



Boleslaw Prus
EMANCIPATED WOMEN
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Translated by Stephanie Kraft

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First published as a serial in the *Daily Courier (Kurier Codzienny)*, 1890-1893. Published as a book in 1894. The table of contents is located at the end of each volume.

For Wieslaw and Maria Olszak, quiet fighters for freedom, who introduced me to the richness of Boleslaw Prus.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to my English text editor, Laura Holland; the Polish Center of Discovery and Learning at Elms College; the Society of Polish and American Culture, Chicopee, Massachusetts; the Five College Seminar on Literary Translation, based at Smith College; and the National Library, Warsaw.

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The cover design by Laura Holland incorporates a fragment of *Zadumana* (1883) by Wladyslaw Czachorski.

Boleslaw Prus

EMANCIPATED WOMEN

(Emancypantki, 1894)

Book I

Volume 1



Chapter I: Feminine Energy and Masculine Indolence

Around the year 1870, the most famous academy for young ladies in Warsaw was Mrs. Latter's boarding school. From it issued model citizens, happy wives, and excellent mothers.

Whenever the newspapers announced the wedding of a wealthy, distinguished young woman who was making a good match, one could wager that among the maidenly attainments of Miss So-and-So, dressed thus and so—the beautiful bride, beaming with happiness—would be found a notice that she had attended Mrs. Latter's school.

After each such notice, several new pupils entered Mrs. Latter's establishment, either as day students or as residents.

It was no wonder that Mrs. Latter, whose school brought such happiness to its alumnae, was herself considered a happy person. It was said of her that, although she undertook her vocation with modest funds, she must possess tens of thousands of rubles; only it was not known if the capital was invested in mortgages or lay in the bank. No one had any doubts about her fortune when they saw the ball gowns worn by her daughter Helena, a lovely young lady of nineteen, or above all when they heard of the expenditures of her son Kazimierz, who was never sparing with money.

But neither the maiden's gowns nor the bachelor's elegance occasioned unpleasant remarks, because their costs were kept within certain limits. Miss Helena went out to gatherings grandly, but rarely. Kazimierz went abroad to finish his education, and his stays in Warsaw were so brief that he could afford a little self-indulgence.

Mrs. Latter's acquaintances whispered that it was not unwise of her to take a lenient view of the whims of a young fellow who, in the society of the distinguished youth of Warsaw, had cured himself of democratic fancies. They even marveled at the wit and tact of the mother, who, instead of reprimanding him for imbibing those ruinous theories, allowed him to regenerate himself with the help of the elegant life.

"When a young man becomes accustomed to social spheres in which one wears clean linen, he will stop growing long hair and a ragged beard," said her friends.

The young man very rapidly grew accustomed to haircuts and clean linen, and even became such a thoroughgoing dandy that in the middle of October it began to be said that soon he was going abroad to study the social sciences. It was understood that it was not young Latter, but young Norski, who was about to go abroad. Mrs. Latter's name from her first marriage was Norska, and Helena and Kazimierz were the children of that union.

Her second husband, Mr. Latter—but never mind about him. Suffice it to say that from the time the boarding school was established, Mrs. Latter wore widow's weeds. That whereas several times a year she went to Powazki and

adorned the grave of her first spouse with flowers, no one asked whether the other spouse also lay at Powazki, or somewhere else.

It was no wonder that Mrs. Latter, whose heart had been twice shattered by fate, was cool in her relations with others and maintained a stern exterior.

In spite of her forty-some years, she was still a beautiful woman. Taller than average, with a figure not showy but not thin, she had black hair slightly frosted with gray, expressive features, a dark complexion, and lovely eyes. Those who claimed to be experts in such matters declared that with such eyes Mrs. Latter could make a conquest of any of a number of wealthy widowers whose daughters lived at her school or came as day students. Unfortunately the possessor of the “black diamonds” had a look more penetrating than tender, which, together with her thin lips and impressive bearing, first and foremost aroused respect for her, in women as much as in men.

Her pupils feared her, though she never raised her voice. The most high-spirited class fell silent at once if the children heard the door of the neighboring classroom opening in a particular way, and the even tread of the headmistress.

The classroom teachers and even the professors marveled at Mrs. Latter’s magical influence over the students. Mothers of grown, eligible daughters thought uneasily of her Helena, as though the young beauty could deprive their girls of their matches and ruin the futures of all maidens preparing for marriage. And more than one well-to-do father of a frail, homely son thought:

“That rascal Norski has got enough health and good looks for ten boys like my Kajtek, though Kajtek is well enough in his way.”

