

ONE  
YEAR

DOROTHEA  
GERARD



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# ONE YEAR

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

AUTHOR OF

“LADY BABY,” “A SPOTLESS REPUTATION,” ETC.

*D. G. Longard de Longgarde,*



NEW YORK  
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## INTRODUCTION

THE year I am going to write about is the only one worth writing about in the whole of my eventless career. There are such things as long, even stretches of road, broken only at one spot by the excitement of a raging torrent, or such things as still summer days, shaken at only one moment by the thrill of an isolated thunder-clap,—only to these things can I liken my peaceful and mildly dull life, cut, as it were, into two distinct halves by that one year into which was crowded all that I have ever known of violent emotions, of apprehension, and even of horror. And yet it is probable that but for Agnes Jeffrey that year would have remained unchronicled and those sentiments unrecorded. It was but a few weeks ago, during the Whitsuntide holidays which, as usual, I was spending at Broadfield, that Agnes put into my hands a bundle of letters on which I recognised my own writing, and tied together with a green ribbon which had scarcely begun to fade.

“You should make a story of that,” she said to me, taking her youngest child on her arm as she spoke.

I untied the green ribbon, my eye catching the rosy flush of the Austrian stamps, and immediately the memories began to surge. Agnes, with her child on her arm, had left the room; I was alone with the dead past. One page after another did I unfold, here skimming along, there spelling out, and presently let them all drop together on the table and gazed out on the softly rolling landscape with eyes that saw neither the blossoming hedgerows nor the vividly green meadows, but rather the flat line of horizon, the straight roads, the wattled willow palings of a far-off land. In the pleasant vicarage garden the first crimson rose had opened over-night, but, although in spirit, too, I looked upon roses, they were roses of a different hue, and of a lower, more rustic, growth; in place of the well-trimmed lawn it was waving patches of grass that I saw; instead of the irreproachable paths rough gravel richly matted with dandelion tufts. And through it all a face looked at me—dark-eyed, colourless, exquisite, and stabbed me to the heart with its phantom gaze.

Oh, Jadwiga, beautiful Jadwiga, shall I ever be able to forget your eyes? Shall I ever see their like again? Assuredly neither one nor the other. Make a story of it? Was not that what Agnes had said? No need of that, surely; the story was there already, ready-made to my hand; my letters told it, and what my letters left out my memory—



not more faded yet than that green ribbon—could supply. If ever I was to do it, now was the time. Sooner would have been too soon, for you have to step back from your model before you can get its right proportions; later might be too late, by laying a haze of oblivion over many even significant details.

I may as well say at once that I am not the heroine of the romance I am about to recount. In order, once for all, to crush this idea in the reader's mind, the simplest course will be to give a truthful personal description. At the moment that I write this I am thirty-six years old, so even five years ago when the events to be recorded took place, I was out of the twenties. My hair is brown—not golden-brown, or ruddy-brown, or “shadowy brown”—but just simply a good honest, unexciting brown. My eyes which are grey can likewise lay no claim to any further adjective. My complexion I have heard described as “opaque,” and I *know* that my nose is dumpy. Add to this somewhat broad cheek bones and a figure more remarkable for solidity than grace, and I think that even the most sanguine reader will not expect to find me figuring in any ultra-romantic situation. What Henry could ever see in me has always been a mystery to my humble comprehension. Surely the eyes of all men are not made on the same plan, and very lucky it is for us the plain

women of the world. No, I am not the heroine, only a witness of that strange family drama of which my letters to Agnes Jeffrey give the outline. In order to explain how I came to be a witness, it is necessary for me to speak of my own affairs, which I will do as briefly as possible.

Henry and I had known each other long before I had got into long skirts or he into the regulation manly garment. When we began to be fond of each other I can't rightly say, because I don't remember any time when it was otherwise. I know that when he told me of his intention of never marrying any woman but myself I was scarcely surprised, nor even pretended to be so; it seemed such an almost inevitable conclusion to our childish intimacy. Neither did it necessarily mean that he would marry me any more than the others, for we both possessed a fair portion of common sense which the sober, middle-class atmosphere in which we grew up had helped to develop. I was only sixteen and he only twenty, yet we had both already found out that, although the little God of Love does make the world go round, he cannot always do the same for the spit, or that, at any rate, he often fails to stick something upon it. I don't remember even feeling particularly aggrieved at this juncture; merely to know that I stood first in Henry's estimation was contentment enough for me.

We separated soon after this conversation—it could scarcely be called a declaration, since we had both known all about it long before—but we occasionally met, and frankly enjoyed our meetings. We were not engaged to be married, whatever our friends might pretend, only it had become an understood thing that, unless we were able to afford to marry some day, we should both probably end our lives single. Sometimes we did not meet for months, for circumstances had forced me to take a situation as a governess, and to follow my employers to various parts of England, while Henry, one in the herd of briefless barristers who look to each morrow for their chance, had chosen London for his headquarters. Years passed in this way, and employment did not come, and without it our chances of union naturally remained invisible. Neither of us had allowed our disappointment to spoil our lives—we felt that would have been poor spirited—but there is no denying that things did feel rather flat at times. We had got into a groove of somewhat blunted, somewhat dogged, patience, and it was beginning to look as though it were going to go on exactly like this to the end when quite suddenly Agnes gave the matter another turn by writing me one of her flurried little notes. She is wonderfully easily flurried, especially when anything goes wrong with anybody she cares for, and she cares for a great many people and is horribly

anxious to see them all as happy as she is her dear little self.

“Do for goodness’ sake take care,” she wrote to me on this occasion, “or Henry will slip through your fingers, after all. A baby in arms could see that that Somerville girl is setting her cap at him in earnest; and the worst of it is I do believe she cares for him.”

The news undoubtedly alarmed me, but also it set me thinking, and not exactly in the direction that Agnes had foreseen. I knew that Lily Somerville was a considerable heiress, and also a bit of a beauty. For a briefless barrister there could be no doubt that she would be a brilliant catch. Henry might not care for her now, but might he not come to care for her in time, especially if she cared for him? Not that for a moment I doubted his loyalty. Although not bound by one word I knew that he would never marry another woman without, so to say, asking my consent. Would it not be better to give it before it was asked? I had been thirty on my last birthday; and was beginning to feel almost middle-aged, while for a man Henry was still distinctly young; was it likely that he would be heartbroken at a release which would be certain to assure his career? Was it right to go on standing in his way as I now suddenly became aware of having done for years past, barring his free passage, perhaps spoiling his best chances?

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He loved me still—I believed it, but if I were out of the way——

At that very time I was without a situation and looking out for another. On the day before I received Agnes's letter I had had my name put down at a registry office. Two places had been suggested, one in an English nobleman's family and under especially favourable conditions, the other in a Polish family living in East Galicia, but anxious to perfect their daughters in our language, which, as I was told, was beginning to be largely cultivated among the Polish aristocracy, I had not hesitated for a moment in deciding for the English offer. To my insular notions East Galicia sounded about as far away as Japan, offering no temptations to my unenterprising spirit. So it had been yesterday, but to-day an abrupt change had come over me. Half an hour after reading Agnes's letter I was back at the office and inquiring whether there was still time to cancel the step taken yesterday. There was still time, I was told, after which I asked whether the Polish situation was still open. Yes, it was; it was not so easy, it seemed, to entice a freeborn young Englishwoman to that semi-barbarous region known as East Galicia. On hearing that I was willing to open negotiations, the head of the registry office nearly embraced me. She had evidently had a lot of bother over the business already and was overjoyed at the

prospect of a termination. I left the office with a strip of paper in my hand on which was written the address :—

Madame Walentyna Bielinska,  
Ludniki,  
Post Zloczek.

As I looked at the words a strange sense of finality came over me. I felt certain already that my path lay toward that unknown place called Ludniki, and I felt it with a mixture of pain and satisfaction. Once over there I should in truth have stepped out of Henry's life, leaving him free to make his choice unencumbered by foolish scruples. It was not nearly so heroic as it sounds. The dream of my early girlhood had grown so faint by this time, so far off through constant receding, besides being somewhat overlaid by the dust of this workaday world, that to give it up finally was not much worse than saying good-bye to a corpse. But saying good-bye even to a corpse does hurt a good deal at times, for which reason I will, with the reader's permission, skip my sensations of the next few days, for I repeat—it is not my story that I am about to tell, but that of quite another person, whose nature was very different from my own, and whose lovely face was never shone upon by an English sun.

## CHAPTER I

LOOKING through my packet of letters I am glad to find the very first one I wrote to Agnes from Ludniki, a week after my arrival there; it will save me the trouble of recalling those early impressions.

It was in October that for the first time I crossed the sea, and not under favourable auspices, for an icy north wind seemed inhospitably intent on blowing me away from British shores. The strange land I was going to appeared more kindly disposed toward me than my native country, for at Ostend the first ray of sunshine I had seen since quitting London greeted me, and the further eastward I travelled the more the autumn mists rolled back from the many tinted landscape. By the time I reached Galicia the transformation was perfect. A faintly blue, but spotless sky shone down on a brilliantly-painted world, a quite different world from the one I had known hitherto, but whose many startling features were softened by the glamour of that perfect season and that perfect sunshine. But my letter must speak for me, I give it here in full:—

“LUDNIKI, October 8th, 188—.

“DEAREST AGNES,—So I have actually done it! The sea is safely between me and my old life, my

hopes and imaginings, and I am glad it is so. So far as country, surroundings, people, habits go I might as well be on another planet from you all. Don't expect my impressions to be very coherent yet; I am still too dizzy from my rush across Europe to be certain about anything. Above all, don't ask me whether I find the country pretty; upon my life I couldn't tell you—*anything* would look pretty in this weather. I have an impression that the place might under other circumstances seem rather flat and rather bare, but nothing matters in this sunshine. We are on the beginning of the great Podolian plain, which stretches into Russia—miles of cornfields, reaped, of course, by this time, with villages buried in fruit-trees, dotted about more or less like islands. Except for these islands and an occasional gentleman's park, the country is almost treeless; the large forests which once covered this tract of land have been cut down long ago to make room for the corn; the soil is too good, it seems, to be left to trees alone. It may sound a little monotonous; perhaps it is, but, as I tell you, I can't fairly judge in this weather. The Ludniki park at any rate is not monotonous, could not be so in any weather; it is too full of surprises for that. There is also a flower garden and a kitchen garden as well as an orchard—so I am given to understand—but all so inextricably mixed up together that I have not yet succeeded in disen-



tangling them. Imagine starting along what appears to be a shrubbery and on turning a corner finding yourself close to a strip of onions, or else stumbling upon a hot-bed (with all the panes smashed) in the very midst of a rose plantation. Everything seems to be more or less represented in this bewildering miscellaneous park; you can find there lawns which nobody ever mows and hedges which nobody ever clips, as well as wooden summerhouses where the honeysuckle is dragging the rotting pillars to the ground; a swing which has not been used for so long that a fine, healthy fern has grown up in its hollow. There is a want of accuracy and method about the whole which would probably drive me mad if the place were mine, but which in no way seems to disturb the happy Polish *insouciance*. And, mind you, it isn't either for want of money or want of hands that these things are so—of the former, so far as I can judge, there is plenty, and of the latter so many that even now at the end of a week I have not yet succeeded in taking a proper inventory of the domestics—but only because no one feels the need of its being otherwise. *To nic nie szkodzi* is the first Polish phrase which I have learned, and of which the translation is:—"It doesn't matter." According to them very little that we consider vital really matters.

"The house itself is a crossbreed between a

palace and a cottage—grey, weather-beaten, roomy, with a pillar-supported verandah, which gives it a sort of sham Greek appearance—ornamented with some rather dilapidated stucco-work, but never rising beyond the ground-floor. The entrance is oddly placed toward one end of the long, low front, an irregularity which at first sight offended my highly symmetrical instincts. The reception-rooms are large and appeared to me at first sight so empty that I imagined a house cleaning must be going on, and that at least half the furniture was outside being dusted; but as a week has passed and no more has turned up I have come to the conclusion that this is the normal state of things. Perhaps it is a mercy, for when I consider the average quantity of sweepings left under each sofa and table now it is easy to calculate what it might grow to if the number of these convenient hiding-places were doubled. Now as to the people who live in this house—I have kept them to the last as being the most interesting—there are three of them to talk of, and all of my own sex, for it seems that I have come into a family of women exclusively. I got to see them one by one—but let me go back to the moment of my arrival.

“It took three hours and four horses to bring me here from the station, also a coachman in a dark green livery on which at least five of the silver-plated buttons were wanting. Their absence was

quite unable to impair the air of consequence with which he flicked up his splendidly-stepping but wretchedly-groomed horses—to *nic nie szkodzi* was what he probably said to himself, if he thought of the matter at all—but to me the missing buttons were a positive mercy. As I sat behind him in state the shyness with which the unwonted pomp of my position filled me was marvellously tempered by the contemplation of the empty space at the back of his broad waist, and of the dangling thread on which the pair to the one silver button bearing the Bielinski arms should by rights have sat. But for this I don't know how I should have borne the overpowering respectfulness of the passers-by, for scarcely an urchin on all the way missed running out of his hut to bow—generally down to the ground—to the carriage and to me as its inmate; my neck grew quite stiff through returning the salutations received; and whenever we stopped to pay toll some one was sure to seize the opportunity of kissing my unwilling hand. I wish I had time to talk to you of the sheepskin-coated peasants—a sort of hairy monsters they seemed to me at first, and a very gentle sort of monster they proved on nearer view—and about their steep-roofed, straw-thatched huts, and the dark-brown wooden minarets that mark the village church—but I know you are impatient to hear of my employers, and so I hurry on.

“When, with a final splutter, we drew up on the badly-weeded gravel, the sun was not far from setting. A long, spare, grey-haired individual, likewise in dark-green livery, but with rather fewer missing buttons than the coachman, ran swiftly down the steps—to kiss my hand, of course; nothing can be fairly started without that, it seems—after which, and having taken a keen, but discreet look at me, he preceded me, smiling, to the entrance lobby, on to which several double-winged doors stood wide open. In one of them a small, dark, angular figure was standing. ‘You are Miss Middleton, are you not?’ said a painfully thin and yet perfectly assured voice in excellent French. I said I was, upon which she went on with bewildering rapidity. ‘Oh, then will you please come in here? Mamma has asked me to take charge of you, and to see you have everything you want. She is rather worse than usual to-day, and Jadwiga doesn’t come back from Limberg till next week. I hope the journey hasn’t been too long for you? Andrej, bring the samovar.’ While speaking she had ushered me into the room, a large, handsome, faded apartment, with a few good pictures on the walls and some valuable carpets on the floor, but without a book in it or a sign of occupation beyond the music on the piano, and with holland covers over the chairs. On nearer view my small hostess disclosed herself as a sallow,

dark-eyed, and almost weirdly thin little maiden, at whose age it was hard to form a guess. Her height did not indicate more than eight or nine, but the absolute assurance of her manner and the precocious expression of her peaky little face made her look almost adult. The small eyes were as bright and as black as those of a mouse, and the dry, yellow skin fell into two strangely elderly folds at each side of the thin mouth. Altogether she struck me as more quaint than attractive, and it was with a certain sinking of the heart that I inquired whether I was speaking to my future pupil. The little girl flushed with vexation at her own oversight. 'How stupid of me!' she said, positively biting her lip with annoyance. 'Naturally I ought to have introduced myself. Of course, I am Anulka—Anulka Bielinska, mamma's youngest daughter, you know, and Jadwiga's sister, and you are to be my governess. I do hope we shall get on together,' she added kindly. Having echoed this hope I became lost in the contemplation of her adroit movements, for the samovar had come in by this time, and Anulka had set about making tea with all the *aplomb* of a grown-up person.

“‘I hope they have given you enough water,’ she remarked presently. ‘There was a gentleman here the other day who has once been in London, and he said the only way to make English people feel at home is to give them plenty of water. Will

one bath be enough, or shall I tell them to give you a second?' I said that one would be quite sufficient; indeed at that moment, and after the long, dusty journey I should have been thankful for even a basin, but this idea did not seem to have occurred to anybody. I next asked my miniature entertainer how old she was. She said she was ten, 'of course.' Everything touching herself or her family seems to Anulka so much a matter of course that it is difficult for her to realise the ignorance of other people. By way of making conversation, I went on to ask how old Jadwiga was. I was told that, 'of course,' she had been nineteen on her last birthday. 'Then, I suppose, she takes no more lessons?' I remarked. Not generally, Anulka said, but she was going to take English lessons from me. She sat staring into her tea-glass for a minute before she added:—'But I don't think it will be for long.' 'Why not?' I naturally inquired. 'Because,' said Anulka, with a gleam in her black eyes, 'I think she will be married soon.' I could think of nothing to say on the reception of this intelligence. Anulka went on talking in the calmest, most matter-of-fact tone. 'I do hope she will be, for unless she is married before I am grown up no one will ever look at me, because, you see, I am not pretty at all.'

“‘And Jadwiga is?’ I asked in growing amusement.

“‘Just wait till you see!’ No words can give the conscious triumph of the glance which went along with the words. ‘There are two gentlemen who want to marry her, only I don’t think she has made up her mind yet which of them she likes best.’ This seemed to me to be going rather fast for a first interview, and for fear of hearing more of the absent Jadwiga’s confidences disclosed, I hastily began talking of something else. But Anulka was not so easily turned from her subject. ‘They haven’t *said* yet that they want to marry her,’ she explained, ‘but it is quite easy to guess. They would never drink so many glasses of tea, nor look at her so hard over the edge, and I am sure they would never be so polite to each other if they did not both want to marry her.’ I looked across with consternation at the child. The horrible acuteness of the remark sent a shiver of repulsion down my backbone. I had just made up my mind that I detested the sharp-eyed imp when quite suddenly a lightning-like change shot across her narrow face. ‘Oh, there is Litawar,’ she shrieked in a genuine child’s voice, putting down the sugar-basin anyhow, and making a dart at a large, woolly, dirty-white puppy, who had just appeared in the open door. ‘Are you fond of dogs? You must know Litawar at once.’ In another moment she had gone down on her thin knees beside the cur, the correct hostess attitude cast to the

winds, and forgetful of the running samovar, whose tap I was barely in time to turn off before the table was flooded. That was the first moment in which I felt that it might be possible to love my queer little pupil. There have been other moments since, but, on the whole, she is a baffling creature, more witch-like than quite human, rarely coming near to one, and always escaping one again. Much of her oddity is a result of ill-health, I imagine, for it seems that she has been sickly since her birth, and her family have kept her in cotton-wool, and made her wear respirators, and never given her anything but boiled water to drink, and in general employed all the usual means of making a delicate child more delicate still.

“I did not see Madame Bielinska until next day. Meanwhile I had slept gloriously on a large bed in a small room, which I can only reach by passing through another, at present unoccupied, bedroom, but which, I am told, is Jadwiga’s, and had had my choice of three different sorts of tubs in which to perform my ablutions. That gentleman who has once been in London must have spread a prodigious impression with regard to our national consumption of water, and the domestics of this establishment have evidently been severely drilled, for so brimful is my morning bath—I have succeeded in reducing it to one—as to demand extreme circumspection in the manner of stepping in and out of it.



“Madame Bielinska is not an old lady, but has, I understand, been a chronic invalid since her husband’s death, about eleven years ago. She seems to spend her life in a room from which both air and sunshine are carefully excluded. The heavily scented air seemed to grip me at the throat as I entered, and for a moment or two I could distinguish nothing in the artificial darkness. At last I made out somebody sitting in a deep armchair, with a silk shawl over her shoulders and pale yellow gloves on her hands. Those gloves fascinated my gaze in the first moment—they appeared so oddly superfluous in this atmosphere. She is a small, frail person, with an almost grotesquely long, bloodless face and a generally startled air. And just as the face is too large for the body, so the eyes are too large for the face; and again, the sockets are too large for the eyes, which used probably to belong to the prominent order, but have come to sink so low that they now roll about, rather at random, in two hollow, purple-veined caverns. There is a scared look somewhere in their depths, as of a person who has seen some dreadful sight, the terror of which has remained permanently fixed in his eyes. She did not seem to take much interest in my arrival, but spoke to me in a politely weary tone, explaining that it was by the wish of her daughter Jadwiga that she had gone to the trouble of procuring an

English governess. Jadwiga was anxious to learn English, principally, it seems, in order to be able to read Byron in the original. I don't know, by the bye, if this argues very promisingly for her literary tastes. After ten minutes' limp talk I was dismissed out of the dim and sickeningly scented little room. I fancy I shall not see very much of my real employer. To my mind she looks like a person who has gone through such heavy troubles that her one desire is for peace and seclusion.

“As for the eldest daughter, that Jadwiga whose name I had heard so often, it was only this morning that I had my first glimpse of her. All this time she has been away at Limberg, not enjoying herself, however, or, at least, I suppose not, since as I understood from the chatter of Anulka—who all this time has very carefully looked after me—she has been spending most of her time in the dentist's hands. This morning I was walking in the garden before breakfast, enjoying the pure, keen sunshine and feasting my eyes on the spider-webs all sparkling with dewdrops and stiffened with just the lightest touch of frost, when, on turning the corner of a path, I came full upon a brilliant but somewhat startling vision—a tall young girl, sauntering idly along, with her hat in her hand and a wreath of crimson and yellow leaves—such leaves as hung on every branch in the wide park—resting lightly on a rather untidy

dark head. Fragments of the very gossamer webs which draped the bushes clung to the shining leaves, and the frosty dewdrops flashed like diamonds in her hair. She had her loose travelling cloak about her still; it hung in long, pale folds to her feet, and, in conjunction with that leafy wreath might very fairly represent the garb of some ancient priestess on her way back from morning sacrifice. She looked white and tired, and her dark eyes were heavy. I fancy that under more favourable circumstances she must be beautiful, in part I am not sure that I did not find her beautiful even in that moment, and in spite of the faintly blue tinge under the eyes, which showed that she had not slept all night, but it was a rather too fantastical and unconventional sort of beauty to entirely suit my sober taste. At sight of me she brightened suddenly. 'At last!' she said with a wonderfully radiant smile. 'I have been waiting for you so long!' I asked in some astonishment how this could be, not immediately realising who she was. 'Yes,' she said, 'I got home very early, when you were all still asleep, and I knew that if I once lay down I should sleep till evening, for I have been travelling all night, but I was too curious to see you. I am to be your pupil, too, you know—in English—and I am just dying to begin.' 'But surely not to-day?' I objected, both pleased and amused with her eagerness. 'No,' she said,

‘of course, not to-day; to-day I only meant to look at your face, so as to make up my mind about you. I could not have slept quietly without that. You kept me waiting rather long; and I passed the time by making this wreath—do you think it very ridiculous?’ I said I found it very becoming, as was not to be denied, and asked her then whether she had yet made up her mind about me? She looked at me very long and earnestly before she said: ‘I believe I have; it sounds sudden, doesn’t it? but I do most things suddenly. Oh, Miss Middleton, I wonder whether you will be my friend?’ As I am not able to do things as suddenly as this, I could only say that I hoped I should, but the eager look in her beautiful eyes and the wonderful radiancy of her smile made me feel horribly prim and British as I expressed this measured desire. ‘I want a friend very badly,’ said Jadwiga, but she was already beginning to yawn; ‘we shall talk about that later; good-bye in the meantime, and good-night,’ and with another sleepy smile she turned away. Having gone only a few steps she came back again abruptly. ‘Is it—is it not very dreadful to be so far away from one’s country?’ she inquired, almost shyly, and looking at me with quite a new expression in her eyes. ‘Sometimes it is better to be far away,’ I evasively replied. ‘You must try not to be unhappy with us,’ she said earnestly. ‘If I can help

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you to forget how far away you are, I shall do so,' and then I felt my two hands taken and sharply pressed, while a quick, hot, little kiss fell on my cold cheek, and then she was gone again, and I was alone. Sudden, yes, undeniably it was sudden, but I cannot say that it was unpleasant. Is it not almost enough to make one love her already?

“Presently, when I passed through the outer room, I could see a slender form lying on the hitherto vacant bed, where Jadwiga had flung herself down, travelling cloak and all, not having taken the time to wash her hands or even to remove her wreath. She has not moved since; each time I pass through the room I can see the fantastically crowned head half buried in the pillow, and hear the sound of her regular breathing. I shall tell you more of her when I know more; the impression she has left on my mind is as yet a mixture of fascination and consternation. If we ever become friends it could only be through the working of the law of contrast.

“This is all for to-day. With Jadwiga's appearance the small family circle appears to be complete, and she promises to be the most interesting member of the group. By next time I write I shall probably have got more used to my surroundings. The owls in the bushes that grow straight against my windows hoot at night rather more than is pleasant, also there is a pane broken in my win-

dow. I have mentioned the matter to Andrej, the venerable footman, who appears to be the person of most authority in the establishment, but he pointed out to me that, as the whole panes were decidedly in the majority, there could not be much wrong, an argument which had not before struck me. No doubt he is right—*to nic nie szkodzi*—you see I am doing my best to assimilate myself to my surroundings.

“Good-bye, my dearest. Write soon to the poor exile, but remember to send me *no* messages.

“Yours ever,

“ELEANOR MIDDLETON.”

## CHAPTER II

IN the days that followed on the writing of that letter I was able to form a clear opinion both of Jadwiga's looks and of her character. About the former I had no difficulty in making up my mind. In the moment that she made her appearance at tea that afternoon, rested, in fresh attire and with her hair in order, I felt satisfied that she was beautiful, although not in any style that I had hitherto had personal experience of. Perhaps she was almost more graceful and charming than strictly speaking beautiful; it is even quite conceivable that but for the light behind it, that delicately pale face with the rather full lips and the unimportant nose might have missed being beautiful. Anulka had the same cast of features and almost the same colour of eyes, only with a keener look in them, but it was quite clear even now that, although she might possibly become what is termed "piquante," she could never be beautiful, and just because that light was wanting.

To my mind Jadwiga had something of the appearance of a plant grown up in the dark; her beautifully clear complexion had grown over-white from want of fresh air, and over-soft, too, as I

gradually found out. Constitutionals are unknown things in Poland, and nobody in their senses thinks of going out except in fine weather, by which is understood not only absence of rain, but also of wind or mud or dust, or anything beyond the most moderate frost. As the winter lasts quite six months it is easy to calculate the amount of fresh air imbibed by the regulation Polish lady. Except on the balmiest summer afternoons or the most tepid moonlight nights going out seems in general to be considered in the light of a necessary evil. Jadwiga's face looked as if it had never encountered a cutting wind, and probably it never had. But that colourless skin was not the result of ill-health—indeed if her health had not been exceptionally good it could never have stood the indoor *régime*—but only of circumstances. Her eyes looked all the darker for it; they were really brown, but by contrast with that almost dead white skin looked black. When she was tired or out of spirits the whiteness became almost ghastly; when, on the other hand, exercise or excitement brought a faint tinge of colour to her cheeks, she became in one moment ten times more beautiful than usual. Her hands were models of what a hand should be, given that it is not meant to be used in any sense as an instrument—beautifully slender and beautifully white, and so soft that even to dream of its caresses was bliss—quite useless, indeed, so



far as work was concerned, but so good to look at that the spectator felt a sense of personal gratitude toward the person who afforded him this treat. From the first the mere sight of these hands made me feel painfully conscious of my own, but I do not think that even the hope of rivalling these works of art could have reconciled me to wearing gloves in the house as Jadwiga was apt to do on the smallest provocation. Her proximity alone had a way of making me feel unpleasantly commonplace and vulgarly robust. I think I must have liked her from the first in spite of this humiliating observation, and in spite of much that startled my somewhat narrowly British ideas. I came soon to understand that she was an outcome of her country and social usages, and to accept her uncomplainingly as such. It was indeed hard not to fall under the charm of her frankly enthusiastic personality. There was something peculiarly insinuating about Jadwiga, something that wound its way into your affections before you were aware that you had left a chink open. Her ardent temperament was joined to a child's candour; she had the carriage of a queen and the caressing ways of a kitten—but of a kitten whose whole soul looked out of its eyes. There never was the shadow of mystery about Jadwiga; her openness at first often embarrassed me.

“I had three teeth stuffed this week,” she an-

nounced to me smiling, as she sipped her tea, "and you can't imagine how happy I feel after it. I had been putting it off as long as I could, for I am an awful coward, but then I began to be afraid I should lose a tooth, and that would never have done, for I am also awfully vain; and besides that it hurt me to eat jam, and I am awfully greedy ——"

"Cowardly, vain, and greedy," summed up Anulka, with her elderly smile, "what a nice idea Miss Middleton will get of you."

"It's better she should know the worst at once," laughed Jadwiga. "Oh, Anulka, do give me some more of that rose jam; I can eat it now with a good conscience."

"It was with rose jam that you spoiled your teeth last time," remarked Anulka almost severely, but she handed the plate all the same.

"Is that your real Polish rose jam?" I asked. "If you will give me some, too, Anulka, I shall risk spoiling my teeth with it, and if it does not spoil them more than it has done your sister's I shall be able to bear the consequences." As I spoke I could not help glancing at the tiny, shining teeth, white as porcelain, which kept appearing between Jadwiga's crimson lips each time she carried the spoon to her mouth. Certainly she did not look in need of a dentist. I have generally noticed that it is the people who are always talking

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about their dentist who have, apparently, the most perfect teeth, perhaps because of the constant attention paid to them; at least it is so in Galicia, where dentists play as great a *rôle* as do confectioners, and owe to the latter at least half of their occupation.

Jadwiga laughed over my last remark. She had a wonderfully low and yet clear laugh.

“Can you English pay compliments, too?” she asked. “I thought it was only we who did that, and that you were all much too sensible and practicable. I wonder if I should like England? Is it really true that one is not allowed even to play the piano on a Sunday? I don’t think I could stand that part.”

“I think there would be several parts you could not stand,” I said, and proceeded to give her a sketch of an orthodox English Sunday, as spent in the last family I had been in—rigidly strict, Low Church people. The eyes of both Jadwiga and Anulka widened with amazement as they listened.

“But that is worse than Ash Wednesday or Good Friday,” said Anulka in horror-stricken tones, “except for the eating. I suppose you are at least allowed to eat as much as you like?”

I replied that that consolation was left us, which slightly relieved Anulka’s mind, but Jadwiga remained pensive.

“But does it not just kill you with dulness?”

she asked at last. "Do you not all hate Sunday?"

"Not those to whom dulness means rest," I replied.

She gave me a quick, deprecating glance; no words could have begged my pardon more distinctly. "Oh, how stupid I am. Of course the dulness does not matter when one is tired, and I am sure you have been tired very often, but we will not let you tire yourself here," and putting out her hand she touched mine with the lightest and yet softest of caresses.

"Now with us," she went on, "Sunday is just the least dull day in the week, sometimes quite gay, for very often our neighbours come and look us up in order to exchange the impressions of the week. It's the only day they are not bothering about their fields, and about the only day that Mamma comes out of her room in order to do the honours of the house; it's only on Sundays that our board ever becomes festive now or that the cards are brought out. By the bye, Miss Middleton, will you not be horrified to see playing-cards on a Sunday? Will you be able to get used to them?"

I replied that I should do my best. "But your Sundays are not always so gay," I objected, "for I have spent one here, and there were no visitors at all."

"That was because Jadwiga was in Limberg,"

promptly replied Anulka, with the odiously acute smile which at moments made me detest her. "They don't come here to talk to Mamma, or me, I'm quite sure about that; and they all knew she was away—we always know everything about each other here; you just see if they don't turn up next Sunday, just as if cards of invitation had been sent round."

"Very likely they will," said Jadwiga, with an inscrutable smile, delicately licking a morsel of sugared roseleaf from off her spoon. "But that won't necessarily make it gay, not unless the right ones come."

"Make your mind easy on that point," said Anulka soothingly, "the right ones will come, and the wrong ones too, and ah, I do hope that Wladimir will bring me the grapes he promised."

"And that Mazurka of Roszkowski's," added Jadwiga.

"You haven't heard Jadwiga play yet?" asked Anulka abruptly.

"You sweet little goose," laughed Jadwiga, "when should Miss Middleton have heard me? While I was asleep?"

"But play something for her now. I am sure you must want to hear Jadwiga play?" she asked eagerly.

"Let it be," said Jadwiga, rising and going somewhat languidly to the piano.

The first thing she played did not enchant me, being the elaborate rendering of "Home, Sweet Home," and played in a somewhat laborious fashion which betrayed more drill than anything else. The intention was obvious, but the result calculated to raise her kindness in my estimation, rather than her talent. But then, without any pause, she went on into Chopin, and immediately a marvelous change came over the spirit of her play. She was doing something now that she understood and loved, something that helped her to express a little of what was within her; and there was a great deal within her, as I was to find out in time. With astonishment I hearkened to the vibrating force of the chords struck by that slender and seemingly so fragile hand; almost with consternation I recognised the breathless passion that seemed to cry out of some of those wonderful notes, a rebellious passion, unable, or perhaps only unwilling, to contain itself. Chopin's mode of expression was one peculiarly congenial to her nature, which either by the affinity of race or some more subtle affinity of spirit, seemed to guess the composer's intention in passages which hitherto had always failed to move me, and at which I now suddenly felt the tears standing in my eyes. For nearly an hour she played on wandering from Mazurkas to Impromptus and back again to Mazurkas and Nocturnes, with a scrap of the funeral march in between. I have

never been a musician myself in the sense of never having played any instrument, but I have always been ridiculously susceptible to good music, and as I now listened in the falling dusk I felt that Ludniki was going to possess at least one great charm for me, independent of the personal one of the player, whose slender silhouette was growing every minute more phantom-like against the fast-failing light. I was alone with her now, for Anulka had early disappeared. She could not have rested until I had heard Jadwiga play ; indeed, her undisguised pride in her sister was one of the redeeming points in the little imp's character, but a small dose of music sufficed for her personally.

That evening while I was brushing out my hair for the night, my door opened, without any previous knock, and Jadwiga's head appeared.

“ May I talk a little ? ” she asked almost humbly, “ or are you too sleepy to listen ? You see I have slept all day and I am horribly wide-awake.”

Although a little startled at the intrusion I felt it morally impossible in face of those pleading eyes to say No. It took me some time to learn that what we call intrusion is here only neighbourly, for the idea of privacy is very faintly developed in those countries.

Jadwiga, without further invitation, sat down in her embroidered dressing-jacket upon my bed, and went on plaiting her hair, with a pensive smile

about her lips, as though amused in spirit at something.

“I wonder how you will like our neighbours,” she presently began. “I mean those that you will see on Sunday. I *do* hope the right ones will come; I should like to show them to you. By the bye, Miss Middleton, are you good at keeping secrets? Oh yes, I know you are, I saw that in your face at once.”

“You are not going to tell me any?” I asked in some apprehension; this really was a little too sudden.

“Not to-day,” said Jadwiga, “because I have not got any quite ready to tell, but perhaps I shall have soon. Would you mind very much if I bothered you with my secrets?”

“N—no,” I said, not quite truthfully, for unasked-for confidences are things I have suffered from all my life. How it comes that people should always be so anxious to tell me their secrets I cannot imagine. I certainly never press them, and I take myself to be a rather uninviting sort of person—but so it is. Formerly I used to mind it more than I do now, for I fancied that they would expect confidences in return, but I generally discover to my relief that the arrangement is not meant to be reciprocal.

“You see,” went on Jadwiga, picking out of her hair a red maple-leaf which had stuck there among



the thick, black tresses, a remnant of that morning's wreath, "if I ever have anything to say about it I don't know to whom to talk. Mamma is much too unwell—and well, just tired of everything to take a lively interest in my small affairs. I know, of course, that she loves me, but I do not want to weary her, and Anulka is much too young to understand"—I rather doubted this in my own mind—"and every one else is far away. I want some one dreadfully; even before you came I wanted to tell you everything; that is what made me so fearfully anxious to know what you were like. I had been waiting for you so impatiently. Of course there have been other governesses in the house, but one of them I did not like, and the other had so many secrets of her own that she had no room for mine."

"You do sound rather lonely," I remarked; "has it always been like this?"

"Not while Papa was alive; at that time Mamma was quite different. I was always about her, and she used to give me piano lessons herself, for she played beautifully once, far better than I do, but she has not played for nearly eleven years."

"Your poor mother must have felt her loss terribly," I ventured to observe, for, indeed, it had struck me that this complete breakdown, both physical and mental, was scarcely quite explained even by her widowhood. Had she not her chil-

dren to live for? I never could spare much patience for people who indulge their grief at the cost of their duty.

“Terribly,” said Jadwiga, very low. Her hands rested in her lap as she spoke, with the black hair wound about them; for a moment or two she remained quite still looking fixedly at the floor.

“If your father has been dead for ten years I suppose Anulka can scarcely remember him?” I remarked.

“She does not remember him at all; she was born after his death.”

“And you?”

“I remember him, oh yes; I shall always remember him.” There was a ring of pain in the words—of a pain that seemed mingled with fear, and as she spoke she got up from my bed.

“Miss Middleton, I think I am getting sleepy after all,” she added, in a different tone. “Good-bye till to-morrow.” And merely nodding to me with a faint smile, she left me alone, a little surprised at this abrupt termination of the interview, and wondering whether I had been in any way indiscreet.

### CHAPTER III

ON Sunday, as Anulka had predicted, I had my first view of our neighbours, and also for the first time saw Madame Bielinska outside her private apartment. In broad daylight she looked even more ghastly than I had expected; these periodical appearances in public were to her obviously a physical and mental torture, undergone solely for the sake of satisfying conventionality, and unable to rouse her from her chronic apathy. Dressed carefully in her best silk, of a fashion of a dozen years back, and with a new pair of yellow gloves on her hands, she remained crushed into a corner of the big sofa or sat throned at the head of the long table, taking no interest in her guests and no part in the conversation; not embarrassed, not ridiculous, but simply wearied, only calling up a tired smile when addressed, and evidently counting the moments to her deliverance. On a stranger the effect was depressing; but the habitual visitors were evidently too well used to the neutral attitude of their hostess to let the entertainment suffer thereby, beyond punctually fulfilling their fixed forms of politeness—and these forms are tolerably complicated, as it is *de rigueur* after every meal for

every gentleman to kiss the hostess's hand and every lady to shake it—they did not trouble themselves further about her. They all knew that she wanted to be let alone. That poor, weary hand was kissed pretty often of a Sunday, for the guests were numerous and the meals frequent. A visit paid in the country in Poland often begins at breakfast-time and never ends till after supper. By one o'clock the big, bare Ludniki drawing-room was quite tolerably peopled, chiefly by the stronger sex—that little wretch of an Anulka had been right about the news of Jadwiga's return having spread—and we sat down to dinner, not much under twenty head high. In one of my early letters to Agnes I find my first impressions of these people put down.

