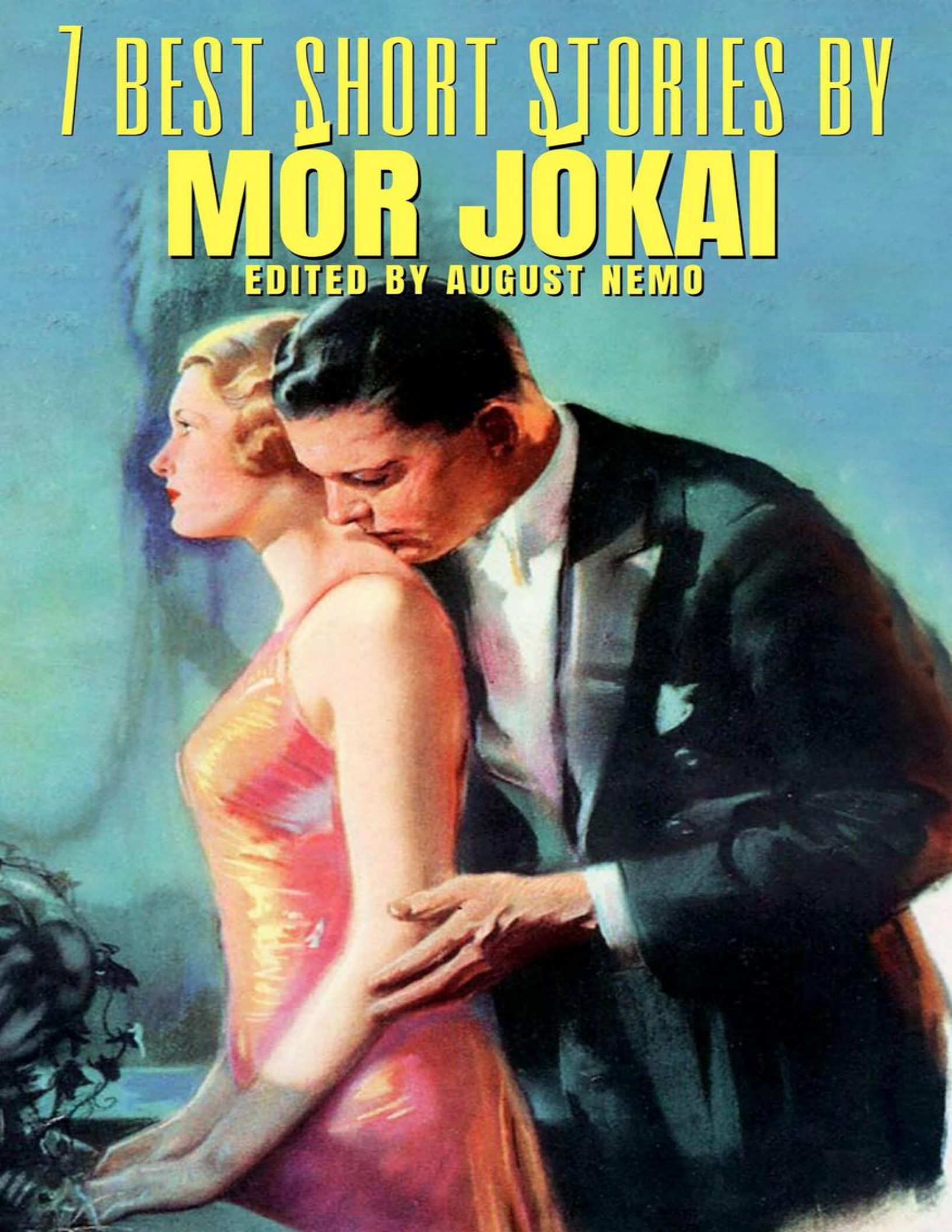
7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY MÓR JÓKAI

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 best short stories by Mór Jókai

