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"THE KNOT:—"

A TALE OF POLAND.

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

CHAPTER IV.

Having tenderly embraced his daughter, the Count looked after her as she left the room, with a melancholy and abstracted air. But speedily recovering himself he turned calmly towards his friends:

"It is time for us to separate," said he, "and you may all yield without apprehension to the soothing influence of sleep. I am now going to give my orders to Valentine, and will have it so arranged that this Russian troop shall be closely watched, and on the least manifestation of danger from them, they shall instantly be put to the sword, as they do not, I believe, number more than forty. To-morrow will be our grand day, and I hope the last rays of its sun will gild our national banner as it proudly floats from the summit of the great tower." Then turning to the Priest, he went on: "You will, I am sure, father, offer up the holy sacrifice for us before dawn, in the chapel. Till then, may God protect us all!"

The party then separated, each being desirous of obtaining some repose ere the fatigues and dangers of the morrow set in. Raphael alone remained behind, requesting the Count to favor him with a few moments' conversation.

"Most willingly, my dear friend," replied the Count, walking back with him towards the fireplace. "Speak now—I listen."

"Now that we are on the eve of great events which concern us all alike," said Raphael, in a voice which he vainly sought to render steady, "will your lordship permit me to open my mind to you? I have long aspired to the hand of your daughter, though fully sensible of my own unworthiness of such an honor. Encouraged, nevertheless, by your lordship's unvarying kindness and attention, I now venture to ask whether you will or can favor my suit, and permit me to speak more freely to the Lady Rosa than I have yet dared to do?"

"My dear Ubinski," exclaimed the Count, pressing his hand with paternal affection, "I will not hesitate to tell you that your proposal gives me very great satisfaction, and be assured that if it be unsuccessful the fault rests not with me.—Yes! I most sincerely wish that my daughter may view the matter as I do, for I should assuredly welcome the day that would give you to me for a son."

"My dear lord!" said Raphael, with unfeigned delight, "how can I ever prove to you how deeply grateful I am for your unmerited partiality?"

"I am just going to tell you that, Raphael," rejoined the Count quickly, "in anticipation of those misfortunes which will inevitably attend us in the prosecution of our designs, I have already offered up myself and all that I possess to the uncertainty of a stormy future. This I have judged it my duty to do as a soldier and a Christian, yet am I still haunted by one sad thought, which, at times, almost unmans me. Indifferent as I am to my own fate, I am full of anxiety for that of my daughter, since, if I am destined to fall, what will become of her?—who will watch over and protect her?—who will devote himself to her happiness?—who, in fine, will love her like her old father?—nobler yet by her mind than by her birth, lovelier a thousand times by her virtues than by the charms of her person? Who can set a proper value on my priceless child? Such are the questions I have often asked myself;—and, Ubinski, notwithstanding the difference between our political opinions, I have found but you in all the range of my acquaintance, with a heart sufficiently pure and a mind sufficiently elevated, to ensure the happiness of my daughter! You may then judge how great is my joy when you propose yourself for her acceptance."

"Ah," exclaimed Raphael, fervently, "if I have no other merit whereon to found my claim, I have at least that of a profound sense of Rosa's inestimable worth, and if I only succeed in winning her affection, I can promise, in all sincerity, that my whole future life shall be devoted, after God, to her happiness. But the main point is, my dear Count, can I have any reasonable hope that she will receive me as a suitor?"

Here Raphael stopped short—his conversation with Stanislaus suddenly recurred to him, and not even the paternal friendship of the Count was able to dispel his fears.

"To-morrow, my dear Ubinski," said the Count after a pause, "to-morrow you shall have a decided answer, for after all, the decision rests with my daughter. In the meantime, you know, you can count on my good offices."

Raphael then retired, and he was scarcely gone, when Casimir entered, and approached his father with a somewhat mysterious air. "I am charged," said he, "with an embassy which, under our present circumstances, may appear strange, yet as I have promised to lose no time, I must go through with it at once: in a word, father, (for this is no time for idle discourse) my

friend Stanislaus seeks, through me, your permission to address my sister."