Mrs. Latter, then, was happy in every respect: envied for her fortune, her authority, her boarding school, her children, even her eyes. In spite of that, an enigmatic crease outlined itself more and more deeply on her forehead; a shadow, falling from no one knew where, pushed farther and farther down her face; and her eyes gazed more and more piercingly beyond people, as if striving to catch sight of things that were invisible to others.

On a certain afternoon Mrs. Latter was walking around her study, which looked out on the Vistula. October was drawing to its close, and the sun, hiding behind Warsaw, painted the houses of Praga, the chimneys of far-off factories and the gray, misty fields with a reddish-yellow light. The light was faded, as if it had been infected by faded leaves or had absorbed the reddish-brown steam of the locomotive that at that moment was moving far and still farther out of Praga—disappearing with its cargo of people and, perhaps, of hopes. It was an appalling light, a reminder that October was in decline; an appalling locomotive, which gave rise to the thought that everything in the world is in ceaseless motion and vanishes from us in order to appear to others, somewhere else.

Mrs. Latter walked quietly around the carpet in her study, which looked like a man’s office. From time to time she looked out the window, where the dimming light reminded her that the end of the month was near. Now and then she glanced at the oak desk, where several great ledgers lay, and a bust of

Socrates leaned above them. But in the sage's furrowed brow she saw no portent favorable to herself; so she pressed her folded hands to her chest and walked faster, as if she were eager to get somewhere as quickly as possible. Her eyes flashed more brightly than usual, her lips were more tightly set, and on her face more and more deeply fell that shadow which neither the beauty of her children nor other people's high opinion of her could dispel.

In the waiting room the master clock, by which the other clocks were set, chimed four-thirty. In her study the big English clock yet more ceremoniously struck the half-hour, and in the more distant rooms a small clock rapidly and faintly echoed the sound. Mrs. Latter approached her desk and rang the bell.

The dark curtain quivered, the door of the waiting room opened quietly, and on the threshold stood a tall manservant with gray side whiskers, wearing a frock coat.

"What time did Stanislaw give Mr. Zgierski the letter?"

"Before one, madam."

"To him personally?"

"Into his own hand," replied the servant.

"You may go. And if someone arrives, show him in directly."

"He makes me wait two and a half hours; obviously I cannot rely on him," she thought. "Of course he understands the situation perfectly. Until New Year's I need seven thousand six hundred rubles. From the day students I will have two thousand five hundred, from the boarders one thousand five hundred at most will come to me, so that is four thousand. But where is the rest?.. And after New Year's? After New Year's it appears that the income will be four thousand rubles less than in previous years. There is no point in deluding myself! Six boarders and twenty day students have left and will not attend next year, and will never attend. That leaves a net income of a thousand rubles a year at most, which could suffice for one person, but not for the three of us. And what then? Paying the lesser debt will bring on greater debt, then still greater, so that finally it must be the end of everything. Zgierski has opened my eyes abruptly; he does not delude himself..."

To Mrs. Latter, life was so filled with numbers, numbers so preyed on her imagination, that whatever she looked at, she saw numbers. The ledgers lying on the desk were swollen with them; they jumped out of the great gilded inkwell; they crawled around the English etchings that adorned the walls of the study. And how many of them hid in the heavy folds of the curtains, and behind the glass front of the ornately carved bookcase, and how many huddled together in the shadow of each of the portieres, no one could have counted.

In order to divert her attention from those thin, vexing apparitions, Mrs. Latter raised her head and, standing in the middle of the study, began to listen to what was transpiring on the floor above her. On that floor was a salon in which students received visitors; but at that moment there were evidently no visitors,

since the schoolgirls were passing continuously through the salon. There were two of the older ones, going from their bedroom to class with even steps, no doubt hand in hand; there was a first- or second-form pupil, running; there was one girl walking around the salon in a circle, perhaps studying; someone else dropped a book.

Then a heavy, wide footfall could be heard. It was Miss Howard, the most distinguished teacher in the school.

“Oh, that Klara Howard!” Mrs. Latter whispered. “That woman has brought me bad luck.”

At Miss Howard’s entrance the pupils immediately fled from the salon, and a few people came in: one, then another, then a third, someone older. Miss Howard’s heavy steps became quick and nimble, and the moving of chairs could be heard. Obviously someone had come for a visit.

