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"THE KNOT:"

A TALE OF POLAND.

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

Recognizing at once the voice of the Count, Raphael opened the door and stood pale and motionless before him.

"What is the matter, Raphael?" asked the Count in a cheerful voice, "Is it not your father who comes to shake hands with you this morning?"

"Can it be possible!" cried the young man, as he threw himself into the arms of the Count. "Yes, very possible!" rejoined the latter, and he pressed Raphael to his heart. "My daughter has confessed to me that you hold the very highest place in her esteem, and in fact, receives your proposal as graciously as even you could desire."

"Oh! it is too much—it is too much!" repeated Raphael, again and again, unable to give expression to the joy of his heart.

"Pardon me, my young friend, it is not enough, for you must instantly appear on the field in front of the enemy. In a word, I want to present you to Rosa as my son and her affianced husband."

"Oh! let us go at once—I am ready."

"Wait a moment, my dear fellow! had you not better complete your toilet! There, son, let me assist you, for I see you are by far too much agitated." And the Count smiled at the youthful eagerness of his friend. "An old officer like myself, you know, is so accustomed to inspect the appearance of his men before he leads them to the charge, that the habit becomes, as it were, instinctive."

Raphael, however, was soon ready, and followed the Count with a hurried step. In the meantime Rosa was not less agitated; her father had announced Raphael's visit, and however great might have been her pleasure, her embarrassment was truly painful. She took a book and sat down near the fire; then rising suddenly, she glanced at her reflection in an opposite mirror, to see that her dress was properly arranged;—then, approaching a window, she stood gazing listlessly out for some minutes—going to the door, she listened, and hearing distant footsteps in the corridor, she threw herself again upon her seat, blushing and breathless. At length, when her father entered with Raphael, she had scarcely strength to rise and advance to meet them.

"My dear child," said the Count archly, as he kissed his daughter's fair brow, "I have brought hither my son Raphael, who, as such, is to be admitted to a high position in your affections, is he not?"

"Will Rosa deign to receive me with favor?" added Raphael, with a touching expression of respectful tenderness in his dark, thoughtful eyes. "And yet I know not how I can prove myself worthy of her regard."

"Oh, my lord!" returned Rosa quickly, "you are pleased to underrate your own merits, but I am not the less aware of their excellence, and—"

"Sweet Rosa," cried Raphael, in unqualified delight, "what earthly sacrifice would I deem too great to testify my gratitude for your almost unbounded kindness?" and taking her unreluctant hand he raised it respectfully to his lips.

"And now, my children," said the Count earnestly, "you will promise me that from this day forward you will be true and faithful to each other; and I know you both well enough to be convinced that the promise will be faithfully kept. For myself, it will enable me to brave all the chances of war without apprehension, so that I can devote myself as I would wish to the service of my unfortunate country."

"Ah! my father!" exclaimed Rosa, with artless fervor, "I am sure God will preserve you through every danger, for I will pray to him earnestly and unceasingly."

"May his holy will be done in all things," replied the Count, "and if we submit to it in a proper spirit we shall be happy, come what may; moreover, I am so happy at this moment that I would not give expression to any saddening fear. We shall now descend to the chapel where the priest and two of our good friends await us, and then, affianced before God's holy altar, you can calmly and trustfully look forward to the moment when you shall be irrevocably united.—Come, my children."

Raphael, in a tumult of joy and surprise, offered his arm to Rosa, and they followed the Count to the chapel. They approached the altar with becoming reverence; and the Count deposited on a plate of chased silver a diamond ring which was an heir-loom in his family, and Raphael placed by its side another jewelled ring, in which was set a miniature of his mother. After the blessing had been pronounced the betrothed exchanged rings, then retiring to the vestibule, they threw themselves on their knees before the Count, who embraced them with tears of joy. It was subsequently agreed that, without affecting any extraordinary restraint, they should all be silent on

the subject of the ceremony which had taken place. "And now," added the Count, "let us rejoice our friends."

