

*Why a Young Russian Soldier Gave a
Hungarian Woman a Pair of Silk Stockings*

“WE’RE HUMAN BEINGS, TOO”

ALEXANDRA ORME

IN 1944, IN A Hungarian village, seventeen people were sitting in a cellar, expecting the Russian armies. For two days Germans and Russians had been fighting over their heads but today it seemed quieter; nobody was shooting. The children grew restless and wanted to go up to see the first Soviet soldiers, but they were told to keep quiet, and only some of the men went up to see what was going on. They came back very soon with the news. The village was occupied by the Red Army.

“How do they look, the liberators? What are they doing? Are they sacking the population? How do they behave?”

These were the questions the men heard on their return to the cellar.

But they answered unwillingly, pretending indifference, the better to hide their fears.

“They look like hooligans, par-

tisans, or marauders, not like any regular army I ever saw,” said one of the men.

“Ildiko!” called the priest of the village from his dark corner in the cellar. “You know your new responsibility; you’re the only one who can talk to them.”

A woman turned her head. “I hardly speak Ruthenian, it’s so many years since I last spoke it,” she said. She was middle-aged and plump, with a large, kind face.

“Good gracious! what will we do if they don’t understand what Ildiko tells them?” shouted another woman. “If she speaks only Ruthenian it might prove as hard for a Russian to understand as Dutch for a German.”

“Not in the least,” and the priest waved his hand to quiet them. “The Slav languages are all very much alike. I’m sure every Russian will understand Ildiko’s Ruthenian.”

One of the men asked: “Mrs.

Ildiko, do you still remember the speech you have to make?"

He was a deserter from the Hungarian army, a lieutenant. For two weeks he had been hiding in this cellar, and expecting the Russians. For him liberation meant more than it did for anybody else. But now, when the Russians were round the corner, he felt uneasy and scared.

"Do repeat your speech, Mrs. Ildiko, just to make sure. Will you?" said the old village druggist, with a kind smile.

Ildiko laughed. She suddenly felt so important. A peasant woman, with a baby hanging at her bare breast, bent over and whispered. "And don't forget to tell them in your speech that they should not take away the cows of the poor."

"Don't be silly, Juliska!" said the only land-owner in the village, who was sitting next to the priest.

She was an old noble woman, proprietor of a small manor, ruined now by German bombs.

"They will be after my ruins, not your cow, I hope. I'm their enemy, not you, though I'm a beggar, and you've still got everything!"

"Now, now," the deserter lieutenant said, trying to calm them down. "We want to hear the speech. Let's have a last rehearsal." And pretending he was a master in a school, he pointed his finger at Ildiko and said severely: "Farkas Ildiko, do tell us now. . . ."

Everybody laughed. They were still excited by their recent fear, but now the tension was dissolved in jokes and laughter.

"Say it first in Hungarian!" shouted several voices.

Ildiko laughed too, cleared her voice, put her hands on her opulent chest, and pretending to be a prima donna, started in a dramatic tone. "Long live the Red Army! Long live Stalin!"

But immediately she was interrupted by a whole chorus.

"Skip Stalin! Why should we like Stalin? They have to chase the Germans, Stalin or no Stalin. Long live the Red Army will do!"

Ildiko continued: "There are only women and children here. The cellar belongs to our priest. We don't hide arms or Germans. We're all Hungarians, nothing but Hungarians. We are happy to greet you in our country. . . ."

"You should have mentioned the cows of the poor," whispered again the woman with the baby hanging at her breast.

"Oh, shut up!" screamed the old woman, ex-proprietor of the manor. "You're going to be liberated now, not me. I'll probably be sent to Siberia by your saviors. Didn't I oppress you terribly since ages?"

Everybody giggled. It was fine to laugh again.

"Let's thank our Lord that we're all alive and that our village was spared," said the old priest in a

solemn and trembling voice. He knelt down on the dirty floor. "Our Father . . ."

