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A TALE OF POLAND.

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

CHAPTER VIII.

Stanislaus had only walked a short distance through the forest when he saw Firley approaching, leading by the bridle his deserted steed. "How happy I am to see your lordship again," cried the worthy steward, "for I feared that some accident had befallen you. I was surprised when I missed you from your usual post beside the Lady Rosa (who will soon be, I suppose, my honored mistress), and could no way account for your absence when I came upon your horse, wandering through the copse, and your lordship may judge that I became dreadfully anxious. But will you please to mount?" added the faithful servant, as he remarked the increasing agitation of his master. Stanislaus made no reply, but flung himself into the saddle. "And what frightened me still more," persisted Firley, "when I came to examine the saddle, I perceived that one of your pistols was gone. But very soon after I had made this alarming discovery the Count and your friend Ubinski passed quite near me, and I heard them repeat your name several times, and one of them spoke as though he had just left you. I then heard the Count say—Oh! as to that, Ubinski, I can answer for Stanislaus—at least, we are sure of his vassals, and that, you know, is the main thing." Now there was not a word of truth in this very plausible story, but as he had followed his master step by step and saw all that had passed, he had built up a structure to suit his own purpose. His fabrication had, in the first place, effectually aroused Stanislaus from his stupor. "Ah! indeed! is it thus they use my name?" cried he, with a strange smile, "I am rejoiced to hear this, because if they wish to use me for their own private ends, I have just cause for breaking with them altogether. For you, Firley, you will ride forward to the castle, and draw thence all our people. I shall await you on the road, so make no delay as business of importance demands my presence at home." "Oh, certainly my lord wishes to superintend in person the preparations for his marriage," observed Firley, as though he understood not the drift of his master's words. "Firley!" cried Stanislaus with sudden fury, "if you ever repeat that word in my presence, you shall have cause to repent it—and, after all, what is it to me?—and I can now curse my own folly for having been so long devoted to one whom I now heartily despise. You must know, then, Firley, that the Count and his daughter have both rejected my offer." "Rejected your offer?" repeated Firley, in well feigned astonishment, although that worthy had already guessed how matters stood. "Yes, rejected—and the preference given to my friend Raphael." "Well, my lord, I can only say that if I had not heard it from your own mouth I could never have believed it." "And yet, Firley, it is a hateful truth!" "And after all, my noble master is about to return home and collect his vassals that he may range them under the Count's banner—for so I heard that nobleman say. I cannot but admire your magnanimity, though I must own I would never have given my master credit for such profound humility!" "A truce to rallery, Firley! and help me to work out my revenge!" "Oh! with all my heart!" returned the steward, with perfect sincerity. "And, indeed, I might have known that a nobleman of unblemished honor such as it is my pride to serve could never have pocketed an affront so gross. Then for your revenge, my good lord, why, it must be proportionate to the grievous wrong you have sustained—that is certain. Well I think the best thing your lordship can do is to abandon these wretches to themselves, and when left to their own paltry resources, you will soon see them bitterly deplore their treatment of you, and even sue with all humility for your forgiveness. Then you can give them contempt for contempt and treat them as they deserve!" "And I assure you I will do it with right good will, but now it looks bad for me to give up the national cause for a private quarrel. I have unhappily made an engagement which, to break, would be dishonor." "And God forbid, my lord! that I should advise you to do anything against the dictates of your conscience; the truth is that I admire exceedingly the delicacy of your sentiments. But yet I must be permitted to remind you that you have your personal dignity to sustain, and that it, too, has its rights. If you do not wish to pronounce hastily, at least maintain towards those who have injured you a cold reserve, so that you will be free to act hereafter as your own honor and interest may require." "Yes! that is very nearly what I had thought of," muttered Stanislaus, but half aloud.

