

BUT FOR THIS. . .

By Lajos Zilahy, published in THE BEDSIDE ESQUIRE, Arnold Gingrich, Ed., New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1940.

He didn't stop to wash the turpentine from his hands, but merely dried them on the rag that was hanging on a nail behind the door.

Then he untied the green carpenter's apron from his waist and shook the shavings from his trousers.

He put on his hat and, before going out the door, turned to the old carpenter who was standing with his back to him, stirring the glue. His voice was weary as he said: "Goodnight."

A strange mysterious feeling had shivered in him since morning.

There had been a bad taste in his mouth.

For a moment his hand would stop moving the plane, and his eyes would close, tired.

He went home and listlessly ate his supper.

He lived at an old woman's, the widow of Ferenz Borka, in a bare little room which had once been a wood shed.

That night on the fourth day of October, 1874 at a quarter past one in the morning, the journeyman carpenter, John Kovacs, died.

He was a soft-spoken, sallow faced man, with sagging shoulders and a rusty mustache.

He died at the age of thirty-five.

Two days later, they buried him.

He left no wife, nor child behind, no one but a cook living in Budapest in the service of a bank president, by the name of Torday.

She was John Kovacs' cousin.

Five years later, the old carpenter in whose shop he had worked, died, and nine years later death took the old woman in whose shed he had lived.

Fourteen years later, Torday's cook, John Kovacs' cousin, died.

Twenty-one years later in the month of March in 1895 in a pub at the end of Kerepesiut, cabbies sat around a red clothed table drinking wine.

It was late in the night, it must have been three o'clock. They sprawled with their elbows on the table, shaking with raucous laughter.

Clouds of thick smoke from vile cigars curled around them. They recalled the days of their military service.

One of them, a big, ruddy-faced, double-chinned coachman whom they called Fritz, was saying: "Once my friend, the corporal, made a recruit stick his head into the stove. . ." And at this point he was seized by a violent fit of laughter as he banged the table with the palm of his hand.

"Jeez!" he roared.

The veins swelled on his neck and temples and for many minutes he choked, twitched and shook with convulsive laughter. When he finally calmed down he continued, interrupting himself with repeated guffaws.

"He made him stick his head into the stove and in there he made him shout one hundred times 'Herr Zugsfierer, ich melde gehorsammst'. . . poor chump, there he was on all fours and we paddled his behind till the skin almost split on our fingers."

Again he stopped to get over another laughing spell.

Then he turned to one of the men. "Do you remember, Franzi?" Franzi nodded.

The big fellow put his hand to his forehead.

"Now. . . what was the fellow's name. . ."

Franzi thought for a moment and then said: "Ah . . . a . . . Kovacs . . . John Kovacs."

That was the last time ever a human voice spoke the name of John Kovacs.

On November the tenth, in 1899, a woman suffering from heart disease was carried from an O Buda tobacco factory to St. John's Hospital. She must have been about forty-five years old.

They put her on the first floor in ward number 3.

She lay there on the bed, quiet and terrified; she knew she was going to die.

It was dark in the ward, the rest of the patients were already asleep: only a wick sputtered in a small blue oil lamp.

Her eyes staring wide into the dim light, the woman reflected upon her life.

She remembered a summer night in the country, and a gentle-

eyed young man, with whom their fingers linked, she was roaming over the heavy scented fields and through whom that night she became a woman.

That young man was John Kovacs and his face, his voice, the glance of his eyes had now returned for the last time.

But this time his name was not spoken, only in the mind of this dying woman did he silently appear for a few moments.

The following year a fire destroyed the Calvinist rectory and its dusty records that contained the particulars of the birth and death of John Kovacs.

In January, 1901, the winter was hard.

Toward evening in the dark a man dressed in rags climbed furtively over the ditch that fenced in the village cemetery. He stole two wooden crosses to build a fire. One of the crosses had marked the grave of John Kovacs.

Again two decades passed.

In 1923, in Kecskemet, a young lawyer sat at his desk making an inventory of his father's estate. He opened every drawer and looked carefully through every scrap of paper. On one was written: "Received 4 Florins, 60 kraciers. The price of two chairs polished respectfully Kovacs John."

The lawyer glanced over the paper, crumpled it in his hand and threw it into the wastepaper basket.

The following day the maid took out the basket and emptied it in the far end of the courtyard.

Three days later it rained.

The crumpled paper soaked through and only this much remained on it: "... Kova ... J ... " The rain had washed away the rest; the letter "J" was barely legible.

These last letters were the last lines, the last speck of matter that remained of John Kovacs.

A few weeks later the sky rumbled and the rain poured down as though emptied from buckets.

On that afternoon the rain washed away the remaining letters.

The letter "v" resisted longest, because there where the line curves in the "v" John Kovacs had pressed on his pen.

Then the rain washed that away too.

And in that instant forty-nine years after his death the life of the journeyman carpenter ceased to exist and forever disappeared from this earth . . . But for this . . .

[Thanks to Joan Young JYoung6180@aol.com for finding and submitting "But for This," of which she said she was reminded when she read Ted Klein's "Three Deaths."]

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And if I might add:

But for this
AND
God's memory,

for He will one day resurrect John Kovacs!

Ron