"Indeed?" exclaimed the Count, more than a little embarrassed by this second application.

"It is even so, father! and I need not, I am sure remind you that this proposal is not to be lightly treated, since Stanislaus is unexceptionable as to family and fortune, and possesses, besides, many brilliant qualifications."

"Undoubtedly," replied the Count, "but you can conceive my perplexity when I tell you that Raphael has just this moment preferred a similar petition."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Casimir, surprised as his father had before been.

"We have then to make a choice, and the necessity is truly a painful one to me. However, it is not for us to decide—the matter rests, of course, with your sister. In the meantime, tell me frankly what is your opinion; laying aside all prepossession for either one or the other, and speaking conscientiously, which of these young noblemen would be best calculated, think you, to ensure the happiness of our dear Rosa?"

"As you have put the question so directly, my dear father, I must candidly acknowledge that notwithstanding the numerous advantages enjoyed by Stanislaus, I have more faith in the nobler and more stable character of Raphael."

"Ha! now I see that you do indeed desire your sister's happiness," said the Count, as he embraced his son, "and your opinion is precisely mine."

"And yet, father, when Stanislaus constituted me his envoy, and while giving me my instructions, he gave me to understand, by all sorts of round-about ways, that he has some reason to believe himself tolerably sure, as far as my sister is concerned, so that it is only your consent he believes wanting to make all right."

"Ha! the case begins to wear a graver aspect," said the Count, in a pensive tone. "However, we shall see how it is. I shall go and talk with Rosa on the subject, and I know she will not deceive me. As to yourself, Casimir, you will await me in my sleeping apartment, where there is a bed prepared for you for to-night. Valentine and his son will keep guard on the door, and as all our people are warned to be on the alert, we can have them around us on the slightest appearance of danger. These precautions were all necessary, I can assure you; for treachery is around us under one form or another. Go, then, and await my coming, but be prudent and watchful. I conjure you, for we know these Russians too well to doubt that there is a price, ay! and a golden one, fixed on your head."

Count Bialewski traversed with a slow step the corridor which led to the apartments of his daughter, reflecting, as he went, on the two proposals he had so lately received, and asked himself what objection could he seriously propose in the event of Rosa's declaring in favor of Stanislaus. He had long since remarked the particular attentions of these two young men, and had made the character of each his peculiar study. This investigation was anything but favorable to Stanislaus, who, with all his striking advantages of face, and form, and manner, appeared to the Count to have a certain flexibility of mind and lightness of principle which might seriously compromise the happiness of his daughter. In Raphael, on the contrary, he had early discovered a high and noble mind, together with the most unobscured sense of rectitude as displayed in all his actions. Raphael's whole soul seemed wrapped up in the loveliness of virtue, and likely to make any sacrifice rather than tarnish that bright ideal. But yet, if Rosa was no longer free to choose, what was to be done? Must he suppress the yearning tenderness of his heart, and exact from her a rigid submission to the calculating views of age? And, moreover, Stanislaus, with all his failings, was not without numerous virtues, and was there not every reason to hope that even those faults and foibles would disappear in time before the bright example of Rosa? It might well be, and yet the Count could not think, without a sigh, on even the probability of such a union.

Full of doubt and anxiety he knocked at Rosa's door and was instantly admitted. She had not yet gone to bed, and was kneeling before a crucifix, engaged in her evening devotions. The Count made a sign that she should not disturb herself, and taking his place in front of the fireplace, he continued to reflect on what he should say to Rosa. Let us then profit by this opportunity, in order to survey the apartment, which was of ordinary dimensions, and might be considered as Rosa's boudoir or work-room. Everything around bore testimony to the taste and refinement of the presiding genius. The compartments of the carved oak wainscoting were adorned with drawing and painting, in which were easily discernible the peculiar genius of Rosa.—A piano stood open at the further end of the room, and on it lay some of the best compositions of Beethoven and Rossini. A large glass case set in between the two windows contained the library, consisting for the most part of the