All the women knelt down quickly, and an old peasant too. The three men were standing with bent heads and grave faces. They were all praying aloud.

Heavy steps were heard on the stairs of the cellar, and immediately after, fists were banging at the door. Then somebody pushed the door, probably with a rifle, and the old wood cracked and gave way. Everybody in the cellar jumped to his feet and hid in dark corners. The old druggist stayed near the priest, and so did a boy of sixteen, looking bravely at the entrance. The ex-lieutenant dashed to the door: a group of Russian soldiers stood there, against the light, so that you could hardly distinguish their faces.

"Ildiko, Ildiko, now, now." The cellar was full of scared whispers.

"How are you?" asked Ildiko in Ruthenian, and the Russian heads turned in her direction like one man.

"Hi, you! Are you from the Ukraine?" said one of them. His voice was harsh and unpleasant. There was silence. Then: "Get the hell out of the way, kids!" shouted another, pushing his comrades aside. "Don't stand in the lights! Let's see who's hiding here."

The soldiers stepped aside. Some of them went down into the cellar. One of them, seeing the priest,

pointed at him with his finger.

"Who's that? A priest?" he roared.

"Yes, yes," said Ildiko, and her voice was less sure than it had been a minute ago.

"You come with us," said a young soldier, pulling at the sleeve of a young peasant woman hidden behind her invalid husband.

"Don't!" shouted the terrified girl, and looking at Ildiko, "What does he want?" she asked, her childish eyes wide open.

"She's got an invalid husband. He just lost his arm at the front. She has to do everything for him; he can't yet use his left hand." Ildiko was explaining as fast as she could. "Leave her alone, soldier. We don't hide any Germans, we don't hide arms. We are just women and children in this cellar, we are so happy you came. . . ."

"O.K., O.K., skip it," answered the soldier. "You go up with us. We want to find out where you get your Ruthenian from."

"You might be a spy, one never knows," cut in another soldier with a nasty laugh. "We will find out upstairs who you are."

The old priest rose to his feet. "Leave the woman alone!" he said in broken Slovak. "She's working here in the postoffice. She's quite innocent; I know her."

But the soldier didn't even listen to him.

"You better sit down and keep

your trap shut, little father," said one of them rather softly. "Be happy the Germans didn't kill you. Pray to your God and mind your own business. As long as you pray to your God and don't interfere with us, we don't mind, you know. We're here to catch spies, and if you poke your nose in everything we might think you're a spy yourself, see?"

And to make himself better understood, the young soldier pushed the priest with five strong, short fingers. The old man almost fell. The druggist ran to his rescue. He was holding him now, and the two old men looked funny and pathetic.

"Oh, leave him alone," said another soldier, disgusted and rather ashamed, and pushed his comrade away from the priest. "Can't you see he's old? Remember your grandfather, if you've got one. Let's take the woman quick, and off we go."

"We're innocent people! Why are you dragging me away?" shouted Ildiko in despair. "We are not spies, we don't hide arms or Germans. Nothing, just Hungarians in this cellar. Why don't you search us?"

"I beg you, officer, to search this cellar," said the old priest ceremoniously, in a shaking voice.

"Oh, shut up, all of you!" shouted the bad soldier, and pointed his short gun at the crowd.

Some of the women shrieked. The ex-lieutenant jumped towards the soldier and patted his arm. "*Tavarishch*," he said, "*Tavarishch*,

nie harasho, women, kids, *nie kulturno*. . . ."

In the meantime the other soldiers were dragging Ildiko up the steep staircase.

"Why?" asked the ex-lieutenant of the bad soldier, and showed with his head the group on the stairs. "We are *harasho* people, good people, *tavarishch!*"

"Shut up!" roared the soldier and raised his gun. Again some of the peasant women shrieked. One of the soldiers came running quickly down the stairs.

"What the hell, Vanya? Don't scare them. They will shout, and we won't succeed, that's all. Come on, you fool." He pulled at his sleeve and they both disappeared behind the door.