“Perhaps the most curious specimen in the collection,” I wrote to her on that occasion, “was a large, elderly, gentlemanlike barbarian in the Polish national dress, who smelt frightfully of strong tobacco, and ought never to move without a spittoon at his elbow, but who makes so splendid a picture, and has so completely the *grand air*, that it is impossible quite to disapprove of anything he does. His name is written Lewicki, I believe, and he is a near neighbour and large landed proprietor. He had his son with him—the nearest approach to my idea of a fairy-tale prince that has ever come my way; long, slender limbs, a beardless boy's face, a

particularly delicate curve of jaw, a marvellous line of throat, long-cut brown eyes, ready either to melt or to kindle, as occasion demanded—you know the sort of thing, don't you? Often enough seen in print but hardly ever in flesh and blood. There is just enough curl in his silky, yellow hair to make his head at a little distance look as though it were moulded out of solid gold. Seriously he seems to me to be about as good looking as a man can be out of a story-book, and also to be quite aware of his good looks and fond of displaying them to the best advantage. I should not call it affectation—it is too *naïf* and straightforward for that—but rather a childishly frank pleasure in what he knows himself to possess.

“Of the other young men present the one with whom I had most conversation was a dark, regular-featured man of somewhere about thirty, who probably would likewise be good looking if he were not quite too unreasonably thin, with a nose that positively looks as though it were coming through the skin, and a perpetual blotch of shadow under the cheek-bones. This, too, is a neighbour, it seems, although not in such good circumstances, as, indeed, his very clothes testify. I don't think I have ever seen within polite walls a black coat so perilously near to the border of the inadmissible. Among the further guests I must not forget to note down the doctor and his wife, inhabitants of Zloc-

zek, our post-town, and a queerly assorted couple—he ponderous and elderly, with a shock-head of grey hair and a face that seems to consist of a series of lumps; she at least twenty years younger and almost as pretty as her husband is ugly—dark-eyed, bright complexioned, lively, and neat as a bird—dressy, talkative, almost obtrusively obliging, and—I should guess—frankly frivolous—too frankly in fact, for it is embarrassing to have to listen to denunciations of the sort of:—‘I can’t manage to be serious like other people’—‘I don’t pretend to care for anything except amusement,’ and difficult to know what to answer. It was all I could do to defend myself from her proffered offers of service, for the little woman seemed to take a fancy to my society, or perhaps was only curious to see what a real Englishwoman was like at close quarters. With clasped hands she implored me to let her do all my shopping for me at Zloczek, informing me in the same breath that nothing decent was to be got there for love or money; if I wanted either letter paper or elastic for my hats I had only to drop her a note and she would immediately abandon all other occupations to fulfil my wishes. When told I was provided with both letter paper and elastic she appeared inconsolable. But, perhaps, I had a desire for thread and needles? No? Was there absolutely nothing that she could get for me; or do for me? Well, then, at least I must

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promise to come and see her, and let her show me her children. It sounds too spasmodic to be genuine, but it is genuine all the same. Very likely she would forget all about the elastic if I did ask her to procure me some, and would send me quite the wrong number of thread, but that does not alter the kindness of the intention. Many of them are like that; it is their way of making one feel at home."

There are more portraits sketched in this same letter, but I have picked out only those of persons who afterward came to play at least some slight part in the story I am telling; the other—principally smooth-faced young men, with wonderfully cut finger nails and rather too exquisite manners, accompanied here and there by a sister or a mother—never came to act as more than chorus.

Despite this wide selection of youths, despite the fact that each of them tried to secure the place beside Jadwiga, it did not take me long to pick out the two most serious candidates for her favour—those referred to by Anulka on the very day of my arrival. That one of them was the fair-haired, fairy-tale prince I had early suspected—those melting brown eyes of his were too tell-tale in their expression—but whether or not his rival was present it took me a little time to ascertain. It was not until we had risen from table, and the customary salutations were going on, that my at-

tention was directed to the gaunt, shabbily-dressed man aforementioned. His turn had come to kiss Jadwiga's hand—the last of the row of black coats filing off toward the drawing-room. By chance I was looking in that direction, and saw how in the moment of raising her hand he quietly and deliberately put back the edge of the glove into which she had already slipped her fingers, and then only proceeded to imprint upon her bare wrist the customary salute. Done clumsily the thing would have been an impertinence, but the sort of respectful audacity of the gesture saved it even in Jadwiga's eyes, though she coloured faintly and attempted to frown. The delicate French kid of her pearl-grey glove was unimpeachable, and yet it was evidently not to his taste. Just then I remembered that this dark, thin man, my opposite at table, had eaten his dinner almost silently, and that his eyes had often strayed toward where Jadwiga sat with the fair-haired youth beside her. From that moment I began to observe him more carefully. The interest I already felt in Jadwiga naturally awoke an interest in her possible wooers.

In the big drawing-room the card tables stood ready—a strange sight to my English eyes by broad daylight and on a Sunday, but to every one else quite natural, almost inevitable. While black coffee was being drunk the old gentlemen began to recruit for their sets, and without much difficulty



either, for young men in this country love tarac and cigarettes almost as much as flirtation and cigarettes. By this time nearly every man in the room and several of the ladies were rolling one of the latter between their fingers. About the only man not doing so was my *vis-à-vis* at dinner, whose name I presently learnt to be Krysztof Malewicz. I was close to where he stood, unoccupied, with his back against the wall when Jadwiga, in her character of *quasi* hostess, intent on seeing every one disposed according to his inclinations, came flitting toward us.

“Oh, Krysztof,” she said, eagerly, “would you not take a hand at Pan Barnowski’s table? They are short of a player over there.”

“I never play cards,” replied Malewicz with a touch of haughty surprise; “surely you know that?”

“Yes, I know; but just for to-day perhaps?” she persisted.

“It is quite impossible,” he said, a little brusquely.

“Even if I ask you?” And I must confess that as she said it she put a not quite legitimate amount of pressure into her eyes, for even the truest and least frivolous Polish woman has at least one grain of the coquette in her composition.

I could see him thrill, but, although his mouth contracted, he answered without hesitation: “Even

if you asked me," and he looked at her very steadily, and, as it seemed to me, sadly, as he spoke.

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently and was gone, but after two minutes was back again.

"I have found somebody—you are let off for to-day—but since you are not going to play cards, what are you going to do?" I must explain here that a Polish hostess has the terrible habit of never leaving her guests to their own devices.

"What are you going to do?" returned Malewicz with his keen, dark eyes upon her face.

"I am going to play presently. Wladimir has brought me that Mazurka he raves about. You can listen if you have nothing better to do, but, by the bye, you don't care for music, I think?"

"I never said I did not care for music," he replied with almost unnecessary deliberateness, "but only that I range music among the luxuries, not the necessities of life."

"Well, Sunday is a day for luxuries, is it not?" she lightly retorted. "You really might do worse than listen."

"Is Wladimir going to listen, too?" he asked without moving a muscle of his face.

"Of course, since it was he who brought me the music. Has he not the first right to hear it?"

"Then I think I shall listen another time—some day perhaps when you think that *I* have a right to hear it."

Jadwiga looked a trifle put out, I thought.

“As you like,” she said, turning from him, “you seem in a difficult humour to suit to-day ; I am not going to make any more suggestions for your benefit. And you, Miss Middleton, how are you going to amuse yourself ? ”

I begged to be allowed to look after myself, being just on the point of slipping away for a walk. Even the Mazurka could not keep me indoors on such an afternoon as this ; I knew that I should hear it another time and under more favourable circumstances.

“May I walk with you ? ” said my neighbour abruptly.

Much though I should have preferred solitude there was nothing for it but to say Yes, and presently, while the cards began to fall on the tables and the cigarette smoke to curl up to the ceiling and the first notes of the Mazurka to float out of the windows, I walked out into the autumn sunshine *tête-à-tête* with this stranger whose name I had not yet mastered, and who already was beginning to interest me by proxy, so to say.

It was a long, straight walk we struck into, the longest and the straightest in the whole park, the only one which seemed to give it a sort of moral backbone ; anywhere else it would have led to a summerhouse, here it led to nowhere in particular. To judge by the profusion of scarlet hips branch-

ing like coral on both sides of the way, there must be a fine show of roses here in summer. I had already adopted this rose-walk for my constitutionals, allured by its privacy as well as its comparative evenness.

To my relief I soon perceived that my companion did not think it necessary to entertain me. Just at first, in fact, he seemed to have forgotten my existence; with his hands behind his back and his eyes fixed abstractedly on the ground he moved along by my side as though I had not been. We were half way down the rose-walk before he remarked unexpectedly:—

“You must have thought me very ungracious just now?”

“About the music?” I said. “Well, so was I, if it comes to that; but I never find that music and society agree.”

“No, not about the music, about the cards. Do you think I was rude to Mademoiselle Bielinska?”

I hesitated. “Not rude, perhaps, but rather more categorical than the occasion demanded. You spoke as though you had a positive dislike to cards.”

“So I have, and with good reason, too. My father lost his fortune at cards,” he added with a simplicity which, to my ideas, was a little startling.

“Does Jadwiga know of this?” I asked, after a moment.

“Every one knows it. Many is the night that her father and mine have spent with a green table between them. Ask Pan Lewicki, Wladimir’s father, he knows it better than anybody, since he is the only one of that gay trio remaining—the *trois mousquetaires*, as they used to call them in Paris long ago. Oh, yes, of course she knows it; but you must not imagine her unkind because of having asked me,” he added, quickly, “she is only thoughtless and young—oh, ever so much younger than I am!”

By the ring in his voice I felt certain from that moment not only that he was seeking Jadwiga, but also that he loved her, and with this conviction in my mind I gave him another and more critical side-glance. He was exaggeratedly thin, certainly, but it was a thinness which did not give the impression of ill-health—rather of extreme wiriness and toughness of fibre. The eyes were black and keen, rather deep-set, with a flame ready to spring to the surface each moment, the forehead well moulded, the whole face eager and strong. Perhaps he was a little too tall for the breadth of his shoulders, but he held himself well. Such as he was I could see no reason why Jadwiga should not love him, and already, unconsciously, I was beginning to hope that she would.

“You don’t seem to be so very old yet,” I could not help observing in answer to his last remark. He did not seem to me to be more than thirty at the outside.

“Do you count age by years?” he replied, “or not rather by what those years have been full of, whether of joy or pain, play or work? I have played very little in my life; perhaps that is why I sometimes think that I have never been young. No, I could not have done what she wanted of me,” he went on in the same breath, “but I wish I could teach myself to be smoother in my refusals. Roughness is not generally the fault of my nation; I think I must have picked it up in the fields among the workmen.”

I believe it was this very roughness which, in the midst of so much smoothness, had awakened my sympathies from the first, by its distant resemblance to British bluntness; but I could scarcely tell him so, and presently the talk—such desultory talk as we carried on—had drifted into other and less personal channels. It was only at the end of our stroll, when we were close to the house again, that there passed some more words which I can still recall.

“Your nation may be both musical and artistic,” I could not help remarking, as we approached the oddly-placed entrance, “but it certainly has no passion for symmetry. What, for instance, could

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have induced the person who built this house to stick the front door into such an improbable place? Why on earth should it not stand in the middle? It is its only legitimate place in a building of this style."

"The person who built the house is not responsible," replied my companion. "The entrance used to be in the middle. Have you not noticed the old door walled up—over there between the two centre windows?"

I certainly had observed a large patch in the masonry, whose colour betrayed it as if of a different date from the rest of the surface. "And that was the entrance?" I asked.

"Yes, I never alighted at any other door when I was a child. You can still trace the bit of road that led up to it, although the grass has grown thick there now."

"And what made them change it?" I asked.

"It was walled up after Pan Bielinski's death," said Malewicz, a trifle curtly. "Probably the family did not care to use it again."

This struck me as curious, but Malewicz was evidently not inclined to say more, and, besides, we had reached the house already.

By this time the big drawing-room was dim and blue with the smoke of innumerable cigarettes, and the tables laden with trays of glasses, and crystal dishes on which marvellous cakes and extraordinary jams lay temptingly displayed, while somewhere in

the corner a big samovar was puffing audibly. The cards still fell regularly on the green tables, but Jadwiga had left the piano, and, surrounded by a small group of admirers, was holding what seemed to be an animated discussion.

“Oh, do come here, Miss Middleton,” she cried, catching sight of us, “and listen to my plan, and you, too, Pan Malewicz. I want to arrange a fishing party this week. This is the year for the big pond to be cleaned, you know, and there will be lots of fish. It is as good as a play to see the peasants driving them into the nets—we can follow them in a boat. You will be of the party, too, will you not, Pan Malewicz? The more people there are the merrier it will be.”

“Which day have you arranged?” asked Malewicz.

“Wednesday.”

“I shall not have got my turnips all in by Wednesday,” said he after a moment’s reflection.

“As if it was possible to think of turnips when a wish of Mademoiselle Bielinska falls into the balance!” cried the golden-haired Wladimir, in evidently sincere indignation. “Why, I would abandon a whole corn harvest rather than disappoint her.”

“The question is, whether the corn harvest would suffer greatly by your absence,” remarked Malewicz without looking at his interlocutor.



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“Really,” said Jadwiga, half laughing and half provoked, “it is evidently wasted trouble to ask anything from you to-day. You have said ‘No’ to me twice to-day, and this is evidently going to be the third time ——”

“Never mind the ungrateful man,” put in Wladimir eagerly. “Leave him to his turnips and his fate, and let us keep the fishing all to ourselves.”

“No, this is not going to be the third time,” said Malewicz quickly. “You are right about my having been very rude to-day. I don’t usually take a holiday during the week, but I shall do so this week in order to make amends. At what hour am I to be at the pond, Pani Bielinska?”

“That is good of you,” said Jadwiga with a frank gratitude, and such a glance as would have unsettled most men’s heads, and impulsively she gave him her hand which he carried to his lips, and kept there a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

Instinctively I looked at my fairy-tale prince, and saw in his smooth face a shadow of annoyance as well as of almost childish surprise.

## CHAPTER IV

IT is difficult for me to say when exactly I began to suspect that there must have been something unusual about Mr. Bielinski's death, some circumstance connected with it that seemed to make the family and even their acquaintances shy of speaking of it, and the memory of which hung over the house like a shadow. I think, however, that my suspicions must have come early, for already before the end of October I find myself writing thus to Agnes :—

“I cannot explain to you why it is, but I have lately begun to scent an element of mystery in the family atmosphere, and at a guess I should say that the mystery points to the defunct Mr. Bielinski. Many circumstances lead me to this conclusion: the reserve of the usually so unreserved Jadwiga concerning her father; that walled-up entrance—used apparently for the last time at his funeral; an unoccupied room which goes by the name of the ‘master’s room,’ and which I have noticed that the servants avoid entering after dark; above all, that stricken woman shut up from the light of day, and who, as I am told, was gay and lively until the day of her widowhood. Surely that man cannot

have died quietly in his bed, but rather in some exceptional way, the impression of which has remained with his family until now. All that I have learnt is that he was a gambler in his youth; but in a country where every second man is a gambler this scarcely even calls for remark, and his fortune, at any rate, does not seem to have suffered from those early excesses. In the room I spoke of there hangs his portrait beside that of Madame Bielinska, both taken at the time of their marriage. It is from him, evidently, that Jadwiga takes her looks, not from her mother—a splendidly moulded, but with far too soft curves for a man, with his daughter's eyes, yet without her straightness of gaze, and a mouth that lacks strength. The oftener I look at the portrait the more so I wonder what his history can have been, and yet I do not well see whom I could ask."

Just about the time of the writing of this letter my suspicions received new food. This was on the day of the fishing party. On that day, too—memorable to me in various ways—Anulka gave us all a fine fright; but before I come to the results of the fishing I have something to say of the fishing itself. This afternoon it was which brought me into better acquaintance with the fair-haired, fair-faced Wladimir, whom at our first meeting I had only admired at a distance, as one admires a picture. The closer view I had that day of him

was calculated only to heighten the favourable impression already received.

I was standing almost solitary on the broad, flat bank which ran round the pond when Wladimir first approached me. It was at the further side of the village, whose straw-thatched hovels crawled up to the gates of Ludniki and whose wide, mud-paved, swine-encumbered street had to be traversed each time you desired to walk outside the park, that lay the pond—a small lake we would have called it at home—about two acres in extent, I should say, almost square, obviously artificial, and fed by a sluice from the neighbouring stream. It formed part of the Ludniki property, but was let to a Jew, as Jadwiga explained to me, and once in three years was run dry in order to be cleared of all fish beyond a given size. This was the eventful year, and consequently the whole interest of the village was centred round the *staw* (pond). On this Wednesday afternoon its low banks were thickly studded with groups of shaggy, flax-haired, scantily-covered children, together with their sheepskin-coated elders, all intent on at least shouting out directions, even if not called upon to take an active part in the sport. The pond itself was more of a curious than a beautiful sight to-day, for all but the last and muddiest two feet of water had been run off, and on the slippery floor of this dingy fluid men and women were staggering

about bare-legged, dragging their heavy nets behind them, and slipping each fish secured into the sack slung round their necks. Sometimes a larger net, held by the occupants of two flat-bottomed boats, was slowly swept toward some particular point, from where a long line of peasants, destined to cut off the retreat of the fish, advanced amid wild shouts and much throwing of stones. All these people were in the service of the Jew farming the pond, and who now moved about the bank from point to point, a restless black figure which seemed to want to be everywhere at a time, and with uneasy eyes that attempted to keep note of every fish slipped into every sack, for fear of being cheated of even one.

Jadwiga and Anulka with Madame Kouska, the doctor's wife, had entered a boat in order to observe the sport more closely, and several of the young men were preparing to follow in a second boat. Left to my own society I was just about to take my place on a stem of one of the old willows with which the bank was planted at regular intervals, and one of which had stooped so low just here that it appeared to be almost crawling on the earth, when Wladimir, who was in the second boat, perceived me, and springing to the shore, came running up the bank.

“Oh, Miss—Miss—I am afraid I have forgotten your name,” he said, with a most engaging

smile, "but surely you are not going to remain here all by yourself? That would be too dreadfully dull for you!"

He looked so genuinely distressed that I almost laughed in his face. How could he know that some people are conceited enough not to find their own company dull?

"There seems no help," I said, "since the boats are full."

"Will you not take my place?" he asked earnestly.

"And leave you alone on the bank? Certainly not; why you have just said that it would be terribly dull. You had better make haste and regain your place; your friends are just pushing off."

He looked after the departing boats, then turned back resolutely toward me.

"Since there is not room for both of us I shall stay here. It would spoil all my pleasure to think of you sitting all alone on this rotten old willow."

I looked at him incredulously, and saw, to my surprise, that he actually meant what he said. From what I learnt to know of him later I really do believe that his pleasure would have suffered considerably from the knowledge that some one was feeling dull on the bank. There is a certain sort of people—and they are always most intrinsically lovable people—who cannot enjoy them-

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selves properly unless they know that every one else is doing the same.

“If there was no room for you in the boat at least there is for me on this trunk,” he said gaily, and without further leave took his place at my side. It was done with such boyish grace, and the whole act was in itself so graceful and so kindly meant, that I do not deny having felt touched. That a young man, in an advanced stage of the tender passion, and with the object of his devotion present, should find time to look after a plain-faced, elderly stranger, and this a governess, was, indeed, unusual. Truly the fairy-tale prince kept up his character in his acts as well as his looks; this was exactly the sort of youth who would alight in order to give a lift to the inevitable old hag, or would stop to bind up the sick wolf’s paw, or to let the mouse out of the trap. True, in the fairy tales, the young man never fails to reap his reward in the shape either of a beautiful princess or of a golden castle built over-night, but what reward could Wladimir ever hope to get from me?

And yet though he had expected both the castle and the princess he could not have been more assiduous than he showed himself during the next hour. A wistful glance in the direction of the distant boats, a momentary cloud of anxiety on his fair forehead when some especially clear peal of laughter came to us across the water was all that

showed his occasionally wavering attention. Why he should desire to win my sympathy I could not possibly imagine, yet the symptoms seemed to point that way. On Sunday he had presumably not discovered me yet, or had been too much engrossed by the reappearance of Jadwiga to have quite realised who I was; but to-day he had apparently singled me out, perhaps only from the same spirit of overflowing hospitality which had moved Madame Kouska to charge herself with my shopping.

“You must find our customs very barbarous,” he said once with a sigh, as the yells of the bare-legged peasants rose in a fresh chorus, for it belonged to the principle of the thing to make as much noise as possible. I could see that he was watching me anxiously, as though to observe the effect of the somewhat uncouth exhibition on a stranger.

“Picturesquely barbarous,” I replied.

“But still, barbarous,” he persisted, evidently dissatisfied. “Tell me, do such exhibitions make you think worse of the nation which tolerates them?”

“Really!” I said, amused at his over-great earnestness, “I have not considered that point seriously yet. Your nation is altogether so puzzling and so—well so inconsistent in its qualities that I have not come to any conclusion about it yet.”

He moved a little nearer to me on our rustic seat, his interest evidently aroused.



“Tell me, now; in what ways? How do you find us inconsistent? What qualities do you grant us, and which deny?”

“Order, to begin with, and method, which really means steadiness and perseverance, while courage and chivalry you have in far greater proportion than even most brave and chivalrous nations.”

Wladimir's eyes shone at my words.

“They are noble qualities which you accord us, nobler than those you deny.”

“But not always so useful in the history of a people.”

“Courage and chivalry,” he repeated, as though taking pleasure in the sound of the words; “then you admit that we can be loyal?”

“Indeed I do, and generously kind; to the stranger above all,” I said with perhaps a little emotion in my voice, for nothing had touched me so much as the warm reception on all sides.

“You are thanking me for having stayed beside you,” said Wladimir, in a burst of delight, “please believe that it was a pleasure.” And to my consternation he took hold of my hand and fervently kissed it.

I had not been thinking more specially of this instance of kindness than of many others, but in face of the boy's artless conviction it was impossible to disclaim.

“If you were as steady as you are hospitable, as

robust and vigorous as you are generous," I remarked, partly as a means of damping his enthusiasm, for I did not care to have him any nearer to me on the willow stem, "then your nation would never have failed."

"You find us effeminate?" he asked, with an instant return of anxiety.

"I should not say that—a people which has died in heaps on battlefields can never be called effeminate, but you seem to keep all your moral energy for extraordinary occasions, and to lock it away carefully in every-day life—that is what makes you so puzzling. Even your clothes and your boots proclaim the difference between Poles and Englishmen; yours are so obviously calculated for drawing-rooms, ours for muddy roads and thorns and heather. Take, for instance, the question of galoshes; I must honestly confess that I had never even seen a man under sixty in galoshes until I came here."

"But what do they do when the weather is wet?" asked Wladimir with charming *naïveté*, looking down reflectively on his own faultless patent leather shoes.

"They get their feet wet," I gravely replied.

"And do you find it ridiculous for a man to keep his feet dry?"

"Ridiculous? No. Nothing is really ridiculous except to the narrow-minded. It all depends on

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the point of view. I only meant that the idea is new to me. And, besides, what can it matter to you what I find or do not find?" I added, fearing that I had gone too far in my strictures. "I do not pretend that my opinion has any weight; indeed it is scarcely an opinion at all, only a first impression."

"It matters to me a great deal what you think," he said with a seriousness which annoyed me then, but which came to explain itself in a hundred ways later. "They are coming back," he said in the same breath, but in quite a different tone, rising to his feet as he spoke.

From the moment that the boats touched the shore I was rid of my almost obtrusively attentive squire. He had fasted too long from the beloved presence to be able to restrain himself any longer. Indeed when I think of the pangs of jealousy which his susceptible heart must have been undergoing while sitting beside me on that willow stem, knowing all the time his rival to be in full possession of the field, I feel remorse even now. But he made up amply for lost time. Dating from the landing of the party he had eyes and ears for one person alone. The rest of the afternoon was, in fact, a sort of moral duel between him and Malewicz, in whom I had pains in recognising my taciturn companion of last Sunday. By the restless light in his black eyes and the

somewhat restless gaiety of his whole bearing it was easy to see that, having once made up his mind to the infringement of principle which to him was included in this week-day holiday, he was determined to drain the pleasure to the dregs. To-day he was as quick as even Wladimir, in reading every wish in the eyes of his mistress. And she had a good many wishes to-day, as indeed she was apt to have. She had brought one with her back from the pond, and as she stepped on shore aided by Malewicz, it was put into words.

“How would it be to drink tea here?” she exclaimed gleefully. “Is there any reason why I should not send for the samovar? It is much too early to go home yet, and it will taste ever so much better here—that willow is a sofa ready made.”

It is needless to say that the idea was enthusiastically taken up, affording the two rivals endless opportunities of outdoing each other's zeal. One charged himself with procuring the samovar from the house, the other with collecting sticks for heating it; both seemed bent on cracking their cheeks with blowing on the recalcitrant coals that would not glow as they ought, and their endeavours to distribute glasses and plates were so much more strenuous than judicious as to prove fatal to more than one piece of crockery. Wladimir it was whose skill in cutting up the cakes called forth

Jadwiga's outspoken approval, but a greater triumph was reserved to Malewicz.

"What a pity we can't have one of those big carps to tea," Madame Kouska had observed. "They did look so appetising flashing about in the net."

"That is an idea!" cried Jadwiga, always ready for anything new. "Why do you say 'a pity'? We have only got to buy one from the Jew and roast it on the spot, here, under the trees—ah, it makes me feel hungry already—let us do it at once, this very moment! I can't possibly wait for more than five minutes."

It was Jadwiga's habit to want everything to happen at once; any space left between a suggestion and its execution was to her impatient cast of mind a sort of agony. She had scarcely done speaking when Malewicz had already started along the bank toward where the Jew, surrounded by large water barrels, was superintending the sorting of the fish. Wladimir, busy with artistically disposing his slices of cake, had missed his opportunity this time. In a few minutes Malewicz was back holding a magnificent carp in his hands. A radiant glance rewarded him—far too radiant it seemed to my perhaps rather rigid principles. Jadwiga, intoxicated either by the brilliancy of the dazzling autumn day—for the magnificent weather of my arrival had not yet broken—or by the ardour of

her admirers, seemed possessed to-day by a devil of coquetry which obviously delighted in pitting the two men against each other. Dressed in a pearl-grey cashmere which she had brought with her from Limberg and with a broad-brimmed, soft felt on her head, her cheeks faintly coloured by the crispness of the air, she was looking beautiful enough to make her task easy indeed.

“You are dropping the water on to the ladies!” cried Wladimir, in accents of true horror. “Why did you not take a boy to carry it?”

Then came the difficult question of cleaning, solved by calling in a peasant girl from the gaping crowd around us.

Soon a most appetising scent arose from the hot coals on which the carp was grilling, and by this time, too, the samovar had allowed itself to be coaxed into a good humour; more baskets of provisions had arrived from the house, and our little feast gaily took its course. When I look back in memory to that day, which, to my mind, always remains a turning-point in Jadwiga's history, I still quite vividly feel the impression of the keen, radiant sunshine—so keen that it drew flashes even from the brown dregs of the pond—of the old burst willows leaning all aslant, as though searching for their images in that dingy mirror, of the last yellow willow leaves that fluttered into our plates from off the almost naked branches and the gossa-

mer threads that kept slowly floating past before our eyes. Close at hand there was a hedge of women and children, devouring us, and more especially our victuals, with their eyes, and beyond there was the flat, treeless country, looking flatter, and to-day, because of the intense transparency of the atmosphere, the mushroom-like huts of distant villages were clearly visible, the brown of the newly-turned fields contrasting sharply even with those that had been turned a week ago—and, above it all, and through it all, there were the yells of the wading peasants in the water.

All at once—we were far on in our feast by that time—the yells rose in an acuter chorus. From a group somewhere about the middle of the pond something apparently exciting but quite incomprehensible was being shouted to us.

“What are they saying?” asked Jadwiga of the bystanders.

“They have caught the biggest fish in the pond,” explained a woman, “and they believe it is going to break the net.”

“Oh, that must be the old carp they put back again each time,” said Jadwiga. “He has been here since the time of my grandfather; the Jew is not allowed to take this one out—he is supposed to bring luck to the pond. I saw him three years ago; let us go and look at him now.”

Some of the ladies, having apparently had

enough boating for the day, pretended not to hear, but Jadwiga ran down to the bank, without stopping to see who was following. The two boats were still lying side by side; I saw Malewicz help her into one and begin rapidly to push away from the shore with the long pole used by the peasants on the pond, for it was too shallow now for oars. I cannot exactly say how the thing happened, for I had remained on the top of the bank, but I suppose that Anulka in her haste had jumped into the wrong boat, and when she saw the first one moving away and in her fear of being left behind tried to jump from the one into the other and fell short. At any rate, not a minute after Jadwiga had left us we heard a double shriek, and, rushing to the top of the bank, saw Anulka splashing wildly in the water, only a few yards from the shore, while the boat with Malewicz and Jadwiga, following the impulse of the last stroke given by the pole, was moving away from her.

“Save her!” cried Jadwiga, standing upright in the boat, and looking as pale as though her sister had fallen into the sea instead of into two feet of water. Having slipped to her knees in falling there was of course not much to be seen of Anulka’s small person, which naturally increased the flurry of the beholders.

I heard Malewicz shouting something, as, having with a rapid movement changed the course of



the boat, he held out the end of the pole toward Anulka. She grasped it convulsively with her wet hands and would have been in the boat almost immediately, but at that moment some one snatched her up bodily and carried her to the bank. It was Wladimir, who arriving just one moment too late to help Jadwiga into the first boat had been preparing to board the second when Anulka took her fatal leap. With his dripping burden in his arms he now climbed the bank, and as he put her down cautiously on the grass his hard breathing and high colour betrayed an excitement which even then struck me as not quite in proportion to the deed accomplished.

“She is saved,” he said, turning with a certain solemnity to Jadwiga, who had already regained the bank.

“Yes, she is saved,” said Jadwiga, as she knelt down beside the shivering, whimpering little bundle, and talking almost as solemnly as he; “I shall never forget it.”

“It was a useless expenditure of valour—and of clothes,” remarked Malewicz, in an almost bitter tone, casting an indescribable glance at the lower portion of Wladimir’s recently so elegant attire. “It would have been just as easy to pull her into the boat.”

“Clothes cannot matter at moments like that,” replied Wladimir, and as he said it his eyes sought

mine with a clearly triumphant glance which seemed to be saying:—"Where is your theory of the wet feet now?" Was it indeed possible that this fascinating but puzzling young man had walked into the water, not only to please Jadwiga, but also in order to give me the lie? At any rate, there could be no doubt that the honours of the day remained with him.

## CHAPTER V

WITH as little delay as possible Anulka was got home and to bed, and the gay afternoon ended in a somewhat disturbed evening. "She will be ill—I am quite sure she will be ill," Jadwiga kept repeating, all the time she was rubbing the little creature down—what a meagre little lady it was out of its clothes—and plying her with hot tea; but when she had been safely buried in blankets and her small teeth had at length ceased chattering, alarm gave way to relief. It really looked as though the dreaded chill had been averted, and the house resumed its normal physiognomy.

We all went to our rooms rather earlier than usual that night, but I was scarcely in mine when the door opened, as it so often did now, and Jadwiga said:—"May I?" and then without awaiting permission, glided in and took up her usual station on the edge of my bed. This was quite an established thing now; hardly an evening passed on which she did not wander in in her dressing-gown, her bare feet in slippers, her fingers busy plaiting up her hair. Anulka slept at the far end of the house, in her old nursery, under charge of the elderly woman who had been with her since her

birth; we had this wing almost to ourselves, Jád-wiga and I. This offered ideal opportunities for confidences, but until now she had apparently nothing to confide in me beyond her opinion on the last poem read, or some rather fantastical news of life in general. To-day it almost seemed as though something more definite were coming; I could see it by the very silence which marked the first few minutes of her presence, and by the lights and shadows that chased each other over her expressive face. I was wondering whether she was going to speak at all when she said without preliminary:—

“What would you do if you were me?”

“About what?” I asked, not guessing the drift of her question.

“About those two men. I don’t think I am inordinately conceited in fancying that both care for me.”

“You would need to be very blind not to see it,” I replied.

“Well, and what would you do?”

“Encourage the one I liked best.”

“That is exactly the difficulty,” said Jadwiga, beginning to laugh with a delicious helplessness; “I am not quite sure which I like best. Sometimes I think it is the one and sometimes the other; they both seem to me to have their points.”

“Which simply means that you don’t care for either properly, or at least not yet.”

“Oh, but I want to,” cried Jadwiga, with almost comical eagerness. “I feel that I shall never be quite satisfied until I care for some one person very much, and I know that when once I begin I shall care more seriously than most people do. Perhaps it is this that has kept me back until now,” she added reflectively; “the sort of feeling that it would be dangerous to let myself go.”

“I should advise you to keep yourself back a little longer,” I remarked, “until you know for certain in which direction you want to go.”

“No, no!” she said impatiently, “it is time now. It is only when one has given one’s heart entirely to some one that one can speak of living a woman’s real life—and I want to give mine entirely. It is only that which can help one to understand all the poems that have ever been written, it is that which explains all the music. I know I shall live a fuller and happier life when I have got one point round which to group all my thoughts, my hopes, my fears, my prayers. At present when I read a love-song of Heine’s I feel as though it were not written for me, and I want it to be written for me—I want to have a part in its beauty and in its pain. Each time I sing: ‘Voi che sapete che cosa e amor,’ I feel ashamed, because I, too, am a woman, and do not yet know what love is.

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It is like worshipping at an altar without an idol on it. Oh, surely you must understand what I mean?"

I could not say that I exactly did, never myself having had experience of this curious state of mind, but looking at Jadwiga's shining eyes and glowing lips and at the heaving of the soft white frill that covered her beautiful breast, I dimly understood that all natures are not alike, and that to some women—perhaps I should rather say to the women of some nations—that sentiment of love is so great a necessity as to make the object on which it is expended of less vital importance than the fact of being able so to expend it. I have always thought that if I had not happened to know Henry I would never have wanted to love at all, but I am told that this is nonsense, and perhaps it is, and perhaps Jadwiga's case is really the more normal of the two.

"You might have pity on my perplexity," said Jadwiga with mock gravity. "I tell you I have never had such difficulty in making up my mind."

"You surely are not going to ask me to do so for you?" I inquired in alarm.

Jadwiga began to laugh—at my distressed mien, I suppose.

"Why not? You are older than I am, and at least ten times more sensible. The balance hangs quite even at present—at least I think it does—a

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word of yours will make it dip one way or the other. Out with it, then. Whom do you vote for—Wladimir or Krysztof?”

She looked at me with audaciously laughing eyes, her head a little thrown back, her white throat displayed. It was evident that—the edge of the fright concerning Anulka once being over—her easily moved spirits had leapt up in reaction; the triumphs of the afternoon had resumed their sway. She was joking, of course, and yet she was not only joking either. I verily do believe that on that evening she was standing at the cross-roads of her fate, inclined superficially to both of her suitors, but deeply as yet to neither, and in a state of mind which made it possible for her to fall in love with either of them, according as mere chance would decide.

“I think Wladimir would make the better lover of the two,” I reflectively replied, wishing to be conscientious even if it were only a joke—“an ideal lover, but I can’t help fancying that the other would make a better husband.”

“That is as much as voting for Krysztof, since a husband lasts longer than a lover.

“Yes, if you insist on having my opinion that is the one I should recommend.”

The recollection of Wladimir’s boyish smile and of that hour spent on the willow trunk made me feel rather ungrateful as I said it, and

yet for the life of me I could not have done otherwise.

“What objection can you possibly have to Wladimir?” asked Jadwiga contradictiously.

“What objection can you have to Pan Malewicz? He is not so good-looking as his rival, but ——”

“Oh, yes, he is good-looking, too, but Wladimir is beautiful.”

“It seems to me that my advice is not wanted,” I said, laughing.

“Yes, it is, it is,” she urged. “Go on, please; what was going to come after that ‘but’?”

“I only meant to say that if he would do proper justice to himself Pan Malewicz could not help being a remarkably fine man, but he never seems to take time to eat, and scarcely to tie his boot laces, and that is what gives him that overdriven look.”

Jadwiga made a little grimace. “You see that is one of the things. I have really no doubt of his worth, but I am not sure that I could pass my life with a man who wears his coats as long as Kryztof does. I know he is a model farmer and does wonders with what remains of the estate, but I do like a man to be turned out well, and not always to be talking of his potatoes and his turnips—whenver he talks at all. If he were my husband I should not know to whom to rave about Chopin or Byron, since both poetry and music seem to be to



him a sort of forbidden luxuries. There is nothing but work in his head; work, work, work; how can that help making a man dull?"

"Does he work for himself alone?" I asked.

"For himself and his mother, and I suppose he works for her really more than for himself. Still, that does not make him a more amusing companion."

"But it throws another light on his manner of being," I remarked. "It shows that he can devote himself."

"Don't praise him too immoderately," laughed Jadwiga, "or you will be damaging his chances."

"Well, decide for yourself, since it is evident that I cannot decide for you, but whichever way it is do not let them *both* go on hoping; it is a cruel sort of kindness."

As I said it there came steps through the adjoining room, and Anulka's attendant put her head in at the door and said something in Polish to Jadwiga. She was on her feet in an instant, white as death.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I told you how it would be," said Jadwiga, excitedly. "She is worse—Anulka. She awoke in high fever and they have sent for the doctor," and, pushing the nurse to one side, she left the room. I followed in silence. In the old nursery at the end of the house we found a strange, shrunken figure in

a limp white dressing-gown and a lace night-cap, sitting motionless beside the bed. The figure did not turn its head at our entrance, and it was not until I was close to the bed that I recognised Madame Bielinska. Her large cavernous eyes never moved from Anulka's face, and the habitual terror which dwelt in their depth seemed to have crept out of them and to have spread over the whole of her emaciated features.

One glance at the ghastly face on the pillow showed that we had rejoiced too soon, and that the dreaded chill had, after all, not been averted. Anulka, her teeth chattering worse than ever, lay cowered up into herself, for the cold fit of the fever was upon her.

There was little rest for the household after that. First there came the long anxious wait for the doctor, then the doctor himself, then the bustle produced by the carrying out of his prescriptions. It was long past midnight when Madame Bielinska allowed herself to be led back to her room. Jadwiga refused to leave her sister, but fell asleep on a sofa in the corner of the nursery, exhausted with the various experiences of the day. Anulka herself had dropped into an uneasy slumber, and to all intents and purposes I found myself alone with Marya, the white-haired nurse, who gave no further vent to her feelings than by the utterance of portentously deep sighs, as she moved about the

room, busy with compresses and basins and night-lights, and all the paraphernalia of a sick-room. Presently she came and sat down beside me, still sighing softly to herself.

“Has she often been taken like this before?” I asked in a whisper of my companion, for in the course of her lengthy career she had picked up enough German to make a sort of roughshod conversation possible between us.

“Often, often,” replied old Marya with an extra deep sigh. “I have thought to bury her ten times at least.”

“It is strange she should be so delicate when her sister appears to have such good health,” I remarked. “It really was nothing of a chill to speak of—a mere mud bath, that was all.”

The woman looked at me as though not sure whether to be indignant at my ignorance or compassionate with it.

“Strange? Would it not be stranger far if she had her sister’s health? Poor mite, poor mite! she has never had a chance. Her father himself took it from her. It is him she has to thank for that puny little face of hers and those narrow shoulders.”

