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"THE KNOT."

A TALE OF POLAND.

(Translated from the French by Mrs. J. Sallier.)

CHAPTER I.

In 1621, when the Polish ambassadors presented to Paul the Fifth the banners taken from the infidels, and piously besought him for relics, the venerable Pontiff replied: "Why ask ye me for relics?—you have but to pick up a little of your polish earth, every particle of which is the relic of a martyr." In what words, then, might Christendom now address that long-suffering, and most heroic nation? In the beginning of the seventeenth century, Catholic Poland generously shed her blood at Chocim, and subsequently under the walls of Vienna, braving and repelling on those two memorable occasions, the attack of seven hundred thousand Turks. She fought for the common good of Europe, but encircled by a halo of glory, and cheered on by plaudits the loudest and most enthusiastic. Poor Poland!—she was then formidable by her power, and illustrious by her achievements.

Who could then have foreseen that those very nations of Europe which owed their salvation to Poland, would one day form a coalition to despoil and subjugate their deliverer? And yet so it stands on the face of history. Artifice, perfidy, violence, were each in turn brought to bear on the unhalloved work, and Poland fell. In 1733, Russia, in concert with Austria, invaded Poland, entered Warsaw, deposed Stanislaus, the king, and proclaimed in his stead Augustus the Third. Thirty years later, Catherine the Second placed one of her creatures on the tottering throne of Poland, and the Russian ambassador might truly say to that phantom of Royalty: "You see I am your master, and you are to remember that your crown depends on your entire submission!" In 1768, the Confederation of Bar essayed, but vainly, to shake off the Russian yoke, and the kingdom was given up to the pitiless fury of a savage soldiery. At length came the dread torture of dismemberment—Prussia, Austria, and Russia tearing asunder their unhappy victim, and dividing amongst themselves her yet palpitating members. Poland, after all, was not dead—the breath of life was not yet extinguished, and she made an attempt to rise by the liberal constitution of the 3d May, 1791. A new struggle followed—the national cause was fettered by the weakness of the king, Stanislaus Augustus, and at its close saw the population of Poland reduced to three millions—whereas, she had once numbered twenty within her fair provinces. But such a people can never remain quiescent under the lash of oppression—they rose again in 1794, when Kosciusko—the intrepid Kosciusko—achieved prodigies of valor in his mighty struggle with the allied powers; but in vain his progress—he fell on the fatal field of Maciejowick, and soon after, twenty thousand victims, consisting of old men and young children, women and girls were brutally massacred in Praga, at the very gates of Warsaw. Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski, the ex-favorite of Catherine, and the last king of Poland, abdicated, and that ill-fated kingdom was definitely divided between her three murderers, banished from amongst the nations, and deprived even of her distinctive name. Yet the drama ended not there. Fired by the victories of Napoleon, this nameless, this dissevered nation again started into life, and followed with renewed hope the steps of the conqueror. Napoleon gave but a cool welcome to auxiliaries who sought but the restoration of their ancient independence, so that, instead of erecting Poland (as policy even, would have dictated) into a free state, whose gratitude would have made it an effective ally, he was led by his insatiable ambition into Russia, where destruction fell upon him.—The great opportunity lost to Poland, she was for the fourth time divided amongst her greedy and ungrateful neighbors. The Emperor Alexander behaved nobly to the provinces which fell to his share, and promulgated a constitution in strict accordance with the engagement entered into at the Congress of Vienna. But such generosity could not last on the part of Russia.—Alexander was succeeded by Nicholas—the reaction of despotism speedily set in, and new chains were forged for unhappy Poland.