It was about eight o'clock, yet the bright day-beam had scarcely dispelled the lingering shadows of the morning twilight; the firmament, in its deep opal blue, thinly veiled by transparent clouds, announced another of those cold, clear days, which are scattered over the dreary time of winter as harbingers of the spring. At that moment the Castle resembled a fortress taken by assault; a constantly increasing multitude fronted its lofty gates, and the esplanade was covered with the population of the neighboring hamlets armed with sticks and rusty guns. The courtyards were filled with guards and huntsmen, some on horseback and others on foot, some blowing a merry blast on their hunting-horns, while others set up the coupled and baying hounds, all of which it may easily be imagined, made a wild and clamorous uproar. At first the Russian garrison which had, on the previous evening, taken possession of the castle, attempted to keep the people from entering, but very soon they were penned up by the curious and astonished multitude in a corner of the court-yard where the only thing they could do was to assume a defensive attitude, and establish a *picquet* at a grating in the wall, so as to keep a watch on those who went and came.

In the meantime the Count passed on into the immense hall, where all that had any pretensions to gentle blood were already assembled. Raphael came after and by his side, leaning on his arm, was Rosa, more charming than ever in her hunting dress, her fair tresses hanging in ringlets on her shoulders and her beautiful eyes cast to the ground, as though to conceal the radiant joy by which they were just then animated. The progress of the party was necessarily slow, being every moment arrested by the salutations of their friends and acquaintances. The first impulse of Stanislaus, when he caught a glimpse of Rosa was to dart forward and offer his arm, but another glance discovered Raphael, and his fine countenance beaming with delight was singularly unwelcome to Stanislaus, who became suddenly fearful that after all he might be defeated. The surprise, nay, consternation so visible on the speaking features of the young noble was quickly perceived by the Count, who, remembering that he owed him a formal answer, took him aside into the embrasure of a window:

"My dear friend," said he, "I have to thank you for the proposal yesterday made by you through my son, and must express my regret that it is not in my power to give you a favorable answer. I am bound to tell you, with the frankness that becomes a soldier, that my daughter has made her final decision, and for me I have left the matter entirely to herself."

"I must, then, have been deceiving myself," muttered Stanislaus, in an embarrassment that he could not conceal, "as I should certainly never have made such a proposal had I dreamed of your daughter's refusal. However, since the Lady Rosa has made her choice, I have only to retire from the field the best way I can."

"But, my dear Stanislaus," exclaimed the Count, with that military vivacity which never quitted him, "we cannot part thus. Had we before us the prospect of a series of festivities, I should never think of urging you to remain amongst us, but the truth is, that though my daughter has been, as it were, forced by circumstances to pronounce her decision, yet the matter rests there for the present. No, no—other scenes now await us, wherein your position is prominently marked, and I am sure that our private affairs will be forgotten in the more engrossing interests of the common cause!"

"God forbid, my lord," Stanislaus exclaimed with noble energy, "God forbid that I should be tempted to forget my engagements with you.—On the contrary, I hope to give you every proof of my devotion to our national cause!"

"You will, then, remain?" said the Count, extending his hand to Stanislaus.

"Certainly I will."

"And you will permit me now to leave you in order to speak with some of these gentlemen?"

"Oh! pray make no ceremony with me!"—The Count walked away, and breakfast was just then announced. The repast which ushered in the chase was not without importance in Poland, for not only the guests, but all the subordinates who were to figure in the sport had a right to take their seats around the truly hospitable board, and the halls were crowded with people who eagerly pressed forward for their turn at the table. From time immemorial a hunting party given by a noble was looked upon as a popular festival, in which all had a right to share; but since Poland, in her enslaved condition, had ceased to be a martial nation, it seemed as though the fiery ardor of her sons had transferred itself to this noble and manly sport where courage, activity, and skill might yet be displayed. Those nobles and gentlemen who had no longer the