great French literature of the seventeenth century, together with a crowd of names ending in *ski*, and well known beyond the Vistula. On either side of the fire-place was ranged flower-vases containing plants of various kinds in full-blossom, which, at that inclement season, spoke volumes for the attentive care bestowed upon them. It was a scene wherein the elegance and luxury of a lordly dwelling were mingled with the simplicity which Rosa best loved, and perhaps the greatest charm of the apartment was the perfect neatness and good order everywhere visible. It was there that Rosa, as mistress of the mansion, was wont to receive her lady visitors. And now, in order to complete the picture, we have but to glance at Rosa herself. She was, as we have elsewhere said, somewhere about twenty; her figure was tall and slender in its proportions; her features regular and well-formed but chiefly remarkable for the serene and noble expression by which they were animated. Indeed, the whole contour of the face, shaded by soft bands of fair hair, and with its deep blue eyes, was singularly soft and feminine, yet they would assuredly have been mistaken who would thence infer that Rosa's mind was such as generally accompanies such a conformation. Physiologists and romancers may say as they will, but it is nevertheless true that though to all appearance Rosa was gentle and even fragile, yet education had made her both courageous and firm. She had been so unfortunate as to lose her mother while yet in the first years of life;—but the loss had been amply compensated by the devoted affection of her father, who had early learned to look upon her as his greatest earthly consolation. He had made her from her very infancy, the object of unceasing vigilance, and of the tenderest care, and not even in those years when he had served in the Polish and in the French armies, did he for a moment forget his daughter, or entrust her to mercenary attendants. At a later period when, after the fall of Napoleon, the generosity of the Czar Alexander had permitted Poland to breathe more freely, and her children to live again in comparative tranquility, the Count retired to his estates, and devoted himself more exclusively to the education of his daughter. In this, his favorite employment, he had been latterly ably assisted by the Abbe Choradzo, a man whose talents and acquisitions were only exceeded by his fervent piety.

It was no way surprising that the mind of Rosa should have been even strongly influenced by the military life which she had shared with her father, and hence it was that while tenderly alive to the wants and sufferings of others, she could look on the most pitiable scene, and with her own hands give relief to the sufferer, and yet preserve an almost stoical coolness. Neither darkness, nor solitude, nor the din of battle, could disturb the firmness of her soul. She had been her father's companion in many a toilsome journey, and was wont to keep close by his side, smiling and calm, though mounted on a fiery charger. She associated herself in all her father's patriotic views, and this not only by her prayers and good wishes, but also by that active sympathy which follows events with eager interest, mourning for the disappointment and rejoicing in the probability of success, leaving nothing undone for the furtherance of the cause that might beseech a modest and a high-souled woman. Yet were all these lofty aspirations bent down and regulated by the strong and tutelary law of religious duty, and Rosa was all the more ardently devoted to the sublime faith of her fathers, for that the Russian clergy and the Russian government had made, and were making, every effort to calumniate and defame it. Such, then, was Rosa; and who can wonder that she was the darling of her father's heart, or be surprised at the rivalry of Stanislaus and Raphael?

Rosa was praying, as we have observed, when her father entered, but she very soon arose and approached him.

"You have something to say to me, I perceive, my dear father," she said. "Tell me, is Casimir safe?"

"Oh, have no fear on that head, my child;—your brother is beyond danger. The business of which I would speak to you, though grave enough, it is true, yet concerns yourself first of all."

"Concerns me, father!—how—what do you mean?"

"Yes, just yourself!—and in order to save you any unnecessary suspense, I shall at once come to the fact, or rather facts. You are already aware that it was not my intention to bestow you in marriage until you had attained the age of twenty-one. We have often conversed on this subject, and with the less pain that we had always agreed that your marriage would in no case separate us, and would give me but a son the more to love. Now there is a mighty struggle at hand, in which I must necessarily run some risk, and my mind would be comparatively easy and free from care had I but the assurance that I had secured for you a protector on whose

honor and affection I could fully rely. Be not surprised, therefore, that I now introduce the subject, and I will add that it would give me a very sensible pleasure if we could now decide on him who is to be the future protector of my Rosa;—besides, I have two proposals to submit to you, which require, of course, an immediate decision as far as they are concerned."

