

A Modern Deborah

Translated for Argonaut
From German of Sacher-
Marsh, by Henry B. Collins

AT the eastern extremity of the long, straggling street of Nagy-Nemethy, are the crumbling ruins of a deserted house. Many, many years ago, when the Hungarian people awoke and began to rattle their chains, there lived in this house a young Jewish couple, Adolf Sonnenfeld and his wife Eglantine. Although scarcely fifteen years of age when her husband first took her from her parents' watchful care, she was no half-opened bud, but a glorious woman, a blooming rose of Sharon. Sonnenfeld, like many a young German townsman, was a slender, fair-haired young fellow. His wife, Eglia, was a lovely Jewess of the purest type. Suppressed fervor lurked behind the cold gaze of her dark, scornful eyes, and the mobile mouth could soften sweetly to the warming kiss or harden with deliberation for command. Her husband was merely a practical man of business, of a sly and cunning disposition, called good-humored by his friends because he was too cautious to risk doing an injury.

One morning at breakfast, having scanned the newspaper, she commenced: "Adolf, every one is taking up arms for the fatherland, old men, boys and women. Why do you hold back?"

"Are you mad?" cried Sonnenfeld, half-irritated, half-frightened; "what is Hungarian liberty to me? Even if I wanted to go to the war they would only laugh at me. I don't know how to hold a gun."

"You can learn—"

"I shan't think of it!" cried Sonnenfeld, cutting her short; "we have soldiers enough—I am no hero!"

The truth came home to Eglia that her husband was no hero very shortly. Hussars came into the village, and then all who had hitherto held back came forward and joined the colors. Sonnenfeld alone was not to be seen; he seemed to have disappeared, and only came in sight again after the last horseman had quitted Nagy-Nemethy. Eglia found out afterwards that he had been hidden in a recess of the cellar and supplied with food and drink by the cook.

When the Hungarian capital fell and the national troops fell back on Debreczin, Sonnenfeld felt sure that all was over. He went about radiant and joyful, as if he had won the victory or inherited a million.

It was not long before the First Imperialist Light Cavalry showed themselves in Nagy-Nemethy. A whole brigade followed and pitched camp in

the neighborhood. Some of the soldiers were billeted in the village, and the general himself took up his quarters in Sonnenfeld's house. The husband surpassed himself in hospitality, loyalty, and attention to the wants of his guest. Eglia, who held herself aloof, timid but inimical, one day saw the general kick her husband out of the door. She felt as if her heart was crushed, then the blood rushed to her face, but she endured in silence.

A few days later hussars appeared in the neighborhood and the Imperialist outposts exchanged shots with them. During the night the brigade became alarmed, for the Hungarians approached on all sides and threatened to overwhelm them. Every one was afoot, the inhabitants stood in the street doors whispering, while cannon and heavily armed cavalry rattled by. Eglia, who had dressed herself rapidly, found that her husband had left the house. She glided out after him, only to find him by the garden hedge deep in conversation with the general. Sonnenfeld bowed obsequiously as he spoke, and the general laughed amiably. That laugh seemed to Eglia even more insulting than the kick he had given her husband a few days back. She only caught detached words and isolated phrases of the conversation; but she gathered that while her husband was assuring him of his devotion the general was complaining that he could gain no information even from the poorest peasant. At sunrise an adjutant arrived bearing a sealed letter for the general, on reading which he gave the order for the Imperialist troops to withdraw to the south.

The changeless scenes of the Hungarian winter campaign followed in quick rotation, each day bringing contradictory reports. Eglia was consumed with anxiety and excitement, and she passed sleepless nights of watching, only to sink wearied and exhausted on her couch as daylight approached, and when the bright sunlight streamed in upon her she would awake with a start as if aroused by some horrid dream.

Business was at a standstill, Sonnenfeld alone showing a restless activity. He contracted for provisions of all kinds for the supply of the Imperialist troops, and after visits from suspicious looking characters would absent himself from home for days together. Eglia watched him with anxious heart and increasing uneasiness.

One beautiful, sunshiny winter's

day hussars, with loaded carbines, rode into the village. The villagers received them with loud hurrahs and cries of welcome, and the joy was increased when a Honved battalion followed them on foot. The Hungarians halted, picketed their outposts, sent out patrols to all points of the compass, and their duty over, began to think of the commissariat. The inhabitants of Nagy-Nemethy brought out the best they had to compensate the brave fellows, if ever so little, for the hardships of their campaign. Eglia did not like to follow the example of the others without first obtaining her husband's consent. She went in search of him, but was unable to find him, either at home or anywhere in the village. Evil forebodings took possession of her mind.