“Her father?” I repeated in surprise. “But to judge from his portrait he must have been a remarkably fine man, with anything but narrow shoulders.”

Marya laughed under her breath, and went on in her hoarse whisper:—

“Ah, so he was, so he was—it is not of what he was in life that I am speaking, but of what he was in death; it is that which frightened our gracious lady to the point of bringing her to bed prematurely, and to make of her babe almost a cripple. Did you not know that she was a seven month child?”

I felt now that I was close to that mystery which I had until now only vaguely suspected, that a question would probably be enough to disclose to me the history of the family, but I shrank from asking it of a servant, and apparently it did not occur to her to tell me more, probably because to her it was no mystery, but an open secret, known to every child within ten miles of Ludniki. This very publicity it was which kept me from knowing it, every one taking for granted that I had heard the truth already from some other person.

We relapsed into silence, and presently Marya left the room to fetch some article required. As the door softly closed I saw Anulka's fever-bright eyes opening wide. The heat fit was upon her now, as I could see by the streak of scarlet on her cheeks.

“I was not asleep,” she said with a grotesquely sly smile on her burning face. “I heard you and Marya talking, but she did not tell you everything.

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Shall I tell it you? Come here and I will whisper."

She stretched out one of her thin arms, and clutching hold of the sleeve of my dressing-gown, pulled my head down to the pillow beside her.

"Papa was mad," she said in my ear, upon which I could feel her dry breath like that of a furnace. "I never saw him, but Marya told me he was mad, and so did Jadwiga, so it must be true. Have you ever seen a mad person?"

"Lie still," I urged, trying to speak calmly, although painfully impressed. "The doctor said you were not to talk," and I gently disengaged myself from her arm. Anulka stared at me in silence, with wide uncomprehending eyes which seemed to have lost the sense of my identity.

When I got back to my room the owls had ceased to scream in the bushes that grew close against the windows, and the birds were beginning to stir, for daylight was near. I lay down on my bed, but what uneasy slumber I snatched was crossed and intercrossed by confused and phantasmal dreams of the muddy pond, the wading peasants, the dripping Anulka, with a mad father hovering somewhere in the background, but always vanishing each time I tried to examine him more closely.

## CHAPTER VI

“LUDNIKI, November 30th, 188—.

“MY DEAR AGNES,—I have got the whole story at last, and a ghastly enough story it is, but it leaves me as puzzled as ever. There is a mystery behind the mystery—to my mind, at least—and which seems to me ten times more bewildering than the thing I have discovered. But in order to explain how I came to discover it I must tell you of one of the most exciting experiences that has ever come my way.

“I think I told you that our little convalescent is always springing the most exotic wishes upon us, which have to be fulfilled on penalty of a relapse, brought on by sheer irritation. Well, the other day she was seized with the desire of—can you guess what? No, of course you can't—of a cigarette. She has smoked some surreptitiously it seems, and so ecstatically enjoyed the forbidden fruit that its recollection came over her, like a craving, the other afternoon. Great consternation in the house; nobody knew exactly what to do; torn between the fear of harming her by either an acquiescence or a refusal—and the chances seemed about equal—everybody began by losing their

heads. Marya, having spent half an hour in useless argument, came running in distress to Jadwiga, Jadwiga came to me for advice. I sent her to her mother, from whom she came back more bewildered than ever, for Madame Bielinska had given up deciding things so long ago, that she has forgotten how to do it. It was finally I who had to speak the last word. Of course I decided against the cigarette, and, of course, every one instantly turned upon me. Could I really take upon me the responsibility of the precious darling fretting herself into a fever? 'Well, then, give it her, in Heaven's name!' I said desperately, 'since you are so certain it will kill her not to have it.' 'But supposing it does her harm? Do you *really* think it will do her harm?' I returned that, not being a doctor, I could be sure of nothing. Then a simple solution struck me: 'Why not send to Doctor Kouski and put the case before him? Clearly it is his business to decide.' This meant a delay of at least two hours, but, after an excited debate, and after Jadwiga had with tears in her eyes implored her sister to be patient for just a little longer, the proposal was adopted.

"'I will write a note to Doctor Kouski,' said Jadwiga, 'and beg him to be lenient.'

"'But supposing Doctor Kouski is not at home?' objected Anulka fretfully.

“‘Then Jan must, of course, go to Doctor Lanicz.’

“Jan was the coachman who was to go on horseback.

“‘Jan is so stupid,’ said Anulka, ‘he is sure to make a mess of it, and to come back without an answer. Couldn’t some one else go? Some one who could explain it all to him?’

“‘It is too cold for Marya, or else we might have sent the sledge,’ Jadwiga was beginning, when I had a second idea.

“‘Let me go!’ I said with alacrity, for the prospect of a sledge drive to Zloczek was strangely enticing. Perhaps it will astonish you to hear me talking of sledges already, but I forgot to explain that we have jumped almost at one bound from after-summer to mid-winter. The fine weather had lasted till past the middle of this month—only the air growing a little keener every day and the sky of a fainter blue, and then one night a vague moan was heard in the distance, and presently grew into a howl, and next morning the view was veiled by a whirl of snowflakes. For three days it was impossible to take a step outside the house; even the servants had to shovel their way before them across the yard and arrived in the kitchen with clumps of snow on their hats. We lived in a sort of semi-darkness, and verily believed we were going to be buried alive. Then on the fourth



morning an equally abrupt change: a cloudless sun rising on a transformed world; everything, as far as the eye could see, of a dazzling white; the trees no longer trees but branches of white coral, immaculate cushions of snow on the window ledges, the top of the park wall padded with snow and apparently powdered over with diamond dust. After my three days' imprisonment I was gasping for air; you can imagine with what zeal I offered myself as messenger. After a little more debate I was accepted, and, laden with injunctions and fur rugs, I set forth on my first sledge drive, promising to be back in the smallest possible time. But in the event Anulka had to wait much longer for her cigarette than either she or I had bargained for.

“I wish I could give you even a faint idea of the beauty of that drive and of its exhilaration, or could make you see the almost painful brilliancy of that vast plain of virgin snow, as yet untrodden by any foot, unmarked by any vehicle, and on which we carved out our way for ourselves, as a ship does upon the ocean—its whiteness broken only by the blue shadows of solitary trees. And everything on which you attempted to rest your dazzled eyes was equally fatiguing to look upon—the huts were not thatched with straw to-day, but with snow; the pollard willows which grew in the palings wore white snow-caps upon their clumsy round heads,

and even the beams of the draw-wells were thickened to twice their natural size by the ridges of snow they bore. If the drive had lasted four hours instead of one I could not have tired of observing the work of the last three days. We were not yet half way to Zloczek, however, when I began to be aware of an indefinable change in the atmosphere. Until then the air had been motionless, though keen, but gradually I began to feel its edge grow sharper in my face, while it piped more shrilly past my ear. I had just observed this when Jan turned on the box and said something to me, which, of course, I did not understand. He pointed forward with his whip at the same time, and I now perceived that the blue vault of the sky which had been so uniform half an hour ago was covered in the west by a whitish grey cloud mass, so compact and so clean cut at the edges that it looked like nothing so much as a vast round hood, gradually mounting higher. It had not yet reached the sun, which still shone in undisturbed brilliancy, but was creeping nearer to it every moment. I had been so busy looking about me at the wonders of this white world that I had had no time to glance ahead. Evidently this was a fresh instalment of the snow-storm which had lasted three days, a sort of after-thought, as though the Ice King had repented of having let us off so cheap. 'Well, we are going to have another shower,' I thought to myself,

smiling a little at Jan's evident anxiety. Zloczek lay somewhere between us and the monstrous snow-hood, and from the way he began to lash out at the horses it was evident that he was making every effort to get there before the snow began. It was a sort of race between us and that cloud, although each was coming from a different direction. At first it seemed as though we were going to win—it was the brilliancy of the sunshine that deceived us—but soon the increased current of air warned us of the approach of the enemy. The grey mantle drew over the sky with amazing rapidity; the church spire of Zloczek, which had already been clearly visible, first disappeared behind it, then I missed a clump of trees I had been observing—one landmark after another was blotted out, until suddenly in one moment the sun was gone, as abruptly as a candle blown out, and leaving us in what, by contrast with the recent brilliancy, seemed almost like darkness. At the same instant the cold became deadly, and, looking past Jan's shoulder, I said aloud instinctively: 'Good gracious! what is that?' forgetting that he could not understand me—for a wall seemed rushing upon us, a white, wild-looking wall, with a furious face and a raging voice that struck terror into my heart even before I realised what there was to fear from it. At the same moment the sledge gave a violent jerk; I saw that Jan was pulling round the horses, and wondered

vaguely whether he had gone mad, for he was also making frantic signs to me with the flat of his left hand. In the next moment he had checked the horses sharply, and, throwing down the reins, had flung himself face foremost on the back of one of them. And after that I had not time to observe anything more, for I was gasping for breath and fighting with the wind for my head covering, for that white wall was upon us. I cannot tell you what a real Polish snowstorm looks like seen at close quarters, for to open my eyes was as impossible to me as to lift my head. Instinctively I crouched to the bottom of the sledge—I knew not what Jan had meant by that frantic pantomime—and as I did so I could feel the lightly-built thing shuddering through each wooden member under the onslaught of the hurricane. For one moment it seemed verily as though it must lift us from our place. I could not exactly say how I expected to be killed—whether by sheer cold, or breathlessness, or by suffocation under the snow, but I remember having felt as though it could surely not be possible to come out of this alive. I cannot tell you either how long it lasted, if it was really only ten minutes, as I have since been assured, then they were certainly the longest ten minutes I have known in my life—each minute was a terror in itself, and yet there was also a mild sort of exhilaration about it which was a better support than all my fur coverings. I

am not sure even that there was not a little regret mingled with the real relief I felt when I became aware that the climax had been passed. As soon as my breath began to come more easily I cautiously looked up and immediately received a fresh shower of snow upon my face, that which had accumulated on my head during the past minutes. Just at first I imagined that somehow I was no longer in the sledge, for to the right and to the left of me the snow was on a level with my elbows, completely masking the woodwork on all sides. The snowflakes still flew past us, but growing thinner every instant, while ahead of us the landscape was wiped out by the retreating snow-cloud. The horses stood with drooping heads, trembling in every limb, up to their bellies in snow, with the scared, yet submissive look of chastised creatures. Jan, a prostrate man of snow, still lay motionless, but presently raised himself slowly and turned toward me, as though to see if I were still alive. We looked at each other in silence, no words were necessary, nor would have been wanted, even with better means of communication. Of course, he had gone through this sort of thing before, and I had not, which no doubt made him the calmer of the two at this moment, in contradistinction to my foolish calmness of ten minutes ago.

“I will skip the next hour or so, which was spent partly in shouting for help and partly (by me) in

waiting for it, for Jan had ended by wading off waist-deep in snow toward the first houses of Zloczek, not more than a quarter of a mile distant. He returned heading a party of men with spades, and presently the half-frozen horses dragged us slowly into Zloczek. The sun was actually out again by this time, although near to setting, and the remnant of the snow-cloud fast disappearing on the horizon. On the whole, I was agreeably surprised by my first view of Zloczek, which had been described to me as 'a dirty hole full of Jews.' How much the snow had to answer for I don't know, of course, but my impression of the long, wide street and the big, square market-place was not unfavourable, perhaps partly because they were empty—of Jews as well as of anything else, for every one was still safe behind doors and windows. The panic of the last half-hour was still written plainly over everything, and, although it was still broad daylight, the bells of our sledge rang out in an almost unbroken silence, as though in a town of the dead.

“I confess I was glad to find myself under the doctor's roof, and only when good little Madame Kouska had pulled the gloves off my numb fingers and unbuttoned my sealskin for me did I realise how very nearly I had been frozen to death. I was greeted with exclamations and overwhelmed with questions, but at the same time entreated not to

answer them and neither to stir out of the roomy armchair into which I had been almost forcibly pushed nor to fatigue myself with speaking until I had swallowed at least three glasses of hot tea. At the third glass I began to be aware that my blood was again circulating and, with reviving senses, remembered my actual errand. But scarcely had I explained and expressed a wish for a speedy settlement of the question, than Madame Kouska laughed in my face. 'One sees you are a stranger here,' she gleefully exclaimed. 'Do you actually imagine that you will get back to Ludniki to-night? Not even a maniac would think of it. Of course you will have to sleep here, whether you like it or not, and if you don't like it, it will be a proper punishment for not having visited me yet—Providence is on my side, you see. Besides, my husband is not at home, and will not be for two days more, so you can't ask your question.'

"'But Anulka will go into a fever if she does not get her cigarette,' I said in distress. Upon which Madame Kouska assured me that Anulka would be sure to be so frightened about me that she would not even think of her cigarette. The snowstorm was quite certain to have put it out of her head, and everybody at Ludniki knew too well what a snowstorm was to think of expecting me back that night.

"I protested vigorously, and it was not until I

had from Jan's pantomime understood the utter unfeasibility of getting through the snowdrifts that night that I resigned myself to my fate.

“Except for my qualms regarding Anulka, it really was not a hard fate, for my dark-eyed little hostess was evidently brimming over with gratification at having captured me thus unawares, and presently proceeded with great delight to show me over the house. The children I had been seeing ever since my arrival—three or four sturdy, but somewhat grimy looking little mites, who kept climbing on to their mother's knee, and rolling off again, and bumping their heads, and howling, and getting consoled, and poking their fingers into her eyes, without ever succeeding in disturbing her equanimity. She is one of those happy people who seem to be pleased with everything. ‘This is my store-room,’ she said to me with conscious pride, opening the door of a small closet off the dining-room, so placed that somebody has to get up from table each time that something is wanted out of it. In the store-room I caught sight of a pleasing mixture of dress-baskets, empty bottles, flour sacks, soap and candles, together with a sprinkling of baby linen hung up to dry. *I* should have called it a superior sort of dusthole, but she called it a store-room, and was evidently happy in its possession; and therefore to be envied, I suppose. The rest of the house was to match, but, indeed, I feel almost



wicked in causing you to smile over these things, for what can empty bottles and broken mouse-traps and even spider-webs matter when they are coupled with so much true kindness of heart; and what is the odds of the sideboard having to stand in the nursery, because of there being no room for it in the dining-room, so long as there is no false shame about the matter? It was delightfully unconventional to be waited on by a barefooted peasant girl, and there was something refreshingly natural in the open and above-board way in which the best china and the 'company spoons' were dealt out in my honour as well as in my presence. Perhaps my tastes are changing, but I can assure you that all the comparisons I made that evening between this and the more correct forms of entertainment I had hitherto been used to, turned out to the disadvantage of the latter.

“It was not until we had had our supper and the children had been put to bed that the conversation became interesting. Despite my partiality for Madame Kouska I must admit that her range of topics is limited, varying principally between babies and frocks, and mingled with a good many confessions touching the incorrigible frivolity of the speaker. ‘I am afraid I am amusing you very badly,’ she said at least ten times that evening, ‘but I don’t know how to talk of anything except balls and fashions.’ Nevertheless I mistrust the genuine-

ness of that absolute frivolity she claims—one thing which leads me to do so is the observation that she dotes on her children, sleeps in a room with three babies, feeds the youngest one on her knee at table, can't enter the nursery without seeing at once who has been crying and who has not, and in general leads the life of a dog at home, though seen out of it no one would guess this smiling model of fashion had any interest higher than her dress. There are also strong grounds for suspicion that she possesses several housewifely virtues, and is as practical about pickling cabbages as about making *ruches*.

“But to return to this particular conversation. We were sitting alone in the little sitting-room, with the albums on the table and the paper flowers in the vases—*tout comme chez nous*, as you see. The small, middle-class apartment with the wood fire crackling in the stove felt wonderfully snug after my experiences of the afternoon, and a gentle drowsiness was beginning to steal over my senses when Madame Kouska startled me by saying:—‘Tell me, are you not afraid of ghosts in that big house over there?’ I replied drowsily that I was not, and had not even heard that the house was supposed to be haunted. ‘Neither have I,’ she replied, ‘but it ought to be, if ever any house was. That Ludniki should not have a ghost of its own is enough to make one disbelieve

in ghosts altogether—surely you must confess that?’

“‘How can I without knowing the reason?’ I said. ‘I have, indeed, noticed that there is a room which the servants don’t like entering after dark, but they have not told me why, and I would not understand if they did.’

“‘Well, surely *that* is comprehensible,’ said my hostess, with a little shiver. ‘I know that nothing would induce *me* to go into that room after eight in the evening.’

“‘Has anything particular happened there?’ I asked, still a little sleepily.

“Madame Kouska’s looks betrayed undisguised amazement.

“‘But surely you know,’ she persisted. ‘It can’t be that you don’t know—living in the house.’

“‘No, I don’t know,’ I said, a little impatiently, I think, ‘and exactly because I am living in the house; though I am always hearing hints dropped and catching half remarks which I don’t know how to interpret. If you know and if it is no secret I wish you would tell me once for all, so as to let me feel a little less foolish when the matter is alluded to.’

“‘Then you know absolutely nothing about Pan Bielinski’s death?’ she asked, still amazed.

“‘Nothing,’ I said.

“ ‘ You don’t know that he was a murderer ? ’ ”

“ I think I must have jumped on my chair, for she put out her hand as though to soothe me.

“ ‘ I don’t believe it,’ I said instinctively, and merely because I loved Jadwiga.

“ ‘ How strange you should not know,’ was all she said, “ and yet it is comprehensible, for of course the family would not speak of it. I will tell you if you wish—it is no secret, since every one here knows it. It happened nearly eleven years ago—it will be eleven years in spring—just after we married—you wouldn’t take me to be thirty, would you?—Bazyli—that is my husband—was the *Bezirks Arzt* (doctor appointed by Government) then, as he is still, and of course was in the middle of it all, in his official capacity. It was a terrible beginning for me, and gave me a painfully vivid idea of a doctor’s experiences.’ ”

“ And then she gave me the following facts in a somewhat sprawling and not always clear shape—for her French is distinctly ricketty—and which I find easier to condense into my own words.

“ It appears then that eleven years ago—come the next 11th of April—a wandering monk had come to the Ludniki house toward evening. He was one of those begging friars who travel about the country for weeks at a time, collecting alms for the poor. All their journeys are done on foot, and this one, too, had come alone and unattended. In

Poland, the land of universal hospitality, it stands to reason that these holy mendicants are received with open arms, and Pan Bielinski did not fall short of what was expected of him in this respect. He was alone at home, his wife and little girl—Jadwiga was then eight years old—having gone to Limberg for some days (to the dentist, I should risk guessing), and being expected home next morning. The friar was received, not at the back door, but at the front, and, as a matter of course, sat at the table of his host. The servants who waited on the *tête-à-tête* meal afterward deposed that there had been a great deal of excited talk between host and guest, none of which they could, however, understand, as it was not conducted in Polish. In all probability it was French, as after circumstances showed. The discussion—if it was a discussion—was continued in the drawing-room until a late hour, after which the friar retired to the room which had been prepared for him. At break of day next morning he was to continue his journey. Pan Bielinski in person conducted him to the house door, and there bent his head to receive his parting blessing. All this was in strict accordance with usage; but after that he did something quite unexpected. At the very moment that the friar's bare, sandalled foot was in the act of crossing the threshold he took a revolver out of his pocket and shot him straight through the head; then, before

the servants standing by had time to collect their senses, he turned, walked back into his own room, and put a second ball into his own brain. He must have been a first-rate shot, for he seems to have killed both his man and himself instantaneously.

“ ‘They were both still lying exactly as they had fallen when my husband and the judge arrived at the house two hours later,’ said Madame Kouska, at this point of the narrative, her pretty face pale with the revival of the awful recollection. ‘Andrej, the old footman, had sense enough left to forbid any one to touch them before the appearance of the authorities. Bazyli says it was the most awful sight he has ever seen, and yet he has seen a good many. In the open house door, exactly on the threshold, which was splashed over with his blood, the monk sat as though cowering on the ground, with his back propped against the doorpost. In his left hand he clutched his rosary, his right arm stretched out, and the forefinger extended, as though he were pointing at something; his eyes were wide open. In the first moment it seemed as though he must be still alive, but soon Bazyli saw that the finger was quite stiff and that the eyes were broken. He says the other body was worse to look at, for Pan Bielinski had fired into his mouth, and in consequence of the concussion the skull was smashed and the muzzle of the revolver

looked out at the top of his head. Oh, it makes me quite sick to think of it even now, although I only heard it described,' and the little woman covered her eyes, shivering.

“‘But Madame Bielinska?’ I asked aghast, with a swift recollection of what Marya had said, ‘surely she did not see.’

“‘Yes, she did,’ said my hostess. ‘The carriage had been already sent to the station during the night, and in the flurry every one forgot about her, and she walked straight into the house while the commission was verifying the facts, with that darling Jadwiga by her side, past the dead monk, and found her husband just as I have described. She very nearly died of it, poor thing, and of course Jadwiga will never forget.’

“‘I should think not,’ I said, and I remembered that Jadwiga had used almost those very words herself the first time I had unwittingly alluded to her father. No wonder her natural communicativeness halted before that terrible subject, which surely must have haunted her childish recollection like a spectre, and no wonder too that Madame Bielinska should bear the reflection of an undying fright in her eyes!

“‘But the sequel?’ I asked. ‘How was it cleared up? What was his motive?’

“‘There is no sequel,’ Madame Kouska told me, ‘and the only explanation is, of course, that he

went suddenly mad, poor man. He used to be very gay in his youth, and even rather wild, but in after years he showed symptoms of melancholy, and grew more nervous and irritable year by year.'

“‘Still that does not seem to explain such a desperate act,’ I objected. ‘Were there no researches made?’

“‘Oh, yes,’ she said, ‘but there was nothing to be discovered, except that the friar was a Frenchman, but nobody knew him, or anything of him, nor where he came from exactly, and beside, there was nobody to be punished for the murder, since the murderer had dealt with himself, so really the authorities had no further cause to act.’

“‘And his friends?’ I asked, ‘did they also accept the theory of the madness?’

“‘They had to. Just at first a few people broke their heads over it and expected some explanation to follow, but when time passed and nothing followed, they began to be of the opinion of everybody else.’

“‘Even his family?’ I asked.

“Madame Kouska shrugged her shoulders. ‘Apparently even his family,’ she said. ‘The dead monk was as much a stranger to them as to the rest of us. Madame Bielinska herself told my husband that she had never seen his face before, and by all accounts it was not a face to be easily forgotten—a dark, fiery face, with piercing black



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eyes, and a coal-black beard just beginning to be streaked with white. Bazyli said to me then that the very gesture in the act of which he had died somehow gave an impression of quite unusual mental energy.'

“This is the story, Agnes, but somehow I feel my doubts as to their theory, and have been trying to build myself up another. Men do not usually go mad quite so suddenly as this, and if they do, it generally is not strangers they go for. But supposing that monk was not a stranger to Pan Bielinski, although he was to every one else? That is the starting-point of my theory. One does not generally discuss excitedly with strangers, does one? He was a Frenchman, remember, and Pan Bielinski had spent part of his youth in Paris, and, according to what Madame Kouska tells me, the servants all received the impression of his being a gentleman. How if some long-buried romance were at the bottom of it all? May these two not have been rivals once upon a time? All the circumstances seem to point to some bitter grudge borne by Pan Bielinski against his chance guest.

“Yet other theories occurred to me as I lay wide-awake in the excellent bed to which Madame Kouska conducted me. I had been dropping with sleep after supper, but the picture of the dead monk and of his murderer had effectually banished all traces of drowsiness, and so I amused myself by

combining. Yet, on the whole, my first theory seems to me most plausible, and I mean to stick to it for my own private satisfaction. Every one else seems content with the version of insanity, but I prefer my supposition. Madame Bielinska never can have been beautiful; let us say that Pan Bielinski's marriage was one 'of reason,' while the real attachment of his life had Paris for its scene and was, of course, of an unhappy description, the disappointment shadowing all his life and causing the melancholy which Madame Kouska speaks of; that the subsequent friar was the *ci-devant* successful rival, who, having betrayed and abandoned the object of their mutual passion, had turned into a repentant sinner; that Bielinski, on seeing him again unexpectedly, could not restrain the impulse to avenge his own defeat and the girl's dishonour.

“But I had better stop, or else you will think that my imagination is bolting with me. I wonder if the truth will ever be known? I hardly think so. It remains for me only to wind up this indecently long scrawl by telling you that, despite both the snowdrifts and Madame Kouska's constraining hospitality—and it was as difficult to get away from the one as from the other—I succeeded in reaching home next day, and was relieved to find that Anulka had managed after all to get her cigarette by bribing Marya (with a holy picture), and

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was none the worse for it. I must confess that as we drove up to the house I cast a glance of a quite new sort of interest toward the spot at which I knew the old front door to have been, and whose condemnation I now completely understood. To a Polish mind the thought of that desecrated threshold, stained by the blood of the departing guest, must always remain a blot of ignominy. No wonder indeed that the family should not have been able to make up its mind ever again to cross it.

“My candle is burning down, I have barely light to finish by.

“Ever your affectionate

“ELEANOR.”

## CHAPTER VII

MY last quoted letter to Agnes has been given without either selection or comment, but, of course, it does not exhaust my reflections on the discovery I had made. It is probable that the details of Madame Kouska's story would have kept my imagination yet easier if it had not been for a letter which I received about this time from my friend, and in which she mentioned that Henry and Lily Somerville were going to spend Christmas in the same house. Agnes had been more than surprised, she had been honestly shocked at what she called the "barbarism" of the act which had separated me from my lover, and, despite my stern command never lost an opportunity of keeping me informed of what was going on at home. She gave me this latest news with a tremour of desperation which I could trace in her very handwriting. "There would yet be time for you to be back," she added; "if you give up your situation at once you could still spend Christmas with us—and naturally so would Henry."

Of course, I never for a moment contemplated acting in this suggestion, but I confess that the news had made my heart beat faster. For weeks

past I had been living in expectation of hearing that the engagement was accomplished; I had been away now for two months; time enough for the cure to have worked. Surely the moment was approaching now. To judge from his silence Henry was either tired of me or angry with me, and I knew the opportunities generally afforded by a Christmas party; it was far better so, but I should feel quieter and more able to settle to my work when something definite had happened.

Here, too, Christmas was already lying in the air, but a different sort of Christmas from any I had hitherto known—one in which holly and mistletoe played no part, and plum pudding and mince pies were replaced by such delicacies as fish fried in honey, cold almond soup and cakes filled with chopped cabbage. The memory of the single Polish Vilia which it has ever been my fate to attend, remains in my mind as a sort of culinary nightmare, sufficient to make me for ever after thankful for plain food. It is natural that the preparations for this huge feast which, in that part of the country, was still conducted after the most generously patriarchal style, should likewise be huge, and perhaps it is equally natural that these vast arrangements should be used by the young people as a pretext for sociable gatherings. For generations past it had been the custom here for near neighbours to lend each other a helping hand

on occasions of this sort. There was a certain amount of system about the thing; each house in the neighbourhood having one day that was fixed as "markday," on which any one who had time and inclination was requested to step in and spend the afternoon in shelling almonds or stoning raisins in company, or at least in pretending to do so, for, of course, the excellent opportunities for flirtation afforded by these simple occupations were not neglected, and had the less chance of being so among young men and women who had known each other since their babyhood.

Needless to say that the Ludniki "markday" was better attended than any other in the neighbourhood; was it not presided over by Jadwiga? The young men came because she was there, and the ladies came because they did not dare to leave them entirely to her, and the result was that one dull December day a large and gay society found itself assembled in the big space adjoining the kitchen, which generally played the part of a servants' hall. From the first the scene was a lively one. Having peeled themselves out of their furs, the ladies began by quarrelling over the white aprons distributed for the protection of the dainty winter gowns, for although every one was regularly requested to come in their worst clothes, no one ever had the abnegation to do so. Then came the allotment of occupations—a wide field for showing

favour. I confess I was rather curious as to how Jadwiga would exercise her authority. Owing first to Anulka's illness, and lately to Madame Bielin-ska's state of health, which anxiety had aggravated, there had been next to no visitors in the house for weeks past. Since the day that she had consulted me as to her choice between her two admirers I had not seen her in the same room with them, and had therefore had no opportunity of judging of whether she had come to a decision or not. To-day my doubts were to be put at rest.

"I may peel the almonds, may I not?" Wladimir had asked at the very outset. He had been among the first arrivals, and had looked wonderfully handsome as he stepped out of the sledge, his fair cheek brightly flushed with the cold air and half buried in the costly fur of his cloak. "You know I peeled them last year, and I am sure I did it well."

"I know why Wladimir wants to peel the almonds," remarked a fair and fuzzy-haired young lady, one of a pair of fair and fuzzy-haired sisters, who seemed to regard the whole thing as one vast opportunity for giggling; "it's because the almonds are in hot water, and he can warm his finger-tips while fishing them out; as if we hadn't all got cold fingers! Just look at the egoism of men!"

"Oh, dear me, Pani Jusia, are your fingers really cold?" asked Wladimir, with most sincere

concern. "Then, of course, I waive my claim to the almonds. Here is the pot. Pani Jadwiga will give me some other occupation; I am prepared for anything."

"Even to grind the chocolate?" asked the second of the giggling sisters. "You know it makes the fingers brown," and she cast a half admiring, half mocking glance toward Wladimir's white, carefully tended hands.

"Even to grind the chocolate or to pound the pepper, for the matter of that," said Wladimir magnanimously. "I know that none of the ladies like pounding the pepper for fear of getting it into their eyes—well, I am ready to do it; may I, Pani Jadwiga?" He looked round him with the air of a person who feels that he is doing something at least creditable.

"No," laughed Jadwiga, "we shall save the pepper for somebody more tiresome; it will be an excellent excuse for sending him into a corner of the room, don't you see?" and she laughed mischievously. "Here, you can help me to peel the apples instead." Apples can be peeled without injury to even the daintiest fingers, and I half suspect my lovely Jadwiga of a little egoism in her choice of occupation, for she certainly watched over her exquisite hands as a mother does over her babes. At her words Wladimir had flushed with pleasure. He was as little able as a child to conceal his feel-



ings, and gratification at the compliment implied now shone out of his brown eyes.

In a few minutes more every one was occupied, more or less strenuously, around a long deal table, on which pyramids of raisins and almonds, blocks of chocolate, and whole sugar loaves were disposed. It looked verily as though we were preparing a meal for an army, or, at least, a giant. Tongues moved of course, at least as fast as fingers, and seriousness had little part in the work; were there not the clumsy to mark, the ignorant to instruct, and the greedy to unmask? For, of course, despite the prospect of the excellent tea which was to rest the labourers from their toils, many of the almonds and raisins never found their way into the vessels destined for them, and a handy lump of chocolate frequently proved itself to be irresistible. What between laughing reprimands, feigned anger, and mock exclamations of distress, mingled with a good deal of giggling, the first hour passed in a very lively fashion.

Our number had swelled to close upon twenty, when, after a longer pause than hitherto, another sledge was heard driving up to the front of the house.

“Who can it be?” asked Wladimir; “not Kryzstof, surely?”

“Not he!” laughed Jadwiga, “our occupations are far too frivolous for him. I remember his

saying last year that we were only playing at work.”

But it was Malewicz, after all. As he entered the room, a minute later, looking somewhat pinched about the eyes and mouth—for he had no such luxurious fur to wrap himself in as had Wladimir—a chorus of astonished voices greeted him.

“Can it be possible?”

“You have actually managed to tear yourself away from your threshing machine?”

“What! another holiday?”

“You don’t mean, surely, that you, too, are going to play at work?” asked Jadwiga, looking at him a little doubtfully, as though not quite sure of whether or not she was glad to see him.

“Playing at work is better than no work at all,” replied Malewicz quietly, as he saluted Jadwiga; “and just now there is nothing waiting for me at home.”

“A gracious speech, truly,” said Wladimir, honestly aghast, as he always was when any one fell short in his presence of the highest standard of amiability.

“Pan Malewicz likes to be ungracious,” put in Jadwiga, possibly a little piqued. “Don’t you know that he considers ungraciousness to be his *rôle*, and cultivates it as a virtue? Play at work? Oh, yes, there is nothing to prevent you doing that.

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What is there still? Let me see—to be sure the pepper has still to be pounded. It is warm work, but you look half frozen as it is. It will be the very thing for you. There! But please take it to the window, as otherwise it will be flying about and getting into our eyes.”

Malewicz, who knew nothing of the remarks lately passed concerning the pounding of this very pepper, resignedly took the articles handed to him and retired in silence to the window, but the rest of the company glanced at one another with a sort of guilty sense of understanding, while the two fair-haired sisters burst into a fresh, but somewhat subdued, titter.

A little later, when the pepper had been disposed of, there came another moment likewise calculated to put a less self-possessed person than Malewicz somewhat out of countenance.

The question of sifting the flour had been raised—an employment which likewise did not range among the favourites, in view of the possible disfigurement of garments, and again it was Wladimir who offered himself.

“I would do it in a moment,” a young married woman of the party declared, “if I only had any other dress on but a black one—but, flour upon black, you know ——”

Then it was that Wladimir stepped into the breach.

Jadwiga looked doubtfully at the fine, dark cloth of his winter suit. Perhaps she was reflecting that it would be a pity to transform the fairy prince into a miller's lad.

"It would be a sin to spoil that coat," she decided. "You would need at least to put something over it."

"Let's dress him up in aprons!" cried the ladies in chorus, delighted at this new pretext for merriment. "He would look delicious as a cook."

"No, I don't think he needs any change," said Jadwiga with a demure little smile. "Pan Malewicz, you are done with the pepper, are you not? Do you mind taking the flour? I fancy it won't make much difference to your coat."

I looked in some surprise at Jadwiga, and so did Malewicz. There had been the slightest possible stress laid on the *your*, and yet enough to make all eyes turn critically from the contemplation of the one coat to the other. Impossible even in a cursory glance not to note the difference of texture and condition, the intention seemed unmistakable, but it was unlike Jadwiga, and shocked me, almost disappointed me in her. After the first moment of astonishment Malewicz quickly recovered himself.

"You are right," he said, before any one else had spoken. "A coat that has swallowed dust and

drunk mud may well also digest a little flour without harm ;” and, taking the sieve, he set about his task in an almost unnecessarily energetic fashion. This time none of the ladies saw the need of an apron, and only the good-natured Wladimir made suggestion to that effect, to which Malewicz replied with, perhaps, a shade of bitterness :—

“No, thank you, I don’t think I would look at all delicious as a cook.” Which was indeed so true that the mere vision of his tall, gaunt figure thus equipped set the tittering sisters off once more.

But in time the flour was sifted as the pepper had been pounded, and Malewicz joined us at the table. By this time the lamps had been brought.

“And now for a story !” cried one of the gentlemen. “The stories always used to come with the lamps. It’s the bit of the evening I like best.”

“Is it to be a funny or a serious story ?” asked Jadwiga.

“Oh, nothing serious, for Heaven’s sake !” implored the majority of the ladies ; “rather fairy tales than that.”

“I have it !” said Jadwiga, looking in my direction. “We needn’t have fairy tales exactly, but we can have some of our legends. Miss Middleton was just saying the other day that she knows none of our national traditions. Here is an oppor-

tunity for instructing her. Let any one who will come out with the tale they know best," and she smiled at me down the length of the table, with that irresistible smile of hers which warmed the heart so suddenly by giving you the feeling that even in the midst of more brilliant and more important people you were not quite forgotten.

"Filko must stop pounding the sugar," decreed Jadwiga, "or we shall not be able to hear."

And after that the legends began for my benefit, told by most of the company in turn—weird and fantastic tales of spirits and warnings and warlike deeds, recounted either briefly or lengthily, either flatly or brilliantly, according to the individuality of the narrator, but all with a dash of poetry, and many with the ring of despair about them, as befits the traditions of a fallen nation. When it came to Wladimir's turn he told the story of the vanished fern blossom, and this tale I remember better than any, perhaps because of the remarks that passed concerning it, or perhaps because of the way it was told, for Wladimir proved by far the best narrator of the company. In the moment that he was preparing to speak and while all eyes turned upon him, it was evident that he felt thoroughly in his element. Having cast a glance down the table to assure himself that the attention was general, and with the long, snaky apple peelings still falling regularly from between his dexterous fingers, he

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began, without any ostentation but only a sort of modest confidence in his own powers:—

“The story of the vanished fern blossom is really a summer story, and I don’t know how it will sound with a lamp on the table and snow on the ground, but I will try. Well, Miss Middleton,” and he turned courteously toward me, “you know, of course, that ferns do not blossom nowadays, and yet this is said to have been the case in times long past. Here, then, is the way that we account for its disappearance. Many, many years ago the ferns blossomed with us, as they did elsewhere, and their blossoms were quite white and very beautiful, as white as the heart of a child, or of a man who has done no harm, and only a child, or a perfectly good man or woman could either see it or gather it, for this flower was visible on one night only of the year, and was guarded by many spirits against the approach of man. In the night of mid-summer, on the stroke of midnight, the bud opened, and who ever, being good and pure, went to the forest alone at that hour, could gather it—for against perfect innocence the spirits had no power—and having gathered it, he could, by only a wish, become possessed of the greatest riches of the world, which nothing could again take from him excepting his own act. And on every 24th of June it happened that hundreds of men and women who held themselves far better

than they were, wandered uselessly through the woods, while only one saw the flower, or, sometimes, not even that one, because even he was not spotless enough, and when morning came the flower had vanished, and would not blossom again for a year. Well, years and years ago there lived a little peasant lad, whose mother had so little to give him to eat that she sent him to herd the neighbours' geese. And while he sat for hours on the wide plain, with his willow wand in his hand, he would wonder in his mind whether there would ever come a time when he should have enough to eat, and whether he should always see his mother's eyes red with weeping at night, and always have to watch her poor, tottering steps moving between the fireplace and the wood heap, and her poor, shaking hands striving to twirl the spindle. 'When I am big it shall not be so,' he said to himself. 'But it will be ten years before I am big, and she will die before then.' And he began to turn over in his small head all the ways that people had of getting money quickly, but could find none. At last some one told him the story of the fern blossom which makes rich in an hour, and immediately a new hope sprung up in his heart, for this rosy-faced little lad with the great, clear eyes had never done harm to either man or beast, and scarcely even knew the name of evil."

Wladimir made a pause here in order to ask for



a fresh batch of apples. As he glanced round the table he must have been gratified to see nothing but attentive faces. They had all heard the legend times enough, but perhaps not told so well as Wladimir told it, and not in his sensitive, musical voice. At any rate, they all listened as though the story was as new to them as to me. With his youthful face and frankly childish eyes, Wladimir might almost have stood for the hero of his own story, grown up to man's estate, and surely this sweet-tempered and obviously kind-hearted youth had done no more harm in his life than the little peasant lad.

Presently he took up his story.