right or privilege of maintaining bands of soldiers at their own expense, now applied all their resources to keep up magnificent hunting trains—some great lords there were who kept all the year round no less than three hundred men, whose sole business it was to follow them to the chase, in which they were likewise joined by friends and acquaintances, and by their neighbors of all ranks in society. On such occasions, indeed, whole villages rose with one consent, and rushed with a stunning shout into the woods. This, then, was just the scene going forward in Count Bialewski's castle: wine, beer, mead and brandy flowed around like water, while the servants quickly followed each other carrying in immense dishes of a made-up substance called *rogue's hash*, composed of *saur kraut*, sausages, pork, and other meats all mixed up together, and around these dishes the hungry huntsmen eagerly thronged.—Nor were the peasantry denied a seat at the board, and a brimming glass. This formidable repast was at length concluded, and the signal for departure was given. The Count had, however, provided for the safety of the castle in case of any sudden attack, and when he presented himself at the head of his numerous retinue at the gate of the court-yard, he saw the Russian troop drawn up in order of battle, and its commander advance towards him.

"My lord Count," said the Russian commander, "my instructions require that I should not permit your departure from the castle, and I trust you will see the necessity of yielding with a good grace to this trifling restraint."

"You will doubtless favor me with the reasons for this very harsh proceeding, my good sir?" replied the Count with difficulty restraining his indignation.

"My lord, orders are sent to me, I transmit them to my men, and am bound to see that they are executed. This is all that belongs to me, and I have nothing to do with causes or motives."

"Well, sir!" returned the Count with the utmost coolness, "I have no mind to obey your orders, and have, as you see, a sufficient escort to continue my journey without your leave. I would warn you, however, for your own sake, to avoid an unequal struggle which would be sure to end in the total annihilation of your troop."

"Such being your lordship's intentions, you are prepared, I suppose, to accept their responsibility, having doubtless reflected maturely on what you are about to do. For me, the only thing I can now do is to keep my men on the defensive, and to enter my protest against what I consider an act of rebellion."

"Sir, it would require an army to restrain Poles when setting out for the chase." And so saying the Count spurred his courser, and beckoned to his numerous train to follow, his friends having silently awaited the conclusion of the recent dialogue, evidently well disposed to second the warlike defiance of their host. This incident had no other result than that of arousing to a higher pitch the martial enthusiasm of the hunters, who speedily filled the air with their national airs and many a shout of exuberant patriotism. And so commenced the great chase, apparently directed against the wolves, but in reality to merge into a combat still fiercer and more determined. Yet the secret of the conspiracy was still known but to a few of the leaders, who were to retire at an appointed time to a secluded glade within the depths of the forest to concert their projects. In the meantime the great body of the hunters were preparing to form an immense circle around the savage animals who were heard howling in the distance. The wolf-chase in Poland may be regarded as a truly defensive war, required for the common safety. From the beginning of November till the end of February these ferocious beasts pour over the country in immense numbers, sweep through the villages, and tear away the domestic animals even from their stables, and wo to the unlucky traveller who journeys alone on their path, for neither the rapidity of his horse nor his own courage, even though he be well armed, can save him from a horrid death. Roaming about in bands of thirty or forty they throw themselves with ravenous fury on whatever crosses their path, and it requires a full troop of hardy and warlike men to beat them back. It is then easy to conceive the great utility of these public hunts, and the ardor with which all engage in them. Some days before the projected party, the wood-rangers were sent to survey the lodging of the particular band it was intended to destroy; from their station by night in the topmost branches of high trees, these men imitated the cry of an old wolf, whereupon the cubs set up a hideous howling, and thus disclosed the place of their concealment to their wily foes. The lodgment of the wolves being thus discovered, they were retained there till the day fixed for the hunt by throwing in amongst them a quantity of worthless carrion.