"Proposals!" repeated Rosa, with a smile and a blush.

"Even so," replied the Count, "and it is precisely those same proposals which embarrass me more than a little. But, after all, as it is for you and not me to decide on their respective merits, I hope to get through the difficulty with your aid. Two young noblemen, of distinguished rank, have proposed for your hand—you know them, and have known them long—it is Raphael and Stanislaus. So now, what think you?"

"And you, my father?" stammered Rosa,—"what is your opinion?"

"I, my child!" returned the Count, "I have nothing to say but this, that my sole desire is to see you happy, and to know how best that happiness may be secured."

"It is—it really is, most perplexing," said Rosa, musingly.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Count.

"But yet—"

"Hear me, Rosa," interrupted her father, "I am fully aware that the matter requires mature consideration, and would, therefore, advise you to postpone your answer till to-morrow. I should, however, remind you that you are not called upon to enter into any sort of engagement, and the question only is to decide between two rival candidates. I should imagine that it is not so very difficult. Only decide—and if you do accept either of these noblemen, you shall have as long time as you may desire before the irrevocable vow is made. Good night, then, my dear child, I shall now leave you to your reflections."

"No, father, no—do not leave me yet!" exclaimed Rosa, in visible confusion. "You know I never willfully conceal any thing from you, and now, if I am indeed called upon to make a choice so unexpectedly, you will not refuse me the benefit of your counsel?"

"I am only too happy, my dear Rosa, in the consciousness of possessing your confidence," replied the Count, embracing his daughter as he spoke, "and if my advice can indeed aid you in this momentous affair, it will be freely and sincerely given. I must confess that I am really anxious to know whether either of my young friends, or which of them, has obtained a place in your heart, for on this information depends, in a great measure, my present and future peace of mind. Speak, then, my daughter, and fearlessly open your heart to your father."

"Alas! my father! you are then about to see a poor, weak heart exposed!" murmured Rosa, and she hid her face in her father's bosom.

CHAPTER V.

"I am quite sure, Rosa," replied the Count, "that you have nothing to reveal which can alter my opinion of your rectitude and purity of heart."

"Spoken like the kindest and most indulgent of fathers," murmured Rosa, "but you shall see. In the first place, then, my dear father, it is long since I perceived the rival assiduities of these noblemen, and as far as Stanislaus is concerned, I must acknowledge, to my shame, that I have but too often given him room to believe that his attentions were very pleasing to me. Stanislaus is, as you know, full of life, and spirits, and has, moreover, an extraordinary talent for drawing one into those conversations which, although trifling and light in their nature, are apt to excite the imagination, and when managed by one so adroit and skilful as Stanislaus, may be easily made to serve his purpose, giving to others the impression that two young people who laugh and chat away so merrily together, must have a good understanding between them. Then, on the other hand, Stanislaus has no equal in those nameless attentions which are generally supposed to be all-powerful with our sex, and I cannot, and may not, deny, that he has made himself exceedingly agreeable to me,—and—may even have acquired a certain influence over my mind, so that—"

Here Rosa made a dead pause,—her cheeks were dyed with a crimson blush, and she evidently knew not how to finish the sentence.

"—So that," said the Count, with a smile, catching up the unfinished sentence, "you have on the whole, shown a pretty strong preference for Stanislaus, and are disposed to favor his wishes?"

"No, no, father!—no such thing, believe me!" cried Rosa, with surprising quickness and vivacity.

"Then what am I to think, dear Rosa! after what you have said?"