“Over at the end of the plain there stood a forest, huge and dark, through which few paths led, where the ground was tangled with ferns and high grasses and strewn with rude blocks of rock. There the boy resolved to go on the next midsummer night. He had never been there before, but he was not afraid, or if he was afraid he had only to think of his mother's red eyelids in order to get courage. The time came at last, and he crept from the hut and ran across the plain which the moonlight made as light as day, and plunged at last into the big forest where it was as dark as a cellar, for here the moonlight could not reach the ground. And before he had gone a hundred paces he saw the flower shining like a lamp in the black-

ness, and he climbed the rock on whose crest it grew, and in another minute it was his. He fell asleep then, tired with running, and with all sorts of confused wishes on his lips and in his heart, and next morning, when he awoke, he was resting on a velvet couch in a palace, and the attendants who flocked round him told him that he was richer than any man in the world. After he had begun to believe, his first thought was his mother. He would have run off to fetch her instantly, but his servants held him back. The riches were his, they told him, but only his alone, in the moment that he attempted to share them with any one, and be it even his mother, they would vanish like dew. He had not heard that part of the story before, and when he heard it now, he sat down on the floor of the room and wept, and wept, and would not be consoled. 'It was for my mother that I wanted it all,' he said sobbing. 'What use is it to me if I cannot give it to her?' 'Your mother is old,' they told him; 'she has one foot in the grave already—let her die in peace as she has lived, and enjoy what Fate has given you.' But he only wept the more, and said he would take a sack of gold to her that very day. 'Do so, if you like,' they said, 'but when you open the sack there will be nothing in it but rotten wood, and when you come back to your palace you will find a heap of stones. You will be as poor as before, and so will your mother.'

What good will that do her then? While now, at least, she is quit of all anxiety on your behalf.' Although the boy would not listen, he could not help hearing, and by degrees the words found their way into his mind and he began to tell himself that it was true, that by ruining himself he would not be helping her. Then he set to work to enjoy his riches, and for a time he succeeded, but when he had got used to eating his fill, something would take hold of him and draw him out of his palace and across the plain to the hut, and would make him look in at the little square window to see what his mother was doing. She was always either weeping by the fire or turning her spindle sadly by the table, but never did he find courage to lift the latch, for he was ashamed somehow to bring his silken clothes into that mud hut. And each time he went back vowing that he would give up all his splendour and return to be poor with her, and never did he do it, for he had got used to soft living and could not make up his mind to rob himself by his own act. Yet, despite all his riches, he grew unhappier day by day. One day, at last, when he looked into the hut, his mother was not sitting either by the fire or by the table; she was lying on the bed with her hands crossed, and two candles burning at her feet. Then he knew that it was too late to go back to her, and, throwing himself on the ground, he tore his silken clothes,

and then, rushing back across the plain, he clambered up the very rock on which he had gathered the white flower, and springing off it, dashed out his brains against its foot, and in that same moment the palace melted into air with all the attendants, and from that moment no fern has ever blossomed again. The flower had cost the life of a man, and therefore it was condemned to be blotted out of the world forever."

Wladimir, carried away by his theme, had ended with a certain emotion in his vibrating voice. There was a short silence after he had done speaking, but the first remark, made somewhat rudely, disturbed the dreamy mood that had settled on the company. It was Malewicz who spoke.

"I think that boy was a fool," he observed, with something harsh in his voice.

Every one looked at him in surprise.

"Why?" asked several of the ladies together.

"Because he did not know what he wanted. Either he could bear to look on while his mother starved, or else he could not. If yes, then he ought to have got the most out of his money; and if not, he should have let his palace go to dust on the first day, without all that fuss about it."

"Surely nobody can really bear to see his mother starve?" began Wladimir, but Malewicz almost roughly interrupted him:

"Why not?" he said with a sort of deliberate

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and ostentatious callousness, which did not quite convince while yet it shocked. "It is all a matter of habit, I assure you, and it all depends upon the price that is asked."

A little indignation was now mingling with the astonishment in the eyes turned upon him. Coming from the lips of a man who himself had a mother—not exactly in the position of the mother in the legend, but, nevertheless, within measurable distance of it—the remark sounded unnecessarily brutal. I confess that I felt as much astonished at him as I had felt a little while ago at Jadwiga. She herself was obviously indignant.

"Surely this is carrying ungraciousness just one point too far," she said, with a flash of beautiful anger in her eyes. "I think you might speak differently of your mother."

"Perhaps I might," he answered immediately, looking her hard in the face as he spoke, "and perhaps, also, I might have acted differently toward her. I am not defending my filial conduct, but only maintaining that, under similar circumstances, I would have known my mind better than did that young man in the story."

The discussion evidently threatened to become too serious for the occasion, and, but for the timely interference of Wladimir—Wladimir always did and said the right thing at the right moment—who began earnestly demanding some instructions with

regard to the apples he had peeled, a shadow would probably have settled on the humour of the company. In this way, however, the subject was forgotten in a few minutes, and the rest of the evening passed off smoothly and gaily—so gaily, in fact, that nothing but the thought that it was Advent prevented its ending in a dance.

That night in my room I said to Jadwiga a little reproachfully, “What was the matter with you this afternoon? I have never seen you like that before. You seem to have made a regular task of snubbing that poor man at every turn.”

“Malewicz?” she asked, laughing. “Why, I was only following your advice. Don’t you remember telling me that it would be unnecessary cruelty to keep up his hopes?”

“That means, then, that you have made your choice?” I asked, with a little unaccountable disappointment. But Jadwiga only laughed and disappeared into her room with shining eyes.

I did not require an answer; the events of the afternoon had been amply sufficient to tell me that, like a true woman as she was, she had taken the exact reverse of the advice I had given her.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE weeks that followed were in their main features a reflection of the afternoon described in the last chapter, inasmuch as in a hundred ways they marked the progress of Wladimir in Jadwiga's favour, and the defeat of Malewicz. Once having made up her mind Jadwiga had thrown herself into her new part with all the unregulated ardour of her temperament, and scarcely an evening now passed without my having to listen to glowing eulogies on her elected hero, for she belonged to those excessively open natures who, in order to taste their emotions to the full, require to share them with another.

“Do you not think he is as perfect a lover as any one has a right to expect?” she would ask me. “Each time I see him he seems to me handsomer, and he is not only beautiful, he is good too; I am sure he has never done any harm in his life.”

“I don't think he has ever done anything in his life,” I replied, “either harm or the reverse. He has scarcely had time, for the matter of that. He seems to me like an unwritten page, still waiting for its stamp.”

“Nothing but noble things could be written on

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so fair a page," said Jadwiga, with characteristically frank enthusiasm.

Sometimes I was pushed to remonstrate with her, as I had done on the evening of the Christmas "markday." Because she had finally lost her heart to Wladimir seemed to me no adequate reason for slighting his unsuccessful rival at every turn. In a person whose true goodness of heart I had instinctively felt convinced of from the first this show of unkindness continued to puzzle and pain me. No opportunity was lost of placing Malewicz himself or his acts in the most unfavourable light possible, and of throwing upon his gaunt and somewhat uncouth figure as much ridicule as would stick—and this both in his presence and out of it. His very horses and his very clothes were made to serve the occasion, although if she had but taken time to reflect I know she would have shrunk with horror from the idea of throwing up his poverty—even indirectly—in his face. But Jadwiga was always more given to impulse than to reflection, and never having tasted poverty she probably did not realise its bitterness. More than once I took up the defence of the attacked man, as, for instance, on one occasion, when a collection was being made for some charity, to which most of the proprietors in the neighbourhood subscribed largely, Malewicz was almost the only one who refused point blank.



“If I gave you a florin,” he said, “it would be the same as if I gave you nothing, and a larger sum I cannot afford to give.”

“Not even for the sick children?” asked Jadwiga indignantly.

“Not even for the sick children,” said Malewicz, colouring faintly, yet without lowering his eyes. “You must remember that charity begins at home,” and he tried to smile.

“The close-handed wretch,” said Jadwiga to me that evening after his departure; “every one is subscribing. Wladimir is even putting off buying a new horse in order to make his subscription larger.”

“Wladimir knows that he will get his horse in time all the same,” I remarked, “while Malewicz probably needs the money for more pressing things than riding-horses.”

Another time—Carnival had come then—it was his ignorance of the Mazur step which filled her with indignation, almost contempt.

“You call yourself a Pole?” she asked, in cold amazement. “A Pole who cannot dance Mazur! Is there such a thing?”

“When should I have learnt it?” asked Malewicz. “While I was ploughing my fields?”

“Other people plough their fields, too,” she retorted, “and yet they find time to cultivate other arts besides those of the farmer.”

“I know they do,” said Malewicz, with his usual grave self-possession, which under all the moral needle-pricks she was continually administering, never quite deserted him, just as his patience never seemed quite to give way. “There have always been people who find time for everything, even for playing at revolutions and running after national myths.”

There was a general chorus of disapproval, in which Jadwiga’s voice was only one of many.

“Playing at revolutions! National myths!”

“You do not mean surely that you call our glorious campaign of ’63 a game?” asked Wladimir, colouring with excitement. “That it ended in disaster is no argument; we proved with our blood that we were in earnest.”

“I will not call it a game if you object to the term,” said Malewicz unmoved, “but rather a piece of childishly *naïve* romance, badly organised, foolishly undertaken, and doomed from the first to failure.”

A fresh chorus of dissent.

“Badly organised, when everything had been prepared for years!”

“Talked about for years, you mean,” corrected Malewicz, “not prepared. We are always much greater at talking than acting. All our leaders together had not as much as a pinch of practical sense among them. How else can you explain it that,

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while the suppliers of the army were disputing as to whether the loaves for the rations were to be baked round or oblong, our soldiers should be starving for want of bread?"

"An accident," said some one, with a picturesque sweep of the arm. "They were heroes, all the same."

"Heroes, perhaps, but they were not organisers, and not politicians either, or they never would have started that bloody and useless dance."

"And if the call came again you would not answer to it?" asked Wladimir, measuring his rival with beautifully flaming eyes. "You would not be ready to shed your last drop of blood for our unhappy mother country?"

"Not as matters stand now," replied Malewicz calmly. "Besides, I know that my blood would do her far more harm than good. Poland is dead, and all the mistakes we make come from imagining that she is only asleep. It is best, surely, to look the truth in the face. We have been tried as a nation and have failed, and if we ever become a nation again it will only be because we ourselves have become different men. Just as a future Poland could only be a quite different Poland from the past—a Poland in which we have learnt to work, rather than to dream and talk. But we are not ready yet, not for a long time yet, and therefore I mean to work instead of dreaming, as be-

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comes a loyal subject of the Emperor Francis Joseph."

He looked steadily round the circle as he spoke and met nothing but inimical glances. At the sound of the last word there was a restless movement in the company, and something was murmured between more than one set of teeth, but I cannot vouch for its having been a blessing. There was not much more said; perhaps the presence of a stranger acted as a restraint, but all drew themselves coldly away from Malewicz, who for the rest of the evening remained well-nigh isolated.

"He has neither spirit nor enthusiasm," said Jadwiga to me afterward. "I am ashamed of such a countryman."

"I confess I rather admire his moral courage," I replied. "It certainly required some pluck to confess his opinions in the face of such nationalists as your neighbours seem to be."

But Jadwiga would not hear a word in his favour and treated him, if possible, more coldly than before, and whenever I ventured to protest, threw up my own words in my face and told me that surely it was kinder to show him plainly that he had nothing to hope for. I have often puzzled over her conduct at this time, and have looked for an explanation of it, and in part, I believe I have found it. It sounds paradoxical, but I believe that it was her very intrinsic kindness which was at the

root of her outward cruelty. Of course all that about crushing his hopes was nonsense, but I fancy that what she was trying to do was to harden her own heart against him, for she could not but be aware that he loved her deeply. The thought of what he would suffer when she gave her hand to Wladimir must have oppressed her even in the midst of her own bliss, and it was the effort to throw off this oppression that led her to try and kill the pity within her by every means that came to hand. The easiest way would, of course, have been if she could have succeeded in convincing herself that he was not worth sparing, that she despised him, instead of compassionating him—thence the constant endeavour to turn him into ridicule. And just because, despite all her efforts, he would not become ridiculous, and because at the bottom of her heart she was forced to esteem him—just because of this did she feel incensed against him. It is a complicated train of thought to follow up, but it tallies with all that I ever got to know of Jadwiga. It is possible, also, that the hope of disgusting him with herself, and thus stifling his passion, may have influenced her, but of this I feel less convinced, being a sort of motive I do not readily believe in.

Meanwhile Wladimir had not yet spoken, but there could be no doubt of his sentiments. Indeed, he had on more than one occasion confided

them to me with childish openness. My position was, in fact, rather comical and exceedingly delicate, placed thus between the two lovers, with an ear open, as it were, on either side, to their respective hopes and sighs, but I was beginning to get broken in to my *rôle* of *confidante*; after all, it was about all that I was good for now. It is true that the Christmas party had passed off without Henry having proposed to Lily Somerville, but that could not alter my own position. If not this time it would be another time, and if not her it would be another. All I had to do now was to forget that I had ever dreamt of founding a home of my own, and to try and seek happiness in the happiness of younger and luckier people than myself.

It seemed difficult to doubt Jadwiga's coming happiness, and yet there were moments in which it was borne in upon me that she had in her a wonderful capacity for being unhappy. A streak of melancholy, a shade of gloom had found its way into her imaginative mind, and would occasionally break out without any apparent reason. I have often thought that her father's terrible end was answerable for this incongruity in her otherwise joyous disposition. The memory of that awful day must have returned to her at moments irresistibly. Diving into my recollections I come upon one day in especial which revealed to me this side of her character. It was a gloomy day toward the end

of winter, with snow still on the ground, but no longer the spotless mantle of yore. Footsteps of every sort, human and animal, now defaced its original whiteness. In the yard and in the park every beast could be traced—there was the deep, small hole of the hare, the flat print of the goose, the more intricate mark of the canine paw; while outside, upon the plain, the beautiful, white mantle was striped in all directions with sledge marks, turned into slides before every hut, and defaced with the black of its smoke. A tattered and soiled mantle, truly, and time it was either to renew it or to doff it. It was to be doffed apparently, for to-day the thaw was at work. The slush was such as to baffle even my walking powers, and accordingly I had taken refuge in my embroidery, while Jadwiga retired to the piano. She and I were alone in the big drawing-room. To-day it was nothing but melancholy airs which she chose, principally Russian *Dumkas*, and when she spoke it was only to ask me whether I did not find that music was meant to express sadness far more than joy. Finally she glided into Chopin's funeral march. I had heard her play it before, but never with such deep emotion, I might say conviction, as to-day. When the last note had sounded she turned toward me where I sat in the window embrasure, trying to catch the fading light on my work.

“I understand that so perfectly,” she said, as though continuing a discussion, “do not you?”

“How do you mean?”

“Chopin’s idea; it is so easy to follow—or rather there are three ideas, quite distinct from each other. The first is simply sadness; deep and dreadful mournfulness; heavy, heavy tears—you can hear them in the chords of the first passage,” and she struck them softly as she spoke. “Then, out of the midst of the sadness break the cries of despair, almost of rebellion, but only for a moment; the dull sadness comes back again. All this is in the first movement. In the second there comes the first breath of resignation. Could anything be more peaceful and more holy, more like a soothing hand laid on a burning wound than this passage?”

“You are right,” I said, as I listened with delight, letting my work drop to my lap. “To hear that is almost to make one submit to anything; but I am curious how you are going to explain the finale. I have never been able to understand what Chopin meant there; that wild, breathless, confused movement seems to me much more like a sort of insane dance than the termination of a funeral march.”

“I understand that, too,” said Jadwiga. “Oh, I understand quite well what he had in his thoughts. He has followed the funeral in mind



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all the time ; he has reached the churchyard ; the coffin has been lowered ; the clods of earth have fallen upon it ; the prayers are said ; all the train of mourners is gone ; and now the dead are alone, and from the forest the wind comes sweeping and brings with it a swarm of dead leaves to whirl and turn and dance round the newly-made grave, and to smother the fresh flowers that have been laid there.”

Jadwiga had risen from her place by the piano, and was now standing beside me, but looking beyond me through the darkening window with fixed, heavy eyes, as though she were gazing on the vision which her own words had conjured up. At moments like this I felt sure she was thinking of her father, and perhaps living through in mind the impressions of the days that had followed the catastrophe. It was at these times of spasmodic sadness, too, that the likeness to the portrait of her dead parent came out most strongly, for his handsome face bore a certain shadow of gloom and care upon it. Since I had learnt his history I did not like to note this resemblance ; whether he were criminal or only insane I felt a reluctance to acknowledge that Jadwiga could be his daughter by anything but physical accident.

As regards the question of his sanity and of my self-made theories, although I pondered upon them frequently during these months, I only once had

an opportunity of discussing the question with another, on which occasion I discovered that I was not the only person who doubted the accuracy of the general assumption. This other person was Malewicz, and it was under the cover of dance music, and while many gay couples were filing past us in the Mazur, that our remarks on the subject passed. This was not at Ludniki but at Krasno, the Lewickis' residence, in whose handsome apartments all the society of the neighbourhood had assembled one day soon after Easter, which was especially early that year, in order to celebrate the feast day of old Pan Lewicki, Wladimir's father. Never had Wladimir been in fuller glory than to-day. To see him standing on the doorstep of the house, with the spring sunshine gleaming on the satin of his doublet, and flashing back from the jewels of his belt—for, in honour of his ultra-national parent, he had to-day thrown himself into the national costume—was in itself a treat to any eye open to artistic effects. It may have been a trifle theatrical, but there could be no doubt about its being successful. To-day he was a fairy-tale prince indeed, not only in form and feature, but in every point of his attire. How should I blame Jadwiga for loving him? A far colder fancy than hers might well have been fired by this picture, which to such sober eyes as mine was almost too dazzling. And then, what supple-

ness of movement, what charm of manner in the task of receiving guest after guest, and conducting them to the presence of his handsome giant of a father, who, being rheumatic, feared to expose himself to the chilly spring air. From beginning to end it was Wladimir who was the soul of the entertainment.

At Krasno things were conducted on a far more lavish scale than at Ludniki; and, as a matter of course, some excellent music had been procured, so that, after several sumptuous meals, the evening ended in the only appropriate way for a Polish feast day to end. Then it was that Malewicz and I came to be thrown into each other's society. At first he did not trouble himself to speak much; this was not the first time that we two had figured as lookers-on, and he had got to understand that I respected his silences; perhaps he even then already vaguely guessed at my sympathy, without having ever appealed to it. To-day, for the first time, he indirectly alluded to his paramount thought.

"Those two will make a wonderful pair," he said, after a time, in a tone of artificial unconcern which, I think, was scarcely meant to deceive. His eyes rested as he spoke on Jadwiga and Wladimir, leading the column of dancers down the length of the long room. Dressed in a pale blue silk which clung to her knee at each gliding step,

allowing the wonderfully narrow foot to appear beneath the hem, her face animated by the congenial movement, her white teeth flashing as she turned toward her partner, Jadwiga was to-day triumphantly beautiful. There were many imitation Jadwigas in the room, many women that were good-looking in the same style, only in another degree, for dark hair and white teeth, and lithe, animated forms are common in Poland; but Jadwiga surpassed them all. I could liken her to the picked specimen in a bunch of one sort of flowers—the one that, although of the same colour and the same shape as its neighbours, yet possesses every characteristic of the species more perfectly developed than they.

When I had murmured some sort of vague acquiescence to Malewicz's remark, he added thoughtfully: "And yet that was not what her father wanted."

"Had he made plans for her already?" I asked in order to cover the genuine embarrassment I felt. "Surely she was a mere child when he died?"

"So she was, and yet he had made plans. Some fathers look far ahead, you know. He had actually thought of a husband for her, but you would never guess whom."

"I don't see how I could well guess that," I remarked.

"No other than your humble servant," said

Malewicz with a short, hard laugh, which it hurt me to hear. "But, as you see, dead men do not always get their wishes—nor living ones either," he added below his breath. Then he went on:—"I don't mean to say that his intention was fixed; probably it was only a passing fancy. My father was an old friend of his, you see, and he thought, no doubt, that he would be doing me a good turn. I daresay you have heard that Pan Bielinski was in general very kind to me?"

He looked at me rather closely as he spoke and I assented, having indeed heard from Jadwiga that her father had on more than one occasion offered help to the son of his dead friend, but also that this help had always been refused.

"He was eccentric in many things," remarked Malewicz, thoughtfully; "the idea of choosing me as a son-in-law is a proof of it, is it not? Why, I believe Pani Jadwiga ranges me quite among the middle-aged."

I knew this to be not exactly true, although, owing to the ten or dozen years difference between them, Malewicz had, of course, never been a play-fellow, in the way Wladimir had been, and therefore did not enjoy such privileges as, for example, being called by his Christian name.

"Eccentric?" I repeated, carefully ignoring the latter half of his remark, "I have heard that he was more than eccentric."

Malewicz turned quickly toward me. "You have heard that he was mad, I suppose? No doubt somebody has told you the story."

"I have been told the story," I said, "but I don't quite know what to think of the madness. Tell me, Pan Malewicz," I added on some impulse of curiosity, for the opportunity seemed too good to be lost, "are you too of the opinion of the world?"

He met my eyes for a moment, and then looked away across the room.

"What other explanation can you possibly find?" he asked, in not quite so decisive a tone as usual.

"I have not found any, or rather I have found dozens, and I don't know how to choose between them."

"Ah!" he said, and looked back at me keenly, and as it seemed to me a little anxiously, "and what may your explanations be?"

Then I gave him the outline of the romance I have evolved out of my inner consciousness, as well as of several variations upon the same theme. He listened with his eyes on the dancers, but evidently intently.

"Do you not think I may have got near the truth?" I asked at last.

He shrugged his shoulders. "How can I tell? What should I know about it more than any one

else?" he asked, almost a little impatiently. "The world says he was mad, and perhaps the world was right."

"Perhaps," I said, "but rather than the world's opinion I would have had that of the old French monk who was the victim."

"He was not so very old," said Malewicz, "certainly under fifty."

"Did you see him?" I asked in some surprise.

"Certainly I did."

"Dead or alive?"

"Alive and dead. Did you not hear that he came to our house just before he went to Ludniki? We are on the way, you know."

"No, I had not heard that before," I said with increased interest. "And what impression did you get of him? Did you too take him for a gentleman and for a Frenchman?"

"He certainly was a Frenchman," said Malewicz, again looking across the room, "and I believe he was a gentleman too."

"But quite a stranger to you, I suppose?"

"Entirely so."

"I wonder whether he would have been a stranger to your father too?" I mused aloud. "He also had been in Paris in his youth, but I believe he was dead by that time?"

"He died two years earlier," said Malewicz briefly.

I pondered for a moment. "Pan Lewicki, Wladimir's father, was the third of the 'Three Mousquetaires,' as I think you said the trio was called in Paris. Did the mysterious monk ever meet his eyes, I wonder?"

"No, Pan Lewicki never saw him, he was away from home at the time. But don't you think, Miss Middleton," he added in another tone, "that we might choose a topic more congenial to a ball-room than are these black memories?"

I assuaged, half ashamed of the curiosity that had pushed me so far, and, although this inquisitiveness sprang only from my warm interest in Jadwiga, and anything that touched her, even indirectly. We talked of other things after that, but I carried away with me the impression that Malewicz too disbelieved in Bielski's madness, and had possibly even formed a theory of his own, distinct no doubt from mine, as well as from that of the public.



## CHAPTER IX

SCARCELY a fortnight after the dance at Krasno I find myself writing thus to Agnes:—

“I have seen my first stork—or rather storks, for there were more than twenty of them. Ever since on my arrival last October I inquired what the untidy, black lumps were which decorated many of the straw roofs in the village, and was told that they were storks’ nests; I have been waiting eagerly for the return of the occupants. But now that they have come something else has happened whose interest quite puts the storks into the shade. To come to the point at once, that which has been preparing all winter has come to pass—since yesterday Jadwiga and Wladimir are betrothed. I rejoice with the sweetest girl I ever knew, and at the same time I feel as though I must pray very hard for her happiness. Why? I am sure I don’t know, but I can’t quite suppress a shade of anxiety. Jadwiga is generous in her love, but she expects the same measure in return—as she gives largely, so she wants to be given to largely, and her own spirit is so high, her temperament so intolerant of anything below the most ideal standard of self-devotion, that it would be difficult for any

man quite to come up to her ideal. Will Wladimir do so, morally, when the first glamour of their love is passed? He is a dear, good boy, and he loves her devotedly—it is scarcely too much to say that he adores her—but I cannot quite rid myself of the feeling that there is a certain want of stamina about him, something too ornamental even to allow of his being useful, a thing, in short, which is intended more to be gazed at than leant upon. It may be that my partiality for Jadwiga makes me hypercritical, but she is perfectly and entirely happy, and so I must not repine.”

And now, leaving the rest of this letter aside, as irrelevant to my subject, I must enter more closely into the circumstances under which I saw my first storks.

A cruel and, so to say, ironical chance had thrown the names-day of Madame Malewicz within the same fortnight as that of Pan Lewicki, and after the comfortable, almost sumptuous, Krasno, it was at the bare and dilapidated Roma Wielka that the society of the neighbourhood assembled. No contrast could have been sharper. Both houses were planned on about the same scale. In times long past Roma Wielka may even have been the more luxurious of the two, whereas now the great rooms looked as empty as though sacked by an enemy. Nothing more mournful to see than poverty in the wrong place; so long as she

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keeps to her proper sphere and hides her head under thatched roofs, she is not without a certain grace of her own; but poverty in halls is quite a different thing from poverty in cottages. To see the steps of a nobly broad terrace crumbling for want of repair; tiles missing from an almost palatial roof; while a park that would require a staff of gardeners to keep it in order is abandoned to a lad with a hoe—powerless, of course, against the invading army of weeds—is enough to strike sadness even to the heart of a stranger. In its golden days the Roma Wielka park must have been a far more ambitious affair than that of Ludniki, as was testified by traces of fountains, remains of plaster figures, and ruins of summer-houses, yet, despite its comparative neglect, Ludniki was a model of order compared to this.

If anything could have enhanced the tragicomical side of this caricature of former grandeur, I think it was the festive air it assumed on the April day of which I am writing. Every effort had, of course, been made to receive the guests becomingly—the same guests that had been feasted at Krasno a fortnight ago—but ah, how apparent the effort was, how thin the mask spread over the features of grinning poverty! What Polish tact could do to smooth over the difficulties of the position was, of course, done. The bare apartment positively shone with the hot-house flowers

brought as feast-day offerings to Madame Malewicz, and whose bright colours so mercifully clothed the nakedness of the rooms which all the elders remembered in their time of prosperity. Yet, despite their smiling unconsciousness, each guest must have known that, in order to spread even this poor fare before them, mother and son would have well-nigh to starve themselves for a month to come. What Malewicz must have suffered on occasions like this it is difficult to conjecture; to his proud and over-sensitive spirit this day must have been one of ever recurring torture, as was to be read in the exaggerated brilliancy of his black eyes, and the tight look about his lips, as gravely, punctiliously, without a trace of Wladmir's playful grace, he did the honours of his bare home.

Fortunately, his mother saved him almost the entire trouble of being amiable. I had seen her once or twice in the course of the winter, when visits had been exchanged between Ludniki and Roma Wielka, and in an earlier letter to my friend I find my first impressions to her thus given :—

Madame Malewicz is a very charming, rather helpless old lady, with a delicate nut-cracker face, and the same black eyes as her son, who has evidently been accustomed until nearly middle-age to be waited on by troops of servants, and who, not being used to think for herself, is always leaving

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her shawl and her cigarettes lying somewhere about the place. I should say, at a guess, that she is exceedingly unpractical and somewhat vague. She bears her privations with the most delightful good humour, and seems to have what people call a "happy disposition," but after nearly twenty years she doesn't seem to have in the least adapted herself to her "new" position. Obviously, she is the sort of person who is meant to be rich, and I don't think I am wrong in supposing that she adds considerably to her son's difficulties by not understanding what she can afford, and what she cannot. Although she is certainly not stupid, she gives me the impression of never quite realising her financial position.

It may have been exactly this last-named deficiency which made of Madame Malewicz so perfect a hostess. If she had had a dozen footmen behind her, and a gorgeously-furnished hall in which to receive her guests, she could not have greeted them with more smiling cordiality, nor—when the time for refreshment came—could she have pressed food upon them with more complete self-confidence had her table been laden with the most costly meats. Nothing but her complete unconsciousness of the deficiencies around her could have made the situation bearable. The occasion which to the son was one of mental agony, was to the mother obviously one of pure

enjoyment. It was clear at a first glance that she was created for society, and merely to put on a silk dress and shake the hands of her acquaintances was bliss to her. I doubt not that her spirit carried her back to similar occasions in a more brilliant setting, and that she lived so entirely in the memory of those fortunate days that the distasteful details of the present escaped her. There was no guest so insignificant but that she had not an appropriate word for him.

“Whom do I see?—actually Wandusia?” she exclaimed, on catching sight of a young girl following close upon her mother. “Wandusia in long skirts—put on in my honour, of course; this is good of you, Stasia. I always said that she must make her *début* at Roma Wielka; we have room enough here, even if the floor is not quite so good as it used to be, and—let me whisper it in Wandusia’s ear—we have three fiddlers coming! What do you think of that?—from Zloczek only, it is true. I had wanted to get the music from Limberg, but that economical son of mine—he’s a tyrant, I assure you—declared it would be extravagant,” clapping him affectionately on his sleeve with her fan. “But he has extravagant moments, too—let me see, where have I got it? Krysztof, my love, just run and fetch me the new cigarette case, I had it a moment ago—it will be either in my bedroom or the dining-room, or, if

not, Hania will know. Ah, Zygmunt Rapinski! this does my eyes good!" she went on in the same breath, addressing a white-haired gentleman. "I knew you would not forget old friends, and you will get your reward too, for the last bottle of *miód*" (a sweet *liqueur* in which honey is the chief ingredient) "is to be opened to-day; you see I have not forgotten your tastes—just imagine what you would have missed by not coming! And Elzbieta too! quite right, my dear, a husband who is as fond of *miód* as Zygmunt had better not be left to himself. There, that sofa is very comfortable; I advise you to take possession of it in good time," pointing with the affability of a queen to a seat on which the frayed satin hung in fringes. "Ah, there comes Krysztof with the cigarette case—I wonder where he found it? Now, my friends, don't you call this good taste?" exhibiting an extremely handsome cigarette case of chased silver, decorated with the Malewicz arms. "Isn't it foolish of him, and isn't it also sweet of him? I have told him a hundred times that I can do without these things, that I can do without anything, that I have no wants; but it is no use, and just because I lost my old one last week he goes and buys me this as a feast-day present!"

The case was indeed so out of keeping with the establishment that I looked instinctively toward Malewicz. There was the ghost of a smile play-

ing about his tight lips, which helped me to guess part of his thoughts. It was not the first time that I had heard Madame Malewicz protest her entire independence of such trifles, but I had also observed that she did not quite live up to her principles. No doubt her son knew better than herself which things were necessary to her happiness, and which not, and mercy knows at what personal sacrifices that cigarette case had been purchased.

“Have any of you gentlemen got any matches about you?” went on the old lady, opening her case, “I had mine a minute ago”—Madame Malewicz always had everything a minute ago—“Elzbieta will join me, I know, but I am not going to give Jadwiga any; it is all very well for old women like us to dye our teeth any colour we like, but it would be a sin to stain those pearls even by a shade,” and she smiled at Jadwiga affectionately, displaying a set of still regular, but almost canary-coloured teeth.

Thus she chattered on with the lightheartedness of a child for whom embarrassment does not exist.

When I had amused myself sufficiently with watching her and admiring her—for it was impossible to do otherwise—I took an opportunity of slipping unobserved from the room and out into the great wilderness which still went by the name of park. The weather at least had been kind to Madame Malewicz; this was a far more perfect



spring day than the one spent lately at Krasno. True it was only the willows and the hazel-nuts that were tufted and tasselled as yet, and the tangled beech branches overhead were almost black, but among them the birds were pouring out their hearts in a perfect flood of melody, and in sheltered places the ground was streaked with vivid green. I had only gathered snowdrops as yet, and was hungering after violets, cowslips, anything to tell me more plainly that the long winter was really over. But, although my mind was bent on flowers, the surroundings necessarily took my thoughts back to Malewicz. Since seeing him in his own home I had got to understand the whole history of the man better. He had not quite reached manhood when his father died, leaving him only the wreck of a princely fortune and his mother to support. Since then he had done nothing but struggle to keep together the remnants of the paternal acres, with the additional difficulty of distinctly remembering the time of luxury. That the responsible position in which he had been prematurely placed should have put a stamp of almost exaggerated seriousness upon him was not to be wondered at, and as easily could I understand that the almost monastic seclusion in which he lived had caused his unfortunate passion for Jadwiga to take entire possession of his soul, standing as it did in place of everything that generally makes life agreeable at

his age. An unfortunate passion indeed! The thought of it oppressed me more than ever. I felt that the crisis was approaching, although I did not know how near it was. Jadwiga had come reluctantly to Roma Wielka, and only because she could not avoid doing so without exciting remark, and I do not think that she herself foresaw the end of the day.

I must have been wandering about for an hour on paths barely to be traced and often obstructed by a self-planted bush, and the bunch in my hands was growing to quite respectable dimensions, when I heard swift, light steps behind me, and turning saw Anulka trying breathlessly to reach me.

“Miss Middleton, oh, Miss Middleton, wait for me!” she panted in her thin voice, and in another moment had reached me, exhausted, but with shining eyes.

“Oh, I had to catch you,” she said, cutting short a remonstrance from me. “I have discovered something so delightful—you can’t imagine—nobody knows it yet.”

“Well, what is it?” I asked, trying to make her stand still, but she had hold of my hand and was dragging me feverishly forward.

“I can’t tell it you; it is something I must show you! Oh, do come quickly or it may be gone!”

There was no opposing Anulka when in this

mood, and only doing my best to moderate the pace I allowed myself to be pulled along between the trees in a different direction from the one I had come by, and with my curiosity only half-awakened and bent chiefly on some new sort of flower, or possibly a bird's nest. We had left the path and were making our way across country, as it were, often having to skirt some spot where the melted snow still lay in compact pools, and passing by patches of hepatica and anemone which my fingers were itching to be at, but which Anulka, in her eagerness, scarcely worthied with a glance.

“Wait only,” she kept repeating, “I have something much more exciting to show you.”

At last, just as the trees were lightening, she stood still, and peered out cautiously from between a fringe of green hazel-nut tassels. There was a clearing in the park just here, a stretch of marshy meadow which was greener than any grass I had yet seen.

“Are they still there?” Anulka was saying under her breath. “Yes, they are! There! Look through here, Miss Middleton.”

I looked, and uttered an exclamation of surprised delight, for the whole green surface of the little meadow was dotted over with tall, white birds, stalking along on their red legs with a solemnity impossible to describe, and gravely poking about for the frogs, more than one of whom

must have wakened from his winter's sleep only to find himself inside a stork, for, although I had never seen a stork out of a picture-book, I had yet vaguely and incredulously guessed at the identity of the mysterious white birds. I say incredulously, because it seemed so much more like Hans Andersen fairy tale than anything in real life.

"Have you counted them?" I whispered to Anulka, quite as interested as she by this time; "there must be more than twenty."

"But there are only two," was the unexpected reply.

"Are you blind?" I inquired amazed.

"Are you looking at the storks?" retorted Anulka.

"Of course. What are *you* looking at?"

"Why, at Jadwiga, of course. At Jadwiga and Wladimir. They are much more interesting, surely, than the storks. Bother the storks! Although, to be sure, it was they who led me here. I saw the flight, and wanted to see where they would alight, so I followed them and saw—well, just what you see over there, between these two twigs."

Then I looked again mechanically, and, sure enough, right opposite, just across the green meadow, Jadwiga and Wladimir were sitting side by side on a bench beneath a mighty but still naked beech, and even from here it was perfectly clear

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that their hands lay in each other's and that his arm was round her waist. They must have sat so for long, for the birds did not mind them, stalking about peacefully till within a few yards of the motionless lovers—and this made it all more like a fairy tale.

“And you thought it was for fear of frightening the storks away that I was speaking so low?” tittered Anulka by my side.

I turned upon her angrily, provoked by the *rôle* of eavesdropper into which I had been betrayed unawares. With her shining black beads of eyes and the grin of delight on her weazened face she seemed the very embodiment of an imp of evil. This was one of the moments in which I positively hated her.

“How could you dare to bring me here?” I was beginning when I became aware that somebody was standing behind me. I turned quickly and saw Malewicz only two paces off, and he, too, was looking straight in front of him, across the meadow with the storks—but not at the storks, of course. His face was so white, his eyes so fixed, and his mouth so pinched, that he looked physically ill. As for Anulka, she only stopped to whisper, “I am frightened of him,” and then darted away among the bushes.

“We had better be going,” I said unsteadily, but I had to touch him on the sleeve before he seemed to notice me. Then he turned his stiffly

moving eyes upon me, and seemed to take another moment or two to recognise me.

“Yes, we had better be going,” he repeated in a rough, uneven voice, and walked two steps away, like a man dazed, then abruptly stood still and looked at me again, his white face working.

“You know that I love her?” he said still in that curiously rough voice, and measuring me almost angrily with his eyes, as though the words had been a challenge.

“I have guessed it,” I said as quietly as I could, for indeed my heart was bleeding for him.

He walked on, speaking rapidly as he went.

“I knew, of course, that I should lose her—that is, that I should never win her. The day had to come, but why *this* day? Why here? Is it not bitter enough without that?”

“They probably forgot where they were,” I said stupidly, which was about the most injudicious remark I could make.

Malewicz gave a desolate laugh.

“You are right—to real lovers the surroundings are as nothing—nothing exists but just they themselves. I daresay they will be quite surprised to hear that it was at Roma Wielka that they plighted their faith to each other. To them it is not Roma Wielka, it is Paradise, and they the only two inhabitants. Oh, to have been only an hour inside that Paradise.”

He stopped again abruptly, and bent his shoulder against a tree stem as though taken with some sudden spasm. I, too, stopped perforce, not knowing whether it would be more merciful to keep my eyes on him or turn them away. It was the first time that I had seen the soul of a man in mental agony, thus bared, as it were, to my gaze, and the spectacle shook me as I had seldom been shaken before. Within the last months I had become almost intimate with Malewicz, but he had always been reticent—for a Pole—and I had not been prepared to see him throw off the mask thus entirely.

“If there was a God in Heaven,” he said fiercely, while he still leaned against the tree and picked at the bark with nervous fingers, “it would not be possible that one man should have his hands full and the other entirely empty. By what fault of mine am I robbed of everything that makes life sweet? My father was the first who robbed me. *Do Paryzie! Do Paryzie!* (To Paris). It used to be the cry of young men in his day, and he followed it, and the gold that had been gained by the sweat of Polish peasants’ brows was all tossed away on the Paris gaming tables, and because he had a gay youth I must have a dark one; because he played I must work beyond my strength—and yet that is not small. One hope, one flower, grew up in my wilderness, and that to-day has been gathered by another!”