Night closed in. Every one slept in Nagy-Nemethy—every one but Eglia. She sat on her bed waiting and listening. She felt that she must listen and wait for—something! Something so terrible it hardly took form in her mind, yet it was something that had been hanging over her for a long time. She sat and waited—one hour—two hours—till she grew drowsy from sheer exhaustion. Suddenly she was startled. Was it the sound of shots—what was the confused noise? The trumpets brayed, words of command were heard, and the firing increased. She ran to the window, and as she threw it open a bullet whistled past and impinged upon the wall behind her. She drew back quickly and extinguished the light. There was fighting in the streets of Nagy-Nemethy.

The Imperialists had advanced upon the Honved battalion under cover of the night, and the Hungarians had been overpowered. A few of them managed to escape with the colors, but the rest were taken prisoners or died the patriot's death.

Eglia sat in her room like one in a trance; her thoughts stood still. The time passed away, but she was heedless of it till suddenly she started at the sound of voices in the next room. Her husband had returned and with him—how well she knew those clear, commanding tones as she listened to the words of praise and the promise of a great reward—to her husband.

The Imperialists did not remain long, and her husband went away in their train. Eglia obtained a conveyance, and, wrapping her children up warmly, drove away with them to her father's house. Having placed them in safety, she returned home on the third day and awaited her husband's return.

On the fourth evening after her return she heard her husband enter the house softly, like a thief, and like a thief he started when his wife, candle in hand, stepped out of her room before him. Placing the light upon the table, she seated herself, and coldly and sternly, like a judge, she commenced her examination.

"Where were you?"

"I have done a bit of good business."

"I know it."

"I have delivered a contract for bread and bacon to—"

"You have delivered up your brethren? You spy!" shrieked the Jewess, flaming with indignation.

"What do you mean?" Sonnenfeld was pale as a ghost.

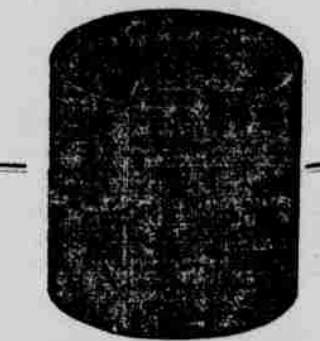
"I overheard your conversation with the general."

"Anything further?" and the husband tried to laugh.

The beautiful Jewess stood up and gazed steadily into his face. "This further. You are a traitor and deserve to die, but I have loved you and would not have the name that I have borne, the name of my children, dishonored before the world. You shall not, therefore, swing from the gallows as you deserve, for I will let you kill yourself here upon the spot."

"I believe you have lost your reason," cried her husband.

For answer she glided quietly into her room and fetched a loaded pistol. "You must die," cried Eglia, "and if you have sunk so low that you do not understand how great is the enormity of the crime you have committed, or if your cowardice be so great you



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dare not kill yourself, then will I be your executioner in the name of the fatherland."

She placed the muzzle of the pistol against his breast, when the wretch fell upon his knees, begging and entreating her to spare his life.

The tragic figure stood superbly above him, gazed at him for a moment with unutterable contempt, and then uncocked the pistol.

"No, truly, you are not worth powder and shot."

She turned from him and went into her own room, when he feverishly sprang to the door and fastened it behind her.

Eglia listened, and when she felt certain her husband had gone to bed, she wrapped herself in a fur cloak and stepped out through the long window into the night.

As day broke the tread of horses sounded in front of Sonnenfeld's house, and a few blows from the butt end of a musket soon broke open the door. Hussars, with his wife at their head, burst into the room where he was sleeping.

"There is the spy," cried she, coldly; "he is my husband, but I would see him hanged."

Sonnenfeld, whining vainly, pleaded for pardon, as the hussars bound his hands behind him and dragged him forth. His wife looked on in silence. When the rope was placed round his neck, and the end slung over the lime-tree, she swung herself into the saddle of a horse that the hussars had prepared for her and galloped away, followed shortly by the soldiers.

At the taking of Waitzen a beautiful woman rode in front of the Honved battalion—it was the Jewess of Nagy-Nemethy. Once again she was seen in the forefront of the fight when the Poles of Mazuchelli's regiment stormed the green hill of Komern at the point of the bayonet, and there she fell riddled with bullets, but wrapped in the standard of her country and staining its colors with her blood.

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