Ildiko was standing, blinking with her eyes in the March sun.

"Come on, spy!" said the bad soldier and pushed her in the direction of the rectory.

Surrounded by soldiers, Ildiko found herself in the old priest's bedroom. One of the Russians stayed outside, another locked the door after him. Six dirty young men made a circle round her. They were rather short, on sturdy, strong legs. They smelled of garlic and perspiration.

"Undress," said the oldest in a mild, ashamed voice.

Terrified to death, Ildiko lifted both hands to her throat, as if somebody were strangling her. "Why?"

What?" she mumbled.

"We must search you," laughed the bad soldier. "D'ye get me? Take off your skirt, we want to see what documents you're hiding under it."

"I don't understand," whispered Ildiko.

"Here you are, comrades," said the third soldier. "In five minutes she forgot her Ruthenian. Isn't it strange, now isn't it. . . ." He was pulling down his gun.

"I'll try to make you understand what it's all about."

"You will recover your senses immediately, just let me help you," the bad soldier was also pulling down his gun with a broad grin. "You just wait."

AND THAT'S HOW Ildiko was raped six times, and indeed understood in time what it was all about, though her understanding didn't help her much.

The Russians changed the sentinel before they left. The bad soldier went out, and in his place a slim young boy entered the priest's bedroom.

"It's your turn, Pietya. But we can't wait for you, kid. You and Vanya can join us later. We must rush now, to look for some food and wine."

"O.K.," said Pietya, and put his gun on the priest's table.

And so Ildiko was raped for the seventh time.

Somebody knocked at the window with his fist. Pietya jumped out of bed and opened the window, putting his head out.

"You're in love or what? Want me to freeze to death here, little son-of-a-bitch?" said Vanya's voice.

"Go home, Vanyusha. I don't need you anymore. Thanks just the same. See you later," answered Pietya.

And he shut the window. Ildiko was sitting, curled up in one corner of the bed, between muddy cushions and sheets. Her eyes were closed, and big tears were running down her cheeks and falling on her fat white knees.

"Don't cry," said Pietya gently. "It won't help you," he added in a matter of fact voice, sitting himself on the bed. "You are pretending you are our allies now, our friends, and still the girls run away whenever they see us. Is it nice? At home, in Ukraine, they run to meet the soldiers. You don't know which one to choose, they are so many. But here you need seven armed men to catch one. That's what you call allies in Europe."

"Bastards," said Ildiko, not impressed, and with a heavy sob, "Asiatics! Dirty dogs! That's what you are: like dirty dogs, not like men. Even the Germans wouldn't. . ."

Pietya was playing with the corner of the sheet, which rapidly changed its color under his sticky,

dirty fingers.

"Look here," he said, lifting his head. "I'll explain it to you. You're a capitalistic state: prostitution, women-mongering, and all that. The fascist soldiers have brothels. But we are free people. You go to bed with every girl. You like it, she likes it. No forced labor. It's communism, see? Everybody's free. Communism," he added gravely.

"That's just what I see," answered Ildiko, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "Freedom, liberty, no prostitution. Seven armed men rape a defenseless woman. You like it, she likes it. Quite simple. No forced labor, hey? Bastard."

Pietya looked at her torn skirt and untidy hair. "Where did you get your Ruthenian from?" he asked unexpectedly.

"I'm from the north, from the Carpathians."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-three, and my son is on the front. I've a grownup son. But he's away," and she broke out crying. "I was working here at the post-office. I'm quite alone. Who should defend me?"

"Oh!" said Pietya. "Who'd believe you've got a soldier son? I thought you were twenty-six, twenty-eight. Now, look here," he added comfortably. "Your son is killing us, and we don't mind. Nobody boxed your ears, nobody said a harsh word to you. We know it's not your fault, we can see you're

innocent. The Russians are a good people. Vanya scared you a little bit. But we were afraid you were going to scream, and alarm others. It was for your own good that he frightened you a little bit; you would have had fifteen, and not seven of us, if it weren't for Vanya. He's not bad, just young. Young boys love to scare people, just scare them, you know, just for fun. Nobody hurt you, not even Vanya. So don't cry, what's your name, don't!" and he lifted her chin. "What's your name? Don't cry."