He broke off with a sort of gasp, and turned his face toward the tree. There passed only a few moments, during which he was obviously struggling for mastery over himself, and then he looked back at me, and I saw that the victory was gained. After his brief outburst of rebellion he had stooped and again taken up his burden.

“Have I frightened you?” he said with rather a ghastly smile. “It does not happen to me often; only now and then the injustice of it all seems to get upon me. Please forget all I have said; I was probably raving. Of course I knew that this consummation was coming—I have had the whole winter to prepare in, but it seems that it was too short, after all. I sincerely wish them all happiness. I am sure that Wladimir loves her, and will try to make her happy. I pray to God that he may succeed. I have known him from a boy, and there is no harm in him beyond a little pardonable vanity, and that surely is justified by circumstances,” and he smiled again, a little more successfully.

To say that there was no harm in Wladimir somehow seemed always the first thing that his friends were moved to say about him, but of Jadwiga’s elected husband I should have liked to hear praise that was a little less negative.



## CHAPTER X

DURING the weeks that followed her betrothal I believe Jadwiga was as happy as it is possible for a mortal creature to be. She had found her ideal—or believed she had done so, which comes to exactly the same thing. She had got hold for life of a congenial spirit, of somebody who could listen to Byron or Chopin for hours without signs of weariness, and could enter with enthusiasm into her most ideal views of life. Personally I doubt whether Byron read by other lips, or Chopin played by other fingers, would have had the same power of entrancing young Lewicki, but to Jadwiga I dared not hint at anything but the most perfect identity of tastes.

Just at first the happy bridegroom was a little disturbed by one thought.

“Do you think anybody guesses which day it was that I spoke to her?” he anxiously inquired of me. “I should be awfully vexed if Krysztof were to know that it happened at Roma Wielka. You see it came over me somehow quite suddenly.” He looked at me with such a boyishly deprecating air as he said it that I could almost have kissed him.

“It would make it harder for Krysztof, don’t you see,” he added thoughtfully, “and besides, it would look in such awfully bad taste”—it was here evidently that lay the rub. The thought of doing anything that was not in the most perfect taste must certainly have been acutely painful to any one of Wladimir’s cast of mind.

To Jadwiga the same thought had doubtless occurred, but she did not speak of it to me. Since her engagement she had no attention of any sort, even for Malewicz. I remember one occasion only in which his name was mentioned between us. I had been defending him against some passing attack, when Jadwiga laughingly broke in:

“If you find him so perfect why don’t you marry him yourself,” she asked, carried away by her exultant spirits. “You’re always sticking together in a corner, at any rate. Oh, have I said anything to hurt you?” she checked herself abruptly, for her quick perception probably showed her some change in my face.

“You have not hurt me,” I said, “but you may as well know that I don’t mean ever to marry. If I feel drawn toward Malewicz it is principally because he too has been unlucky in love.”

“He too! Oh, Miss Middleton—Eleanor! then you *have* a secret which you have never told me; you are unhappy and you have not allowed me to console you!”

I don't know what made me so foolish, but just then my eyelids began to burn most suspiciously and my sight grew blurred. Perhaps it was the contrast between her fate and mine that overpowered me thus unexpectedly.

Her arms were round my neck in a moment, her soothing voice in my ear, murmuring all sorts of the most ingenuous words of endearment. Never before or since has it been my fate to be called "a little dove" or a "sweet lamb"—things to which I am aware of bearing no resemblance, but that was Jadwiga's way, for her nature was essentially caressing. In a few minutes more she knew all about my poor little dead romance. I should need to have been of wood to resist her. She listened with an astonishment that was evidently as boundless as her sympathy. That common sense could have anything to do with sentiment was a thing which had evidently not occurred to her before.

"And you went away of your own free will?" she asked, incredulously. "Nobody forced you? Why did you not marry and then trust to Providence?"

"Because neither Henry nor I are idealists," I replied, smiling, recovered by this time from that moment of weakness, "and because we can both make a sum in addition. We knew that by marrying we should be risking starvation, not only for ourselves, but possibly for others."

“I don’t understand that at all,” said Jadwiga, thoughtfully. She was kneeling beside me, with one arm still round my neck, and gazing with wide, dreamy eyes through the open window beyond at the blue of the spring sky.

“If two people really are fond of each other, what can want of money matter—what can *anything* matter?”

“You have never wanted it, you see,” I gently observed.

“No, but I almost wish I had, just to be able to show what *I* understand by love. That about the world being well lost is no nonsense to me; it is the only thing that I entirely subscribe to—a complete devotion, an entire giving away of oneself, a merging of one soul into another—it is the only sort of love that seems to me possible. What can poverty, or pain, or shame, or any of the misfortunes of life do to such a love as that, except to make each cling closer to the other?”

Her dreamy eyes took fire as she spoke, and I felt the hand that lay about my neck thrill with the inward emotion. She looked infinitely beautiful and infinitely in earnest as she gazed past me into the blue distance, and inwardly I prayed that her high ideal might never be put to too hard a test.

But the test was coming sooner than it was possible to foresee, and was to prove far harder than anything I dreamed of.

Even although I should live to be a hundred I shall never be able to forget the smallest details of the day which abruptly broke in upon Jadwiga's dream of bliss, turning the peaceful monotony of Ludniki into agitation and perplexity. Her engagement was nearly three months old by this time, and the outfit was making great progress, for the wedding had been fixed for August. This very day we were expecting the post to bring us the patterns for the wedding-gown, and were accordingly looking forward to its arrival with more than the usual interest. Of late Wladimir had spent his afternoons entirely at Ludniki, for his father had gone off to nurse his rheumatism at Karlsbad, and the empty house at Krasno was not to his taste. He was here again to-day, and was even making himself useful, for all hands were busy in the rose-walk. We were in the very flush of the rose season then, and the long, straight walk which I had first seen bristling with hips was now turned into a perfect dream of beauty. Like two long untidy garlands the low-growing roses ran down each side of the path, spilling their vividly crimson petals profusely on the ground, intoxicating the eye with their colour, the brain with their scent. Every morning when I walked there, there were fresh ones newly opened, while over-blown ones had been torn to tatters by the night breeze. To-day Anulka and I, basket in hand, were diligently collecting the

flowers, while Jadwiga and Wladimir, installed in one of the old summerhouses, and surrounded with more heaped baskets of the crimson petals, were supposed to be clipping off the hard underpart of each petal, useless for culinary purposes, for these were the roses from which was fabricated the delicious jam I had tasted so often. From the direction of the house the clink of sugar being vigorously pounded rang toward us like a monotonous chorus, and, from time to time, Róza, the kitchen maid, appeared to fetch a new supply of rose leaves, and each time regularly Wladimir offered to carry them for her, and then allowed himself to be persuaded to stay where he was.

What a different place the Ludniki park appeared to me to-day from what it had done at first sight! I remember reflecting on it as I skirted the rose hedge, scissors in hand. Then I had been shocked by the untidiness, now I was chiefly charmed by the beauty. Was it a deterioration in me? Perhaps. Evidently the atmosphere of comfortable neglect in which I lived was having its effect upon me. What a lot of time, to be sure, we waste in tidying up and putting things straight generally! Is it really a gain to cultivate our sense of symmetry to the point of being disturbed by a stray paper or a chipped plate, or to get so sensitive by habit as not to be able to stand an empty bottle with equanimity? Upon my word, I believe they

are right. By their principle of *Nie nie skadzie* they escape quite a lot of bothers, even if they occasionally risk not finding a footstool when they want it, or only finding one with a broken leg. In such and such like reflections I had caught myself indulging lately.

“I think I hear Jan’s horse,” said Jadwiga to me as I brought her another basketful. “Do send Anulka for the post-bag.”

It was Jan, who, according to established custom, had ridden in to fetch the post from Zloczek.

“Oh, *aren’t* you curious?” screamed Anulka as she ran off, “but I hope you’ll choose brocade, not satin. Satin is so every-day, you know.”

“I shall choose whatever Wladimir likes best,” said Jadwiga simply, and their eyes met for a moment, and Wladimir blew aside his cigarette smoke in order to be able to see her face better, for it is almost superfluous to say that he was smoking cigarettes. In Galicia cigarette smoking is the accompaniment of everything, from card-playing to love-making.

Presently Anulka was to be seen coming toward us with the post-bag dangling from her arm.

“Jan says the patterns are there,” she shouted to us from afar.

The brass setting of the worn and weather-beaten old post-bag glimmered faintly in the sunshine. Its familiar countenance bore its usual expression of

stolid indifference; there was nothing to show that it carried a thunderbolt within it.

Jadwiga took her hands out of the rose leaves to open the bag. She had a rose in her hair, and one in her belt, and she had stuck the most perfect rose she could find into Wladimir's buttonhole. In her light summer dress she looked like a queen of the roses indeed.

"Yes, the patterns are here, and, let me see, what else? A letter from Madame Clarisse"—that was the milliner at Limberg—"and another big letter—for me?"

She looked at the address on the long, thick, blue envelope, and her face grew suddenly grave.

"How strange!" she said in a subdued tone. "It is addressed to Papa. It must be somebody who does not know—who thinks he is still alive; but I cannot imagine who. Wladimir, are these not French postage stamps?"

"Yes," said Wladimir, examining them; "and the postmark is Paris."

"Perhaps somebody who knew him long ago, but what can he have to write to him now? I suppose I had better take the letter to Mamma."

"Oh, won't you look at the patterns first?" asked Anulka in an agony of impatience.

"No, I must go to Mamma," said Jadwiga, obviously agitated, as she always was when anything reminded her of her father, and, with the blue letter



in her hand, she rose hastily, overturning a basket as she did so, and littering the ground with petals.

“Can I not take it for you?” asked Wladimir; but she gently shook her head.

“You can unpack the patterns meanwhile,” she said. “I daresay I shall be back in a few minutes. Very likely this is only some old account which has been overlooked.”

But she did not come back in a few minutes. We sat on working among the rose leaves for nearly half an hour longer, and still our helper did not rejoin us. Wladimir rolled innumerable cigarettes between his dexterous fingers and threw questioning glances along the rose-walk, but its length remained deserted. The patterns of brocade and satin, having been sufficiently gloated over by Anulka, lay unheeded on the table. By degrees a vague sort of anxiety grew up within me. The letter was from Paris—Jadwiga’s father had been in Paris—the dead monk was a Frenchman—these thoughts moved confusedly in my brain, and out of these materials my fears constructed some undefined danger to Jadwiga’s happiness.

“I think I shall go and see if there is no bad news,” I said at last, as carelessly as I could.

“That would be good of you,” said Wladimir, who, poor boy, was looking more disappointed than anxious. He had not counted upon seeing his afternoon thus curtailed of its rightful measure.

In the house I was met by the smell of hot rose jam which penetrated all the passages. I had gone only a few steps when I almost ran against Jadwiga.

“I was just coming to look for you,” she said with a white, startled face, catching her breath strangely between her words. “Mamma is very ill.”

“Because of that letter?” I asked instinctively.

“Yes—I suppose so—but I don’t know exactly. There were several letters inside the packet, not only one. I stopped to see her read them because I really was curious, but she had only read one when her eyes opened wide—oh, so terribly wide!—and she fell back quite stiff in her chair. Marya thinks she is coming round now, but I have sent for Doctor Kouski. I was just coming to ask for your smelling-salts.”

I fetched the smelling-salts, but was met at the door of Madame Bielinska’s room by Marya in one of her most determined moods. I was not to come in, nobody was to come in until the doctor arrived, she categorically declared, not even the young lady. Madame Bielinska had opened her eyes, but she seemed in a sort of stupor; it was best not to disturb her further just yet. And here were the letters which had arrived by the post, Pani Jadwiga had better take care of them meanwhile, and she thrust into Jadwiga’s hands the whole packet, and shut the door in our faces.

## CHAPTER XI

JADWIGA and I, left alone in the passage, looked at each other for a moment in silence. Then she said in an excited whisper:—

“Come to my room. I want you to help me to read these. I have tried to, but I don’t understand anything; the words seem to jump up and down before my eyes, and they talk of such strange things—there seems to be no sense in it.”

“But ought I to read them?” I asked, doubtfully. “If these are family affairs——”

“You must, you must!” she repeated excitedly. “I cannot read them alone—I am too frightened—of I don’t know what. And they have to be read—something may have to be done, and if Mamma is ill there’s only me. Oh, don’t make me read them alone!”

I don’t know whether I was right to yield but I did, suffering myself to be led along to Jadwiga’s room, where the first thing she did was to lock the door.

“Why do you do that?” I inquired, startled by so unusual a precaution on her part.

“I don’t know. I don’t want any one to see the letters yet until I know what is in them. Here they are! But don’t read them too loud, please.”

“I would rather read them to myself first,” I said, infected by her excitement, “if I am to read them at all. Let me just throw a glance over them.”

“Yes, yes, only be quick,” said Jadwiga feverishly, and while I sat down at the table she took some paces about the room, aimlessly and uneasily, and finally sat down on her bed and watched me as I read. I could feel her eyes upon my face and could hear her deep, unsteady breaths. Through the open window the hot smell of the rose-jam still floated in, coming from culinary regions, and somewhere in the distance somebody was still pounding sugar.

I don't know what I expected as I took the papers into my hands; all sorts of wild surmises were in my head, but none of them were quite the truth.

Inside the big, blue envelope there had been a smaller one, originally white, but a good deal yellowed by age, and fastened with seals on which, although they had been broken within the last half-hour, an elaborate coat of arms was still traceable. Besides this there were several letters, whose limpness showed them to be of the same date as the envelope, and having evidently come out of it. One only, written on crisp, business paper, bore a date of only a few days back. This is the one I first took up. It came from the office

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of a Paris solicitor, and, to the best of my recollection, it ran as follows:—

“SIR,—During the revision of the business effects of my predecessor in this office, M. Nicolas Grimond, defunct on the 10th of last month, I have come across various parcels—of letters presumably—deposited here years ago by the Vicomte d’Urvain, and in accordance with the directions on the wrappers, have the honour to return to you, or to your heirs, those that bear your address. I will here remark that Monsieur Grimond had for years past been charged with the affairs of the family of d’Urvain.

“A notice of the safe reception will oblige

“Your devoted servant,

“JOSEPH CHARDON.”

or some name of that sort.

I looked more carefully at the inner envelope. There, upon the surface, I found the somewhat faded inscription:—

“In case of Monsieur Grimond’s death to be returned unopened to

“MONSIEUR HAZIMIR BIELINSKI,

“Ludniki,

“Post Zloczek,

“Galicia,

“Austria.”

and below the signature:—

“ACHILLE D’URVAIN.”

In complete darkness I turned to the letters

which had evidently been contained in the sealed envelope. There were three of them, written in a flowing, legible hand, that was more like that of a woman than a man, and they were all signed "Hazimir Bielinski." The envelopes they had been in were addressed the one to "Monsieur le Vicomte d'Urvain, Capitaine dans le 2me Régiment de Lanciers—Tunis—Afrique"—the others to the same name, but bearing the designations of more obscure African places that I have forgotten. The first was dated from Paris, and here are its contents. I have altered a word here and there, but certainly nothing essential; there was a time when I knew those letters better by heart than any lesson I ever learnt:—

"PARIS,

"Hotel d'Angleterre,

"May 11th, 185—.

"MY DEAR VICOMTE,—I have not done it yet, but I mean to do it. God knows that I shall have no peace until it is done. I would have written to you even if your lines, penned at Marseilles, had not arrived, for in our hurried interview on last Wednesday morning I could not even attempt to justify myself in your eyes—no, not to justify, but only partially to excuse. You have probably never been desperate, or you would know that a desperate man is not to be judged as one that is master of all his powers. After the many pleasant hours spent in your society I should be loth to lose your esteem entirely, and therefore I will here

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attempt to tell you briefly the history of my great fault, or of my crime, if you will so call it.

“You will remember that for a week past I had been losing heavily; the run of bad luck was beginning to get on my nerves, I believe, for both my sleep and appetite went, and I lived in a state of chronic irritation, very hard to keep within bounds. Then came that dreadful Monday when all the powers of hell seemed to have conspired against me. When I rose from the table that night—no, it was morning already—I could see my ruin quite close to me—you all could see it, I think, for every one agreed that a *revanche* was due to me, and *he*—I cannot bring myself to write the name of the man I have wronged—was the first to offer it me for the following night. I knew it was my last chance; I knew that one more such night must leave me a beggar. Everything, my whole future, depended upon how the cards fell.

“I swear to you by the memory of my mother that when I sat down at the table I had no more thought of doing a dishonest act than of murdering any of my companions. I was content to trust to my luck, hoping fiercely that it would be on the turn. It was only when I gradually comprehended that the luck had *not* turned, that this night was to be but a continuation of the last, that I began to get mad. And then the opportunity came.

“Oh, that mirror, that fatal mirror! If it had not been for the chance of the place I sat in I could never have had the means, even if I had had the will, to do harm. How was I to know how to set about playing false? I had heard indeed of marked cards, but I never would have had the

nerve for such a manipulation, and would most certainly have betrayed myself at the first attempt—but the mirror showed me the way. I was holding the Bank, as you remember. From the moment I perceived that, by slightly tilting up the card I was dealing, I could catch a glimpse of its underside, the temptation to guide my play by this discovery became irresistible. At first I did it only by way of experiment, as it were. It did not seem to me possible that the players should not perceive my manœuvre, but when it became clear to me that they did not, then my will seemed to go from me. Remember, on one side there was Ruin standing—real Ruin this time, and not merely its shadow—on the other this ridiculously easy, childishly simple means of retrieving my fortunes. It was like a new sort of game within the game, and I think that it was a little the mere interest of the thing that drew me on until, gaining confidence, I grew bolder and began to stake higher. Nothing ever was so successful. The bystanders—and the excitement of the play had drawn many to the table—laughingly declared that I was having more than my *revanche*. Once only, when glancing upward, I met among the lookers-on a pair of eyes fixed with suspicious attention upon me. They were your eyes, Vicomte, but by that time I was too flushed with success to heed the warning in them. It was only when, after that long night, I found you waiting for me at the door of my hotel that I understood that I was detected. You will do me the justice to admit that I attempted no denial; it had been but a brief madness, and it was over. I don't think I ever seriously thought of



profiting by the act into which I had been betrayed. To give you the promise which you demanded of me was, therefore, only to meet my own conscience half-way. Do not regret, as you do in your letter, that you were unable to stand by until I had redeemed my word. Both your duty and mine is clear. You are called to defend your country's interests on a distant field of battle; I am bound to make good the loss which my opponent of the other day has apparently obtained at my hands. Your warning was not required, but I accept it as part of my punishment. You are my judge and I am the sinner, and the sentence you have pronounced upon me shall be fulfilled to the letter. Only have a little patience. This affair must be treated between me and *him*, and I cannot make up my mind to do so verbally. So long as we are in Paris we meet daily. I shall wait until we are separated, and then I shall write to him. Do not blame the delay. If he were in any way unharassed by his losses of last week I would speak at once, but his pockets are still full—neither he nor anybody else suspects that those losses were anything but a trick of fortune. You and I are the only mortals who know the secret. He will be leaving Paris next week; be merciful and grant me these few days more in which to say good-bye to my like of hitherto—perhaps even to the world, for what possible future remains open to me I cannot see.

“As for the calculation you make, it is, I fear, correct. Yes, it cannot have been less than a hundred and twenty thousand francs that passed between us on Tuesday night.

“Farewell. Think of me as little badly as you can, as of one who fell by weakness and not by wickedness, and who quickly threw from him his wrongful gains.

“HAZIMIR BIELINSKI.”

The second letter was shorter, and written from Ludniki a few months later.

“DEAR VICOMTE,—You are cruel because you have never been unfortunate. Have I not told you that restitution shall be made; and can you not let me choose my own time? Surely you forget that what you ask of me is nothing less than beggaring myself? If I am to do your will entirely there will be no help but to sell Ludniki; according to your merciless view of the case not a stone of it belongs to me now. But are you quite sure that your view is the correct one? At the first moment I was so overwhelmed by the mere thought of what I had attempted to do that I unhesitatingly accepted your verdict; but reflection has put another light on the matter. It is true that I took the mirror to aid, but is it certain that without the mirror I should not have made a few lucky guesses? Besides, as I told you, it was no more than a glimpse of the underside that I caught, so that, even with that aid, I was scarcely doing more than guessing; if I remember right there were even times when, in a fit of momentary terror, I did not consult the mirror at all; and some of my winnings may have proceeded from exactly those times. How then do you want to decide which part of the sum gained that night is my lawful property and which not? The matter is not nearly so simple as

to you, with your high-minded but surely somewhat impulsive chivalry, it appeared in the first moment. Let me implore you to submit the matter to a calmer consideration. I think you will find that I am not obliged to despoil myself entirely. Do not use the power which chance—or rather which I myself have given you over me too harshly—for without my own confession what proof would you have against me? Remember that he is still rich, while I am threatened with poverty, that that which he does not even miss means for me the common sustenance of life. Of course he shall have his due, but I must first be clear in my mind as to what exactly is his due.

“I shall await your answer before doing anything further. I do not know where my letter will find you; according to the papers the French troops are moving continually, but in time these lines will reach your hands.

“I do not know whether I may yet venture to sign myself,

Your friend,

“HAZIMIR BIELINSKI.”

I took up the last remaining letter and read :—

“LUDNIKI, November 17th, 185—.

“MONSIEUR LE VICOMTE,—Your last letter was to me a painful surprise. Had I not told you that I was ready to abide by your decision, and was only in doubt as to the exact amount of restitution due? Since you insist upon a complete sacrifice, it shall, of course, be made, but, at least, you will allow me to make it in my own fashion. During these months, while waiting for your letter, it has oc-

curred to me that restitution does not necessarily entail confession. I have only to repeat the unhappy experiment which Fate forced upon me, using it this time against myself; *he* shall win back from me all that he lost on that fatal night; he will have his money again without finding it necessary to despise me. I feel a little lighter in heart since thinking of this, for I do not know how I could have borne the shame even before only one man more. The beggary still remains, and this, too, is hard enough to bear. Beside your words of stern condemnation might you not find some of sympathy for a very unhappy man? The exposure you threaten me with is a superfluous cruelty, since you know that I have no choice.

“HAZIMIR BIELINSKI.”

As I laid the third letter on the table I raised my eyes and met those of Jadwiga fixed with a devouring glance upon my face. She was still sitting on the bed, as though she had found that the best place from which to follow my expression as I read. Whether there was anything to see there I don't know, for I had read very fast, the writing being clear despite the faded ink, and had scarcely taken time to think as I hurried on, for I too was devoured by a painful curiosity.

“Well?” asked Jadwiga, impatiently. “Do you understand anything? Is there any sense in it at all?”

I could not answer immediately, for the simple reason that as yet I had nothing to say. Leaning

my cheek on my hand I sat for a few moments quite still, with closed eyes, allowing the phrases just read to pass once more slowly through my mind, and gradually to group themselves to a whole.

“Yes,” I said slowly, after that minute. “I am afraid I understand. But tell me first, are you quite sure these letters are written by your father?”

“Yes; I am sure of that. There was no other Hazimir Bielinski; and, beside, it is the same writing that Mamma has in her prayer-book.”

“Then—but are you sure that you want to know everything? These letters were not meant to be read by you or by me either.”

“Perhaps not, but I must know everything now,” said Jadwiga, with sudden fierceness. “You have no right to keep anything from me.”

She sprang from the bed and came toward the table, but I gently laid my hands upon the papers that lay scattered there.

“My poor child, then let me tell you—it would be worse to read the words. I can only say what seems to be the truth. The person who wrote these letters confesses to having used an unfair advantage while playing at cards, and having thus wronged another.”

Jadwiga looked at me wildly across the table on which, with convulsively clenched hands, she was leaning.

“But I have just told you that the person who wrote these letters was my father,” she said, almost coldly.

I looked down in silence, unable to bear her gaze.

“An unfair advantage,” she continued, abstractedly, “but that would be the same as cheating, would it not? Tell me quick, Miss Middleton, is that what you mean?”

“That is what these letters seem to mean,” I answered, helplessly.

“But it is a lie!” she cried, giving the frail table so vehement a push that it groaned in all its somewhat decrepit members. “It is a vile lie, or else a mistake—don’t you think it is a mistake Miss Middleton? Surely a card cheater is the basest, most contemptible thing in the world—therefore it *cannot* be true. *You* don’t think it is true, do you?” And her eyes seemed to be imploring me to unsay the words just spoken.

I had taken up the letters again, and was once more running my eye over them, perhaps in some desperate hope of extracting another meaning, although in my heart of hearts I was already convinced.

“How can I say what is true and what is not?” I answered, with painful hesitation. “If it is a lie then it is your father himself who has spoken it, and why should he ——”

My words were cut short by a lively movement of the door-handle—knocking was not customary at Ludniki.

Jadwiga flew to the door and turned the key.

“Is Mamma worse?” she asked of Marya, who stood without, flurried, but also indignant.

“Much worse, I consider,” she replied, with a certain air of injured consequence she was apt to assume whenever her prescriptions were not followed to the letter. “But she has taken it into her head that she is better, and nothing will suit her but that the young lady should come at once and bring the letters with her. I’ve never seen her anything like this. It’s no use telling her that quiet is what she needs. I shouldn’t be surprised if she refused to see Dr. Kouski when he comes.”

Jadwiga snatched up the scattered papers from the table and seized me by the hand.

“You will come with me?” she said with irresistible entreaty in her eyes; “she might be taken ill again.”

“I will follow you in a minute,” I said, for I had suddenly remembered that Wladimir was still waiting in the garden, in complete ignorance and probably keen anxiety, and I thought that I might as well take upon myself to send him home. His presence, until the situation was somewhat cleared and the most violent emotions calmed, struck me only as a fresh complication.

“Madame Bielinska has had a fainting fit,” I explained to the distressed youth, “and Jadwiga is too busy with her mother to come out again.”

“But she is not ill herself?” he anxiously inquired. “Was there any bad news in that letter?”

“There was some rather—startling news, but I cannot stop to talk about that now. Jadwiga is quite well; you need have no fear on her account.”

“But is there nothing I can do? Can’t I fetch a doctor, or go a message, or something?” he inquired desperately.

“No, there is nothing except to leave Jadwiga undisturbed beside her mother,” I replied.

“But I suppose I may come again to-morrow to inquire?”

“Of course you may,” I replied, in a fever to be quit of him and back again beside Jadwiga.



## CHAPTER XII

WHEN I reached Madame Bielinska's room a great surprise awaited me. She was not lying on the bed as I expected, but sitting upright in the deep armchair, in which I had never seen her otherwise than sunk into a broken and insignificant heap. Her spare figure had been wonderfully straightened and, as it were, enlarged by some acute tension of the nerves; on her usually so bloodless cheeks there burned two bright spots, while the cavernous eyes no longer looked empty of everything but the reflection of terror, but showed something like a new life in their depth.

"The letters!" she was saying as I entered. "The letters! Where are they? I must read them again."

Jadwiga, on her knees beside her mother, was holding them half hidden against her dress.

"Little mother," she entreated, "do not read them. They will make you ill again. It is all a mistake—I do not believe it."

"I do," said the mother, in so strangely incisive a tone that Jadwiga looked at her speechless, at the same time mechanically abandoning the papers she held.

Madame Bielinska took them eagerly, with a gesture I had never seen in her, or supposed her capable of, and for a few minutes all was silent while she closely read the letters, nodding her head slowly the while, and sometimes uttering a queer little sound in her throat as though of assent or corroboration. What struck me as the strangest part of the matter was that neither grief, despair, nor shame had any part in her expression. These were the things I expected to find there—was she not reading the confession of her husband's disgrace?—while what I saw instead was excitement undoubtedly, but mingled with something that almost resembled satisfaction.

When she had done reading she seemed for the first time to notice my presence.

“Don't send Eleanor away,” said Jadwiga quickly, catching her mother's glance toward me. “She knows all there is to know—she has read the letters—I made her read them—she is our friend, Mamma.”

At the same time her eyes were asking me plainly not to go. It was evident that she was afraid of being left alone with this so curiously unfamiliar mother.

“So be it,” said Madame Bielinska readily. “Why should she not know? Everybody will soon know, and she may help us with her advice;

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we will require much reflection and good counsel. Jadwiga, my love, will you go to the press between the windows ? ”

She was fumbling at her neck as she spoke, and now pulled out a narrow black ribbon on which hung a small key.

“ There at the bottom, on the lowest shelf, you will find a leather box, the one with the monogram on the top ; bring it to me, please, at once ; there is something in it.”

In wordless astonishment Jadwiga obeyed, and I looked on, unable even to conjecture on what her mind was running, and wondering whether her senses were not, after all, deranged.

Madame Bielinska grasped at the box that Jadwiga brought her as though at a prize. With steady hands she unlocked it, and searched for a few moments within. It seemed principally to contain old letters. At last she found what she wanted.

“ There ! ” she said, with a sigh of relief, and, unfolding a limp sheet of paper, she handed it without further word to her daughter Jadwiga, whose eyes were not accustomed to the dim light of the apartment, took it to the window. As she read, the perplexity on her face deepened ; then, still in silence, she passed it on to me.

The letter was not written on letter paper, but on a sheet that might have been torn out of a large

note-book, and was dated from a military lazaretto in a West African camp.

“June 16th, 185—.

“MONSIEUR BIELINSKI,—Your letter has found me here—only just in time. I am not able to answer it myself, for the sabre cut on my right arm forbids me holding a pen. Even these few words have to be dictated to Sœur Marie Cécile, the good angel who nurses me and who has saved my soul, as I trust to God, although she has not been able to save my body. I am forced to use her hand as the instrument wherewith to convey to you my last warning—the warning of a dying man. But you need not fear betrayal; I will use words which you alone can understand. Your letter tells me that you see your duty plainly at last; fulfil it in your own fashion, but do not delay. In my opinion only a full confession could bring a full atonement, but so long as the thing is done I will not insist on the way it is done. But do not grow weak. I speak to you as one whose foot is in the grave. By the time you read these lines the lips that dictated them will be cold. When I spoke to you before, I spoke as the indignant man of the world, for whom only the world’s code of honour exists; now I speak as the sinner whose eyes have been opened at the last moment to the follies of his youth, to the time he has wasted in the world, and it is God’s commandments and not man’s that I call upon you to respect. But I believe even these words are not wanted. You will have redeemed your word ere this, and made the great sacrifice. May God reward it you, and may you not forget to pray for my soul. U.”

These lines were penned in a delicate woman's hand, and only the U at the foot had been painfully scrambled by another, evidently the dictator of the letter. When I had read it I looked at Jadwiga, and Jadwiga looked at me, then at her mother, who was carefully watching us both. A minute passed before any one spoke. I was trying to piece together the different pieces of evidence—my ideas were not clearly ranged just yet.

“I don't understand,” said Jadwiga, at last slowly.

“Don't you? Surely it is clear enough. The writer of the letter is the same man to whom these three are addressed,” and Madame Bielinska indicated the papers in her lap.

“But where does this one come from?”

“That I am going to tell you. After your father's death I found it. When I had recovered my senses and a little of my strength, the first thing I did was to search all his papers. Every one told me that he had been mad, and I pretended to believe them, but I did not do so really for a moment. Somewhere, so I felt certain, there must exist some other explanation, and I had no peace until I had read every line he left behind him, hoping that one might give me a clue. And at last I found this; and even this was not among his papers, but lying between the leaves of a book which had been packed away at the back of a shelf. I suppose that was the only reason of its

not having been destroyed, as every other one coming from the same quarter has evidently been destroyed. He had mislaid it, and the merest chance put the book into my hands a few months after his death. I had grown so used to scan every paper which my eye fell upon that I at once read this one, and I immediately understood that here lay the secret of his death. But it was scarcely to be called a clue—nothing that I could follow up, and it told me nothing except that there had been some disgrace in his youth, and what this disgrace might be I have been trying to guess ever since, and I see now that I have not been far from the truth—for I have often thought of cards. Oh, I am not so stupid as people take me to be!”

There was a convulsive movement about her lips which may have been meant for a smile.

Jadwiga had sat down opposite to her mother, and was earnestly looking at her.

“The secret of his death?” she repeated. “How does this explain the secret of his death?”

Madame Bielinska made a movement of impatience.

“How slow you are, Jadwiga!” she said, in a tone of querulous irritation. “It is all as plain as day. Ever since I found this French letter I have suspected that the monk who fell by Hazimir’s hand was the writer; now I am sure of it.”

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“But the man who wrote this letter was dead long before—he wrote it on his death-bed.”

“He thought he was on his death-bed, but he did not die. This Sister Marie Cécile whom he speaks of here, did after all, succeed in saving his body as well as his soul, and evidently succeeded so well with the latter that the first use he made of his returning health was to forswear the world and take the cowl. Read the letter again, and say whether this is not exactly the thing which you would expect of the writer, supposing he recovered.”

She looked at me as though appealing to my judgment, and I silently inclined my head.

“Whether Hazimir ever had any further communication with him,” went on Madame Bielinska, “I do not know, of course. If he had he took care to destroy all traces, or perhaps he got no more. The Vicomte, in this note, seems to have considered the matter settled, and once in the cloister he may have left all worldly concerns outside.”

Jadwiga began to move uneasily in her chair.

“But, Mamma, even supposing you are right—even supposing my father did commit so—so great a fault, this surely does not explain the—end. Since he had atoned for his weakness so many years before, what further cause of quarrel could there be between him and the Frenchman?”

“But he had not atoned for it!” cried Madame Bielinska, in a shrill accent that rang almost like one of triumph, and grasping the two arms of her chair, she bent so far forward that I thought she must fall, staring back unflinchingly into her daughter’s wide and horror-stricken eyes. “Don’t you understand, yet? Does he not say in all these letters of his that, in order to make restitution, he will have to beggar himself—to sell Ludniki? And did he beggar himself? Has Ludniki been sold? And remember during all these years we have fallen heir to no inheritance; no money has come to us from other quarters. What does it mean? Why simply that the excuses which had served for weeks and for months had ended by serving for years. And when twenty years later the Vicomte turned monk, came to this door—whether by pure chance or with some latent intention, who can ever tell now—and found that the promise given had not been kept, and that the sinner was still in possession of his wrongful gains, has turned his wrath upon him, possibly threatening him with immediate exposure—and then—well, surely, now, you cannot believe that your father was mad when he turned the pistol first upon the only other man who knew the truth, and then upon himself?”

She stopped, sinking back in her chair, her breath coming fast.



I looked at her, lost in amazement at so much rapidity and clearness of thought in a person whom I had always regarded as anything but intellectual. Yes, those deductions were doubtless correct; that might very well have been the way in which the thing had played itself out. To be sure this old woman had had eleven years to brood over a subject which to us was new in its essentials, so it was scarcely a wonder if she found her way more rapidly in the puzzle. She had had her theory lying all ready, so to say, with only the missing pieces to fit in.

Jadwiga sprang to her feet, grasping at her head.

“But then Ludniki is not ours!” she cried, in a tone of acute anguish. “It cannot be ours if all this is true. Whose is it, Mamma?”

“That is what we still have to find out,” said Madame Bielinska, more quietly. “Ludniki belongs to the man who was cheated that night in Paris. His name is nowhere in the letters, but I shall find it out, ah, yes, I shall certainly find it out, never fear! The first thing to do is to write to that Paris solicitor and have every inquiry made concerning the Vicomte d’Urvain; it is just possible that he has left other papers which may give a further clue to the man we need. Besides there must be many men still alive who remember that Paris time. Lewicki was in Paris in the fifties; possibly he can furnish me with names—but I

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shall have to wait until he is back from Karlsbad for that. Oh, I shall find him—I shall find him yet!”

“And when you have found him?” I ventured to inquire.

“He shall be given back every penny that is his own,” she said, turning upon me her transfigured face. “How I thank God that the sum is mentioned in this first letter! It makes the matter simple. A hundred and twenty thousand francs—yes, of course, Ludniki will have to go; we shall be poor, but we shall be free of that terrible shadow which has been choking me for eleven years—the stain shall be washed out; as the restitution is tardy so it shall be full.”

She looked toward her daughter as though in expectation of an echo to her words, but Jadwiga, very pale, with eyes darkened by thought, was gazing straight in front of her.

“It shall be full,” she repeated, after her mother, but without the mother’s strange enthusiasm, “it shall be full, but the stain—no, nothing can ever wash the stain away.”

When Doctor Kouski came he was, as Marya had surmised, not admitted.

“Tell him that it was only a stupid mistake of Marya’s, then give him some tea and send him away,” said Madame Bielinska decisively to Jadwiga. “Miss Middleton will perhaps stay here in

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the meantime while I dictate to her the letter for the French solicitor. If it goes back with the doctor to Zloczek, it will still catch the post.”

Within the next half-hour the letter was written, consisting principally of a request for all information obtainable with regard to the late Vicomte d'Urvain, and in especial as to what was known of his end; also as to whether any members of the family still survived, with whom it might be possible to enter into communication.

The letter, although lengthy, was perfectly clear and vigorously expressed. Out of every word that she dictated to me there spoke the relief of a soul that has found its liberty at last—that after eleven years of surmises was able at last to take action. I have often since tried to imagine what those eleven years must have been like, but have never been able to grasp it; unless I may compare it to living shut up with a dangerous animal, whose face one has never seen, and the particulars of which one yet attempts to conjecture. To-day the monster had shown its features and, however loathsome they were, I suppose there was a sort of mild relief in knowing the worst. No truth could be more terrible than the incertitude which had been sucking the life-blood from her. This, at last, is the only way in which I can explain to myself the abrupt change in my employer.

That night on my way to bed I took my candle

into the room which lay beside the walled-up entrance, and held it up to the portrait which hung there. Since knowing the man's history I felt a need to look in his face. Yes, that was the face of exactly the man who would have written those letters—remorseful and penitent in the first overwhelming shame of the discovery, querulous and self-pitying as the shock of emotion passed. No man with that mouth could be very firm of will. With the absence of the warner the tottering resolve would have tottered still further, and after his supposed death it is quite conceivable that, believing himself free of the sole witness of his crime, the temptation of keeping both his money and the world's esteem had proved too strong to be resisted. No one would ever know the details of that buried history, but with the materials already at hand it was not hard to reconstruct the outline.

## CHAPTER XIII

NEXT morning Jadwiga appeared more animated, although the heavy eyelids spoke of tears shed under cover of darkness—tears of shame, as I well knew. The first stupor was passed, I could see, and she had caught sight of a saving thought.

“I hope he will come early,” she said to me, as she convulsively pressed my hands. “He is sure to come early in order to inquire after Mamma. I think I shall feel better when I have heard his words of sympathy; Wladimir always finds the right thing to say.”

“And you mean to tell him everything?” I asked.

She looked at me with boundless astonishment.

“Naturally; how can I have a secret from him? Is he not my future husband? Does not that which touches me touch him? Is not my grief his grief?”

“Of course, of course,” I said, a little hastily, half ashamed of the thought which had crossed my mind. “It is evident that he must know. But you must expect to see him a good deal—shaken by the news.”