"This brings us to the close of 1830, when the events occurred which we are about to relate. It is not easy to imagine the utter wretchedness of a country which had lain under the iron yoke of the oppressor—torn and tortured by every species of cruelty and persecution. Terror overspread the land, for the Russian government was known to have its thousands of spies stationed throughout the provinces, in order to give information of even the faintest symptom of revolution. The broken-spirited Poles glided through their towns and cities more like shadows than living men—neither in the streets, on the public promenades, nor even in private assemblies, did any man dare to give utterance to a patriotic sentiment, though it were to his dearest friend. Members of the same family, when separated by distance, might no longer enjoy the pleasure of a

mutual correspondence, for the seal was unhesitatingly broken by an infamous and unprincipled police. On the most trifling accusation a citizen would disappear, and not even an answer as to his fate could be obtained by his afflicted family. The dungeons were filled with unhappy victims, and Siberia beheld with amazement her dreary deserts peopled with the fair sons of Poland.

Was it not, then, matter of surprise and admiration that Poland, bruised and broken as she was, even then contemplated the prospect of deliverance? Her heroic sons were wont to assemble in the impervious shades of her dense forests, and under cover of the night to concert measures for yet another attempt to liberate their suffering country, holding their own individual lives as naught, could that glorious end be attained by their sacrifice. This great question was agitated (secretly, of course), from one end of the country to the other, and the time had arrived when each awaited the summons to arise and smite the oppressor.

Such was the state of affairs, when, on the morning of the 1st of December, 1830, a young Polish nobleman, named Raphael Ubinski, rode along by the shores of the Ujensien, in the neighborhood of Grodno: a splendid hunting train by which he was preceded giving sufficient indication of the rank and fortune of its master.—The hounds made the shore resound with their joyous baying, and the hunters, mounted each on a gallant courser, sounded at intervals their lively chorus, whereupon whole troops of boys and children, darting forth from the adjacent cottages, took their places in the rear of the cortege, eager to share in the sports of the day.—The fair face of nature, faded as it was by the icy touch of winter, wore at that moment when lit up by the rays of the wintry sun, such a charm as we see on the pallid countenance of a dying maiden when she smiles a melancholy smile. In front lay a spacious plain. On one side the river rolled on in peaceful majesty, its waves borrowing a rich purple tint from the rosy clouds of the early morning; while on the other, the dark line of the leafless forest was traced in broken and irregular undulations on the bright sky beyond. Yet neither the unhopd-for beauty of the day nor the noisy gaiety of huntsman or peasant, could brighten the serious and somewhat anxious face of the young nobleman, who rode at some distance behind his troop, as though to pursue his reflections undisturbed.

Raphael Ubinski, who had lost both his parents some years prior to the opening of his tale, was then about twenty-five or twenty-six years of age. He lived retired on his parental estates with his maternal grandmother, a woman whose high moral courage and unbending principles of rectitude commanded Raphael's respect and admiration, as her judicious kindness won his warmest affection. Brought up as he had been in the ways of religion and virtue, he knew how to resist all the gaudy seductions of youth and prosperity. Study was the amusement of his leisure hours, and deeply struck with the impression that a son of Poland might serve her by the powers of his mind as well as by his sword, he applied every faculty to make himself worthy of those high avocations to which he was by birth entitled. Yet Raphael was far from being ambitious, but seeing as he fully did the deplorable condition to which his country was reduced, he ardently desired to devote himself to her deliverance. There had been a time when, led away by the enthusiasm of youth, he had thought that force alone could remedy the misfortunes of Poland, and had thrown himself heart and soul into those secret societies which, eluding the vigilance of the Russian police, multiplied throughout the provinces. But, according as his reason and judgment were matured by study and reflection, he had become sensible that his unhappy country had no chance for success in a struggle with three great powers united against her to retain her in bondage. This saddening conviction had for some time damped the ardor of those hopes, which nothing could destroy, founded, as they were, on those sacred and immutable rights for which he would willingly have laid down his life. "Alas, no!" would he sigh, in bitter sorrow, "God can never sanction deeds of violence and treason, yet Poland, poor exhausted land, cannot surely be doomed to groan in perpetual slavery. There must be some means of deliverance for her. Oh! that it were given me to know them!" After numberless reflections on this all-engrossing subject, he arrived at the conclusion that Poland must needs have patience, and prepare herself by a high and pure morality for whatever contingencies might arise in her favor. In the actual condition of the people, and the violent agitation of men's minds there were many signs whereby a reflecting and philosophic mind might dive into the future. These ideas, now settled into convictions, had effected an entire change in the mind and in the conduct of Raphael, so that, instead of fomenting the angry impatience of his fellow-patriots, and urging them on to that violent demonstration which he now saw would but make