“Perhaps Malinowska, that friend of Howard, is here to look over my school?” thought Mrs. Latter. “Those lunatics see everything the same way! She has twelve or fifteen thousand rubles, so she will start a school in order to ruin me. Naturally she will lose her money in two years, because she thinks her calling is to revolutionize the education of young women. Howard will write her program...ha, ha! The press will be happy, because for a while she will stop dropping articles on the editors’ desks like a doctor laying on poultices. Independent women! I am not independent, I who created this school from nothing? They, only they, will teach me independence on thirteen thousand rubles that Malinowska wants to waste on Howard’s nostrums?”

The hand of the English clock moved slowly toward five o’clock, reminding Mrs. Latter that her evening receiving hours were soon to begin. At the same time it reminded her that thousands of people had made their way through this study, people with demands, requests, inquiries. All of them had received answers, help, explanations, and what had come of it? What remained from all that counsel given to others? Nothing; a steadily deepening deficit today, and possible bankruptcy tomorrow.

But... “I will not give up!” Mrs. Latter whispered, putting both hands to her head. “I will not give up!.. I will not sacrifice my children. I will not sacrifice anything. It is not true that there are situations with no way out. If there are too many boarding schools in Warsaw, the weaker ones will collapse, not mine.”

Her keen hearing caught a murmur in the waiting room. Someone, instead of ringing, joggled the door handle once or twice, and when the footman opened the door, slowly removed his wraps and spoke in an undertone. Mrs. Latter pursed her lips wryly, guessing from these preparations that such a visitor must have come to further his own interests, not hers.

In the door appeared the gray whiskers of the footman, who whispered:
“That one...the professor.”

And a moment later, a person in a black coat, stocky, of medium height, walked into the study. He had a pale, bloated-looking face, a dull-eyed, benevolent look, and a bald pate with a tuft of hair that stretched from right to left above his forehead like a dark scar. Walking slowly, he raised his knees high and held the thumb of his left hand behind the lapel of his coat—all of which seemed to attest that this mild-mannered gentleman was not distinguished for his physical vigor.

Mrs. Latter, standing with her hands folded on her chest, buried her burning gaze in his glassy eyes; but the visitor was too phlegmatic even to be abashed by her look.

“I have just...” he began.

At that moment the master clock, the English clock and the little clock in one of the distant rooms struck five in their various ways. The visitor paused in his speech as if not wishing to disturb the clocks, was silent, then began again.

“I have just...”

“I have reached a decision,” said Mrs. Latter, interrupting him. “You will give not six but twelve lectures here each week.”

“Very good...”

“Six lectures on geography and six on natural science.”

“Very good...” the visitor repeated, nodding a few times, but not taking his left thumb from under the lapel of his coat—a mannerism that had begun to irritate Mrs. Latter.

She interrupted him again:

“You will be paid forty-eight rubles a month.”

The visitor closed his mouth, but began to drum rapidly on his lapel with the fingers of his left hand. Then, training his mild eyes on Mrs. Latter’s nervous face, he said:

“Surely that is not ten zlotys an hour?”

“Rubles,” replied the headmistress. Someone rang the bell energetically and walked into the waiting room with a rustling sound.

“I believe that my predecessor received two rubles an hour?”

“At present we are not in a position to pay more than one ruble an hour for these subjects. Furthermore, I have three candidates,” said Mrs. Latter, looking at the door.

“Very well,” said the visitor, always speaking in an even tone. “Perhaps in exchange, however, my niece...”

“We will speak of this tomorrow, if you please,” she interrupted with a bow.

The visitor, not betraying any astonishment, lingered for a moment, collected his scattered thoughts and, with a nod, left the study. As he walked

out, he raised his knees as high as before, and never removed his thumb from his lapel.

“A complete milksop,” thought Mrs. Latter.

The footman opened the door, and in from the waiting room proceeded a lady, not tall but stout and florid, wearing a silk dress of light golden brown. The flowing motion of her gown seemed to fill the whole room with its rustle, and the remaining daylight fled before the glare of her watch chains, her rings, her bracelets and the brilliants glittering in her hair.

Mrs. Latter greeted her and conducted her to a leather sofa, on which the lady sat in such a way that she seemed to grow even shorter, and the gown overflowed still more. When the servant lighted a pair of gas lamps, one could imagine that the lady’s plump hands restrained, with difficulty, a deluge of silken fabric that might have engulfed the room.