“Shaken, of course; whatever shakes me could

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not leave him cold. But I know that I shall find his hand ready to support me. He shall be our staff on the thorny road we are about to tread. His sense of justice is so keen that I know he will feel with us that we have no choice."

Evidently it was no use to warn her. The possibility of a disappointment had not even crossed her mind. In her eagerness and the natural craving for the sympathy that, of course, was the most precious to her, she could scarcely await the moment in which to announce to her lover that her father had been a scoundrel, and that she herself was portionless.

I held my peace after that, although tormented by vague presentiments. What right, after all, had I to poison this sublime confidence? Might not she be right, and I wrong? How could I say that his love would not stand the test it was about to be put to?

Jadwiga had not very long to wait; soon after ten o'clock Wladimir was at the door. He began by sending in a discreet inquiry regarding Madame Bielinska's health, and a message to say that he would return in the afternoon at the usual hour; but Jadwiga, unable to bear the delay, had him instantly summoned to the drawing-room. I accompanied her only to the door and there something made me take her into my arms and kiss her; after that I fled out into the park in terror of over-

hearing any word of the painful explanation about to take place. My steps turned instinctively toward the rose-walk, but in my present mood I could see no beauty in it; to my eyes there seemed to be more thorns than roses to-day, and so busy was my mind with the tragedy of the past that the petals spilled over-night upon the moist earth appeared to me as pools of recently shed blood. In the old rickety summerhouse the basket which Jadwiga had overturned yesterday still lay on its side, its contents strewn broadcast over the moss-grown floor. On the table the patterns of satin and brocade lay unheeded; one or two had been carried away by the wind. I mechanically picked them out of the dewy grass.

Presently Anulka joined me. For some minutes she walked in silence beside me; then, having almost forgotten her presence, I heard her piping voice beside me.

“What does cheating at cards mean exactly?”

I turned with a start to find her bead-like eyes fixed watchfully upon my face.

“What makes you ask me that now?” I inquired, with a dawning feeling of repulsion upon me.

“Something that I heard yesterday when you were talking with Jadwiga in her room.”

“But you were not there,” I objected, “and the door was shut.”

“But the window was open,” said Anulka, simply.

This was not the first time that I had caught my pupil eavesdropping. She was the sort of child whose eyes and ears were always wide open, eager for excitement in any shape, and whose nervous vivacity kept her continually on the move. She would slip about as noiselessly and as deftly as a weasel, appearing at the most unexpected places and picking up scraps of information, of which fortunately she could not digest the greater part.

Having administered a suitable admonition, I added severely :

“Whatever you have heard you must not speak of it again, Anulka. It is a sad story which you cannot understand.”

“That is what Marya says,” replied Anulka. “She thinks I must have heard wrong, but I am sure I did not. Jadwiga said quite plainly, ‘But that would be the same as cheating at cards.’”

“Then you have spoken to Marya, too?” I asked with a feeling of desperation, foreseeing that the flood of tongues was loosened already.

“Of course, since I had nobody else to talk to last night; you could not expect me to keep it to myself, could you? But, dear Miss Middleton, do tell me how he did it. It can’t be easy to cheat at cards.”



“Hush, not so loud!” I said nervously, as I looked about me.

“But how did he do it?” she persisted. “I want so much to know.”

I resisted a little longer, but in the end there was nothing for it but to tell her of the looking-glass and of the temptation to which her unhappy father had yielded. She listened with keen attention, and at the end, to my horror, she clapped her hands.

“Oh, *what* a good idea!” she gleefully exclaimed. “I wonder how nobody thought of that before. It just shows how clever he was.”

“Anulka,” I cried in consternation, “what are you thinking of? It was so wrong a thing to do that your father suffered remorse for it all his life.”

“But it was only a game,” said Anulka, with perfect equanimity, “so what could it matter?”

I attempted an explanation, but not with much effect. She was evidently quite honest in her inability to see the criminal side of the matter.

“In a game surely every one tries to get the best of it,” she objected to my strictures, “and if he found a better way of doing so than the others, then why should he not use it? If people don’t want to lose money, then they should not play cards. But it was stupid of him to let himself be caught,” she added in a tone of disapproval.

I gave up any further attempt, knowing by experience that the strange want of proportion in this

curious child's ideas of morality was not amenable to argument—as well discuss a difference of tints with a colour-blind person. It was not that she loved evil for its own sake, but that she was incapable of recognising it under many of its forms. I have never held her quite responsible for a mental twist, which, together with her corporal defects, she probably owed to the circumstances of her birth.

When at last I regained the house I found the big drawing-room empty, and presently came upon Jadwiga sitting alone on the verandah, with a book on her lap which she was pretending to read. One glance at her face showed me that the interview had not turned out exactly as she had expected. I did not say “Well?” but I suppose my eyes said it for me, for she at once began to speak rather hurriedly.

“You were right,” she said with a nervous smile; “he was very much shaken; I think almost more than I thought he would be. But that is natural; it came upon him with such a surprise, just as it came upon me. By this afternoon he will have had time to recover from the first shock.”

“He is gone?” I inquired.

“Yes, of course; he only came in now to inquire after Mamma; he was on his way to one of the farms—he has to replace his father now, you know, but he is coming back as usual.”

I put a few more questions tentatively, and, although Jadwiga's answers were unusually reserved, I yet managed to get a pretty clear picture of the interview just passed. Evidently Wladimir had been more than shaken, he had been simply overwhelmed by the revelation made to him, and, therefore, not in a fit state to offer any support to Jadwiga's own distress. He had obviously been too horror-stricken to make any direct response to her wild appeal, and in the first moment unable to do anything, poor boy, but protest his unchanged affection. All this was natural enough considering his youth and the terrible nature of the disclosure made; but what disturbed me was Jadwiga's evident anxiety to excuse him, and the look of perplexed astonishment which had remained upon her face since her parting with him.

"I think I must have told him too abruptly," she said. "I am always so impatient. Wladimir is so entirely the soul of honour that, of course, this frightful disgrace makes him lose his head just at first," and all the time she was watching my face, as though for corroboration of her own sentiments.

As the hour approached at which Wladimir's appearance was to be expected I could see that a creeping uneasiness began to take hold of Jadwiga, an uneasiness which she was anxious to hide even from me, to whom her heart had yet been so com-

pletely open lately. But she was not made for concealment; at every moment I could see her furtively consulting the jewelled toy of a watch that hung at her belt, while the transparency of the pretexts she found for visiting the verandah, from where a view of the gate was to be commanded, was not calculated to deceive even a child. Wladimir had never been late before, and it was curious certainly that to-day of all days he should tarry behind the hour. To me it was evident that Jadwiga was suffering acutely, but it was clear also that nothing would yet induce her to put her fears into words—doubtless the thought of doing so must have appeared to her as a treachery toward the man in whose loyalty she still believed with all the ardour of her young and romantically generous heart. The mere conception of his failing her in her need lay too far away from her own attitude of mind to be grasped in so short a time.

“He has been prevented by some accident,” she said to me once when our eyes met. “I fear he may have fallen from his horse; that is what makes me so uneasy.” And she looked at me as though daring me to throw doubt upon this assertion.

I spent the afternoon between the garden and the house. Madame Bielinska had a little collapsed after the unusual strain of yesterday, but, although she remained in her room, it was not in her usual state of inaction. Every time I presented myself

there to see whether she required anything I found her busy sorting papers and going over accounts. It was evident that she, too, was looking out for Wladimir's arrival.

“Is he not there yet?” she asked me each time I entered. “Be sure to send him in immediately. I want to ask him about his father's plans and about when he is expected back. It is he who will be most likely to give me a clue. Is that not Wladimir?” and she lent an ear to a sound in the passage. “No, only Andrej's step. By the way, Miss Middleton, I have promised Andrej to send some mustard plasters to his wife—she has a pain in her chest, it seems. If you want a walk perhaps you would be so good as to take them to her, and also show her how to put them on?”

The grey-haired footman was a married man, whose domestic hearth, whither he returned every day at night-fall, was situated at the far end of the village. The fact of Madame Bielinska charging me with an errand of the sort was to me an additional proof of the revolution produced by yesterday's events. Her interest, even in the details of life, seemed to have abruptly revived—and to think that it was the discovery of her husband's disgrace which had given back to her her power of living! Surely the human heart can never be quite explained.

It was drawing toward evening by this time,

and the chances of seeing Wladimir again that day were fast fading. I went in search of Jadwiga, assured that the walk would do her good, but at the mere suggestion she shrank back.

“Outside the gate? Oh, no, I could not go outside the gate,” she said. “I should feel as though every one knew the story already.”

I next looked out for Anulka, whom I had not seen for some time. It was in the big drawing-room that I found her, installed in front of a green table, and going through some strange manipulations with a pack of playing-cards. So engrossed was she in her game that she did not notice my approach, and it was only when I stood close beside her that I understood what she was doing, for straight opposite hung the long rococo mirror, in which she was amusing herself by reflecting the undersides of the cards in her hand, naming them aloud as she did so, and then turning them over to see if she was right.

“Ten of clubs—knave of diamonds,” she kept on saying like a lesson; and then burst into a little squeal of delight whenever she saw that it tallied.

“Leave that, Anulka!” I said indignantly, snatching the cards from her hands, but she only grinned up delightedly into my face.

“It is quite easy,” she assured me eagerly. “I believe I could do it, too. Look! You have only to hold them like this.”

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I wanted to insist on her coming out with me, but, perhaps because of my nerves being off their balance, my authority failed, and when a few minutes later I passed by the open window I could still hear the voice of the uncanny child declaiming, "Seven of hearts—six of clubs—queen of——"

Andrej's hut lay near the big fish pond and down a narrow lane confined between high palings of wattled willows. The willows, which had originally served as stakes, had, for the most part, taken root too, and grown up into considerable trees of the pollard order, whose heads almost met across the lane, which, consequently, was not very light, even at noonday. Just now, when it was dusk in the chief village street, it was almost dark here, and, seen through the descending shadows, the irregularly grown willows, with their round tops and queerly contorted branches, had something weirdly human about them.

I had discharged my errand and was returning along this gloomy and tortuous passage when, on coming round a corner of the paling, I was startled to see what seemed to be one of the willow trees step out of its place and stand still in the middle of the road, as though to bar the passage. I stood still instinctively, but at that moment the willow spoke in a well-known voice.

"It is I, Miss Middleton, do not be angry, but I

saw you passing, and followed you here, because I must speak to you."

The tone was so deeply moved that it somewhat modified the displeasure with which I answered,

"You, Pan Lewicki? Why here, and not at the house? We have been expecting you all the afternoon."

"I know, I know!" he said, wildly grasping at his temples as he spoke. "I have been close at hand for hours, but how could I present myself before I had got absolute clearness in this terrible affair? I kept hoping for some chance; I wanted to speak to you before I spoke to her, and now that fortune has favoured me you will not refuse to tell me all you know. I am mad! I tell you, mad with perplexity, and only the fullest light can help me."

"But you have had the fullest light," I answered sadly. "Jadwiga says that she told you all."

"Then it is true, actually true?" he questioned distractedly. "I thought that perhaps her imagination had run wild. She spoke of letters, but I did not see them—have you seen them? Tell me what is written there—every word you can remember. After all I have a right to know."

There was no denying this, he *had* the right to know. In a few words I gave him my version of the case, as well as the conclusions drawn by



Madame Bielinska. He listened breathlessly, often interrupting me with exclamations of distress and astonishment.

“Then there is no doubt at all in your mind?” he asked in a tone of acute anxiety. “Her father was no, I cannot say it here, not even in a strange tongue, for fear of listening ears.”

“You need not be so careful!” I replied, “it would be wasted pains. Soon if I am not mistaken, what I have told you to-day will be proclaimed upon the house-tops,—they themselves will proclaim it.”

He looked at me aghast; even in the thick dusk I could see his brown eyes open wide.

“They themselves? You do not mean to say that they will tell the world the story?”

“The mother certainly will; indeed she must if she wants to make restitution, and that is her one idea at present.”

“Restitution, yes, but need it be public? Why brand oneself with one’s own hands? Surely no one need know but the wronged man alone?”

“But the wronged man has to be searched for first, and that scarcely can be done in secret. And, beside, how would you explain to the world this sudden change of fortune? No, I fear that exposure is inevitable.”

I could see how at the word “exposure” he shrank back, as though at some unpleasant touch.

Then, suddenly, a paroxysm of despair seemed to seize him. We had been slowly walking on during those last minutes. Now Wladimir stood still abruptly. Close beside him there was a big stone, one of those used as stiles in crossing the pailing, for there were no openings all along the lane. Wladimir sat down upon this, and there before my eyes he burst into tears.

“Oh Jadwiga! my poor, poor Jadwiga!” he sobbed, evidently from the bottom of his heart. “How will you bear it?”

“She bears it bravely,” I said, looking down at him curiously, “and the support of your love will help her to bear it better still.”

I don't know with what intention I said this, but I believe it was by way of experiment.

He buried his face a little deeper in his hands.

“Be still!” he said, in a tone of real suffering. “You don't know how you hurt me, oh pray be still!”

“But do you love her?” I asked, a little mercilessly perhaps.

“With all my heart,” he readily replied. Then, rising to his feet, “You tell her that, will you not?” and in his eagerness he laid his hand on my arm. “You tell her I love her as deeply as ever?”

“Why do you not tell her so yourself?” I asked. “Come with me now and you will need no messenger.”

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“Not to-day,” he said quickly. “I am not yet enough master of myself to-day. How do I know that in my trouble of mind I may not use some word that would wound her? No, it is better not to-day.”

And, as though afraid of further argument, he turned and walked away hastily, quickly disappearing in the gloom of the narrow lane, in which I was left standing alone, but very busy with my thoughts.

## CHAPTER XIV

I DID not give Jadwiga Wladimir's message, nor did I even mention to her my meeting with him in the village. To do so would only have been to augment the suspense she was evidently undergoing. If my suspicions were correct, then she would soon know more than I could tell her. But the end was nearer than I imagined.

On the following forenoon I was busy with Anulka in the schoolroom, when the door was flung open, and Jadwiga entered, holding an open letter in her hand. I had seen her in various moods, but never in anything resembling this. Her black eyes flamed in a face of an almost corpse-like whiteness, her dilated nostrils worked, and she was evidently breathing with difficulty. I rose in alarm, interrogating her with my eyes, and fully prepared for a calamity.

She could not speak immediately, but with a silent and imperative gesture she indicated her sister, and I understood and ordered Anulka from the room, taking the precaution this time of shutting the window as well as the door.

"Here!" said Jadwiga, at last, in a voice that she was evidently struggling to keep low, but

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which vibrated in every tone. "It has come; read this!"

"But this is written in Polish!" I said, glancing at the sheet she held toward me.

"To be sure, I forgot; I think I must be a little mad. Well, an outline will do; it isn't difficult to understand. He loves me as much as ever—so it is written here—he never can be happy again in his life—do you want to know why? Because his duty as a son calls upon him to keep himself clear of the stain which has revealed itself on our family shield. His father would never survive the shame of being brought into connection with anything that smells of dishonour—he doesn't say it like that, you know, it is much more beautifully expressed, but that is what it means—and his conscience, with which he has been struggling since yesterday, forbids him to bring those white hairs to the grave. There is a great deal more about the agony of tearing out one's own heart with one's own hands, and there is also a gleam of hope held out. If the matter could be kept dark, if the restitution could be made in secret, might it not be possible to escape the shame, both for ourselves and for him? He implores me to think over the matter once more, to induce my mother to think it over; it is the only chance of happiness he can see, for if there was no exposure then there would be no shame in the eyes of the world; and he loves me so much

that he is ready to bear the secret knowledge of my father's guilt—but only so long as it remains secret, you understand. In other words he wants to bargain with me—with *me*, Eleanor! He makes his conditions, he calculates his sacrifices: he will go thus far and no farther: my love is worth this to him, and not that. Great God, why is the shame not his instead of mine? Why was not his father a thief or a forger, that he should see, and the world should see that love, the real love, is able to laugh at everything outside itself? But this love—this!”—and she flung the paper contemptuously on the table—“this has the worth of the paper and ink it is written with, no more! Oh, Eleanor, are all men like that?”

She had spoken in short sentences, fetching her breath audibly at each pause: by degrees only her broken voice rose to a shriller key, and the passionate sentences grew more fluent. In the last words there was a ring of such heart-rending despair that I felt tears of acute pity starting to my eyes.

“Not all,” I said gently, and as I said it I thought of two men—one was Henry, dead to me now, but of whom I instinctively knew that, supposing he had gained me, nothing short of death would have induced him to give me up again; the other was Krzysztof Malewicz. This one, too, I had not even put to the test, but felt calmly certain of the result.

“I am dismissed,” went on Jadwiga, fixing her dangerously brilliant eyes upon me—“you understand; I am told that I am not worth the loss of the world’s esteem, and the man who tells me so is the same whom I believed was ready to die at my slightest word—he has told me so a hundred times. What have I done to be punished for my father’s sin? Am I different from what I was before those letters came? Have I different eyes than then, a different mouth, a different mind? Am I less desirable? His duty to his father! Oh, it enrages me to hear him talk of it; what is his duty to his father compared to his duty toward me, who was to have been his wife? Oh, how badly we have understood each other all the time! Wladimir, Wladimir, what would I not have done for you—no, not for *you*, but for the man I believed you were!”

And, with features convulsed with pain, she let herself drop on to the chair which Anulka had quitted, and, laying her face on the table, sobbed convulsively yet without tears.

Presently she looked up. “Tell me, Eleanor,” she asked in a voice exhausted by emotion, “did you know it would come like this? Why do you look so little surprised?”

“I could not know it would come like this, but I am not very much surprised. It seems to me the only thing that Wladimir could do—wait a mo-

ment," I added, seeing her look of surprised indignation—"I don't mean what he could do, being a man, but being Wladimir."

"Then his love for me has been a farce?"

"No, not a farce; although it is not enough for you, it has been the best he can give. What he writes here isn't a lie, he loves you, but it is simply that he has not got the mental vigour necessary to do without the world's esteem, not that sort of grim sturdiness which makes it possible to defy public opinion. He is not a monster of any sort, and, Jadwiga, my poor child, believe me, he never was worthy of you."

"Why do you call me poor?" she retorted in an instant. "I am not to be pitied, it seems to me I am to be envied, since I have discovered in time to what a weakling I was about to sacrifice myself. I might have been bound to him for life before the discovery came. But it hurts here, it hurts here all the same," and she laid her clenched hand on her heart. "It is like seeing a friend die; *my* Wladimir is dead to-day, and nothing can ever make him alive again."

After that, for some moments, she sank into silence, brooding, with her eyes on the table. Suddenly, a hard smile flickered across her face, worse to see than the look of pain of a minute ago.

"And *this* Wladimir thinks I shall grasp at the



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hope he holds out! Secrecy—dead secrecy—on that condition he may yet consent to make me happy, and he does not yet know that I want none of that happiness. Quick, Eleanor, quick—paper and pen! The messenger is still outside; he must not be left in his false belief for one minute longer than can be helped. Oh, give me any paper quickly!”

The colour was flowing over her face now, as, with fingers which more than trembled, which visibly jerked with excitement, she dipped the pen into the ink and began writing hastily on the sheet I pushed toward her. What she exactly said in the few lines which formed all the answer to Wladimir's lengthy epistle, I do not know, but as I watched her quivering lips and the light that escaped like sparks of fire from under her black eyelashes, I know that, despite the contemptuous indignation in my heart, I felt sorry for the man who was to read those lines, and who, after all, loved her as well as he understood how to love.

“There actually is something to be said in his excuse,” I find myself writing at this juncture to Agnes, to whom I had already given a brief outline of the situation, “for the test he was put to was no light one, and how make him responsible for the limitations of his nature? I had taken his measure long ago, and I now see that I had taken it correctly. When a man is so distinctly, I should

like to say, so ostentatiously, ornamental, it awakes the idea, does it not, that he must almost necessarily be rather useless? Ask this sort of man to turn music and to hand cups—oh, yes, by all means—but not to stand firm in a moral earthquake. He seems to me to want an audience for everything he does—an admiring one, of course. He lives chronically on a platform, and requires to be applauded. This it is that makes him so intensely dependent on other people's opinion, and this it is also that makes him spare no pains in order to win sympathy. I understand perfectly now how he could spend an hour with me on that tree trunk in autumn, and what made him wade into the muddy water to fetch out Anulka. He loved Jadwiga then already, but it was not only because he loved her that he sacrificed his boots, it was also to triumphantly refute the accusation of effeminacy which I had just been pronouncing against his nation. He is so hungry of approval that he will jump up to take Kasia's basket for her, since even a kitchen-maid's sympathy is precious to him. All this sort of thing gives him the appearance of always thinking of others, so much so that most people never find out that he is only a more refined, I should like to say, a more artistic, egoist from the usual kind. He would not harm anybody for the world, I am sure of that; he is ready to sacrifice even his comforts to his fellow-creatures so long as

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he is rewarded by their love and esteem. I absolve him from any mercenary motives in his present conduct. I never suspected him of wanting Jadwiga's money, and I do not accuse him of abandoning her because he finds out that the money is not hers; mere money and mere physical comfort have no intense value for him. It is not these things, but popularity, which is his passion. How could you expect such a man to take upon himself the disgrace which will for ever attach to the name of Bielinski? And how should he ever live up to Jadwiga's exalted ideals, or satisfy the really extravagant demands she makes upon a man's devotion? I believe she's right, and that she is to be congratulated instead of condoled with on having found out her mistake in time."

I have only a few more words to say of Wladimir before he disappears from the scene of the drama which I am attempting to present. After our meeting in the village I only saw him once more, and, to the best of my knowledge, this was also the last time that Jadwiga set eyes upon him.

I never imagined that, after the exchange of letters, he would have the courage to show his face at Ludniki, but I was mistaken. Those few lines of which I had watched the writing had evidently acted like the sting of a whip-cord, for, on the evening of that same day, Jadwiga and I, coming

back slowly along the rose-walk, where I had induced her to take an evening stroll, saw a well-known figure advancing toward us. Jadwiga checked her steps for just a perceptible interval, and I saw the colour leaving her face. Then she walked on as before, only tightening her hold upon my arm, within which her hand lay.

“ Shall I tell him that you cannot receive him ? ” I whispered, for there still was time for her to turn off by a side walk.

“ For what good ? ” she replied in a voice that sounded only a little more metallic than usual. “ I am not afraid of meeting him ; it is better so.”

Although she was not afraid, it was evident that he was. As he drew near, the perturbation on his features was easy to read, but greater than the perturbation was a sort of acute anxiety which seemed to dominate every other emotion.

When she was within half-a-dozen paces of him Jadwiga stood still, and, with a coolness so icy that it actually sent a shiver of compassion down my back—compassion for the man to whom it was addressed—put some questions in Polish. I understood enough of the language by this time to guess that she was asking whether he had not received her letter.

When he at length succeeded in speaking he did so with almost incoherent eagerness. He explained that it was just because he had got the letter that

he was here—that he could not believe that she was serious in what she had written; then a few more words in an imploring tone before I caught the word “father.”

“Will you believe it, if you hear me speak it?” asked Jadwiga. “No, you shall stay there,” she said turning almost fiercely upon me, for, painfully conscious of the superfluity of my presence, I had been meanwhile gently trying to disengage my arm, but Jadwiga’s delicate fingers held me as though they had been steel claws. “I have no secrets to talk about to Mr. Lewicki,” she continued, talking now in French. “I am glad to have a witness to what I have to say, and it is this: that henceforward this gentleman is of no more account to me than the least of the peasants who bend their heads before me on the road—oh, of much less—for many of them are brave and honourable men, while you,” and she fixed her flaming eyes full on his face—“I do not care who hears me—you are a coward—a traitor and a coward—and, although I should live to be a hundred years, I shall never forgive myself for having loved you.”

At this his perturbation seemed to vanish for a time, forced back by the insult to his pride. His fair face flushed dark red up to his golden hair roots, and I saw his fingers closing against his palms. In that moment he looked anything but despicable.

“If a man were to say that to me—” he began with difficulty, but she interrupted him.

“You would invite him to cross swords with you, and would imagine that that washed you clean of the name of coward. Bah! it is not of that sort of courage I am talking; that is the common, the vulgar sort; every man who is not a Jew and not a cripple has plenty of that, I make no doubt. I speak of the rarer, nobler courage, the courage of the heart; and you cannot give me the lie with your sword in your hand because I am not a man, only a woman, whom one does not fight, but whom one can betray and abandon, and leave standing alone in the moment when she most needs support.”

There was a slight vibration in her voice, and before this momentary evidence of emotion Wladimir's indignant attitude instantly succumbed.

“Jadwiga, Jadwiga!” he cried, taking his head between his hands. “Do not judge me so harshly; do not be so absolutely merciless! Could you expect me to kill my father by this sorrow?”

“I expect everything of the man who loves me,” she replied with as magnificent a disdain as though she did not know herself to be almost a beggar, with a knave for a father.

“Jadwiga, be merciful!” cried the unhappy man again distractedly. There were tears in his

eyes, but there were none in hers; and yet there was a little pain on her face, too, as she gazed at him across the few paces of ground that divided them. No doubt she was taking her last look at *her* Wladimir, who, after all, bore the same face and form as the one that stood before her.

“If it were only myself I had to think of—” he began again.

“I know—I know, you told me all that in your letter,” said Jadwiga. “It seems to me that the subject is exhausted,” and she began to move on again, taking me with her. But this seemed to make Wladimir wild.

“Stop! stop!” he implored her, standing so as to bar our passage. “Say at least that you believe in my love—you must see that I am suffering. Circumstances are too strong for me, but this I know, that I shall never love another woman as I have loved you.”

“Oh, yes, I will say that I believe in your love,” answered Jadwiga readily and indifferently, “if that is any satisfaction to you; only it is not the same sort of thing that goes by that name with me. Our opinions on that subject evidently lie too far apart to make a discussion of any use.”

“And that you do not despise me—that you can understand my motives, even if you do not subscribe to them. I could not bear to live with the thought of your contempt!”

This, then, was the real kernel of the matter. To lose the esteem of the person he certainly held highest in the world, what agony this thought must have brought to the Wladimir whom I had just been describing to Agnes. This it was which had given him the courage to brave Jadwiga's anger by presenting himself once more. He had come here not to beg to be taken back into favour, but to wring from her some faint and far-off admission of esteem—a word, not of forgiveness, but of justification. But he might have known Jadwiga better.

Without replying she again moved a step forward, and this time, in terror of seeing her escape before the saving word was spoken, Wladimir forgot himself so far as to lay his hand upon her sleeve, as within the last weeks he had done so often with impunity.

“No, no!” he cried, “you shall not go until you have said that you understand.”

I felt a more convulsive movement of the hand on my arm, as Jadwiga, standing still again, slowly looked her lover all over.

“Shall not go?” she repeated, and the disdain in voice and eyes was such that I wondered the man could bear it. “Do you not forget that I am in my home, and that there are servants enough in the house? aye, and with strong arms, too!”



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Then, as he fell back, as though before a blow, she walked past him without either another word or another glance, without even hastening her pace, as she leisurely pursued her way down the walk. Nothing but her set features and the strain of her fingers upon my arm betrayed the excitement which must have been raging within her. To look at us both I am sure that I must have appeared the more disturbed of the two, for I was trembling a little with the emotion of what was just passed, and threw stolen and apprehensive glances into the beautiful face beside me. The upper lip was slightly lifted, disclosing the small teeth beneath, which in this moment looked almost menacingly white.

We had not yet reached the end of the walk when she said with a deep breath:—

“I am glad that it came that way.”

In my heart of hearts I was sorry for Wladimir, but in that moment I simply had not the courage to say it.

## CHAPTER XV

IT has been said that in the afflictions of our best friends we find something not displeasing to ourselves; but surely, if this be so, there must be something wrong, either with ourselves or our friends. At any rate, in the days I am writing I experienced the exact reverse. So completely had I got used to looking for my sunshine from one quarter, that now it failed me my life seemed to grow suddenly dark. In Jadwiga's happiness I had sought to find a reflection of that which I had never possessed, and, for want of all other causes of joy, I had succeeded so well in identifying myself with her, that the blow fell on me only with less force than on her. It almost seemed to me that I had lost Henry over again. All those gentle memories that had been lulled to sleep with my songs of rejoicing over Jadwiga's bliss, stirred in their graves and threatened to climb out again, now that my voice was suddenly silenced. Every hour I had spent with Henry in long-past childish days, each ramble we had taken, each rabbit we had reared, each scrape we had got into in common, began to come back to my mind with annoying persistency. To reflect on the falseness of

Jadwiga's lover was to bring the worth of a true lover home to me as it had never before been brought home, and uneasily I asked myself, infected perhaps by her idealism, whether I had after all been right in separating myself thus decisively from the man of whom I could not help thinking that he loved me still. It was startling to find the wound so fresh, after nine months of separation. Would it ever heal? And did his heart ever ache as mine was now aching?

And all this because Jadwiga had lost Wladimir!

By Jadwiga's wish it was I who announced the truth to Madame Bielinska.

"I do not want to speak of him even to my mother," she said to me on the evening of the meeting in the park. "Go in and tell her that I have dismissed him and that I never want to hear his name again."

I found Madame Bielinska in her room, busily occupied with the papers among which she now spent her days. She looked up as I entered.

"I have been making a calculation," she said, without giving me time to speak, "and I think I have got it almost right. You know it is not only the capital we owe, by this time, there is the interest as well, and since the sum is owing now for more than thirty years, the interest calculated at five per cent. comes to more than the original capital, which means that instead of sixty thousand

we owe a hundred and fifty thousand florins." And she looked at me with the air of a person who has made an entirely satisfactory discovery. "Would you mind looking it over just to see if I am right?"

"Presently," I said, "but just now I have something else to tell you." And I gave her the sum of Jadwiga's message. She listened at first without much interest, but gradually more closely.

"You mean that the engagement is broken off?" she asked at last.

"Yes," I said.

A cloud came over her face: she leant back in her chair with an air of discouragement.

"That is bad," she murmured; "that is very bad, I had hoped so much from Bazyli Lewicki."

"From Wladimir," I corrected; "I too had hoped better things from him."

"No, I do not mean Wladimir," she said sharply. "I am speaking of Bazyli; it is he alone who could give me a clue; and now, if there has been a break, how do I know that he will be willing to help me?"

"But Jadwiga!" I said, aghast at this attitude which I took for callousness, but which was only the unavoidable result of complete absorption in one idea. "Have you no word for her and for what she is suffering?"

She looked at me with her great cavernous eyes which were almost as much socket as eyeball; she

seemed to be laboriously forcing herself to my view of the case.

“Yes Jadwiga,” she said abstractedly, “I am sorry for her, poor child. No,” she went on suddenly in another and more decisive tone, “I am not sorry for her; she has escaped much if she has escaped from the hands of a man who is capable of baseness. What think you: would *she* bear being tied to a master whom she cannot honour?”

By the ring in the tone of her strained voice, and by the twitch at the corners of her bloodless lips I knew that she was thinking of the man whose portrait hung in that uninhabited room.

It was only for a minute that Madame Bielinska had been torn out of her dominant train of thought.

“After all,” she began again, “even if the young people have separated that is no reason for the old people not to put their heads together. I shall send for Bazyli the moment he is back; he cannot well refuse to answer a simple question. Yes, I think I need have no fear,” and her countenance cleared. “And now, Miss Middleton, would you just run your eye over this paper; I was never very strong in figures.”

This was only the first of many calculations I was asked to make during these days, while we were sitting still, so to say, waiting for the answer from the Parisian attorney, which was to bring us the certainty of the Vicomte’s identity with the

murdered monk. In default of any more active step, which it would have been possible to take at present, Madame Bielinska lived almost entirely in figures. Now and then she would appear at meal-times, and sometimes even get as far as the garden, and to see her in the full sunlight seemed like the resurrection of a dead body. To me she had become almost talkative, but always only on one subject.

“Do you think it quite impossible that the restitution should, after all, have been already made?” I asked her once. “Might he not have carried out his plan of letting his adversary win back the sum? and might not the loss have been subsequently covered by other rightful gains?”

She shook her head decisively.

“It is well known that Hazimir never touched cards again after that journey to Paris,—it was his last. There were many jokes made at the time on the subject of his conversion; that is proof enough that he did not carry out his plan.”

I was silenced, of course; indeed the moral evidence was too strong to be withstood. It was a dawning circumstance, certainly, that the person who had known him best should be the one to believe most readily in his guilt.

In all these discussions Jadwiga took no part. She was scarcely the same Jadwiga she had been before the reception of that letter which she had

brought into the schoolroom. That flash of outraged pride seemed to have been as the death-cry of something stricken. After that supreme effort her forces broke. Never could I have believed that that haughty head could droop as I saw it droop. Seeing her so still and so white the mother made the mistake of believing that she was pining after her lover, but the first attempted word of sympathy brought her an answer which could not be understood.

“*I sigh after him?*” she replied, turning indignantly upon her mother, and the fire coming back to her eyes for one moment. “Am I your own child, and do you know me as little as this? What is he to me? Nothing—nothing at all. I swear to you that not even in the night when no one sees me have I shed one tear for him! no, not so much as a sigh have I spent—he is not worth as much as that. Oh, it is not that—it is not that at all!”

And really it was not that.

It was no love-sick yearnings under which she was sinking, not her lover's abandonment which was crushing her, but only the weight of the shame which that abandonment seemed to have finally brought home to her. To see him shrink was unavoidably to magnify in her eyes the thing before which he shrank. By nature, by the whole constitution of her mind, Jadwiga was far less

armed against a shock of this particular kind than was her mother. To her almost fantastically ideal conception of right and wrong, to her romantic admiration of nobleness and purity in any shape, the revelation of her father's baseness could not be otherwise than overwhelming, and she had not her mother's strange enthusiasm to support her. Love alone could have helped her in this crisis, and love had failed her.

"The thing is really not so bad for you as for me," Madame Bielinska once remarked dispassionately. "You could not choose your father for yourself, while I did choose my husband."

But Jadwiga made no response. She had never been really intimate with her mother, and even to me she avoided putting into words the true cause of her sufferings. In her grief she proved far more reticent than she had been in her joy.

Meanwhile it was clear to me that reports were beginning to spread. The servants looked at me doubtfully, as though longing to put questions and not quite daring, and Marya once ventured to ask: "It is not true, is it, that the place is to be sold?" and immediately afterward, "Why does the young gentleman never visit the young lady now?" which showed one clearly that the two circumstances were instinctively connected, even by the outside mind.



“Anulka has been chattering,” I said indignantly to Madame Bielinska. “Is there no way of keeping that child’s tongue tied?”

She only looked at me wonderingly. “What for?” she asked. “If I thought that Marya could give me any clue I would speak to her about it myself.”

I have sometimes wondered whether Madame Bielinska was quite in her right mind at that time. But for this explanation there would have been something almost indecent in her frankness. It was at the time of Madame Malewicz’s visit that this propensity showed itself most crudely.

I half suspect the old lady was sent by her son. What reports had reached his ears I do not know, but he cannot have been aware of Wladimir’s departure, for immediately after his last appearance at Ludniki, Wladimir had rejoined his father at Karlsbad. There was food enough for surmise in this circumstance alone.

When the carriage drove up to the door we were sitting with Madame Bielinska in her own room. At the mere sound of the wheels Jadwiga had started to her feet.

“Visitors!” she said in an accent almost of terror. “Surely you are not going to receive them, Mamma?”

“It depends on who it is,” replied Madame Bielinska composedly.

Meanwhile I had recognised the occupant of the carriage.

“Malwina Malewicz?” said my employer brightening. “Oh, bring her in, by all means; she has always taken an interest in everything concerning us.”

Jadwiga had already disappeared from the room, so it fell to me to receive the visitor.

When I reached the entrance Madame Malewicz was still laboriously descending from the carriage. There was only one servant to help her out, you see, and, to judge from the helplessness with which she groped about for her belongings, and attempted to guard her skirt from the wheel, and anxiously looked out for the proper spot on which to place her exquisite little foot, she would have required at least half-a-dozen.

“I am so stupid,” she said radiantly, catching sight of me. “I go out driving so little now that I quite forget the way. There—I think I have got everything now—except my fan; where can that be, I wonder? If Krysztof were here he would find it immediately—he always finds my things. Oh, dear; oh, dear! What a bother it is to grow old, to be sure.”

At last I got her safely landed in the dressing-room, where she required a glass of raspberry juice and water to refresh her after her recent efforts, as well as a few minutes to put her hair into order.

Although she was only going to see another old woman like herself, she yet arranged her delicate silver curls, as coquettishly before the glass as though she had been eighteen. All this time she scarcely stopped talking—about the roads and the weather chiefly—but I could see by her face that something else was coming. It came as she sipped her raspberry juice, preparatory to penetrating into Madame Bielinska's apartment.

“Tell me,” she said, growing suddenly grave, “is it true what people say?”

“I don't know what they say,” I answered.

“All sorts of things—but I mean now about the marriage. Is it actually off?”

“That certainly is true.”

“Quite off?” she urged, with deepening interest. “Not merely a lovers' quarrel?”

“So entirely off,” I assured her, “that I know of no power on earth that could ever bring it on again.”

“Dear, dear!” she said, rocking her head gently from side to side, “this is sudden, certainly, and very sad.” But she did not look sad exactly as she said it, and by a little spark in the corners of her lively black eyes I knew that she was thinking of Krysztof, of whose attachment she must have been aware. “And the reason,” she added tentatively. “I suppose it would be indiscreet to inquire the reason?”

“It certainly would be indiscreet of me to give it you,” I replied, “but I don’t think you will be kept in ignorance for long.” And at that moment Marya came to say that Madame Bielinska was ready to receive the gracious lady.

I did not see Madame Malewicz again that day, and so was not able to judge of the effect of the disclosures which, according to my surmises, my employer had made to her.

“You see, she is an old friend of the family,” Madame Bielinska explained to me half apologetically, “and her husband knew many of the French set in which Hazimir lost his money. It seemed to me not impossible that she should remember something which could give us a clue. We cannot afford to leave a stone unturned.”

“And did she remember anything?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Madame Bielinska sadly. “Malwina has an excellent heart, but her head is the head of a child.”

It happened that next day I was again in the village and again alone. More than once lately I had been back at Andrej’s hut, for his wife was still on the sick list, and very grateful for whatever small advice I could give her. I knew the dark little basket-work lane by heart already, and each crippled willow by sight, and, before plunging into its shadows, never failed to enjoy the glimpse over the plain, with the shimmer of the fish pond in the

foreground, the blue summer haze in the distance, and the yellow sea of corn between the two. Since my meeting with Wladimir I had never encountered anything here beyond a stray pig wallowing in the mud, but to-day almost at the same spot a man was standing in my path. My first impression was that this was Wladimir again, waylaying me in the hope attempting some last desperate appeal, and, accordingly, without glancing toward him, I prepared to pass quickly by, but, to my astonishment, he did not move, and looking up perforce, for the way was narrow, I saw that it was Malewicz. At the moment that I recognised him I also understood why he was here. It seemed to me even that I had expected something of the sort. He himself met the thought half-way.