matters worse, he sought only to restrain their impetuosity, and to prove to them that they could best serve their country by applying themselves to foster and develop the national virtues. But this language, being new to them, was not often understood, while the reserve which Raphael was wont to assume when violent measures were under discussion, placed him in that false position, wherein a man appears, in the eyes of the impetuous and unthinking, to be undecided as to his course, simply because he aims only at what is practicable, and knows better than any other the means of attaining his end.

Such were the reflections of Raphael as he rode along by the river on the morning in question. He was on his way to join a great chase in the domains of the Count Bialewski, which chase was neither more nor less than a pretext for assembling the neighboring noblemen, so that they might stimulate each other in the pursuit of freedom, and at the same time concert the needful measures for a struggle which could not now be distant. Raphael was more than a little embarrassed by the awkwardness of his position in regard to his friends, knowing that time alone could justify his opinions, and he shrank from assemblies like the present where he found it difficult to defend his convictions. But why, then, did he accept the invitation of the Count, a veteran soldier of exalted patriotism, whose whole soul was on fire with the desire of doing battle against the Russians? In the first place, having once entered with all sincerity into the views and hopes of his fellow-patriots, he knew not how to withdraw himself with any sort of grace from their councils; and in the next place, why Count Bialewski had a lovely daughter, and Raphael was but twenty-five. This daughter of the Count, fair as lover could desire, the co-heiress of a rich inheritance, and gifted with many rare qualities, both of mind and heart, was naturally an object of exceeding interest to all the young nobles in her vicinity. She was now in her twentieth year, but her father had been known to declare that he would not give her in marriage till she was twenty-one at least. In the meantime many suitors presented themselves, and amongst them Raphael stood eagerly forward. It was not for him, then, to refuse the Count's invitation, and still less could he do so, as he knew full well that there would not be wanting some, who, in the hope of prejudicing Rosa against him, would represent his peculiar political opinions in the most unfavorable light, whereas he felt within his soul a certain energy of conviction which assured him that he could well justify himself when present.

Reflecting thus, alternately on the sad condition and cheerless prospects of his country, and the serious difficulties of his own individual position, he was journeying towards the castle, when he saw rapidly approaching, by a cross road, a gay and numerous hunting party. A moment after, he recognized in its chief, one of his friends, named Stanislaus Dewello, who, coming eagerly forward, greeted Raphael in the most cordial manner.

"I am so much the more gratified by this encounter, my dear Raphael," he exclaimed with animation, "that I had little expected to meet you here."

"And why so?"

"Why, because we scarcely ever see you now-a-days. You seem to shrink from the companionship of your former friends, and wrap yourself up in gloomy reserve, until we are brought to ask each other whether we can indeed count on you in the noble enterprise to which we are devoted?"

"Before I take upon me to answer you, my dear Stanislaus," said Raphael, lowering his voice, "will you be kind enough to inform me whether it is your indispensable custom to have that worthy steward of yours stationed as close behind as though he were your shadow?"

"Oh!" returned Stanislaus, "you need have no fears on that head; he is in all respects a most faithful fellow, and (between ourselves be it said) he has saved me from utter ruin, half a score of times at least. Nevertheless, I will send him away for the present, for if you will only hear me, I have something of importance to communicate. Firley, my good friend," turning to the steward, "we desire to be left alone just now, and let us have a little quiet, too, by all means—so you will tell our noisy hunters to keep their *fanfaras* for a more fitting moment. That's a good fellow—go now!"

The man scarcely attempted to repress a gesture of discontent, yet he gave the spur to his horse and rode away, an ironical smile curling on his lip.

"Are you sure of that man?" inquired Raphael, who had observed him closely.

"As sure as I am of myself!" promptly rejoined Stanislaus.