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August Nemo

Table of Contents

The Author

By R. Nisbet Bain

At the general meeting of the Hungarian Academy on October 17, 1843, the secretary reported that the 100-florin prize for the best drama of the year had been awarded to Károly Obernik's *Föur és pór* (Squire and Boor), but that another drama, entitled *Zsido fiú* (The Jew Boy), had been honourably mentioned, and, indeed, in the opinion of one of the judges, Joseph Bajza, was scarcely inferior to the prize-play itself. The author of the latter piece was a youth of eighteen, Maurus Jókai, a law student at Kecskemet, whose literary essays had already begun to attract some notice in the local papers. That name is now one of the most illustrious in Hungary, and one of the best known in Europe.

Maurus Jókai was born at Rév-Komárom on February 18, 1825. His father, Joseph, a scion of the Ásva branch of the old Calvinist Jókay family, was a lawyer by profession, but a lawyer who had seen something of the world, and loved art and letters. His mother came of the noble Pulays. She was venerated by her son, and is the prototype of the downright, masterful housewives, with warm hearts, capable heads, and truant sons, who so frequently figure in his pages. Maurus was their third and youngest child and the pet of the whole family. He seems to have been a super-sensitive, very affectionate lad, always fonder of books than of games, but liking best of all to listen to the innumerable tales his father had to tell of the Napoleonic wars, in which he himself had borne a humble part, or of the still more marvellous exploits and legends of the old Magyar heroes. It was doubtless from

his father that Maurus inherited much of his literary and artistic talents.

At a very early age little Maurus was remarkable for an extraordinarily vivid imagination, but this quality, which, at a later day, was to bring him both fame and fortune, made his childhood wretched. Naturally timid, his nervous fancy was perpetually tormenting him. He had a morbid fear of being buried alive; old, long-bearded Jews and stray dogs inspired him with dread; his first visit to a day-school, at the age of four, was a terrifying adventure, though his father went with him. Even now, however, the child's precocity was prodigious. To him study was no toil, but a passion. His masters could not teach him quickly enough.

In his twelfth year occurred the first calamity of his life. He was summoned from his studies to the death-bed of his beloved father, a catastrophe which he took so much to heart that he fell seriously ill, and for a time his own life was despaired of. He owed his recovery entirely to "my good and blessed sister Esther," as he ever afterwards called her, who nursed him through his illness with a rare and skilful devotion. He recovered but slowly, and for the next five years was haunted by a black melancholy which he endeavoured to combat by the most intense application to study. At the Comorn Gymnasium, whither he was first sent, he had the good fortune to have for his tutor Francis Váły, subsequently his brother-in-law, a man of rigid puritan principles, profound learning, and many-sided accomplishments, in every way an excellent teacher, who instructed him in French, English, and Italian, and prepared him for college. Váły's influence was decidedly bracing, and his pupil rewarded his conscientious care with a lifelong gratitude. It was Váły, too, who first taught Jókai the useful virtue of early rising. Summer and winter he was obliged to be in his tutor's study at five o'clock every morning. The

habit so acquired was never abandoned, and is the simplest explanation of Jókai's extraordinary productivity. By far the greater part of his three hundred volumes has been written before breakfast.

From the Gymnasium of Comorn Jókai proceeded, in 1841, to the Calvinist college at Pápá. It was here that he fell in with a number of talented young men of his own age, including that brilliant meteoric genius Alexander Petöfi, who was presently to reveal himself as one of the greatest lyric poets of the century. The young men founded a mutual improvement society, whose members met regularly to criticise each other's compositions, and Jókai was also one of the principal contributors to the college magazine. Yet curiously enough he displayed at this time so much skill as a painter, sculptor, and carver in ivory that many seriously thought he would owe the future fame which every one already predicted for him rather to his brush and chisel than to his pen.