“You know what I want?” he asked in a more peremptory than inquiring tone. “My mother was at Ludniki yesterday.”

“If you know all that your mother knows—” I began, but he broke in :

“Yes, yes; but my mother is not quite the reporter I should wish. She has too much imagination, and perhaps, also, too much heart. I should like to hear your account.”

“About the letters that came from Paris?”

“No, no,” he said impatiently, “not about them, but about Wladimir. Is it true that he has abandoned her?”

I told him that it was true.

He stood intent for a moment or two, evidently struggling with his emotion.

“The hound!” he said at last, bringing out even these words with a painful effort. Then only his tongue seemed to be loosened. “Oh,” he cried in a voice which shook its depth, “you know what it meant to me to lose her, you know what my hopes were, but I swear to you that if I could put a soul into that boy in order to give him back to her as she requires him, I would do so, so much does it hurt me to think of her grief. How does she bear it?” The last question was put with the abruptness of a keen anxiety.

“Her lover’s loss?” I asked.

“Yes, her lover’s loss.”

“Then I can only answer that there is nothing to bear. She has no lover; from the moment that she knew him as he is he became blotted out of her life as though he had never been, and, even though you could perform the miracle of making of him a hero, I can swear to you that she would not take him back.”

“Oh, you say so?” said Malewicz with eyes alight. “She is so strong as that? God be thanked for it! Her love is dead, you say?”

“As dead as though it had never lived.”

He took a turn across the lane, and came back to my side.

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“But her heart is not dead, is it?” he asked more gently. “Could it not live again—for another?”

We looked each other full in the eyes for a few seconds, and then I spoke.

“I understand you, Pan Malewicz—it is best to be plain. You are asking me whether, now that the road is clear, there is any hope for yourself?”

“That is it exactly. What do you say?”

“Only that time alone can answer that question; at the present moment it is not to be thought of. Any attempt on your part would certainly fail now. But she is young—if you give her time——”

“But I cannot give her time,” he said with a vehemence that startled me. I thought I had gauged the depth of his passion for Jadwiga, but this tone was to me a revelation. “It must be done at once if it is to be done at all. Will you be my ally? That is what I chiefly wanted to ask you. You think me too precipitate, I know, but there is no help for it. Believe me, this is the right time; after all, a heart is often caught at the rebound, is it not?” and he smiled a little nervously. “Will you help me or not? I am not asking you for your own sake, but for the sake of her whom we both love. I will do it without your assistance if needs be, but it would be easier if you were on my side.”

I answered, deeply moved, “I have always been on your side; but how I am to help you now I do

not see. Jadwiga has grown so shy of the outer world that she hides from all but the most familiar faces. Do you know that since the arrival of those letters she has not been outside the gates? If you come to Ludniki you may possibly see the mother, but certainly not the daughter."

"Then I shall begin with the mother. You think she will admit me?"

"It is not impossible. Just as Jadwiga shrinks from the light she seems to seek it. If by any chance you could bring her some news of Pan Lewicki's return, then your admission would be certain, for she grasps at even the palest shadow of a clue."

"Oh?" he said with increased attention.

I went on to give him in general words an idea of Madame Bielinska's state of mind. It seemed to me that he required some preparation. He listened intently, with eyebrows drawn deep over his eyes.

"Good," he said when I ceased. "I think I understand. You have helped me already. Oh, I shall find a way, never fear."

Upon this we parted—as allies, for it had not been possible to resist his urgency. I had not so much as asked him whether he had well considered the situation, or reminded him that Jadwiga would now be almost as poor as himself. Merely to suggest this idea would have seemed to me an insult to a love such as his.



## CHAPTER XVI

THE day that followed was oppressively hot, so hot that I let Anulka off at least a quarter of her lessons, and took refuge on the pillared verandah before the house, which, lying toward the East, was in deep shadow at this hour. Jadwiga was there, too. She had caused a hammock to be slung between two pillars, and was lying in it now so still that I took her to be asleep. My hands, too, lay idle in my lap. The oppressive atmosphere made even the lightest occupation an effort. There was a subdued hum of insects in the air, the leaves of the creepers that grew around the white pillars being motionless.

Presently a very slight crunching of the gravel made me discover that I had almost fallen asleep. I drowsily turned my head and instantly became wide-awake, for Malewicz, walking cautiously, was only at a dozen paces from the verandah. He must have left his horses in the village in order to approach the house unperceived. In my astonishment at his audacity I began by simply staring; then quickly I turned toward the unconscious Jadwiga, who, with the edge of the hammock drawn half over her face, had evidently perceived

nothing. A peremptory gesture of the visitor checked the warning I had almost uttered, and in the same flash of thought I was already wondering at myself for having wanted to utter it. Was I not his ally?

It was not until his foot was on the stone step that something stirred in the hammock, and Jadwiga's eyes looked out inquiringly. A deep red flush dyed her face on the instant. For a moment she seemed to be meditating an escape even then, for her eyes strayed desperately toward the door, but, quickly recognising the impossibility, she contented herself with sitting up in the hammock, pushing back her hair from her forehead, and looking with cold inquiry toward the visitor. I think she had nearly spoken, but he was too wise to give her time. With a profound bow in her direction he had turned straight to me.

"Will you kindly ask Madame Bielinska whether she will receive me?" he said quickly. "I have a message for her from my mother—an important message," he added with emphasis.

I rose in some slight flurry, wondering how Jadwiga would bear being left alone with him, but she was spared this ordeal, for, without another glance toward her he followed me into the house.

"This is almost too bold," I said, as we crossed through the lobby.

"Success belongs to the bold," he replied.

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“But am I not also discreet?” And I was forced to acknowledge that it was so.

When I came back to the verandah alone the hammock was empty, and I spent a solitary half-hour trying to imagine what the message could be that Madame Malewicz was sending by her son. At the end of that time Marya came to say that the gracious lady wished to see me in her room.

My first glance showed me that the message had been a welcome one. Madame Bielinska was sitting upright in her chair and greeted me eagerly.

“Heaven is with us!” she began, in a lively tone. “Kryzstof has offered his help. He has old letters of his father’s—many dated from Paris. He hopes to find in them the names of the Paris companions among whom we must seek our creditor. Is this not so, Kryzstof?”

“It is so,” said Malewicz, who was seated at only two paces from his hostess. “My mother has remembered these letters. The names mentioned in them belong mostly to families that are still extant in France. Since we have dates to go by I do not think it impossible that we should in this way find the man we require.”

It was rather soon to say “we,” but he said it, and looked at me straight as he spoke, and I looked back at him scrutinisingly. Not that I distrusted what he said, but merely that I was struck with wonder—almost with alarm—at his ingenuity.

“Have you those letters here?” I asked.

“No, they have to be hunted for first, as is usual with my mother’s possessions, but they are certainly safe. To-morrow I hope to bring them.”

“What a diplomat!” I inwardly ejaculated.

It was not until some time after he had gone that Jadwiga came in. By the cloud on her face as she listened to her mother’s account of the visit I could see that something displeased her intensely. Yet all she said was, in a tone of unusual reserve:—

“And you have accepted his services?”

“Naturally I have,” was Madame Bielinska’s reply. “In this cause I refuse no services.”

“I wish it had been any one else,” said Jadwiga, with painfully puckered eyebrows, and by the strong reluctance in her face I knew of what she was thinking. That just this man toward whom she could not feel quite guiltless, on whom she had reeked her disdain and her mockery, that just he of all others should be the one to offer his help must have been to Jadwiga’s spirit a very keen sort of torture. To know him in full possession of the disgraceful secret of the past, a witness to her present humiliation, was bad enough, but to have to owe him gratitude for a service was worse infinitely. Jadwiga did not tell me these things then, but I had got to read her face and her bearing like an open book.

When Malewicz came back next day with the letters she kept carefully out of his way, but the nature of the search now entered on made frequent visits necessary, or, at least, seemed to explain them, and she could not keep out of his way for ever.

“We have found three French names already,” Madame Bielinska informed me delightedly. “I wanted to write at once to Monsieur Grimond to get him to make inquiries about the families, but Krysztof has offered to manage the correspondence himself. He says it will take less time, and he promises to bring me every scrap of news he gets.”

Needless to say that he did more than keep his promise, for he came very often when he had no news to give, but merely an idea to suggest or an inquiry to make. Within a week, and without visible effort, he had glided into the position of something between a secretary and a family adviser, and looked as much at home in Madame Bielinska’s sanctuary as did Madame Bielinska herself. She had got so used to his presence that the days which did not bring him left her restless and dissatisfied. In him she had found exactly what she wanted; a listener as well as an adviser.

“Where did you pick up your secret of manœuvring?” I asked him once, laughingly, but he answered, without laughing:—“Don’t you

know that I am half an Armenian, and that cunning is an Armenian quality?"

The bitterness of the tone reminded me that he had indeed some Armenian blood in his veins, and that in the days of his hopeless courtship Jadwiga had often contemptuously referred to him as "The Armenian."

During that first week Jadwiga and Krysztof had not met again, and I was beginning to wonder whether he would not soon grow tired of these fruitless tactics, when one afternoon his opportunity came.

We were again on the verandah, Jadwiga listlessly reading, I writing to Agnes. I knew that about an hour ago Malewicz had come and been taken straight to Madame Bielinska's room; but by Jadwiga's unconsciousness, by the mere fact of her being here, I saw that she was not aware of his presence in the house, and I resolved to leave her in ignorance. In order to leave the house he would have to pass here—well, so much the better; it was time to clear the situation one way or the other, and it was more than time to rouse Jadwiga from the apathy that had so transformed her.

At last I heard his step, and Jadwiga heard it too, and raised her head to listen, but he was already in the doorway. With a glance he had taken in the situation.

"Pani Jadwiga," he said quickly, to the young

girl who had already risen from her seat with the obvious intention of retiring, "it is fortunate that I find you; I have a word to say to you from my mother."

It was wonderful how useful he contrived to make his mother.

Jadwiga hesitated for a moment and then sat down again.

"What can your mother have to say to me?" she asked, in a tone of constraint.

"She would beg you to take pity on her loneliness; the harvest is approaching, I shall be tied to the fields, and she will spend her days alone—would it be asking too much that you should keep her company—only for a few days? always supposing that you can be spared here."

All the blood rushed to Jadwiga's face as she replied hastily:—

"Oh, no, I cannot—it is impossible; I cannot go away from here, and besides—" she broke off abruptly.

"Besides what?" asked Malewicz, gently.

"Your mother would gain nothing by such a companion as I am now. She had better look for somebody in a gayer mood, and who—who would do her house more honour."

The last words were spoken with averted face, vehemently and bitterly, pressed out, as it were, against her own will.

“Neither my mother nor I know of anybody who could do that,” said Malewicz, very deliberately. “Will you not reconsider your resolution?”

She did not turn her face at once, but the hands that lay in her lap were twisted tightly together.

“I cannot come,” she said, in a choked voice.

“Then this is all I am to say to my mother?”

There was a moment's pause before she showed him her deeply moved face.

“No, that is not all; you are to tell her also that she is very good and that I thank her deeply. Will you tell her that?” and with an effort she held out her hand, but avoided looking at him. He took it in silence and raised it to his lips, then turned immediately and left us alone.

Jadwiga looked after him with her eyes full of perplexity.

“But—I don't understand,” she said, confusedly. “I thought he knew everything.”

“So he does.”

“And his mother, too? And yet she asks me to visit her? But it is he who made her do that,” she added at once. I could see that she was intensely touched. Whether or not Malewicz had expected his proposition to be accepted it had certainly not failed in its object.

“I don't understand him at all,” she said, musingly.



“Don’t you?” said I, watching her carefully.

“There is nothing here, at any rate, that should be astonishing to *you*. Was it not you who asked, What can poverty, or grief, or shame do to a love that is real?”

“Oh, don’t; you hurt me!” she said, sharply, and I saw that I had said enough for once.

But from that moment she did not hide from Malewicz as she had hidden hitherto. It was easy to see that, in the respectfulness, almost the reverence of his bearing toward her, her cruelly wounded pride had found its first balm. To know that he knew everything was to give an especial value to his smallest act of courtesy, and weight to his every word. And in this crisis the man showed qualities for which I had never credited him. The ungracious harshness of former days had completely disappeared, giving way to a considerateness, almost a gentleness, which was better proof than anything of his sentiments. It was clear that for her he could commit the prodigy of acting against his natural propensities. In an Englishman such a transformation would be almost impossible, but these slow natures—even the most stubborn of them—have a suppleness of which we do not dream. In a thousand delicate ways he brought home to Jadwiga the convictions that the stain which rested on her father could not touch her, that to him, at least, she was the same woman, the

same supreme queen that she had been before the fatal discovery ; and it was wonderful to watch how little by little the teaching took effect, how her stricken self-esteem raised itself up once more, how her smarting spirit was slowly soothed. Surely it would have been wonderful if the idea had not obtruded itself that the man who did this would also have been capable of bearing the burden with her. There had always been something a little artificial in Jadwiga's dislike to Malewicz, just as there had been something artificial in that love, fed by poetry and inflamed by music, which she had felt for Wladimir, and both sentiments had now come to the ground.

But in all this I am anticipating. It was not in a day nor a week that this happened, and other things also happened during the time I am telling of. The first event of note was the arrival of Monsieur Grimond's long looked for reply, whose dry business-like phrases, by informing us that the Vicomte Achille d'Urvain—the last of his name—had entered a monastery of the order of St. Francis more than a quarter of a century ago, beyond which point it became difficult to trace him, owing the monastic change of name, brought us the corroboration of our surmises.

The certitude scarcely caused any great emotion, even to Madame Bielinska ; she had been sure already, without this proof.

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“I am afraid there is not much more to be hoped for from that quarter,” she remarked. “It is fortunate that Krysztof has got hold of other threads.”

And really it was fortunate. Without the correspondence with Paris which Malewicz was assiduously cultivating, I scarcely know how poor Madame Bielinska would have got through those weary weeks of waiting, for Pan Lewicki had not yet come home. It was understood that he had left Karlsbad and that father and son were making a tour in the Austrian Alps, perhaps with the object of letting a little grass grow over the broken engagement. Once or twice Madame Bielinska suggested that the overseer at Krasno must surely be able to forward a letter, but by the advice of Malewicz, who proved how difficult it would be to treat the subject by writing, she always desisted from her purpose.

## CHAPTER XVII

ABOUT the beginning of August, I observed a change in Malewicz's demeanour. Knowing something of the ardour that devoured him I had marvelled at his patience; now, all at once, it seemed to give way finally.

The first time that this fact obtruded itself on my notice was one afternoon when he joined Jadwiga and me in the garden. He seemed to me at once more preoccupied than usual, and I noticed that his eyes rested on Jadwiga in a way they had never dared to do before. The conversation to-day would not become consecutive; there were frequent pauses, and every time we began to speak it was on another subject. I especially remember one remark of Malewicz's.

"Those flowers are lilies, are they not?" he began abruptly, after a pause that had been especially long, and looking toward an oval bed which lay opposite to the bench we were sitting on.

"Of course they are lilies," answered Jadwiga in some surprise.

"And how are lilies cultivated? What do they require to make them grow so tall and straight?"

“A great deal of water,” said Jadwiga, thinking probably that he had snatched at the first available subject of conversation.

“And of manure, I think I have heard,” said Malewicz.

“Yes, manure does them good, certainly, as to almost all flowers.”

“Is it not strange,” said Malewicz, musingly, “that so fair a flower as a lily should grow out of so vile a thing as dung? Have you ever thought about that? Is that lily less spotless, or less precious because it owes so many elements of its being to the dunghill? Would any one hesitate to gather it because of that thought? Not I for one! What care I where it comes from or what was before it? A lily is to me a lily, and my hand would stretch instantly toward it, if only the precious flower would consent to be gathered by my fingers.”

He looked from the flower-bed toward Jadwiga as he spoke, and his glance was yet plainer than his words. But she was gazing straight away in front of her, and her colour neither rose nor fell; it was almost as though she had not heard.

When he was gone she turned toward me.

“I know what he meant,” she said, looking at me steadily. “It was a strange way of putting it, but I understand quite well.”

“And is it impossible that the lily should ever

allow itself to be gathered by that hand?" I asked, with some trepidation, for I had as yet no clue to her present attitude of mind.

She slowly shook her head.

"Neither by that nor by any other hand. I know what you have been imagining all this time. You think that because I tolerate his presence I may get to feel for him what I know he feels for me. I am only trying to pay off a little of the debt I owe him, for I am very guilty toward him. I have misjudged him cruelly, and treated him cruelly too, and I am deeply ashamed of having done so, and would show him that he has all my esteem,—but love? I have no more love to give,—not the love that men want; men themselves have killed it, in the person of that one man on whom I set my faith and who failed me."

The frank acknowledgment was exactly what I should have expected from her intrinsically generous nature, but the hopelessness of her tone cut me to the quick.

"But if your love was still to be given," I urged, "can you doubt that this would be the right man to give it to?"

There was a slight disturbance in her eyes as she looked at me, and faint though it was I noted it with hope.

"No," she said slowly. "He might have been worthy,—I believe he is worthy." It was strange

to note how even in her humiliation her woman's pride still valued the gift within her power to bestow.

She was silent for a minute now, plunged in such deep thought that I shrank from disturbing her. Then, without changing her attitude, she spoke again.

“I feel—I will tell you what I feel about it,—I feel as if I had had the chance of loving him and had missed it. Do you remember that day last year—it was soon after you came—when I consulted you—not quite seriously I think—about the choice of a lover? If I had taken your advice then all probably would have been different; and I could have taken it, for to the best of my belief I loved neither of them at that moment, but I could have loved either of them, for my heart was full of tenderness which had to be spent. It was like standing at a cross-road without knowing what was at the end of either way,—well, and I took the wrong turn, that is all.”

“But your steps can be retraced,” I said, “you have begun to retrace them already.”

But Jadwiga only shook her head and said: “Not now; it could have been then, but not now.”

Next time Malewicz came to the house I managed to waylay him.

“You must not be imprudent,” I said. “She

is not ready to listen to you. You must give her time.”

In reply he burst out impatiently :—

“Time ! time ! Always that talk of time when every day is precious ! Have I not given her time enough already ? She is used to my presence now ; I cannot go on playing the family friend for ever.”

I was too surprised to make much answer, and very soon it was forced upon me that my warning had been absolutely wasted. The strong guard which until now Malewicz had put both upon his eyes and upon his speech was abruptly removed. Within a few days he had thrown off the disguise under which he had hitherto figured, and appeared as what he was, an urgent and impatient lover. Jadwiga could no longer doubt that he was paying her his addresses ; and yet, although she never by word or glance encouraged his hopes, it was much already that she did not avoid him entirely. No doubt her heart was too sick to allow of her using toward him those means of discouragement which she had used once before ; and, more likely still, the balm of his friendship was too welcome to be foregone.

In surprise, almost in consternation, I looked on at Malewicz's headlong tactics. His urgency seemed to me not only unwise in the extreme, but also indelicate. Repeatedly I warned him, but he only laughed in my face.



“Patience?” he would say. “Don’t talk to me of that! Have you any notion of the amount of patience it has taken me to get to this point? But the time for patience is past now; if she is to be gained at all it can only be by storm, believe me.”

And again my words were cast to the winds, and his efforts redoubled instead of relaxing.

Madame Bielinska did not seem to notice anything especial. To her Krysztof was still only a secretary and adviser, but I confess I felt curious regarding the attitude of the other mother—Krysztof’s mother—in the matter. This curiosity was to be speedily satisfied.

“Tell me, Miss Middleton,” Madame Malewicz said to me one day when she had accompanied her son to Ludniki, and at a moment when we found ourselves alone, “do you think Krysztof has a chance?”

“Would you be glad if I said ‘yes’?” I inquired, looking at her curiously.

“Glad? Why, of course I should. Is he not my only boy?”

“And you have no objection to seeing your only boy married to the daughter of a cheater at cards, who, besides, would bring him no portion?”

“Why, you see it is this way,” said the old lady in some slight embarrassment, “it is not she who cheated at cards, but her father, and how do any of us know what was the exact moral worth of

our ancestors, or whether they might not have succumbed under such a temptation? Even granted they would not, *she*, at any rate, is innocent, so why should she be punished?

“And as for the money,” went on Madame Malewicz, “Kryzstof assures me that there will be enough remaining to live in a quiet way. I never understand about money matters, but he has such an excellent head, and if they don’t mind living in a small way, why should I? I have so few wants, you know, and am so easily satisfied (this was an *idée fixe* of the dear old creature). And, besides, Kryzstof thinks it will be better to sell the estate and go to live in some place where nobody knows the story. He talks of Abbazzia or Como, and I have always longed to see the south!”

Her black eyes sparkled as she said it like the eyes of the veriest girl, and her small, but alas! bright yellow teeth were displayed in a delighted smile.

Oh, blessed irresponsibility! If it was foolish, I had only to think of how others had acted in order to find it a noble sort of foolishness. From that side clearly there was no opposition to be feared.

Thinking back of that time I cannot exactly disentangle the sequence of incidents; possibly I may not have given them quite in their right places, but of the general outline of these weeks I am certain. Single pictures rise in my memory, standing out sharply from the haze of forgotten hours. The

background of these pictures was always either the white pillars of the verandah or the leafy depths of the park, for it was a life almost of imprisonment that we led, since nothing could induce Jadwiga to leave the precincts of her home. The only glimpses which she now had of the outer world were from the top of an old summerhouse which had an upper story, and from which, between the crowns of the trees, the horizon was visible. From up there among the overblown honeysuckle which held the rotting pillars tightly clasped in its saving embrace, she could watch the wide plain turn from pale gold to dark gold—for all that was visible of the country from here was one vast cornfield—a sea of one uniform tint, sometimes ruffled like the sea into ripples that went to break on some unseen shore, sometimes motionless beneath a deep blue sky, becalmed as the sea itself can be in perfect autumn days.

Among the pictures aforementioned there rises up one which I see more clearly than the rest. The harvest had been going on for some time now. One day, from the top of our watch tower, we saw that the plain was no longer golden, but of a dead, greyish-green tint, and at the same time we heard the sound of singing approaching from the village street.

“The harvest wreath! the harvest wreath!” cried Anulka, clapping her hands with joy. “They

are bringing the harvest wreath! Oh, come, Jadwiga, we must be there!”

“I am not coming,” said Jadwiga indifferently.

I knew it was customary in Poland for the field workers on the last day of the harvest, to come in procession to the summerhouse, one of the girls being crowned with a wreath of corn ears, to be laid at the feet of the lord or lady of the house. Curious to see this picturesque ceremony I followed Anulka as she careered back toward the house. A strong scent of garlic was the first thing that apprised me of the vicinity of the singers, who were grouped on the verandah; the women's coloured head cloths making bright blotches of red and yellow against the white pillars, their flashing teeth displayed, as they shouted out the harvest song. There was the bristling, monstrous wreath on the head of a handsome sun-burnt girl and there, too, was Madame Bielinska, standing in the full light of the day, and smiling graciously at her subordinates, who stared back at her as though at one arisen from the dead; and well they might, seeing that they had not seen her for eleven years. I have had the song translated to me since and noted down the queer and so oddly inappropriate verses:

“ We have a proud mistress,  
She comes to the door,  
Her keys ring in her hand,  
She thanks God the corn is gathered.

- “ Our master comes not.  
He is gone to Swów,  
He takes corn with him,  
He brings back money.
- “ Master, sell thy grey cow,  
Master sell thy brown cow,  
Master sell thy black cow,  
And buy us *wódki*.
- “ White feathers has our cock,  
But black are the master's eyes.  
He lives among the corn,  
And the corn looks toward him.
- “ The corn bows before him,  
The corn lies at his feet,  
He puts out his hand  
And the corn comes to him.
- “ Our master has a golden house  
With a golden door  
And a golden window.  
His labourers stand around him.
- “ Little grey quail,  
Wilt thou still hide ?  
We have cut away the corn,  
Thou canst not lie under it.
- “ The moon is on our path,  
Our wreath is on our head,  
We shall not go astray  
Nor lose our wreath.
- “ The meadow has spoken  
And it has told us  
That the master has *wódki*  
And many glasses in a row.

“ We bring you the corn  
Of all your fields.  
May you sow again,  
And may you reap.”

When my ears began to ache I withdrew noiselessly, and at the same time Malewicz detached himself from the group of spectators. He spoke very little as he walked by my side. Presently Anulka came running after us; the wreath of corn-ears which I had just seen on the head of the village girl now hung round her neck like a necklace. She ran past us to where Jadwiga sat alone, and, wriggling her thin neck out of the wreath, put it quickly on to her sister's head.

“ Oh, you look so lovely in it!” she cried, “ much prettier than Hania Wasytko looked !”

Jadwiga put up her hand impatiently and pulled it off.

“ It is the last harvest wreath they will bring us,” she said, contemplating it as it lay in her lap. “ They indeed will reap again, but we shall not sow. Poor wretches! They do not know that by this time next year we shall have sold not only our grey and brown cows but also our house !”

Then she looked up suddenly into Malewicz's face.

“ Tell me,” she said almost sharply, “ is this correspondence of yours ever going to bring any

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result? It seems to me that you are always writing letters and never getting answers or, at any rate, no answers that bring us a step further.”

To my knowledge this was the first time that Jadwiga had referred to the subject thus directly to Malewicz. He looked surprised, but answered immediately :

“On the contrary ; we have got several steps further already. The last letter from Paris brought us two new names, in the bearer of one of which I hope to discover the person we need.”

Jadwiga sighed and said nothing more, and Malewicz took the first opportunity of changing the subject.

As it so happened it was I who, against my own will, pushed Malewicz prematurely to put his fate to the touch.

I was talking one afternoon to the old postman Andrej, discussing the health of his wife. Since I had begun to visit her Andrej exhausted himself in all sorts of little cares for me, meant to prove his gratitude. He would pursue me with glasses of wine of which I had no need whatever, and did all that lay in his power to make me take to the national *wódki*—fortunately without effect. To-day he had surreptitiously brought me a slice of cake—he seemed to labour under the delusion that I was chronically starving—and while I was eating a little of it to please him, we carried on as much

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conversation as our mutual broken German allowed of.

“It is not Zosia alone” (Zosia was his wife) “who looks white,” said the good soul, after several preliminary sighs. “Just look at our young lady! It is a pity she does not drink *wódki*.”

“I doubt whether *wódki* would do her any good,” I replied, trying not to smile.

“I know what would,” said Andrej quickly, and then, with the privilege of an old servant, he added: “If the Krasno carriage would stand at our door that would do her good.”

“Nonsense, Andrej,” I said provoked. “You must not speak like that. Our young lady and that young gentleman have found out in time that they do not suit each other, and she is not thinking of him at all now—believe me! And, besides that, he is far away now.”

“Not further away than Krasno,” said Andrej obstinately.

“He is not at Krasno; he is in the Alps.”

“Then either Jan is deaf or Michal is blind,” replied Andrej.

“Who is Michal?”

“The Krasno coachman. It is close upon a week ago that you spoke to him in the market-place at Zloczek. He was standing there waiting with the four grey horses in the *britzska*—the one that is only brought out when the master him-



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self is there—and he told Jan that the family had been home for two days already, and that Pan Lewicki's rheumatism had been washed away by the waters."

"Are you sure of this?" I asked.

"I am sure of what Jan told me," said Andrej a little sulkily, "but you can ask him yourself if you think I'm maundering."

I left the rest of my cake on the plate and went straight to Madame Bielinska. Malewicz was in the room, but I did not think of looking toward him as I rapidly began to speak.

"Just fancy what I have heard. Pan Lewicki is back; he has been back for more than a week, it seems." And I repeated what I had heard from Andrej.

Madame Bielinska's pale face grew red all over as she listened. Without immediately speaking she turned her sunken eyes reproachfully upon Malewicz.

"A week!" she repeated after a moment. "A whole week! And you promised so faithfully to keep watch!"

For the first time in my experience of Malewicz I saw him out of countenance.

"It cannot be so long as that," he said quickly. "I should surely have heard of it; he may be here since yesterday or the day before ——"

"It was last week that Jan saw the carriage at

Zloczek," I said looking at him, and astonished to meet so disturbed a gaze.

He gave an embarrassed laugh.

"Well, that only shows what a bad detective I am; but I did my best, believe me, I did my best."

He sighed so heavily with the last words that Madame Bielinska's anger melted.

"Well, I forgive you, but there must not be another moment lost. It is too late for to-day. Tomorrow before breakfast a messenger shall be at Krasno, and shall ask Bazyli to visit me immediately."

Malewicz bent his head, as though in acquiescence, but without speaking. When, a few minutes later, I left the room he followed me into the passage.

"Where is Pani Jadwiga?" he asked in an agitated whisper. "Not in her room, I hope?"

There had been a thunderstorm that afternoon, succeeded by a faint drizzle of rain which kept us indoors.

"She is in the drawing-room, I believe," I said. "She had an idea of practising, although I do not hear the piano."

Seeing him now at close quarters I perceived a strained look about his mouth, which I had got to associate with his moments of strong emotion.

"Very well. Be so kind as not to follow me there," he said briefly.

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“What are you going to do?” I asked.  
“Surely not to ——”

“I am not bound to answer that question,” he said in the same tone of extreme irritation. “I only ask you not to disturb me.”

“Is it Wladimir’s return that is exciting you so?” I persisted. “If so, believe me, you have nothing to fear; she does not think of him at all.”

He looked as though he were laughing, although no sound came.

“Wladimir!” he said, in an accent of inimitable contempt. “What do I care for the boy!” And, brushing past me, he went toward the drawing-room.

I did not see him again that day, and it was only late at night that I saw Jadwiga alone; but the first glance I had of her face told me how matters stood.

While I was brushing out my hair before the glass the door softly opened, and a white-robed form stole in and sat down in silence on my bed. It was many months now since she had come in thus, for since the shock of the catastrophe she had been chary of her confidences. My heart swelled as I thought of happier days, so recent and yet so irrevocably lost, when she had sat exactly as she sat now, only with something so different in her eyes.

“Do you know what I have done to-day?” she asked after a moment.

“ You have refused Malewicz ? ” I said, looking at what I could see of her profile in the glass.

“ Do you think it very foolish of me ? ” she humbly inquired.

“ I think it much more foolish of him to press you for your decision now ; in six months’ time your answer might perhaps have been different.”

“ Do you think so ? ” she asked, looking at me earnestly, but refraining from direct contradiction, a symptom which I at once put down as favourable. “ Then I wish he had waited. It hurts me to hurt him, but how can I say ‘ Yes ’ to him when I am not sure whether what I feel is not only gratitude for his devotion ? ”

“ At any rate she is not sure that she does *not* care for him,” I commented in my own mind.

“ You acknowledge his devotion ? ” I said aloud.

“ I not only acknowledge it, I suffer under it. It is dreadful to owe so much to a person, and not to be able to pay him back.”

She mused for a moment with her eyes on the ground.

“ If I had known him last year as I know him now —— ”

I rose from my place before the mirror, and, going up to where she sat, took her two hands between my own.

“ Stop thinking of last year, Jadwiga,” I said, stooping down so as to look into her eyes.

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“Think of this moment only—of this moment and of the future. You made a mistake then, but, believe me, it is *not* too late yet. You have time enough to learn to love him, and you will have to love somebody—you are not made to live alone. Why not choose this man who has proved his faithfulness so brilliantly?”

Jadwiga looked at me in astonishment, a sort of far-off hope dawning in the depth of her dark eyes.

“Perhaps,” she said, hesitatingly, “you may be right—I don’t know, but it is so quick, so terribly quick. How good you are, Eleanor! Even though I may not know what I feel for him, I am quite sure that I love *you!*”

She kissed me with one of her haunting smiles, and disappeared again through the door.

## CHAPTER XVIII

LOOKING out of the window on the following afternoon I saw a britzska with four grey horses sweeping up to the door. This meant that, despite the rupture, Pan Lewicki had immediately answered Madame Bielinska's summons. No less was to be expected from Polish courtesy. He came alone, of course; indeed, as I afterward ascertained, Andrej's information was so far incorrect that Wladimir had not come home with his father, but had started to travel in the East. I watched the picturesque giant alighting without any especial emotion. From the first the hope which my employer had set upon the revelations he might be expected to make had appeared to me extravagant. It is true that he was the one surviving member of the gambling trio which had tried to ruin itself in Paris thirty years ago, but it did not seem to me likely that he would be able to do more than add a few names to the list of those French acquaintances with whom their gay days had been spent. Never in my life was I so mistaken.

The interview was lengthy. More than an hour passed before I saw Pan Lewicki again taking his seat in his britzska and covering his handsome, iron-grey head with the square Polish *tartatka*.

I was watching him out of sight when the door behind me opened, and, turning round, I beheld to my astonishment Madame Bielinska entering. Since I dwelt under her roof this was the first time that I had seen her here. Her face was flushed and shining with excitement.

“Where is Jadwiga?” she said, stuttering a little in her haste. “Call her quickly, I beg of you! Oh, Miss Middleton, we have found him—we have found him at last!” And, to my consternation, she half fell into my arms, clinging convulsively round my neck, and doing something which was neither laughing nor crying, or which, perhaps, was a mixture of both.

“Pan Lewicki has found him for you?” I asked, guiding her carefully to a chair. “Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, yes, that is it; and can you imagine who it is? Guess!”

“How can I possibly do that?” I objected. “I have got all those French names completely mixed up.”

“But it is not a French name at all; it is a Polish name,” she said, shaking my arm as she held it. “I don’t know why we took for granted from the first that it was a Frenchman whom Hazimir had cheated; it was not a Frenchman, it was his own compatriot, his friend. Oh, can’t you guess now?”

“Not Pan Lewicki himself?” I asked, in growing bewilderment.

“No—the other one, Krysztof, nobody else but our good friend Krysztof!”—she almost screamed, and this time she gripped my arm with painful force.

The want of government in her demeanour from the moment she had entered the room had made me fear that her mind was slightly unhinged, now I thought I was sure of it; I therefore answered as gently as possible:—

“Surely there must be a mistake here, dear Madame; you forget that Krysztof was barely born when these things happened.”

“Not he but his father; don’t you understand? It can be no other. Bazyli remembers those two evenings quite well, the one on which Malewicz—Stepan Malewicz—won so greatly from Hazimir, and the following evening on which he lost much more heavily. The duel at cards between them was one of the events of the club season. Bazyli was among the spectators who stood round watching; he remembers the Vicomte perfectly and his departure for Africa—he thinks he can even remember the mirror on the wall, for that old man’s memory is as keen as a knife and as clear as glass. He always had a good head and gambled as methodically as he did everything else. The dates in the letter tally exactly with those in his memory—



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everything tallies—there can be no doubt Stepan Malewicz is the man who was wronged by Hazimir, and Krysztof is his only son—therefore it is to him that we owe restitution—it is he who is the real master of Ludniki.”

In that moment I perceived Jadwiga standing in the doorway, with her garden-hat in her hand. Her figure was stiff, almost to immobility, only her eyes moved slowly from her mother to me.

“Jadwiga, my child, we have found him!” said Madame Bielinska, stretching her arms toward her daughter. “Bazyli says ——”

“I have heard what he says,” said Jadwiga, speaking with some difficulty, “but may he not be mistaken?”

“It seems to me,” I put in, “that these are surmises, very plausible surmises certainly, but yet not proofs.”

“To me it is proved already,” said Madame Bielinska hastily, afraid evidently of having her discovery wrenched from her.

“But the Malewiczs are poor,” I objected, “and in your husband’s letter it is expressly stated that his opponent is rich, and can spare the money.”

“So he could at the time; it was in the golden days of the family. Hazimir stopped gambling after that visit to Paris, but Stepan Malewicz did not, although he had a wife and a child already;

that evening at the club was only one in a series of disastrous evenings for him. And Hazimir could look on at the ruin consummating itself, and could keep to himself the money which would at least have averted the worst!" There was inexpressible contempt on her emaciated face as she said it, and her thin, long-fingered hands closed slowly upon her knee. Then a faint smile flickered over her features.

"Poor Krysztof! What a surprise for him to find that he is after all not quite a beggar! And to think that he was looking for himself all the time!"

She gave a broken laugh and looked toward her daughter, as though for sympathy in what evidently struck her as an excellent joke; but neither on Jadwiga's white face nor in her wide, perplexed eyes was there any response.

"I suppose he will be coming to-day," said Madame Bielinska, as she rose.

But Malewicz did not come that day, as, indeed, after yesterday's events was not to be expected. Madame Bielinska waited in a fever until late at night, and next morning early the same messenger who had been sent to Krasno was despatched to Roma Wielka.

That next day was the first of September, a date which, for various reasons, I am not likely to forget. That it should prove a turning-point in Jad-

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wiga's life was to be foreseen, but nothing warned me that to me, too, it was to bring a crisis.

Jadwiga and I were both sitting with Madame Bielinska when toward midday Malewicz was announced. I expected to see Jadwiga take instantly to flight, but to my surprise she kept her place, only stiffening a little in her chair and drawing in her under-lip between her teeth, a trick she had when her nerves were off their balance. As the door opened I could see a thrill pass through her from head to foot, then my eyes turned irresistibly toward the newcomer, and immediately something in his face gave me a fresh shock of astonishment. Almost in the same moment, and before any one had spoken, Jadwiga sprang to her feet.

“You know it!” she cried shrilly, “you know it! It is true then, since you know it!”

My thoughts had not yet been able to follow hers, and already I vaguely felt that she was right. Whether Malewicz had come here with the intention of acting complete ignorance I do not know, but, be that as it may, the sudden attack, coming from so unexpected a quarter, had thrown him momentarily off his guard. His face, during that one minute of silence, in which he was evidently trying to speak, was a plain avowal. Madame Bielinska, who, as little as I, had suspected the truth, which Jadwiga's instinct had somehow leapt at, looked inquiringly at all our faces in turn.

The silence had not lasted more than a few moments when Jadwiga, without saying a further word, flung out of the second door.

I was preparing to follow when Madame Bielinska said quickly and with a loftiness which astonished me —

“Miss Middleton, you will oblige me by staying. There is something here which perhaps you can help me to understand. Tell me”—and she turned to Malewicz—“is it as she says? You are not only the person I have been looking for all summer, but you *know* it?”

Malewicz seemed to be hesitating, then a cloud of sullenness settled on his features.

“Be it so,” he said. “I am that person and I know it. The comedy need be carried no further, since it has lost its point.”

Madame Bielinska’s skin-and-bone hands tightened on the two carved knobs of her chair, as she measured him with a glance that was almost a glare.

“You knew it,” she said with badly suppressed rage, “you knew it, and you have pretended to be my friend and my helper! False man! False man! Go from my house never to return! It will be your house soon as you know well, but as long as I am here you shall not cross its threshold.” Her long finger shook as it pointed at the door, and in her staring eyes there was a look that bordered on hatred.

“Why do you not go?” she asked, as he did not move. “Have you anything to say in your excuse? You shall have your money, every penny of it, but you are no longer my friend.”

Malewicz walked to the door without speaking, then turned, as though on some sudden resolution.