"It is well. And now, Stanislaus, can it be necessary for me to assure you again and again, that however much I may disapprove of your present plans, I am still entirely devoted to the same end at which you all aim?"

"I believe it, Raphael, I believe it; but, nevertheless, if it be permitted to each of us to have and entertain our own private opinions on the subject, should we not all submit our judgment to that of the majority, that by our unanimity we may ensure success to the national cause?"

"Alas!" sighed Raphael, "I can never adopt your views, for I see all too clearly the dread abyss into which you are hurrying. On the contrary, I must ever protest against a course of action, the result of which will be still deeper misery for our common country. But if, notwithstanding my earnest remonstrances, you are still determined to drag that hapless country into a fruitless struggle, then I can only say that my duty will not permit me to absent myself from your ranks."

"So far, well, my friend. And now to speak plainly, as one friend to another. I would rather not see you at the castle to-day."

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Raphael, with surprise.

"Why, just this—that your eloquence may have its effect in cooling the zeal of our friends, at a time, too, when we require all the courage and all the energy we can bring to bear. Besides, you cannot hope to effect a change in our counsels, for we are in hourly expectation of hearing that which will draw our swords from their scabbards. Leave us then to act as occasion may require; nor seek to interfere with our arrangements through your influence with the Count, remembering always that though he ever seems to hear you with attention, he neither can nor will adopt your advice."

"Nevertheless, my good friend, you will allow that I know best what suits me, so you must 'en put up with my company as far as the castle."

"Ay, marry, my master! You can do as you like, and I have only to confess myself a consummate dolt for having tried to turn you from a path which leads you to the bower of your lady-love. Now I am sure you cannot deny that neither politics nor patriotism forms the sole subject of your grave cogitations?"

"Nay, it were scarcely prudent in me to make a confident of one so prone to laughter. So, think as you may on that score, I am not to be persuaded from availing myself of the invitation with which the Count has honored me!"

"Since that is the case, then," cried Stanislaus, quickly, "I am bound to speak plainly and seriously, even at the risk of awakening your astonishment. You know me well enough to understand that I am pretty well skilled in the art of pleasing, and not less penetrating as to the success of such endeavors as have the favor of the fair for their end and aim. Now were you to ask me, on the strength of my superior judgment in such matters, what I think of your prospects with the Lady Rosa, (nay, hear me out, man)—I have a right so to speak) I should tell you candidly and fairly that you are but losing time, and had better go seek your fortune elsewhere. Heretofore it was quite allowable for you to pay your court to the lady—ay, and win her, if you could—but now the case is widely altered. When a decided preference has been shown, we should at once give way to the successful candidate."

"And that successful candidate—" demanded Raphael, with a faltering voice and a pale cheek.

"He stands before you, my dear Cato!"

On hearing this announcement, Raphael's first thought was expressed by an incredulous and almost contemptuous smile. But when he looked upon the beaming face of his rival, a thousand anxious thoughts took possession of his mind, and gave him more uneasiness than he would have been willing to confess. However he might seek to repel the idea that the noble heart of Rosa could be caught by the merely superficial advantages of Stanislaus, he could not conceal from himself the fact that it would be difficult to find a more accomplished or more attractive cavalier. His figure was tall and commanding, yet perfectly elegant; and his handsome features were illuminated with a sprightly and spirited expression which gave them no ordinary charm.—Moreover, Stanislaus was lively and generous—was gifted with uncommon powers of persuasion, and had all the dauntless bravery of the knights of old. But on the other side, (for all things earthly have their shade), his character had no solidity; he was prodigal, volatile, passionately fond of pleasure, and the sworn foe of anything like labor. And yet, as Raphael inwardly exclaimed, how light might each of these faults appear in a young man who, like Stanislaus, could throw a charm even around his failings!

As for Raphael himself, he could bear no comparison to his brilliant rival. There was nothing in his appearance to attract attention, save only that unpretending and quiet grace which denotes the truly well-bred man. His countenance was rather interesting than handsome, and yet from the nobleness of its outline, and the intellectual expression of its every feature, it was just the face to rivet the attention of a superior mind.