Meanwhile, about three or four o'clock the faint wintry sun began to decline westward; the north wind piped shrilly amongst the tall and leafless trees, and the hunters widely scattered over the fields and roads thronged in to the merry sound of the horn. Notwithstanding the fatigues of the day, and the sharp squalls of the frosty wind, they approached the castle with laugh and song, wearing more the aspect of a victorious army than a troop of huntsmen. Some were discussing the most striking incidents of the chase, others disputing on the skill and dexterity of those who had distinguished themselves in the course of the day: some were playing lively airs on small trumpets fabricated of the bark of the birch tree, while others gaily fired at the numerous flocks of crows who, hovering around, contributed by their harsh croakings, to swell still louder the general uproar. On reaching the castle, another festival awaited the hunters, who took care to march in perfect order, and with a show of haughty defiance in front of the Russian soldiers, who stood under arms motionless as statues, and many a bitter jest and biting sarcasm was flung at them by the Poles as they passed. They then proceeded to take their places at the table which had long awaited their arrival; bottles flew merrily from hand to hand, and glasses were clinked together with hurrahs which awoke the slumbering echoes of the vaulted halls. Throughout that vast assemblage the most perfect harmony prevailed—masters for the time forgot their distinctive rights, and all were fellow-citizens and brethren. It was when these fraternal transports were at their height that the Count arose, and in a loud, clear voice, commanded silence, when, as if by enchantment, the clamor ceased, and gave place to a profound stillness. "My friends!" cried the Count, "glorious news have reached us—Warsaw has driven forth the Russians, and all Poland is on fire. Our brethren have sworn to die or conquer the tyrant, and shall not we imitate—shall we not aid them? Yes, Poland for ever, and death to the oppressor!" As though it were an electric spark, this news sets hearts and souls on fire, and roused them almost to delirium. Rising with one accord, they embraced each other, laughing and weeping alternately, and wildly stamping their feet in unison as the cry was echoed from mouth to mouth—"Poland—Poland for ever! Death and vengeance for the Russian tyrants!" But they stopped not there, for each man ran and snatched up his arms, and brandishing them aloft, they cried as with one voice that the Russians must be instantly expelled from the castle, "for Lithuania," said they, "must be free like Warsaw." "All in good time," said the Count, "and there is no doubt but we shall do our brethren of Warsaw have done. Follow me now, but be sure that no one strikes a blow until I give the signal. We are twenty to one, and it would throw foul dishonor on the national cause were we to shed the blood of a defenceless enemy." Rushing then into the court-yard, with arms in hands they quickly surrounded the pavilion occupied by the Russians, before the latter had time to respond to the cry of their sentinels. Their chief was thrown completely off his guard, because having seen the Poles entirely given up (as he believed) to the pleasures of the table, he never dreamed of an attack from them. So it was that when one half of his men were sleeping, the other half were quietly eating their supper. "And now let me tell you that resistance is useless," said the Count, as he advanced alone into the Russian quarters, "and would but draw down destruction on your whole party. We have no desire to shed your blood, but we must and shall be masters on our own soil. You will then give up your arms to us, and having done so you may retire unmolested and go wherever you please." The Russian officer still hesitated, but casting a glance behind him, he saw that the greater part of his men were far from being in readiness to support him, he was therefore compelled to yield. "The duty of a soldier," said he, as though to excuse his submission, "The duty of a soldier is to die rather than yield, but when even his death can do no good, I think he may with honor capitulate." The Count had at first resolved to keep this detachment as prisoners of war, but fearing that he might not be able to command the long pent-up wrath of his people, who might insist on sacrificing the Russians to their vengeance, he generously decided on dismissing them from the castle. Availing himself at once, then, of his influence over his friends, he prevailed upon them to consent to this capitulation. The Russians then, glad to escape with their lives, marched out with heads uncovered through the stately ranks of their adversaries, and rapidly gained the open country. "I am afraid," said one of the gentlemen who