In 1843, his mother sent him to Kecskemet to study jurisprudence, and in the fine, bracing air of the Alföld, or great Hungarian plain, amidst miles of orchards and vineyards, the delicate young student recovered something like normal health. It was here, too, that he was first brought into contact with the true Magyar folk-life and folk-humour, and as he himself expressed it, "became a man and a Hungarian writer." Forty-nine years later he was to record his impressions of the place in the exquisite tale "A sarga rózsa" (The Yellow Rose), certainly one of the finest of his later works. It was at Kecskemet, too, as already mentioned, that he now wrote his first play, *The Jew Boy*. At the same time he won a considerable local reputation as a portrait-painter.

Yielding to the wishes of his friends, Jókai now resolved to follow his father's profession, and for three years continued

to study the law with his usual assiduity at Comorn and Pest. In 1844 he obtained his articles, and won his first action. It had needed no small heroism in an ambitious youth of nineteen to submit to the drudgery of the law after such a brilliant literary *début* as the honourable mention of his first play by the Hungarian Academy in a prize competition (though his admirers certainly never will begrudge the time thus spent in a lawyer's office, where he picked up some of his best comical characters, mainly of the Swiveller type); but, yielding now to natural bias, Jókai made up his mind to go to the capital, and try his luck at literature. Accordingly, in 1845, the youth (he was barely twenty), undismayed by many previous terrifying examples of misery and ruin, cited *in terrorem* by his apprehensive kinsmen, flitted to Pest with a manuscript romance in his pocket. His friend Petöfi, who had settled there before him, and was becoming famous, received him with open arms, and introduced him to the young army of *literati* whom he had gathered round him at the Café Pillwax, as "a true Frenchman." In those days such a description was the highest conceivable praise. The face of every liberty-loving nation was then turned towards France, and thence the dawn of a new era was confidently anticipated. The young Magyars read nothing but French books. Lamartine's "History of the Girondists" and Tocquevelle's "Democracy" were their Bibles. Petöfi worshipped Beranger, whom he was speedily to excel, while Jókai had found his ideal in Victor Hugo. "This school might easily have become dangerous to us," says Jókai, "had not its influence, fortunately, coincided with the opening up of a new and hitherto unexplored field—the popular romance. Hitherto it had been the endeavour of Magyar writers to write in a style distinct from the language of ordinary life. Our group, on the other hand, started with the idea that it was just the very expressions, constructions, and modes of thought employed in everyday life that Hungarian writers ought to take as the fundamental

principle of their writing, nay, that they should even develop ideally beautiful poetry itself from the life of the common people. . . . My own ambition," he adds, "was to explore those regions where the hoof of Pegasus had hitherto left no trace." And in this he certainly succeeded when he wrote his first considerable romance "Hétköznapok."

The novel had been successfully cultivated in Hungary long before Jókai appeared upon the scene. As early as 1794, Joseph Kármán had written "Fanni hagyományai" (Fanny's Legacies), obviously suggested by "Pamela," and still one of the best purely analytical romances in the language. A generation later, two noblemen, Baron Joseph Eötvös and Baron Michael Jósika, Jókai's elder contemporaries, respectively founded the didactic novel with a purpose and the historical romance. Eötvös, one of the most liberal and enlightened spirits of his age, fought, almost single-handed, against the abuses of feudalism in his great "A falu jegyzöje" (The Village Notary), while Jósika, an intelligent disciple of Walter Scott, enriched the national literature with a whole series of original historical romances which gave to Hungarian prose a new elevation and a distinction. But "Hétköznapok" was something quite new—so much so, indeed, that Jókai himself was doubtful about it, and determined that it should stand or fall by the verdict of the academician Ignatius Nagy, one of the most productive and ingenious writers of his day, whose influence was then at its height, and who was regarded as an oracle by literary "young Hungary." Jókai, who had never seen the great man before, approached him with considerable trepidation, which was not diminished by the very peculiar appearance of this Aristarchus. "He had," Jókai tells us, "a most embarrassing face covered with dark-red spots right up to his astonishingly lofty forehead, whose shiny baldness was half cut in two, as it were, by a bright black peruke. He had also an inconceivably big red nose, at which, however, you had