“I have seen my daughters settled upstairs,” she began, “and I would like to ask that they be allowed to take leave of me tomorrow.”

“You depart tomorrow?”

“Ah, yes, madam, in the evening,” the woman sighed. “Ten miles by train, then three by coach. My one comfort on the journey will be that my children remain in your care. What a distinguished person Miss Howard is, and what an excellent school!”

As a sign of gratitude Mrs. Latter inclined her head.

“I have never seen such a fine staircase in any school,” said the lady, who bowed in return with a grace befitting the profusion of her hazel gown. “And lovely accommodations. Only... I have a favor to ask madam,” she added with a pleasant smile. “My brother has given my girls some very fine bed curtains from his own factory. Would it be possible to have them hung over the beds? I can see to it myself...”

“I would have nothing against it,” replied Mrs. Latter, “but the doctor does not allow it. He says that curtains in the bedrooms obstruct the flow of air.”

“Doctor Laranski is your attending physician?” the lady put in. “A doctor of great reputation. I know him, because he came to us four times from Warsaw two years ago (ten miles by train, then three by carriage), when my husband was ill with his—I beg your pardon—his bladder. I know him extremely well (each journey cost us one hundred and twenty rubles!), so perhaps he will make an exception for my children...”

“I doubt it very much,” answered Mrs. Latter, “because last year he would not allow curtains to be hung over the bed of Count Kisiel’s niece, who is living in the dormitory with your daughters.”

“Ah! If so...” sighed the lady, wiping her face with a lace handkerchief.

There followed a pause during which it seemed that each lady wanted to say something and was searching for the proper way. The more the lady in

the hazel gown gazed at Mrs. Latter, the more Mrs. Latter tried to assume an expression of polite indifference. The darting eyes of the guest said: "Well, you speak first, then I will be bolder," whereas Mrs. Latter's chiseled features seemed to answer, "No, you attack me, and I will prevail."

In this struggle of impatience with cold blood, the lady in silk gave way.

"I would like to ask another favor—" she began—"to ask... that my daughters become more accomplished."

"Please continue."

"One, for example, might learn to play the zither. My husband likes that instrument very much; he even has a zither, because when he was training in Vienna, he belonged to a society of zither players. The other could learn to paint with pastels, at least. How nice it is to see young women painting with pastels! When I was in Carlsbad last year, all the young Englishwomen, whenever they weren't having croquet parties, opened their sketchbooks and painted. It so enhances the graces of a young person..."

"Which of them wants to paint?"

"Which? Neither of them wants to," the lady answered with a sigh. "But I think the older should, because, after all, she must marry first."

"Please, madam, how will these accomplishments benefit them?" Mrs. Latter inquired in a soft voice. "Poor things, they already work more than other students at their lessons..."

"But... I would not have expected such an opinion from you!" replied the lady, adjusting herself on the sofa. "How can it be that accomplishments are not necessary for a young woman in our times, when everyone says that a woman ought to be independent, ought to be educated in all fields?"

"But they have no time..."

"Time?" repeated the guest with a touch of irony. "If they have time to sew linen for foundlings in shelters..."

"In that way they learn to sew—"

"My daughters, thank God, will not need to sew," retorted the lady with a dignified air. "But never mind. If you do not wish to give my suggestions your consideration, the girls must wait."

Mrs. Latter grew cold at these last words. So again two boarding students paying two hundred rubles were going to leave!

"In that case," continued the lady, striving for a tone of icy sweetness, "perhaps madam will do me this favor at least: to have the girls dance."

"They are studying with a ballet dancer of the first rank."

"Yes, but they dance only with each other; they do not meet other young people. Meanwhile, today," said the lady with a sigh, "when the world demands that a woman be independent, when young Englishwomen go skating and

ride horseback with young men, our poor girls are so timid in the company of gentlemen that not a word do they utter. My husband is in despair and says that they are altogether stupid.”

“Madam, I cannot invite boys to the dancing lessons,” answered Mrs. Latter.

“Ha! In that case,” the lady said, lowering her voice, “you will not be surprised if after the holidays...”

“I would not be surprised at anything,” replied Mrs. Latter, whose anger was rising. “But in the matter of your account...”

The lady folded her plump hands and said sweetly:

“Just now I should like to pay the remainder for the first half-year. How much do I owe you?”

“Two hundred and fifty rubles.”