stood near the Count, "that this act of generosity may draw upon us a large reinforcement of the enemy; and that sooner than we think." "And that very idea made me hesitate at first," said the Count, in reply, "but then again I quickly remembered that whether I retained these Russians or sent them away, there are sure to be spies somewhere about us, who will be only too glad to inform against us, and make a good job for themselves. And, moreover, a cause so just, so holy as our must never be tarnished by cold-blooded cruelty. Now, gentlemen," went on the gallant old soldier, "we must strain every point in order to follow up as it should be done, this first act of independence. It behoves us, then, to separate for the present, but on the third day let us assemble here again, at the head of all our vassals. Once more I would remind you that it is idle to waste time so precious on trifling preparations; profit, on the contrary, by the enthusiasm first evoked—bring hither all who are willing to follow your banners, for we have arms and ammunition for all. You will leave here with me as many of your men as you can spare, and I shall employ the time in drilling them, and in forming our battalions so as to be ready for the field as soon as you arrive with the remainder of your forces. And so I will bid you adieu for the present, and may God bless your endeavors!" The confederates then took leave of each other, promising faithfully to meet at the appointed time, sword in hand, ready for the battle, and on those conditions each set out for his own domains. As the evening was then far advanced, the Count applied himself, with the aid of Casimir and Raphael, to dispose of his numerous guests for the night. When all the inferior apartments of the castle had been filled, the neighboring farm-houses were put in requisition, and group after group wheeled away, saluting the Count, as they passed him, with patriotic exclamations, until all had sought their appointed lodgings, and silence reigned where all had so lately been tumult and uproar, no sound being heard save the measured step of the sentinels as they paced their prescribed bounds. Then it was that the Count, Rosa, Casimir and Raphael drew their seats around the cheerful hearth to discuss the events of the day and the chances of the future. "All have done their duty," said the Count, "and I trust that even Stanislaus, though he left us so abruptly, will not disgrace his name when the day of trial comes. Notwithstanding his disappointment I think we may reckon on him." "It matters not," said Casimir, "but for my part, I had no idea that he was so susceptible as this most ill-timed flight would prove him to be. Do you know that all our friends who are acquainted with his rejection are convinced that he is at bottom a coward." "Stanislaus is far too passionate to be a coward," said Raphael, "but I think it likely that the poor lad will endeavor to console himself for his disappointment by some new method." "Do let us be charitable, friends mine," interposed Rosa, and let us at least compassionate those who are unhappily governed by furious passions! Just as she spoke, another individual joined the little circle, to their surprise as well as pleasure—it was the Abbe Choradzo. "My dear friends," said the good priest smiling, "since my parishioners have all come hither to enrol themselves under your banners, I have come to offer my services should you require a chaplain." "A thousand thanks, my dear, good friend," exclaimed the Count, warmly shaking the priest's hand, "for you are worth a whole battalion to us." "My children," said the worthy vicar, "the counsels of peace would be now superfluous and out of place, and though my ministry is essentially one of peace, yet its functions change not their character when exercised amid the tumult of battle and the horrors of bloodshed. Wherever death is hovering in the air, there is the place for the priest of the Most High, whose office it is to lead souls to God. My duties of prayer and charity may then be fulfilled in the midst of those stormy scenes which will soon burst on these devoted provinces. Besides, tho' a priest, I am yet a citizen of Poland, and an ardent upholder of her imperishable rights. As a priest, I would have sought to attain those rights by some other, and, it appears to me, surer means, but you have decided otherwise—my country takes up arms to break the unjust and intolerable yoke which oppresses her, and I owe her my feeble support. Dispose, therefore, of all my little property, and do with it whatever you may deem best for the common good." "If God is for us who will be against us?" cried the Count with enthusiasm. "Ah! be not deceived, my friend," returned the priest quickly, "the just cause is not always successful; whether it be that means are often employed which God cannot sanction, or whether it be that by the failure of such causes as

have right on their side, God himself proves to us the indispensable necessity of his rigorous judgments. Let us, however, place our whole trust in God, and whatever may be the issue of events, His almighty arm will never fail us.—And now, my dear Count, I must beg a bed in your fortress for to-night—it is time to seek that repose which wearied nature requires." The little party then separated, and promised to be up and stirring before the dawn, and they kept their word. The fearful anxiety which all more or less felt, suffered none to enjoy very long the tranquil pleasure of sound sleep. As soon as the daylight appeared, the Count set out to examine in detail the ground around the castle so as to prepare his defences against a surprise. The castle itself was only open to a front attack, for in its rear lay, as we have said, the vast and impenetrable forest, but then the front was only defended by an old moat on which the ravages of time were every where visible, and the facade was of such a length as to require a numerous garrison, the more so as there was not a single piece of cannon. "We can decide on nothing," observed the Count to Raphael and Casimir, who accompanied him, "until we have ascertained the exact number of our garrison. Let us go and see." The court-yards were, even at that early hour, thronged with people, who were flocking in from all the surrounding country. But the multitude was composed, in a great measure, of women, children, and old men. The Count commanded silence, and ordered all those who were fit to bear arms, to pass beheld him; in a moment he was obeyed, and arms were distributed amongst these men, who numbered about two hundred men—Casimir immediately set about giving them what training the time would permit. The Count then conducted the immense crowd of those who were unfit for service to the esplanade in front of the castle, and showed them how they could make themselves useful by fetching earth from the fields around to form an entrenchment on the line of the moat. Thereupon, the whole multitude of old men, women and children, set eagerly about their work, and as they numbered altogether no less than seven or eight hundred, and worked with right good will, the work sped bravely on, and by evening of that same day, the entrenchment assumed an imposing aspect. At that time the castle began really to look like war—hour after hour witnessed arrivals of arms, provisions, and volunteers, and every where was seen the most cheering good humor and even joy. Within the castle Rosa was not idle; calm and serene in the midst of confusion and uproar, she occupied herself, with the assistance of the priest, in preparing bandages and medicaments for those who might be wounded in the conflict. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when a considerable body of Russian troops was seen advancing towards the castle. CHAPTER IX. Although the Count affected to make light of this sudden appearance of the Russians, yet, in reality, it gave him the most serious uneasiness; in the first place, he was far from being ready to receive them, and in the next it was more than probable that the presence of such a force in the neighborhood would paralyze the energy of his friends, and deter many from coming forward.—He at once resolved to judge for himself as to the actual number of the enemy, and requesting Raphael to accompany him, he set out, followed at a short distance by some of his people. Having crossed the narrow river which formed the boundary of the esplanade, they turned to the right, in the direction of the Grodno, and had not journeyed far, when, by the last glimmering light of day, they saw all too plainly a glittering forest of Russian bayonets covering the road far and near. The column, it appeared, had halted, and the officers, standing together at a short distance, seemed consulting on what next was to be done. "There are not less than seven or eight hundred men there," observed the Count; "what a misfortune it is that we have not had two days more to prepare—were but our forces gathered together we could easily manage this division, and then the advantage of obtaining the first victory would have been an incalculable one to us, as it would awake the enthusiastic hopes of the people?" "I perceive they have three or four pieces of cannon, too," said Raphael, pointing them out to the Count. "So much the worse for our chance of maintaining our position," replied the Count, with a dejected air. But let us not forget ourselves here, for we have not a moment to lose. It will be an hour yet before the enemy can reach the castle, and as it will then be pitch dark, he must suspend his operations till the morrow, so that we have still from twelve to fifteen hours to urge on our defences. If we then find them of reasonable strength, we may try a forlorn hope, and if we are too weak to attack these Russians, as I much fear we shall be, our remaining here as long