no time to be amazed, so instantly were you spell-bound by a couple of squinting eyes—one of which glared as fixedly at you as if it was made wholly of stone. His voice, on the other hand, was as the voice of a little child. And within this repulsive frame dwelt the noblest of souls, in this crippled body the most energetic of characters. From no other strange face did I ever get a kinder glance than I got from those stiff, fishy eyes, and that rich voice announced to me my first great piece of good luck. Upon his recommendation, the publisher Hartleben agreed to publish my first romance, and gave me 360 silver florins for it—in those days an immense fortune to me. I had no further need now to go scribbling all day long in a lawyer's office at six florins a month."

"Hétköznapok" was published, in two volumes, in 1846. The book caused a profound sensation. Its very extravagance suited the taste of an age steeped in Eugene Sueism, and Petöfi, in introducing Jókai to Professor Roye as "a writer who writes French romances in Magyar," hit off both the book and its author to a nicety. It was just the brilliant, exuberant, fanciful sort of thing that a clever youth with a boundless imagination, and no knowledge whatever of the world, would be likely to produce. Still, even the writers who pointed out its crudities and morbidities, praised its striking originality and charm of style, and though it gave but a faint indication of the real genius of the author it brought him into notice, and editors began to look kindly upon him. Thus Frankenburg, the editor of the literary review *Életképek*, who had just parted with his dramatic critic for being a little too unmerciful to the artistes, was induced to take on Jókai in his place. By way of honorarium, he offered the young aspirant a free seat at the theatre and ten florins a month. But Jókai's year of office came to an end the very first week. To make up for his predecessor's want of gallantry, and obeying the dictates of his youthful enthusiasm, he lauded

every lady *artiste* to the skies. "I can honestly say," Jókai tells us, with evident enjoyment of the laugh against himself, "that I meant every word of it. It was then that I saw a ballet for the first time in my life, and it was my solemn conviction that I was bound by a debt of gratitude to say a good word for the excellent damsel who exhibited her natural charms to the public eye with such magnanimous frankness. And a pretty lecture Frankenburg read me for it, too. 'Delightful Sylphid, indeed!—a clumsy stork, I should say!' Still, *that* might have passed. But it was my magnifying of Lilla Szilágyi, who took the part of Smike in *The Beggars of London*, which did the business for me. I called her 'a lovely sapling!' and promised her a brilliant future in her dramatic career. 'Leave her alone—she has no reputation at all,' said the editor. 'Then she'll get one!' said I. 'But you'll never get to be a critic,' said he. And so, for Lilla Szilágyi's sake, I laid down my *rôle* of critic; and yet I was right, after all, for she really *did* become a great artiste. I felt this snub very much at the time, but now I bless my fate that things fell out as they did. Fancy if *now* my sole title to fame rested upon my reputation as a dramatic critic!—terrible thought!"

A few days afterwards a new career suddenly opened out before Jókai. Paul Királyi, the editor of the *Jelenkor*, invited Jókai to join his paper as a correspondent at a salary of thirty-five florins a month. Of course he jumped at it; a newspaper contributor in Hungary was then a personage of some importance. About the same time he passed his first legal examination, and became a certificated lawyer. His diploma, if not *præclarus*, was, at any rate, *laudabilis*. The oral *rigorosum* he passed through brilliantly, but, oddly enough, his *Hungarian style* was not considered satisfactory. The publication of his diploma was a sufficiently dignified excuse for a visit to his native place. He was well received in the bosom of his family; the whole clan Jókai came together for dinner at his mother's, and for supper at the house of his

brother-in-law, Francis Váły. The two Calvinist ministers of the place were also invited, and one of them toasted him as "the ward of two guardians, and guardian of Two Wards," the first allusion being to their spiritual guardianship, and the second to his new drama, *The Two Wards*. "It was the first toast that ever made me blush," says Jókai. The next day was fixed for the meeting of the County Board, and at the end of the proceedings his diploma was promulgated. On the same day his mother gave him his father's silver-mounted sword and the cornelian signet-ring with the old family crest upon it, which the elder Jókai had been wont to wear. "Democrat as I am," says Jókai, "I frankly confess that to me there was a soul-steeling thought in the reflection that with this sword my worthy ancestors, much better men than I, had defended their nation and constitution of yore, and that this signet-ring had put the seal upon their covenanted rights for all time."

