her funny sounding Hungarian: "I ask for a little tasting" and out would come our favorite, the meaty little pieces of fat, deep fried, until they were golden brown and crisp. I once wanted to help the kitchen maids cut up the fat for this purpose, and was doing fine until my hand slipped and I wound up with a neat deep cut in one of my fingers. The blood came spurting forth in a great gush, and I got deadly sick from the sight of it, mixed with the heavy smell of the cooking fat. They practically had to carry me out of the kitchen... Lia had a field day giving me a hard time about that for a long time.

One of the best parts of life for me was the early morning. As long as the weather permitted, I would get up around 6:00 a.m. and hurry down to the stable, where my donkey was already saddled and ready to take me for the morning ride. I adored the early morning air, the sun glimmering through the fresh green leaves of the forest, the golden fragrance of the wet leaves shining in the early morning dew.

My donkey's name was Danny and Lia's was Viola. They were husband and wife, and to our greatest joy, eventually produced a lovely little foal, whom we instantly named Zebulon. "Zeby", as we affectionately called him, was extremely cute with his dark gray fur and the black cross on his back. I always wondered about that cross and Lia educated me about it, saying that it was there because the Virgin Mary carried her young son Jesus on a donkey all the way to Egypt.

Zeby had the funniest habit of walking almost blindly. He would do fine until a tree didn't get in his way, but when that happened, he just stood there and waited for the tree to move. We quickly established the undeniable fact that this is why people said in Hungarian: "Stupid as a donkey." They could be stubborn too,

another well known fact. In the summer we often rode on a cart drawn by Danny and Viola. Annie would sit up front and drive them. They weren't exactly fast, but they got us to the lake where we went swimming. On the way there, we had to cross the railroad tracks at a spot where the golden sand, typical of our area, was particularly deep. It was hard for them to pull the cart across, and one day they decided to take a rest... exactly in the middle of the tracks. All the pulling, pushing, yelling, cajoling, or even prodding them on with the whip, didn't do any good. We were dead scared that a train would come, so Annie finally had enough, got off the cart, and after she gave both Danny and Viola a good swift kick in the rump, they finally understood. The fact that the cart was a good 200 pounds lighter at this moment might also have helped.

The summer, of course, was the most fun time of all. My brother Ferko and older sister Etti were home from my grandmother's and we went swimming every day. There were 9 lakes on the estate, artificially created to breed fish which were harvested once a year and sold to the cities. Number 7 lake was the one we used for swimming.

My father had a gypsy-style mud hut built on the sandy beach for us to change in. We even had a wooden dock from which one could dive into the deeper water. Annie taught us all to swim. Not the fast crawl, but to swim, so that we would never sink, and never get tired. She would hold my chin just high enough for the water not to reach my mouth, and then she would count one-two-tempo, one-two-tempo and make me do a breast stroke with my arms, while kicking with both legs. At first I was dead scared, but she said she would never let anything happen to me. That I knew for sure anyway, so after a while I relaxed. But the thing that really made me catch on was that sitting on the dock, she showed me what the frogs did under water when we scared them into diving off the deep end.

Pretty soon she would urge me to move faster, hold my fingers tight, form a little paddle with my hands and push the water down and away from me. It worked! Suddenly I felt myself not sinking any more. And once I did the breast stroke well, she taught me how to do the same thing on my back. This way soon I could swim with her, clear across the lake and back and never get tired, because whenever I felt like it, I would just turn over and rest.

When my brother came home from Grandmother's, he used to tell me many stories about all that happened during the school year. In my very young days I also spent time there, and vividly remember the immense manor house my grandmother lived in, and the beautiful huge park around it. It was much bigger than our house, and I never forgot the great winding stairway which went up and around the center hall, all the way to the second floor.

Grandmother had a butler named Krizsahn. He must have been a circus artist in his earlier days, because I saw him one morning as he appeared at the head of the staircase on the second floor with a fully laden breakfast tray on his left shoulder. He proceeded to hoist himself onto the polished mahogany railing with his legs sticking out left and right in front of him as a balance, and his right hand behind him on the railing as a brake. He then started to slide down the great curvature of the staircase at a breakneck speed, and landed with an elegant little hop at the bottom... never spilling a thing off that tray. When I told grandmother, she wouldn't believe it.

One day Ferko was giving me a hard time out in front of the main entrance just below the great staircase. Grandmother Christa was a person of great dignity and very exact habits. She used to walk down that staircase, every day, precisely at the same time for her little walk in the park. But before proceeding, she always stopped at the bottom post of the stairway to check her favorite big outside thermometer, because it wouldn't do at all not to know what the outside temperature was that day.

Well, with Ferko teasing, and annoying the daylight out of me, my patience reached its end, and I said: "Ferko, if you don't stop bothering me, I'm going to break that thermometer with my stick." The ultimatum thus given, I waited for the result. When it was obvious that my warning went unheeded as Ferko forced me to the ground and actually spat into my ear, my dignity got so ruffled that I said: "Alright, I warned you" and with a swift whack of my stick, I smashed the thermometer into many little pieces.

The torture which came afterwards I have never forgotten. Annie dressed me in my best Sunday outfit, and said: "You have to go to your grandmother and take the consequences." With that I was directed towards her great rooms. One huge door opened and closed after another, as I went from room to room, Annie urging me on from behind. The air seemed to get thicker and thicker as my heart sank lower and lower.

I knew I was getting close to my grandmother's favorite salon where I suspected she would be sitting in judgment over my crime. Annie wouldn't go any further and she just pushed me slightly saying: "Go on, go on!". In the next room, to my great relief, I saw Krizsahn in his red and blue livery standing by the tall brown padded doors. When I got there, he winked at me, opened the door, stepped inside and with a loud clear voice said: "My Lady, the young Count of Golden Acres, your grandson," and with a slight bow towards me, let me walk through the threshold, and silently closed the door behind me.