Arrived near the appointed place, a short pause was made in order to restore order amongst the hunters, whereupon the head gamekeeper, who

was the real director of the chase, proceeded to assign to each individual his post and his duties. Before the strong net-work placed by his orders at all the principal openings, he stationed men armed with huge sticks and sheltered behind the trees; then between the net at every thirty paces he placed the hunters, taking care that they were not under scent. The young lads who were to make the beat held themselves as close as possible to the spot whence they were to start the dogs at the foe. As for the dogs, they were no sooner freed from their lashings, than they flew with the rapidity of lightning into the under-wood; the huntsmen blew their horns, and the chase instantly began. With eye fixed, ear strained, and finger on his trigger, each hunter remained motionless. The deepest silence reigned around, when suddenly one of the dogs gives tongue, then another, and another, and soon the whole pack joins in the clamor. The echoes of the forest catch up the noise, now increased a hundred fold by the cries of the hunters, the cracking of whips, and the loud neighing of the affrighted horses. On the other side the lads have broken the beat crying out with all their might and striking the trees with their sticks.—Surprised and terrified, the wolves venture out, to seek safety in flight, but a murderous volley is poured in on them from all sides, and those who escape the lead, rush madly into the nets. And then the horns sound without intermission that glorious finale—"Death to the wolves, and victory to the hunters!"

The battle once gained, the order established by the head keeper was quickly broken up, all pressing eagerly forward to witness its results, while group of hunters are seen plunging here and there into the thicket in pursuit of the scattered remains of the band. Meanwhile, Rosa, surrounded by some of her friends, and attended by the most experienced huntsmen, had courageously led on the main body, while her father, with the other conspirators, had retired to their place of meeting. Stanislaus alone was not found amongst them. In the tumult and wretchedness of his mind one thought alone restrains him from giving way to the fierce promptings of his frenzied jealousy. It is still possible, he thinks, that Rosa may not have voluntarily rejected him—might she not have accepted his rival through the influence of her father, and by his commands? This point he must speedily have decided.

CHAPTER VII.

Notwithstanding his recent explanation with the Count, Stanislaus could not bring himself to believe that he was entirely rejected, and restraining with difficulty the motions of his wounded self-love, he watched impatiently for an opportunity to speak with Rosa. But, alas! Raphael was ever by her side, watching over her safety with the tenderest solicitude, and anticipating with careful foresight the various dangers of the chase. He spoke to her, too, in a low, earnest voice, and Rosa listened with an interest so great as though nothing could have diverted her attention from what he was saying. And Stanislaus followed at the distance of a hundred paces or so, his heart rent and torn by alternate shame and jealousy, as he noted all their motions. It is probable that no such opportunity as he desired would have presented itself had not the preconcerted signal announced from a distance that the hour of meeting for the patriots was come, whereupon Raphael plunged his horse into the thicket, and disappeared in the direction of the sound.—And had Stanislaus listened to the voice of honor or of duty he, too, would have gone; but allowing himself to be governed by his evil passions, he spurred his charger, and quickly rode up to Rosa. The latter, surprised by seeing him so suddenly, and in such visible agitation, exclaimed in a faltering voice:

"I was far from expecting to see you here, M. Dewello; I thought you were gone to the meeting."

"No! Lady Rosa," replied Stanislaus, with an emotion which he no longer sought to control, "I am by your side, most probably for the last time."

"What do you mean, I pray you?"

"You cannot be ignorant of my meaning, if it be true that you have voluntarily rejected the proposal which I yesterday had the honor to transmit to your father."

"Voluntarily!" repeated Rosa, with emphasis. "Are you aware that you do my father a grievous wrong to suppose him capable of coercing my will?"

"Then, lady, it is you who repulse me?" cried Stanislaus, with swelling indignation.

"The word is a harsh one, and I should never have used it in this case," returned Rosa, calmly; "but it is certainly true that I have accepted a nobleman for whom I have ever professed and entertained the most profound esteem."