On returning to Pest, he found awaiting him a letter from Petöfi, informing him that he had just married Julia Szendrey, and begging Jókai to seek out a convenient lodging where they and he could live together. That a newly married husband should invite his faithful bachelor comrade to live with him under the same roof was, as Jókai well remarks, a fact belonging to the realm of fairy-tale. Jókai immediately hunted up a nice first-floor apartment in Tobacco Street, consisting of three rooms and their appurtenances, the first room being for the Petöfis, the second for himself, while the intermediate one was to be a common dining-room, each with a separate entrance. The young couple came in during the autumn; they kept one maid, and Jókai had an old man-servant to wait upon him. The furniture was primitive. Mrs. Petöfi, who had left the mansion of her wealthy and eminent father without either dowry or blessing—the family utterly opposing the match, and visiting the enamoured young lady with the full weight

of their heavy displeasure—had not so much as a fashionable hat to put on, and sewed together a sort of head-dress of her own invention, which, when finished, she had not the courage to wear. They had nothing, and yet were perfectly happy, and so was Jókai. Their dinners were sent in from a tavern, the Golden Eagle, close at hand, and their chief amusement was to learn English and laugh at each other's blunders.

A quarrel with the naturally irritating and overbearing Petöfi put an end to this symposium, and, doubtless to every one's relief, Jókai started a bachelor establishment of his own, consisting of a couple of rooms, which he furnished himself. Properly speaking, it only became a bachelor's establishment when he entered it. Previously thereto it had been occupied by a little old woman, popularly known as Mámi, who kept a well-known registry office for servants, and the consequence was that a whole mob of cooks, parlour-maids, and nursery-maids invaded Jókai's premises at all hours, under the persuasion that he could provide them with places. This constant flow of petticoats to his door not only disturbed his work terribly, but was sufficient to have brought a less studious and conscientious man into disrepute. It was at this time that Jókai became the responsible editor of the *Életképek* during the temporary absence of Frankenburg, and so began his political career. The *Életképek* was one of the most widely read journals of those days. Under Frankenburg's able editorship it had become the leading radical print, and it was no small glory for Jókai that, despite his youth, he should have been thought worthy of directing it. It numbered among its contributors some of the most brilliant names in the Hungarian Literature, from Vörösmarty to Arany. His literary colleagues assembled regularly at Jókai's lodgings to discuss current political events, and more than one idea of reform was hatched under the wing of the *Életképek*. It was in this

occupation that the stormy, headlong month of March, 1848, found our hero. It was to tear him away from his moorings and cast him upon a veritable sea of troubles; but it was also to arouse and develop his capabilities in the school of life and action.

On February 23, 1848, a revolution broke out at Paris, and in a couple of days Louis Philip was a dethroned exile. Such a facile victory of liberal principles encouraged other liberty-loving nations to follow the example of the mother of constitutions, and the Hungarians were among the first to rise. In the Diet, Louis Kossuth eloquently demanded equality before the law, a popular representative parliament, and an independent, responsible ministry; but the new wine of nineteenth-century liberalism speedily burst the old bottles of obsolete, if picturesque, constitutional forms, and the direction of the movement, which became more and more impetuous every moment, slipped from the control of the cautious diplomatists and politicians at Vienna into the hands of the enthusiastic journalists and demagogues of Budapest. Amongst these, young Jókai, from the first, took a leading part. Early in the morning of March 15, he and his friends, Petöfi, Vasváry, and Bulyovszky, met in Jókai's room, by lamplight, and his comrades entrusted him with the framing of a manifesto, based upon the famous *Twelve Points*, or Articles of Pest, drawn up the day before by Joseph Irinyi, embodying the wishes of the Hungarian nation. This done, they rushed out into the public squares and harangued the mob, which had assembled in thousands. But speech-making was not sufficient; they wanted to *do* something, and the first thing to be done was, obviously, to give practical application to the doctrine of a free press. So they determined to print forthwith the Twelve Articles, the Manifesto, and Petöfi's incendiary song, "Talpra Magyar," without the consent of the censor. What followed must be told in Jókai's own words:—