Yet, on a first glance (and such leaves generally the most durable impression) it was impossible not to admire the singularly fine features of Stanislaus. There was, therefore, nothing improbable in the declaration Raphael had just heard;—and so deep was his emotion, that it required all his self-control to preserve an appearance of composure. Still, he did not despair, being well acquainted with the extreme self-confidence which formed a distinctive mark in the character of his rival, and after a short silence, he replied:

"I am fain to believe, Stanislaus, that you would never have spoken so confidently did you not deem yourself fully authorized. Nevertheless, you must permit me to say that knowing as I do the extreme reserve usual to the Lady Rosa, together with that shrinking delicacy of feeling which belongs to her, I must still doubt whether you are as certain of her real sentiments as you seem to think."

"Why, Raphael, you must assuredly take me for a fool, to suspect me of making an idle boast where success was still doubtful?"

"Tell me, then, on what grounds do you build your hopes? For I dare affirm that you have received no formal consent from either Rosa or her father."

"It is true, I have not; yet the thing must be beyond all doubt when our mutual friend and common rival, Leopold Mapski, said to me only yesterday, that he believed I should fully to compete with me, and that he felt himself constrained to waive his pretensions in my favor. May I die if I exaggerate in the least, on the contrary, I omit much of what he said, lest it might tire you to listen!"

"That may all be," rejoined Raphael, dryly, "and yet I do not despair."

"You do not despair! Why, see you not, my dear Raphael, that there exists between the Lady Rosa and myself the most perfect union of taste and feeling? You cannot but remember, I am sure, that on winter evenings, when we assembled for music, she and I invariably sang together, nor the equally evident fact that when we meet in the ball-room I am ever her favorite partner. Have you not observed that when we walk together, my arm is sure to be eagerly accepted—not to say, sought? while in the chase, does she not always recognize your humble servant as the most skilful quarry that ever shielded a lady fair from the perils of the forest? Are you so blind as not to see the advantages to be derived from these occasions, so trifling in themselves—the numberless sweet words and interesting conversations which spring from this intimacy, strengthening and confirming my exclusive rights?"

"Were these the only means of pleasing the Lady Rosa?" returned Raphael, in a tone half serious, half ironical. "I must own it would be downright folly to compete with you, and it would only remain for me to follow Leopold's example, and resign in your favor. But—"

"But the grave Raphael chooses to imagine that a young counsel may be caught by a philosophical or literary disquisition, or that she may be fascinated by the political speculations of a senator that is to be, or that she might be led to conceive an interest in a religious controversy. Considering himself a perfect master in each and all of these matters, he very probably fancies that they may overbalance the trifling counter-advantages of his rivals. Oh, sanctified simplicity! how richly you deserve a heavenly crown, since, alas! you are not likely to obtain your earthly rewards!"

"Go on at your leisure, Stanislaus, for you know I am proof against both raillery and sarcasm. Yet I cannot refrain from reminding you that magnanimity becomes a victor."

"But do you really dispute my claim to that title?"

"I dispute nothing. But when the Count decides against me, in his daughter's name, then I shall silently withdraw my claim. I may even add that defeat will lose something of its bitterness if you are to be the conqueror."

"Many thanks, my friend, and I cannot but admire your resignation even in perspective, tho' I much fear I could never imitate it in such a case. But this, I suppose, is one of the advantages of having what are called the Christian virtues. I have now only to say that being *warned*, you are already *half armed*. But here we are at the Castle, and without enemy I hope!"

"Oh, certainly," said Raphael, aloud; but within himself he said—"Yes truly, if Rosa has been allured by the brilliant exterior of this young man—if she has yielded herself to the fascination of his manner and address, then have I but little cause for regret. If such be the case, I have been lamentably mistaken in my estimate of her character. A thousand others are as fair to look upon, and those perfections of mind and heart for which I loved her being thus found unreal, I can with comparative ease submit to her decision. Such a woman would be ill-suited to share the iron destiny which awaits