"That is giving me to understand exactly what you think of me, and I should retire without a word more, cursing the day when I saw you first. Nevertheless I will so far humble myself as to explain to you the motive which in-

duced me to seek an interview in which I have played no very dignified part in your eyes. It is true that though I have never dared to tell you so, you were the star of my future, and for two whole years I have devoted my every thought to you, which you could not but perceive. During those two fatal years there were times when I ventured to think that my attentions were acceptable to you, and (alas! how cruelly am I punished for my presumption!) I even dared to flatter myself that I stood higher in your favor than any of my rivals. I have been deceived it appears, but say, Lady Rosa, was the fault or error altogether mine?"

Stanislaus paused, believing that his question was most embarrassing for one so frank and sincere as Rosa. The latter was, indeed, puzzled what to say, and some time elapsed before she ventured to reply; yet when she spoke her voice was calm and even firm.

"I was hesitating whether I should at all answer you, and whether respect for myself did not imperatively call upon me to put a stop at once to a conversation wherein I am every moment treated with unbecoming levity. I have at length decided to reply, less to justify myself, it may be, than to make known to you a certain order of ideas with which you appear to be wholly unacquainted. Yes! I have committed a fault in admitting, as perfectly innocent, those thousand little intimacies which society willingly sanctions; I have erred in putting faith in the disinterestedness of those who spontaneously loaded me with their kind attention, and talked so nobly and so movingly of friendship and esteem. I should have known that people of the world calculate amid their very pleasures and amusements, and will not take the slightest trouble without hope of a three-fold remuneration. I should have turned aside from those flowers which were strewn on my path but to hide its pitfalls, and should, above all, have remembered that innocence is an object of ridicule to that world, who, if permitted, will speedily tarnish its purity and wither its freshness. Simplicity and credulity are the faults whereof I have been guilty. Suffer me to tell you, however, that I think it is only myself who has a right to condemn these errors, and that I had severely done, before you took upon you to call me to account. I deny, therefore, your idle accusations. You have never been deceived by me, and to end as I have begun, I must tell you that if there were any deception in the case it was practised by you, when you knowingly surrounded me with snares, and wrested my simplest words and deeds into a meaning all your own. I have confided in you because I looked upon you as a friend, and I defy you to produce a single word of mine which could be made to bear any other interpretation."

In the course of this address Rosa had insensibly displayed all the masculine energy of her nature, her look and voice giving double force to the firmness and decision of her reply. Stanislaus was utterly confounded by the justice as well as the keenness of her reproach, and though his whole frame trembled with passion, he sought only to secure his retreat. "To persist now," said he, "would be indeed to overstep the bounds of respect. I am perfectly well aware of those whom I have to blame for your opinion of me, and so I take my leave, promising never again to obtrude myself upon you!"

Thereupon he turned down the first path, and throwing the reins on his horse's neck, permitted him to go on at random. His soul at that moment resembled a tempestuous sea, whose furious waves lash each other on with ceaseless violence: disappointment, envy, hatred, and jealousy held alternate possession of his mind, each leaving behind, as it passed away, a sting of deadly venom. Whither will he go?—what must he do? One thing is certain, Raphael must be the victim, and already he thirsts for his blood, and will force him to a combat even if it be necessary to spit upon his face. And then the Count—oh! yes! he can do for him, too—he will defeat all his projects—he will have a glorious revenge by informing the government of his plotting and planning, and that will be sure destruction. At this latter idea, Stanislaus stooped short a moment, and he felt the blush of shame kindling on his cheek, and blending with that of anger. Ha, would not that step be sure to disgrace him for ever?—Well, then, he will openly declare himself the enemy of the Count; he will meet him sword in hand on the battle-field, and there seek an honorable revenge. Yes, but then he would also be the enemy of his country, and were her defenders to obtain the victory, what a withering blow that would be! No, no—he cannot thus dishonor himself, and a sudden re-action of feeling urged him to join the assembly. With ill-suppressed emotion, he turned his steed towards the appointed rendezvous, muttering as he went, "I know how to obtain satisfaction without compromising my honor."

While Stanislaus made his toilsome way thro' the thick underwood, he was followed afar by his worthy Steward, Firley, who, having early in the