"The printing-press of Landerer and Heckenast was honoured with this compulsory distinction. The printers, naturally, were not justified in printing anything without the permission of the authorities, so we turned up our sleeves and worked away at the hand-presses ourselves. The name of the typewriter who set up the first word of freedom was *Potemkin*! While Irinyi and other young authors were working away at the press, it was my duty to harangue the mob which thronged the whole length of Hatváni Street. I had no idea how to set about it, but it came of its own accord. My worthy and loyal contemporary, Paul Szontagh, occasionally quotes to me, even now, some of the heaven-storming phrases which he heard me utter on that occasion, *e.g.* '. . . No, fellow-citizens! he is no true hero who can only *die* for his country; he who can *slay* for his country, he is the true hero!' That was the sort of oratory I used to practise in those days. Meanwhile the rain was beginning to fall, and rain is the most reactionary opponent of every revolution. But my people were not to be dispersed by the rain, and all at once the whole street was filled with expanded umbrellas. I was outraged at the sight. 'What, gentlemen!' I thundered, from the corner of the street, 'if you stick up your umbrellas now against mere rain-drops, what will you stick up against the bullets which will presently begin to fall?' It was only then that I noticed that there were not only gentlemen around me, but ladies also. I exhorted the ladies to go home. Here they would get dripping wet, I said, and some other accident might befall them. 'We are no worse off here than you are,' was the reply. They were determined to wait till the printed broad-sides were ready. Not very long afterwards, Irinyi appeared at the window of the printing-office, for to get out of the door was a sheer impossibility. He held in his hands the first printed sheets from the free press. Ah, that scene, when the very first few sheets were distributed from hand to hand! . . . And now a young county official was seen forcing his

way through the dense crowd right to the very door of the printing-office, and from thence he addressed me. The Vice-Lieutenant of the county, Paul Nyáry, sent word that I was to go to him at the town hall. 'Why should *I* go?' I cried, from my point of vantage. 'I'll be shot if I do! If the Vice-Lieutenant of the county wants to speaks to me, let *him* come *here*! We are "the mountain" now.' And Mohammed really *did* come to 'the mountain,' and, . . . what is more, he came to approve of what we had done hitherto, and then to go along with us to the town hall to ratify the articles of the liberal programme. . . . The town hall was crammed to suffocation. Those who were called upon to speak, stood upon the green table, and remained there afterwards, so that at last the whole magistracy of the county, and I and all my colleagues, were standing on the table. The Burgomaster announced from the balcony of the town hall that the town of Pest had adopted the Twelve Articles, and with that the avalanche carried the whole of the burgesses along with it. . . . In the evening the town was illuminated, and a free performance was given at the theatre, *Bánk Bán*, Katona's celebrated historical drama, being the piece selected. But the mob, which, by this time, was in a state of ecstasy, had no longer the patience to listen to the sublime declamations of the Ban Peter. It called for 'Talpra Magyar!' (Up, up, Magyars!), the Hungarian Marseillaise. What was to be done? The brilliant court of King Andrew II., with the Queen and *Bánk Bán* to boot, had to form a group round Gabriel Egressy, who, in a simple *attila*, and with a sword by his side, stood in the middle of the stage and declaimed, with magnificent emphasis, Petöfi's inspiring poem. . . . Then the band struck up the Rákóczy march, so long prohibited in Hungary because of its supposed revolutionary tendency. This naturally increased the excitement instead of extinguishing it. . . . Then a voice from the gallery suddenly cried, 'Long live Tancsis!'—Tancsis, by the way, was a political prisoner