“I have only one thing to say in my defence,” he said hurriedly—“I love your daughter, I have loved her for long. Give me the money if you will, but give me her with it, and neither she nor you need descend by one step from your present estate.” He looked at her with passionate entreaty, the look of a man who is making his last desperate move.

Madame Bielinska sat rigid for a moment longer, then slowly sank back in her chair.

“It is a plot, then,” she murmured between her working lips; “you would be the generous creditor who would sacrifice himself in order to preserve to us our bread and butter—you would crush us with your magnanimity. No, no, Pan Malewicz, you need not hope to get either my consent or my daughter’s to so obvious a financial arrangement; we may be poor but we are not base.”

Malewicz turned to me. “Ask this lady,” he said with flaming eyes, “ask Miss Middleton if I am sacrificing myself, or if I am pleading for the fulfilment of what has been my one thought for years—if I look on myself as the giver or the re-

ceiver; she knows a little of what there is in my heart."

Madame Bielinska considered him for a moment, her attention arrested in spite of herself, then she obstinately shook her head.

"No, no—it may be that you love her, but she cannot love you, she has loved another, too, lately. And then you are false, you have deceived me—I would not have such a son. Go, I tell you, go, and do not return!"

He went then without another word, and with only one long, questioning look in my direction.

I did not wait for Madame Bielinska to speak.

"You will call him back again," I said reproachfully, "if not to-day then to-morrow."

"Never!" she answered vehemently, "he has cheated me!"

"But if Jadwiga were to love him? If she were to come to love him?"

She moved uneasily in her chair.

"That will not be, and if it were to be it—would not do. That would be too easy a way, don't you see. We need not descend from our social estate, he said—but I *want* to descend, I *want* to suffer materially instead of mentally, else there would be no penance, nothing to make me feel that I had indeed paid the price of that sin—it would not *hurt* enough, don't you see?" And she raised her haggard eyes to my face, struggling to express her meaning.

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I understood, and left her with a sigh, foreseeing a new inimical influence to the union which I still hoped to bring about. It was clear that she could not forgive the man who could have quenched her thirst for penance two months ago and had not done so.

I had an idea that Jadwiga ought not to be left alone, but she had locked herself into her room, and not being able to reach mine except through hers I was forced to look for another refuge. This I found in the store-room, where Marya, assisted by Anulka, who had offered herself in the hopes of there being stray spoons to lick, was engaged in arranging long rows of preserves. Too restless for solitude I likewise commenced handing up jam-pots.

Presently, while we three were thus busy, a shadow fell in the doorway. Turning round I almost started to see Malewicz looking at me with a distinct request in his eyes.

“I thought you were gone,” I said, as, putting down the pot I held, I joined him in the passage.

“I am going presently, do not fear, but I should like to speak to you for a few minutes alone. Is there no place where we will not be seen? I am a proscribed criminal, you know, and I should not like to be turned out of the house door.”

Just then we came to a door standing ajar, and which led to a square space at the head of the

cellar staircase, a sort of ante-chamber to the cellar, so to say, where empty wine casks and corkless bottles stood about in a dim half light, plentifully draped with cobwebs.

“No one will find us here,” I said, sitting down on an overturned packing case.

There were plenty more seats of the sort available, and Malewicz, having taken another, and disposed of his long legs as best he could among the bottles, began speaking at once, though in a guarded voice.

“This is probably the last time I shall be in this house, and I should like one person at least to know exactly how matters stand.”

“You have known the truth all along?” I asked, trying to read his face in the half light.

“Not quite all along.”

“Since when, then?”

“Since two days before Hazimir Bielinski’s death. On that day, as I once told you, the strange monk came to Roma Wielka. I received him as a matter of course, just as Bielinski received him next day. I was only twenty at the time, but already my own master, my father having died some years previously. When he heard my name the stranger—he knew no word of Polish—seemed struck; he had evidently come to the house without inquiring who the owner was. He sat still for some moments as though plunged in deep thought,



from which he awoke to throw a piercing glance round the room. 'But I thought your family was rich,' he said with a somewhat brutal directness. 'I am certain I have heard it was rich.' I was young enough to be annoyed at the remark, and answered stiffly that he had heard aright, but that riches are not necessarily permanent. The French monk shook his head. 'Oh, the cards,' he groaned, 'the cards! I knew they would be his perdition. Your father had a great loss in Paris in 185—, had he not?' I replied that he had sustained various losses, wondering the while at my visitor's information and at his tenacity. 'But,' he went on with evidently growing interest, 'that loss was retrieved. Do you not remember having heard of any great gain he made since that time?—of any—what shall I call it?—good turn that came to your fortunes after the year 185—? But, to be sure, you were a child then.' To this I answered that from what my mother had told me—she was recovering from a severe illness at the time, and, therefore, not present—I was almost certain that since the year he spoke of my father had done nothing but steadily lose. I could see by the monk's face that this perplexed him extremely. 'Is there not a house in the neighbourhood called Ludniki?' he asked after a minute's silence, and when I answered in the affirmative, he went on: 'And whom does it belong to now?'

‘To Hazimir Bielinski,’ I replied. ‘That cannot be,’ he said quickly, ‘it must have been sold long ago.’ ‘For what reason?’ I objected. ‘The family is perfectly well off,’ and I think I added, ‘The cards were less fatal to them than to us.’

“My strange visitor seemed able to contain himself no longer. He left his seat and began pacing the room with wide steps, his brown frock beating against his bare, sandalled feet, his rosary clanking by his side like a sword. His movements alone would have betrayed him for a Frenchman. ‘Perfectly well off,’ he repeated, ‘are you sure of what you say? Are you sure that there has been no fall in the fortunes of Hazimir Bielinski within the last twenty years? Think well before you speak.’ I could only repeat my former statement. He took two more turns in the room, his hand working the while in his black, scarcely grizzled beard, and then he burst out with a vehemence that shook me, ‘Ah, *le lâche!* then he has lied to me and to God! He has flourished upon his wrongful gains—may the devil take his soul!’ But he had scarcely said it when he crossed himself quickly. ‘God forgive the sinful words that came to my lips,’ he said. ‘It is not the devil who can help here; it is God alone, and I as His instrument. Young man, I have come to you in a good hour. Your home is poor—it needs not eyes as sharp as mine to see it—but I can make it rich

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again, or, if not rich, I can at least give you back comfort—comfort which is yours by all the laws of heaven and earth. You have been robbed, my son, you have been robbed, and you know it not!’

“And then, while I listened in amazement, more than half persuaded that I was harbouring a lunatic, he told me the story of those two evenings at Paris, exactly as it is told in the letters which we both know, only judged from a different point of view. He spoke of the correspondence which had passed between him and Bielinski, of his own conversion on what he had believed to be his death-bed. He reproached himself in bitter words with not having kept his eye on Bielinski through the cloister gates, so to say. ‘I was too much absorbed by my own soul,’ he said, ‘my soul which I had only newly discovered, to have any thoughts ever for the souls of others. And, besides—God be my witness!—I believed him. Oh, *le lâche!* But I will go to him to-morrow. It is God who has led my steps this way. I shall save his soul in spite of himself, and I shall give you back what is rightfully yours.’

“Well,” continued Malewicz, “he went next day—you know with what result. You can well imagine the excitement which the revelation had caused in my twenty-year-old heart. Poverty had never been congenial to me; it was antipathetic to my mother, even though she herself might not

know it. I went to bed that night in a tumult of perplexity and hope, and dreamed of years of comfort to come. It became clear to me now why Hazimir Bielinski had so often offered me money, and I felt thankful that I had never taken it. He was not unscrupulous though he might be weak, and no doubt it inconvenienced him to see me in so sorry a plight.

“I was startled out of my new hopes by the news of the horrible catastrophe. Like almost every one in the neighbourhood I hurried to Ludniki to assure myself of the truth, for it was not to be believed in hearsay alone. I saw them both lying in their blood, and to me alone of all the horror-stricken spectators the explanation of the dreadful event was as clear as day; I alone could read the meaning of that stiff, right hand, which, even in death, seemed to keep its gesture of denunciation. Why did I not speak, you will ask? Think of the situation; could I overwhelm the already so deeply stricken family by handing out the disgraceful key to the enigma? I was young, remember, and far too much shaken to think of claiming my rights in the presence of those two corpses. Later on, I said to myself, it will be time enough to retrieve what is my due; I must let the unhappy woman find the ground under her feet again. Besides, all the proofs I had in my hands were merely moral ones; the family might choose to ac-

cept them or they might not. More valid proofs might perhaps be procurable. I knew that Bielinski's letters had not been destroyed, for the Vicomte, turned monk, had told me so himself. They were deposited somewhere in Paris—research and inquiry might bring them to light; but I put that all off for later, and meanwhile I held my tongue even toward my mother, for I well knew, that, once shared by her, my secret would be a secret no longer. Thus a year, two years passed, and I still hesitated to act, and then—and then ——”

Malewicz broke off his narrative and, leaning forward on his primitive seat, stared moodily at the wall opposite. Now that my eyes had got accustomed to the half light I could read every shade of expression on his dark, keen face, and could even note the threadbare appearance of the black coat which hung so loosely on his gaunt figure.

“Then I began to understand that I loved her,” he said, sinking his voice by another tone. His foot touched an empty bottle as he spoke and made it clink against its neighbour. He looked anxiously toward the door, afraid of having betrayed our presence. Despite my agitation our situation in the midst of these barrels and packing-cases and in the gloom of these dusty corners irresistibly reminded me of the games of hide and seek I had played with Henry—oh, so many years ago. I

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had played another game of hide and seek with him since then—but enough of that now.

“She was but a child,” went on Malewicz, almost whispering now, “and already I knew that for me there was going to be no other woman in the world. From the moment that I understood this I also understood that I should have to be silent for ever. I might, perhaps, have been able to put her family to disgrace, but not herself. I will not say that I took my resolution with a light heart. From the moment I decided that I could not speak I scarcely felt able to look my mother in the eyes. It was no good working like two men instead of one in order to procure to her a few of the comforts which she required almost as much as daily bread—it was no good going to bed hungry and wearing my clothes so long as they would hang upon me; although I more than once half-killed myself with sheer work, it was only the bread I could manage to give her—very dry bread, for the most part—and I could not keep my eyes shut to the fact that I was sacrificing my mother to a woman who would probably never love me. People talked of my filial devotion, but in my heart of hearts I knew that I was a bad son—a bad son, because too good a lover. Perhaps it was a crime, and perhaps it is for this crime that Heaven is punishing me so heavily now. But for the unfortunate reappearance of those letters, my secret would

have been buried with me. From the moment of their arrival Bazyli Lewicki has been my terror, just as he has been Madame Bielinska's hope. The monk had mentioned him as having been present on the critical evening, and I was tormented with the idea that a word of his might put her on the right track. You see how true that presentiment was. Do you understand now why Jadwiga had to be won by storm, if she was to be won at all?" He looked at me piercingly, with anguish in his black eyes.

"And your correspondence with Paris?" I asked.

"A farce," he replied, looking me straight in the face. "I wrote the letters, it is true, but only those of which I felt sure that they could lead to no result. It was as good a way as any other of keeping Madame Bielinska's thoughts steadily turned toward Paris."

"And you could play this comedy?" I asked, my senses of rectitude outraged, despite my pity for him.

He smiled without joy. "I have told you that I am half an Armenian. I have no remorse for my deception: the only thing I repent of is the moment of weakness which betrayed me to her this morning. After that moment denial would have been useless. To know that I have been aware of the family disgrace for so long past will only add to her sense of humiliation; that at least might have been spared her; she has enough to bear al-

ready!" He looked at me so earnestly and with so much passionate solicitude in his eyes that I straightway forgave the "Armenian" for the too great diplomacy which a minute before had roused my British blood.

I was beginning to answer him when outside in the passage Anulka raced past, calling for me and loudly announcing that the soup was on the table. Clearly it was time to evacuate our retreat, and accordingly we parted without any more words.

And now I come to the most astonishing moment of this eventful day, to the moment which abruptly and rudely tore my thoughts away from Jadwiga and turned them toward myself.

The same old leather post-bag with the dim brass fastenings—never rubbed up by any chance—which had brought disgrace to the house of Bielinski was to bring me the tidings of an unexpected joy, and with the same startling suddenness.

I was on my way to the dining-room when my eye caught it lying on the lobby table. In the general agitation nobody had thought of examining its contents. Probably I would not have done so either if a somewhat prolonged silence of Agnes' had not made me feel anxious. I emptied the bag on the table, looking out for my friend's handwriting—it was not visible, and yet there was an English stamp, and below it—surely my overstrained nerves were playing me a trick?—but



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was that not a handwriting which I had once known better than my own, and which I had never thought to see again?

I am not writing my own story but Jadwiga's, and so it is not necessary to give the exact contents of Henry's letter; let it be sufficient to say that he briefly announced to me the unexpected death of an aunt, and the equally unexpected legacy for which he figured in her testament—a modest enough sum, in truth, yet large enough to make his marriage no longer appear in the light of an absurdity. After which he, somewhat less briefly, asserted that his feelings toward me had undergone no change since last we parted, and ended by inquiring after the condition of my own.

Again I take refuge in the statement made above, and which absolves me of all necessity of entering into the exact sensations produced within me by this astonishing event; but I will not scruple to assert that the surprise was almost too great for me just at first, the light almost too blinding, the shock almost too much like a blow. It was in a state of mental giddiness, still seasoned with incredulity that I ate my soup—almost cold by this time. It is not only misfortune, it is also good fortune which occasionally knocks us on the head so brutally as almost to do for us entirely.

Was it possible that our game of hide and seek had come to an end for ever?

## CHAPTER XIX

I DID not at once sit down to answer Henry's letter; I was not yet mistress of myself to do so. Not that I exactly disbelieved in my good fortune, but that I had lost the habit of personal happiness too completely to be able to recover it at a moment's notice. Something within me was stiff with unuse, congealed with want of warmth, and required a little time to resume its action. I went about my usual occupations with a stupid feeling of unreality about it all, re-reading Henry's letter at intervals, prepared each time to find that I had mistaken his meaning.

The day was closing in when something happened which seemed in one moment to give me back all my powers of sensation. It was but a small incident in itself, valuable probably to me alone.

Lately Jadwiga had almost entirely neglected her piano; therefore it touched me with a sort of pleasurable astonishment—as I was wandering in the garden after sunset, in search of I knew not what myself—to hear chords that were broken at first, but which gradually gathered to melody, floating out by the open window. In one moment I felt it

—that was what I wanted—music, and, drawn as though by an invisible thread, I entered the house and approached the drawing-room door; but there I stood still, partly for fear of disturbing the player, partly because of the astonishment within me. I thought I knew every shade of Jadwiga's playing; but this was new to me. The opening, unequal chords had given the impression of hands groping about on the keys almost helplessly; it was by degrees only that they warmed to their task, but, having warmed to it, they drew sounds from the old piano of which I had never thought it capable. It seemed to be a song of triumph which they were ringing out of the yellow keys, a wild cry of victory, fierce, abrupt, and yet not joyful; and while I listened, breathless, the exultation had sunk to lament. Every one—that is, every one susceptible to music—knows the sort of melody that is almost as much pain as pleasure to hear. There is almost always a chord, sometimes a single note, on which the pain and the pleasure seem to culminate, which appears to dominate the whole, and, hearing it, you have the feeling that it is almost unbearable, that if it returns but once more you will have to—you don't know exactly what, but that, at any rate, it will be too much for you. It was this sort of music I was listening to now, and each one of those supreme notes seemed to stab straight into my heart like a well-aimed knife. Presently, as I

leant against the door post, listening, I discovered that I was crying, and that, despite my tears, I was happy, and at last believed in my own happiness. All that had been stiff within me had been softened, all that had been cold had been melted by that delivering music.

It ceased, and I opened the door, meaning to say a word of thanks to my sweet friend, but I had not taken two steps before I stood still, disbelieving my tear-blurred gaze, for the face that looked at me over the piano was not the one I had expected to see. It was not Jadwiga who sat there, it was her mother. To me it was like a ridiculous transformation scene.

“I beg your pardon,” I murmured in groundless confusion, “I fancied—I thought——”

She made no reply. I am not sure that she even noticed me. Even through the dusk I could read the dreamy, far-off look on her emaciated face—a look of inexpressible satisfaction. It was the first time she had played for eleven years, as I afterward heard; no doubt to her, too, music had been a saving outlet to emotions which, without it, might have come near to kill her.

Late that night I sat up answering Henry's letter. I could not sleep until I had done so, I now suddenly felt. It was a strange sort of night, brilliant, and yet wild, with weird effects of illumination, the smallest details of which deeply im-

pressed my excited fancy. Moonlight is generally associated in our minds with stillness ; but to-night, although the moon was at its full, a wind had risen after sunset, which kept closing the clouds over its face, thus making intervals that were almost as clear as day alternate with sudden darkness. The path of light traversing the lawn, which I could see from my window, had been swallowed into blackness and a dozen times emerged again from the shadows. A dull, banging sound in the distance told me that a window had been left unfastened somewhere in the house ; its regularly recurring beats ran as a sort of accompaniment to the progress of my pen. It was not until I laid it down finally that my nerves began to rebel against the irritation. Would nobody think of fastening it ? I asked myself. But the house was evidently asleep ; if I wanted that window fastened I should have to do it myself. Accordingly, with carefully shaded candle, I slipped out through Jadwiga's room, and set out on a voyage of discovery.

Nothing is so deceptive as a loose window on a windy night. When you stand still to listen it regularly stops banging, and when it begins again it is certain to be on the opposite side of the house from where you are. I had looked into several rooms without discovering anything, when, by too abruptly closing a door, I put out my candle. Not that that mattered much, for the intermittent moon-

light would come to my aid. Just then I reached the door of the room which was known as "the Master's room," and opened it as I had opened the others. As I did so I felt a sensation which I had never experienced before—that of my hair moving on my head—for there, at the far end of the room, with its back turned to me, there stood a white figure immovable, a human figure robed in flowing draperies. It was just then one of the moonlight intervals, which materially added to the ghastliness of the impression. Out of doors, among trees and grass, moonlight is partly awful and partly enchanting; indoors, however, to my mind, it is never anything but awful. The silver flood is meant for leafy glades, or boldly cut rocks, not for tables and chairs, framed by human hands, and unable to bear each wholesale idealisation. Admitted into the dwelling of man, where only the homely lamp should reign, moonbeams are strangers, and bring with them I know not what sense of mournfulness and desolation. I felt something of this as I marked the glare of light on the polished table, the harsh reflection on the leg of some chair, or on the corner of some picture frame on the wall.

It was in front of one of these pictures that the white figure stood in the middle of a flood of light which gave to its garments an element almost of transparency. As I entered it turned its head, and I found myself looking across the room into Jad-

wiga's deadly pale face. But there was something else in her face which shocked me more than the pallor, a sort of fixity in the painfully wide-open eyes, a look of distress, of despair, of perplexity, —I do not know how to define it, but a look I had never before seen on any human face, and pray to God I may never see again. A sudden remorse took possession of me at the sight, for having since mid-day lived entirely on my own thoughts.

“Jadwiga!” I exclaimed, “I thought you were in your bed,—what can you be doing here?”

As I drew nearer I saw that the picture before which she had been standing, apparently in rapt contemplation, was the portrait of her father, Hazimir Bielinski.

She looked at me for so long and so blankly before answering that I began to ask myself whether she were not walking in her sleep. I had never seen her face so white nor her eyes so black before; it was only when I stood close to her that I discovered the reason of this blackness to be the extraordinary dilation of the pupils. I touched her hand and almost shuddered at the contact, so cold was it, but my movement seemed to have aroused her from a sort of stupor.

“It is nothing,” she said hastily, passing her hand across her forehead. “I could not sleep,—I had toothache, so I came to look for some drops.”

“But the drops are not here, surely?” I asked.

“No,—I know; I came in here for something else. I had fancy to look at Papa’s picture; I was passing the door, you know.”

“A strange moment for looking at it surely. Have you not plenty of other opportunities? But you will come to bed now, Jadwiga, will you not?” I pleaded, and gently took hold of her hand.

“Immediately!” she said, turning back to the picture; “I have still one word to say to him.”

Her manner began to alarm me vaguely. “Jadwiga,” I said, feeling principally the need of forcibly removing her thoughts from their present groove, “I have something to tell you,—something good that has happened to myself,” and in a few words I gave her the contents of Henry’s letter. I could not be sure that she even heard me, for her eyes remained fixed on the picture while I spoke, but as I paused she said without any especial emotion:

“So you will marry him, I suppose?”

“Of course I will,” I replied, foolishly hurt at this indifference.

“I hope you will be happy,” said Jadwiga, turning from the picture and beginning to walk toward the door. But she was scarcely half-way across the room when she turned back again, and, coming to me, took my two hands between her cold ones.

“Then at least one of us is to be happy,” she said, in almost her old voice. “Thank God for



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that!" and I felt her lips upon my cheek,—they were as burning as the fingers were cold.

"One of us?" I asked, keeping hold of her hands. "Can we not both be happy yet?"

At the same moment the moonlight went out, exactly as my candle had done, so that I could not see what there was in her face, but her voice was a different one when she spoke.

"I forgot," she said with an inexpressible weariness in her tone, "you are an accomplice; you too would make me have a financial arrangement,—and I thought you understood!"

"Never mind what I am," I said, drawing her toward the door; "we can talk of that to-morrow; come to bed now."

She submitted without another word; and, groping my way along the dark passage, I led her to her room, and soon, worn out with emotions, and despite the loose window which continued banging in the distance, was fast asleep myself.

I feel that I must hurry to the end. Gazing back in memory on the day that followed on that night, even though five years lie between them and now, I find that my nerves are not equal to dwelling very exhaustively on details.

I was in the middle of a dream in which Henry and I were engaged in fabricating a rabbit-hutch out of an empty wine-cask, while Anulka built a wall of jam-pots round it, when a sharp, rapping

sound which did and yet did not belong to the dream, seemed to come from the inside of the cask. "Can it be the rabbits?" I asked myself, even while beginning to come to my senses,—“but they are not in yet;” and as I argued thus the raps grew louder and more hurried, and I awoke with a start to the consciousness that somebody was knocking at my window.

It was a thing that had never happened before, and in sudden terror I sprung to the ground and ran toward the light. The sun was not up yet, and the garden was full of mist, the first autumn mist of the season. At the window rising out of the white vapours, there was a face which I did not immediately recognise—old Andrej, with his grey hair all tumbled about his startled eyes, and with his lips moving, though I could not hear him through the close double window. In nervous haste I tore it open.

“What is it? What is it?” I asked, already infected by his excitement.

He replied by pointing vaguely toward the village.

“Over there,” he said, breathing hard, for he had evidently been running as fast as his old legs could carry him; “over there! come quick! Our young lady,—oh Mother of God, our young lady!”

I did not stop to ask another question, for the sense of disaster was upon me already. Throwing

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on the clothes I found nearest at hand, and pushing my bare feet into slippers, I ran out of the house. As I passed through Jadwiga's room I scarcely even looked toward the bed; I knew already that it would be empty.

Andrej was at the gate already, and once assured that I was following him, he set off running without once looking back.

The village was barely beginning to awake. Here and there a door was open and a yawning peasant stretched himself on the threshold. The basket work palings and the straw-thatched roofs loomed bulkily out of the morning fog. I noticed it all vaguely as I ran past, and noticed also as a grotesquely comical detail that Andrej, although he had on his green livery coat, had not taken time to put on the trousers to match, his legs being encased in staringly white under-garments which moved before me through the mist, almost like the twinkling of two guiding stars. I had not got half-way down the village street when I lost one of my slippers, and ran on with one foot bare; at another time I suppose I could not have borne the pain of the stones, but my nerves were at too high a tension to let me be aware of anything merely physical just now. All this time I had not attempted to conjecture what our goal was or what exactly we should find when we got there. I remember thinking that it was a strange place to look

for Jadwiga in—out here in the public road, where she had not put her foot for months, and it seemed to me also, as I kept my eyes fastened on those white legs in advance, that the street, stretching away into the mist and slowly disclosing one feature after another, would never come to an end. Andrej's hut lay in this direction, and I think that, on the whole, I expected most to be taken there; but we came to the opening of the narrow willow lane I knew so well, and passed it, still at a run, and suddenly it flashed upon me that we were going to the pond. In that moment I think I knew everything, though I only clutched the shawl huddled round me a little tighter, and stumbled on with set teeth. In another moment figures seemed to grow out of the mist—unnaturally tall they looked against the sky, for they were grouped on the top of the sloping bank. When I had climbed the side panting, Andrej was already on his knees beside something which lay on the grass. The silent group parted to let me pass, and then I saw what during the last horrible minutes I had almost been expecting to see—Jadwiga in the same white dressing-gown which she had worn last night, only that its drenched folds clung closely to her limbs, and with her wet face turned motionless to the sky. Her hair had come undone and wandered in clammy strains, shiny as water serpents, over her shoulders and bosom, twisting right round one of her arms and

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even her neck; her lips were parted and her half-open eyes brimful of water.

I had almost thrown myself upon her, wildly, despairingly, when it occurred to me that there might still be hope.

“The doctor!” I said, angrily shaking the shoulder of the loudly wailing Andrej. “Have you sent for the doctor? Has anything been done? She must be taken into shelter at once.”

Nothing had been done as I might have known had I known Ruthenian peasants better. A leader is the first thing they need in anything like an emergency, and this instinct it probably was which had sent the distracted Andrej straight to my window. But although they cannot command they know how to obey. Within five minutes of my appearance on the scene a man on horseback was on his way to Zloczek, and Jadwiga transported to Andrej’s hut close by, and lying on his wife’s bed, whence the water from her hair and clothes dripped and dripped on to the rude floor. Then began the last forlorn struggle—the warming of blankets, the trickling of *wódki* between her closed teeth, also the burning of herbs before her face, recommended by one of the village cronies. Each newcomer had a remedy of his own, of which he positively asserted that it must bring revival.

Let me not live through those hours again—I scarcely know even now if, indeed, they were hours

or only minutes—enough to say that she did not revive, and that when the morning sun, struggling through the vapours, poured in at the little square window I knew, without any doctor to tell me so, that it was time to close those half-lifted lids.

## CHAPTER XX

THE next thing I remember is walking back again through the village, slowly this time, and with a pair of shoes belonging to Andrej's wife on my feet. In front of us, stretched on a mattress they carried Jadwiga, and from out of every hut we passed some man or woman came to join us. It was an ever-increasing but silent procession that escorted Jadwiga back to the home which she had left all alone before daylight. The catastrophe was such as to impress even the rustic imagination; solitary sighs were heard from the men, an occasional sob from a woman, a muttering of prayer from both sexes, but no loud note of lamentation disturbed the solemnity of that last escort. Ruthenian peasants have a sense of fitness which some other nations lack, and I believe that in their humble way they had loved her—no one could escape loving her—and had felt a common pride in "our young lady's" beauty.

On the verandah, supported by Marya, Madame Bielinska stood, already informed of what we were bringing, her scanty grey hair slipping from under the night-cap she had forgotten to remove, her face strangely yellow and furrowed in the full morning light. She did not speak as the bearers mounted

the steps, but her arms moved helplessly up and down, forward, and then down again, and these silent gestures said more than any words could have done; but I had no thought for her just then, and no pity either. Anulka was not visible; I learnt since that, as we approached the house, she had been carried off the verandah in convulsions.

The next hours are blurred in my memory. Toward evening I find myself again standing in the big drawing-room, transformed already into a sort of mortuary chapel, and beside the couch on which Jadwiga had been laid, dressed in white, as is the custom of the country for young girls, and with a bridal veil flowing over her clasped hands and long, black hair. They had managed to get the hair dry by some means or other, and, instead of water snakes, it now resembled carefully sorted silken strains. The garden had been plundered of its asters and hollyhocks, which filled every receptacle that could be made to hold a flower, and tall wax candles burnt on each side of her.

On the floor at the foot of the bier there cowed something which might have been a small heap of black clothes. I went up and laid my hand upon it mercilessly.

“Does it hurt enough *now*?” I asked, with I know not what feeling of savage satisfaction in the midst of my own pain—and I pointed to the form on the couch.



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The unhappy mother lifted her face to me, the scared, quivering face of a broken woman.

“It does,” she said, with shaking lips. “Surely it will be paid for now!” And right through the depth of her suffering there pierced that gleam almost of fanaticism which I had seen so often within the last few months. I knew then that she would not die of her grief, since she would not be without consolation. Jadwiga would be to her not only a lost child, but also a victim of atonement for the past.

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Two days later I again traversed the village, sitting in a carriage this time beside my deeply veiled employer, whose rigid features were scarcely visible through the density of the black crape. We had done what we could to dissuade her from going, but she was bent on drinking her chalice to its dregs. The little Greek church, all of wood, and with three dark brown minarets cut clear against the wide sky, lay separate from the village, out on the plain, in the midst of its still leafy cemetery, which, with the high enclosing paling, formed a sort of island in the midst of the flat fields. There it was that the Bielinski family, although belonging, like the Poles, to the Roman Catholic Church, had its burying-place, and to the Ruthenian village priest it was that the Catholic

*curé* of Zloczek had transferred his powers for the occasion.

I had never entered one of those so naïvely gorgeous village churches without deep emotion, and it will be well believed that on this occasion I was less than ever in a position to criticise the rude yet impressive details of my surroundings. The tattered banners, the daubed pictures, the crazy candlesticks, the bright but not over-clean altar-cloths, and the strings of glass beads—for a village church in East Galicia is as full of miscellaneous objects as a curiosity box of curiosities—were to me to-day nothing but the background to Jadwiga's coffin, and all this truly oriental profusion of gilding and of colour, over which the dulness of time had mercifully passed, seemed there only to do her honour. As I knelt there, clutching a monstrous candle of brown bees-wax which it took both my hands to support, and with the thick scent of incense in my nostrils, I felt as though I were alone with her, as I had been on the day when she had first taken me to this church and explained to me the symbolic pictures on the wall. There were some she could not understand, she said—and now, where was she; and was there anything more which she could not understand? Surely not.

I think the whole village must have been in the church; from my place beside the altar and through the gilded gates flung back upon their hinges I

could see the rude, furrowed faces turned motionless toward the priest at the altar, and only the lips moving. All the neighbours were there too, I believe; in the more civilised group straight opposite I caught a sight of many faces which had grown familiar within the past year, but which I was probably looking on for the last time.

I did not think that Madame Bielinska would succeed in reaching the grave, but she did. It was not until the priest had departed and the earth had begun to be filled in that she seemed to require the support of Marya's arm, who gently led her back toward the entrance. I did not follow immediately; I had a fancy to see the last earth-clod laid on. One by one the mourners threaded their way back between the green mounds, for no distinct path led to the enclosed space in the corner of the cemetery, and presently I found myself alone with the sexton.

Half an hour later I too was threading my way back. The church door still stood open, and I turned that way, instead of toward the gate. A few minutes more alone in that temple of ignorant but real piety might help to lay a little of the tumult in my heart. A large porch with benches running round it is an almost invariable feature of these churches; as I was traversing this one I perceived a man sitting on the bench with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. At the

sound of my step on the hollow, wooden floor he looked up, and I saw a face that was at the same time both familiar and strange. I had not so much as given a thought to Malewicz since the catastrophe, and the sight of him now thus startled me out of my own pain, by reminding me that there was a sorrow here even greater than mine—no, it was more than a sorrow, it was a despair. When I had seen him three days ago he had still been a young man, despite everything, but the stubby beard which was now sprouting about his chin and cheeks was already the beard of an old man. I stood looking at him, wondering if he would speak; he did so only after a long minute.

“Tell me,” he said, hesitatingly and unevenly, plunging his eyes into mine as though to reach the truth, “tell me; why is it? Is it because she hated me that she did it?”

He had not thought of rising. I sat down beside him and, in the depth of my compassion, laid my hand upon his.

“No,” I answered, “it is not that. If she had hated you her path might have been thorny but it would have been clear. It was not loss of fortune that she was afraid of. If you had been nothing at all to her she would only have needed to hand over to you your money and to retire with her mother into obscurity—and you know that she was strong enough for that.”

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His eyes fiercely asked for more, although his lips did not move.

“I think, on the contrary, that it was exactly her doubts as to her own feelings which drove her to the step. I am quite certain that she was beginning to foresee the possibility of returning your affection—she almost acknowledged as much to me—but just as she had come to foresee it you were unmasked as the man on whose generosity the family had been practically living for the last dozen years. To some spirits such generosity is unbearable and awakes resentment against the giver rather than gratitude. Jadwiga was of those spirits. Two days before her death she said to me:—‘It is dreadful to owe so much to a person and not to be able to pay him back’—and at that moment she did not yet know the whole of her debt. She could not pay you back in the way you wanted to be paid without being sure that she loved you, and she never could be sure now, as that poor half crazy mother of hers will have poured into her ears on that last unhappy day—the world, for one, as her mother will have told her, would never be convinced that she had not taken you merely in order not to have to part with the money. On the one side there was the ignominy of the position, on the other the pang of renouncing the hope newborn within her—the choice was impossible, or it seemed to her impossible at the first glimpse; she

had not the patience to wait and let her emotions calm—she always was inclined to do things ‘suddenly,’ as she herself called it, and, therefore, she preferred to cut the knot of perplexity by doing what her father did. Oh, it is not hard to understand, I think. You must remember that what she has gone through this summer would be enough to profoundly shake any nervous system.”

“Then it was my love that killed her,” said Malewicz, with a smile that frightened me, “and you think I can go on living?”

“Hush!” I said, pressing my hand on his. “Not a word of that. I, too, have been tempted to brand myself a murderess, and to wonder what would have been if I had kept by her side that last day, but it is all empty and useless. We have both loved her and we have both failed to save her. Let it be enough that we are sure of our intentions; let us not look back too intently, for madness might very likely be found to lie in that direction.”

He snatched his hand from mine and rose from the bench.

“Oh, the English!” he said with a bitter laugh, “the English! What a nation of common sense!” And, without taking leave of me, he descended the wooden steps and disappeared round the shoulder of the church. That was the last I saw of Krystof Malewicz.

Not that I left the country immediately. De-

spite Henry's urgent summons it seemed to me that to abandon Madame Bielinska at this moment would scarcely have been Christianlike. Anulka, too, in her desolation clung to me in a way she had never clung before, and I felt as though her little thin fingers were forcibly keeping me back on Polish soil. It was not until all the preliminaries for the handing over of the estate to Malewicz had been completed that I thought of making up my parcels. All his efforts to effect a compromise had been shattered on Madame Bielinska's immovable resolve. Even the loan of the house, which obviously he did not require, she indignantly refused. No doubt she hated the place too intensely by this time to go on living there.

The eve of my departure from Ludniki was also almost the eve of the Bielinskis' farewell to their ancient home. On that last afternoon I went once more to the cemetery. For want of flowers—for by this time autumn was far advanced—I had made a wreath of coloured leaves—just the sort of wreath Jadwiga had worn on her head when I met her for the first time in the park, scarcely more than a year ago. It was a grey, windy day, and as I stood beside the earth heap, that was marked as yet by no monument, a curious feeling of rebellion grew out of my sadness. I was going home to love and happiness. Fate had treated me kindly indeed, and yet I could not forgive her for her

cruelty to the victim who slept here. Was there not something almost against nature in the thought that I, the elder and plainer woman, should have grasped that crown of life which had been refused to her, that my sun of happiness should be dawning just as hers had gone down forever?

While I stood thus a gust came sweeping over the green mounds, bringing with it a shower of leaves. As I watched them chasing each other round the railed-off enclosure, a strain of melody, to which I could not immediately give a name, began to work in my brain. Those mad leaves seemed to be moving to some familiar measure. Presently I had got it: the perplexing finale to Chopin's funeral march. But now, with *Jadwiga's* own words coming back to my memory, it perplexed me no longer. Yes, there they were, the yellow and red ones, the speckled and the striped ones, gay as harlequins and lively as imps—those that looked as though they had been dipped in blood, and the pale ones with the black spots, which to Henry and me had always appeared like slices of current cake—there they were, hopping in and out of the railing, giddily whirling upon the new-made grave. Surely it must have been at such a season and on such a spot that the idea of that last bewildering passage had crept into the Polish master's imagination.

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That night as I lay awake in bed I heard the outer door open, and through the empty room which had been Jadwiga's there came a pattering of bare feet. In another minute invisible hands were groping about me, and Anulka's voice implored:—

“I could not sleep over there, so far from you. Let me in, please, oh, please! I will lie so still!”

With the deftness of a little snake she slipped in under the cover, and I could feel the chill of her little cold feet against mine.

“There is one thing you must tell me before you go,” she whispered as I took her into my arms; “what am I to do to be like Jadwiga? I should like people to be happy when I am there, as they were with her, and unhappy when I die, as they are unhappy about her. After all it is nicer when people like you; tell me, did they only like her because she was beautiful? because then I should have no chance.”

I was too astonished to answer immediately; the question was so unlike the Anulka I had known till now.

“No,” I said at last, “they did not like her only because she was beautiful, but also because her heart was so full of kindness that it overflowed. God forbid that you should be as Jadwiga was in everything, for that would probably mean to suffer as much as she suffered, but if you could get her

kind heart without her impulsive temper you would certainly be loved and perhaps you would even be happy."

We talked for a little longer in the dark, and when at last she fell asleep in my arms I prayed to God that the shock of the catastrophe might prove to have been the convulsion needed for the awakening of the soul.

Four days later I landed in England, and from the moment that I caught sight of Henry's face among the waiters on the pier I began to live my own life again.

That was five years ago, and sometimes I am half persuaded that the events of my one year of exile have no more substance than that well-known stuff of which dreams are made, so badly do they fit into my present placid, and—let me say it boldly—humdrum existence. Have I ever really seen a church with three minarets, or a meadow dotted with storks? I could almost doubt it, but for the sharp state at my heart when I think of these things. Besides, there is the parcel of letters which Agnes has given back to me, and which cannot be explained away, and occasionally, though at more and more rare intervals, there is a shred of news which reaches me from over there. Madame Bielinska is living in lodgings in Limberg with Anulka, who is being educated for a governess. I wonder what sort of a one she will make, by the

bye? Malewicz has, after all, gone on living; he is unmarried, but I do not think it impossible that he may marry yet, not to please himself, but his mother, to whom he will always feel that he owes a reparation. As for Wladimir, I have heard that on his return from his Eastern voyage he was discovered one day on his knees and in tears on Jadwiga's grave, sobbing out: "How she must have loved me!" No doubt he will die persuaded that Jadwiga took her life because she could not live without him. Meanwhile he has found some one to dry his tears for him—no other than the elder of the two giggling sisters who had squeezed so many jokes out of the semi-culinary Christmas party, and whose father is one of the notabilities of the neighbourhood.

I am as happy as the love of husband and child can make me, and yet I have a place in my heart which belongs to neither husband nor child. In some moments—such, for instance as when some one asks me why I have called my little girl by such a strange out-landish name as Jadwiga—it is to that place I retire—alone with my memories.

THE END









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