"Nay, hear me to the end, father, before you form your judgment—I wish to show myself as I really am, so that you can the better give me your advice when you have heard all. At the

same time that Stanislaus was paying me those dangerous assiduities, I could not avoid seeing the respectful attention of Ubinski, and I can truly say that I early became convinced of the immense difference between the two; the one was, to be sure, witty, gay and satirical;—but the other was noble, and serious, and benevolent. Raphael, it is true, never soared aloft, as Stanislaus often did, on the wing of enthusiasm, but when called forth by circumstances, he invariably proved himself for removed from all narrow and selfish prejudices, and in fact as possessing one of those lofty minds which truly enable our kind. Hence it was that in his presence I often reproached myself for giving way to those frivolous amusements, and blasphemy as I thought of how he must regard them. At such moments Stanislaus fell immeasurably in my estimation, and, in short, I could never say of him what I have ever thought of—of—the other.—Ah! father! with what entire confidence can a woman lean on the arm of one like Raphael, and how natural it is for her to love one so every way noble—one of whose virtues she has so much reason to be proud! Such, then, is my opinion of these young noblemen, and now, my dear father, you can decide for me—at least, I hope so."

"Then my opinion is, that you have only suffered Stanislaus to catch hold of your imagination, while Raphael has reached your heart, and most worthy he is of any woman's love."

"I am truly rejoiced to hear you say so!"—Rosa exclaimed, with artless fervor.

"And why not decide at once in Raphael's favor?"

"Ah! I was afraid that I could never be worthy of him," said Rosa, in a subdued voice, "and I feared, besides, that I had, although unintentionally, given Stanislaus too much encouragement to draw myself out with fitting grace."

"Have you given him any sort of promise?"

"Never—never, father! nor any thing that even could interpret as such. No, the only thing wherewith I have to reproach myself is the not having shunned those occasions which brought us in close connexion with each other, particularly as my indiscretion in those matters may seem to denote a preference which I never really or seriously felt. The truth is that the exquisite charms of his manner and conversation have at times induced me to pay him too much attention—more than he deserved. Yet I solemnly repeat to you that I have never regarded him with that admiration—that that deep feeling with which I have long looked upon his rival."

"My dear child," said the Count, with affectionate gravity, "you must neither be surprised nor afflicted by those apparent contradictions which seemed to have troubled you more than enough. They are in perfect accordance with our poor, weak nature, seeing that we cannot help being dazzled and attracted, it may even be by a brilliant and specious exterior; but the rational and thinking mind easily discerns the real character beneath all its glittering and meretricious ornaments, and despising the hollow cheat, it turns with intuitive respect and admiration to where it discovers true merit and unostentatious nobleness. And I must say, Rosa, that you have thus shown considerable penetration. Stanislaus is, beyond all doubt, brilliant and accomplished, but is far too much devoted to pleasure ever to become a great man;—he is, indeed, one of those who entirely depend on chance, and may turn to good or evil, just as circumstances happen. Raphael, on the contrary, will on every possible occasion, prove himself both high-minded and upright—and will be sure to be one day a distinguished man. For my part, though our political opinions are entirely different, I would have no hesitation in confiding to him my dearest earthly treasure—am I then to understand that you authorise me to give him a favorable answer?"

"You know we are not to be separated, father!" cried Rosa, as she threw herself on his neck, giving no more direct answer to his question.

"Oh! that is understood!" returned the Count, with a gratified smile. "And now, my sweet child, farewell till to-morrow."

Whilst the Count seeks his own chamber, after having ascertained that all necessary precautions had been taken against a surprise from the Russians, let us penetrate, for a moment, to that of Stanislaus. Reclining on a sofa, with his feet extended in front of a bright fire, he was carelessly glancing over some papers which Firley, his steward, had presented for his inspection.—This Firley was apparently between forty and fifty years of age, in stature but little above the middle size, with a florid and rather jocular countenance, and a pair of quick and restless eyes, whose habitual expression was that of sly cunning.

"Firley," said Stanislaus, with a yawn, as he put away the last of the documents, "can you tell me why I have entrusted to you the management of my affairs?"

"Why, my lord! it was, I suppose, in order