who had been released that very morning from the citadel of Buda by the mob—and with that the whole populace suddenly roared with one voice, 'Tancsis! Tancsis!' A frightful tumult arose. Tancsis was not at hand. He lived somewhere in a distant suburb. But even had he been near, it would have been a cruel thing to have dragged on to the stage a poor, worn-out invalid, that he might merely make his bow to the public. But what was to be done? 'Well, my sons,' said Nyáry, with whom I was standing in the same box, 'you have awakened this great monster; now see if you can put him to sleep again!' All my young friends, one after the other, attempted to address the people. . . . The curtain was let down, but then the tumult grew more than ever, the gallery stamped like mad; it was a perfect pandemonium. Then an idea occurred to me. I could get on to the stage from Nyáry's box. I rushed on through the side wings. A pretty figure I cut, I must say. I was splashed up to the knees with mud, from scouring the streets all day. I wore huge goloshes; my battered cylinder, surmounted by a gigantic red feather, was drenched with rain, so that I could easily have thrust it under my arm and made a crush hat of it. I looked around me and perceived Egressy. I told him to draw up the curtain; I would harangue the people from the stage. Rozsa Laborfalvi, who played the part of 'Queen Gertrude,' came towards me. She smiled upon me with truly majestic grace, greeted me, and pressed my hand. She was wearing the Magyar tricolour cockade—red, white, and green—on her bosom, and she took it off and pinned it on my breast. Then the curtain was raised. When the mob beheld my muddy, saturated figure, it began to shout afresh, and the uproar gradually became a call for every one to hear me. When at last I was able to speak, I delivered myself of this masterly piece of oratory: 'Brother citizens! Our friend Tancsis is not here, he is at home in the bosom of his family. Allow the poor blind man to taste the joy of seeing his family once more.' It was only then that I became conscious of the

nonsense I was talking. How could a *blind* man *see* his family? If the mob began to laugh I was done for! It was the tricoloured ribbon which saved me. 'Regard this tricoloured cockade on my breast!' I cried. 'Let it be the badge of this glorious day! Let every man who is freedom's warrior wear it! It will distinguish us from the hirelings of slavery. These three colours represent the three sacred words, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity! Let every one in whom Magyar blood and a free spirit burns wear them on his breast.' And so the thing was done. The tricoloured cockade preserved order. Whoever wished to pin on the tricoloured cockade had to hurry home first. Ten minutes later the theatre was empty, and the next day the tricoloured cockade was to be seen on every breast. . . . In the intoxication of my triumph I hastened after Rozsa Laborfalvi as soon as this scene was over and pressed her hand. And with that pressure our engagement began. . . . And the honeymoon was in keeping with the engagement. The roar of cannon and the clash of arms was the music that played at *my* wedding."

The lady whose heart and hand Jókai won under such stimulating circumstances was in every way worthy of him. Born at Miskolcz in 1817, Judith Laborfalvi-Benké, to give her her full family name, was thus eight years her husband's senior. Her father, Joseph Benké, a retired actor, and subsequently a teacher at the Roman Catholic girls' school at Miskolcz, permitted her, in her sixteenth year, to try her fortune on the stage, at Budapest. But the first attempt was a decided failure, and she returned home, apparently disillusioned. A second attempt proved much more successful. Her fine figure, handsome face, and sweet voice now made a great impression, and the experienced stage-manager, Egressy, recognizing her great capabilities, encouraged her to proceed. By 1837 she had superseded Madame Kantor, hitherto the chief heroine of the Magyar stage, and henceforth, till her retirement from the stage in