as we can may give our friends time to rejoin us. Truly, I am at a loss to know how it is that these Russians have got here so quickly, for the prisoners whom we liberated could not even yet have reached Grodno, much less to be back again with reinforcements. To what, then, are we to attribute this unlooked-for apparition? It is a mystery to me!" Yet, unaccountable as it seemed to the Count, the matter is plain enough, for this sudden appearance of the Russians was the natural consequence of the note addressed by Firley to the Russian officer. The latter had instantly sent off an express requesting a reinforcement, and next day when he was on his march to Grodno with his men, he had fallen in with these troops who, in compliance with his desire, had been sent on by forced marches. But the reinforcements consisted of not more than a hundred men, and the face of things had changed completely since he had sent for them—it was then the object to arrest a criminal, but now a revolution had commenced, and must be put down at all hazards.—The two detachments, then, had stopped to await the arrival of a still larger force, for which they had sent back to Grodno. And so it was that the Russians had baffled the Count's foresight by appearing before his castle two days sooner than he had expected. "My dear Raphael," said the Count, as they speedily retraced their steps towards the castle, "I have not attempted to conceal from you the imminence of our danger; and you see, therefore, that everything depends on keeping up the courage of our little garrison, and if possible redoubling their enthusiasm, since our only chance rests on one bold stroke. Were it not for the artillery, I should not fear so much, but its effects are terrible on raw, undisciplined men." "Well! at worst we can do as the Vendean did in their unequal struggles against the French republic," responded Raphael, gaily. "We can kneel before the cannons, so that the balls will pass over head, and then rush on the cannoniers." "Why, Raphael, it is the suggestion of an old soldier. You must always have had a hankering after our trade, notwithstanding your late condemnation of our policy. You cannot have forgotten, either, that some years ago, you were among the most sanguine of my young friends, and I suppose nature ever comes uppermost, do what we will, as a buoy floats on the water." "Under one form or another," answered Raphael, "my first thought has ever been that of devoting myself to my country, and I shrink not from shedding my blood for her since she requires it at my hands." "Ah! would that all our confederates resembled you, my friend, for then I should have no fears—success would then, indeed, crown our efforts." Here they arrived at the esplanade, where they found the rustic garrison all assembled. "My friends," said the Count, as he alighted from his horse, "my friends, the Russians are near, but before they can undertake anything against us we shall for outnumber them, and my only fear is that our friends, surrounding them on all sides, may deprive us of the honor of the victory!" "Let us go now, then—lead us on at once to meet them!" was heard on all sides, and so great appeared the enthusiasm of the people, that the Count was reassured. "Not so!" said the Count, in a tone of command, "you shall not march hence till the fitting time is come. Remember that you are soldiers, and must be perfectly obedient to your officers. This night I expect numerous reinforcements, and till they arrive we must do nothing, for we know that our friends would wish to have a share in the glory of the first victory, so let us do as we would be done by. Have your arms in perfect readiness, and leave the rest to us." Having thus guarded against the effect of the sudden appearance of the enemy, the Count applied himself to increase the strength of his defences by all possible means. He ordered large fires to be kindled all along the esplanade, in order to give the appearance of a numerous encampment, and then hurried on the forming of the entrenchments which were to screen his people from the cannonading. He next proceeded to the river, which must necessarily be crossed in order to reach the castle, and saw that the wooden bridge which stretched across it was cut away. Thus he hoped to delay the attack, by obliging the Russians to erect a bridge before they could cross. Having by this manoeuvre gained a few hours more, he sent out scouts to raise the country and others to watch the enemy and then entered the castle with Raphael and Casimir. They were met at the gate by Rosa and the vicar, who were anxious to learn the news. "There will be nothing serious before to-morrow," said the Count, in answer to their inquiries; "but we have great need to profit by the intervening hours. Even you can give us effectual aid, as it is absolutely necessary to write immediately and send off an express to each of