She pushed his hand away with fury. "Nobody hurt me, so? And what if I'll have a baby, and what if I got syphilis? What are you still doing here? Leave me! Leave me alone! I want to go back to my cellar!" and suddenly, "Oh! how can I go back now? How can I face them? Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, why, why? Why just me?"

"You were nice and fat, and you spoke a Slav language."

But Ildiko started to beat her head against the wall, howling like a child in despair.

"We were not fighting in Roumania, so we don't have syphilis," said Pietya mildly.

"And if you had a baby, so what? A nice, fat, Russian baby. You could bring it up as a Hungarian. You won't even remember who made it. It will be fine like his father. And no trouble with a Russian baby. They're very strong and

healthy. You'll be grateful to us every time you look at him. And in case your son shouldn't come back from the war, you might need it badly."

"Jesus!" shouted Ildiko desperately. "Oh, merciful Jesus! Get out of here! Get out! Why are you still hanging around? Can't you understand, you damn, dirty Asiatic? Can't you see what you've done to me?" She started to pull wildly at her torn skirt and blouse.

Pietya rose to his feet, and fumbled nervously in his pockets. At last he found the thing he was looking for, and triumphantly pulled out a pair of torn silk stockings.

"I'm not from Asia," he said kindly. "I'm from the Poltava district, Ukraine. Look, I wanted to send those to my mother for a girl I know at home. She's called Pasha, we're engaged to be married. Now, you take them. Look, it's silk. Just one hole in them. Now, don't cry, take them, please. We are also just human beings, nothing else. It's nature's fault, see? Nature's," he repeated, as if this word explained everything.

He put the torn, filthy stockings on her knees.

"Take them, dear, please do. And don't nourish a grudge against us. You don't know what our life is like. You can't even imagine what it is to be a soldier. Take these stockings. I can swear to God, they're silk. Look, don't you believe?"

And Pietya was standing there, blushing, pushing his fur cap from the left ear to the right.

"I must be going," he said from the threshold. "Farewell! And don't nourish a grudge against us. We're poor. What could we give you? We don't possess anything ourselves."

"Indeed," Ildiko lifted her head with pride and disdain, "Indeed: one pair of torn stockings is not much."

"Wait," interrupted Pietya in haste, and fumbled again in his pockets. He pulled out a small object and turned it for a while in his fingers, looking at it with tenderness. "Here, take this too. Hey! Look at this present I'm giving you, just look. It's an electric torch," he said slowly, as if the words were most important. "Electric. You press this button and you light it. Look, just a button."

And he put the tiny flashlight next to Ildiko's white knee. Standing in the door, he turned again.

"It has no lamp and no battery. But never mind. You can pinch both somewhere from somebody if you're smart. You know what a battery is? You'll be able to light it then. You put the lamp here, screw it in the top. And you push in the battery from the other end. See?" he said. "You're not cross with us now, are you? You *can't* be cross any more."

And he ran out, leaving the door open.



MR. ACHESON'S DEPARTMENT

(As Seen in 1857)

THE Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time, without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong, without the express authority of the Circumlocution Office.

If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of *ungrammatical correspondence*, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.

This glorious establishment had been early in the field, when the one glorious principle involving the difficult art of governing a country, was first distinctly revealed to states-

men. It had been foremost to study that bright revelation, and to carry its shining influence through the whole of the official proceedings. Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving — **HOW NOT TO DO IT.**

Through this delicate perception, through the tact with which it invariably seized it, and through the genius with which it always acted on it, the Circumlocution Office had risen to over-top all the public departments; and the public condition had risen to be — what it was.

It is true that How not to do it was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all round the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How not to do it.

It is true that from the moment