The lady’s voice became yet sweeter when she said, drawing her purse from her pocket:

“Could we arrive at a round figure... two hundred? Indeed, some girls pay four hundred rubles a year, here and at other schools. I tell you sincerely, I would not think of withdrawing my children from such a model school, where there is truly motherly supervision, order, beautiful manners, if madam would agree to eight hundred rubles a year... Because madam would not believe what terrible times these are for us. Barley went up by fifty percent, and hops... madam! Add to that that we have three miles of the worst sort of road between us and the railroads, that my poor husband is continually ill with his bladder, and that next year I must go to Carlsbad again. I do swear, that these days there are no people so unhappy as manufacturers, and all the world thinks we have everything but bird’s milk,” she concluded, wiping the tears from her eyes, this time with a cambric handkerchief. The lace handkerchief had another purpose.

“Let it be two hundred rubles for the time being,” Mrs. Latter answered slowly.

“Dear, dear lady!” cried the guest, as if she were ready to embrace her.

Mrs. Latter bowed courteously, took two hundred-ruble notes, cut a receipt from a book, and handed it to the portly woman, over whose face joy and tenderness raced like two clouds over a clearing sky.

As she led the rustling and glittering lady out to the waiting room and paused until she made her exit, Mrs. Latter said to the servant:

“Ask Miss Howard to come to me.”

She returned to her study and began to walk around fretfully. She saw before her the glassy eyes of the professor who held his left thumb behind his lapel and agreed without protest to the reduction of his income by twenty-four rubles a month, and beside him the hazel gown and sparkling jewels of the woman who had wrenched fifty rubles for the half-term from her.

“Oh, it is hard!” she said to herself. “The needy one must give in. So it was, is and will be...”

There was a knock at the door.

“Please come in.”

The door opened slightly and in walked, or rather burst, a girl of eighteen, who stopped suddenly before the headmistress. She was of medium height, a brunette, with round eyes and a curving mouth. Black ringlets were scattered across her low forehead as if she had been running against the wind. Her gray eyes, dark skin and red parted lips glowed with health, energy and cheerfulness, but this bounding vivacity was checked by Mrs. Latter’s presence.

“Ah, Magda. How are you?” Mrs. Latter asked.

“I have come to tell you,” the girl said quickly, with a schoolgirl curtsy, “that I was with Zofia Piasecka. The poor thing has a little fever, but nothing serious, and she is only afraid that she will not be able to attend classes tomorrow.”

“Did you kiss her?”

“I don’t remember. Anyway, I washed my face and hands. Please, ma’am, it can’t be anything too bad,” she added with profound conviction. “She is such a dear, good child.”

Mrs. Latter smiled. “What happened in the third form?” she inquired.

“Oh, please, ma’am—nothing. The professor is the most worthy man, but he was offended for no good reason. He thought Zdanowska was laughing at him, but what had happened was that Sztenglowna had showed her the chimneysweep on the roof, so she started giggling. Please, ma’am”—she spoke in a pleading voice, as if it were a matter of pardoning someone sentenced to hard labor—“don’t be angry at Zdanowska. I pacified the professor,” she continued in a playful tone. “I took him by the hand and looked him sweetly in the eye, and he thought none the worse of Zdanowska. And in the meantime the poor child was crying so, and falling into such despair, that she was even upset with me.”

“Even with you?” responded the headmistress. “Is Miss Howard upstairs?”

“Yes. Just now Helena and Kazimierz are visiting with her, and they are talking about very intellectual things.”

“About the independence of women, no doubt?”

“No, but about how women should support themselves, and how they should not be overly sentimental, and how they should be in every way like men: wise like them, courageous like them. But it seems to me that Miss Howard is coming right now.”

“Come to me after six, Magda. I will give you some work,” Mrs. Latter said, laughing.

The girl disappeared through the doorway leading to the waiting room, and in the meantime the middle door was opened by a forceful hand. In it stood a tall, strongly built woman in a black gown. She had a long, monotonously rosy

face, fair hair the color of the Vistula when it rises, and a figure as trim as it was upright. She looked somewhat haughtily at Mrs. Latter, nodded, and said in a contralto voice:

“You wanted to see me?”

But behind her tone another meaning could be sensed:

“If someone wants to see me, it should be they who come to me.”

Mrs. Latter helped the teacher to a seat on the sofa, then, sitting on a chair herself, pressed Miss Howard’s long hands and said warmly:

“I should like to talk with you, Klara. But above all—please do not think that I have any intention of affronting you—”

“I do not assume that anyone has any right to affront me,” replied Miss Howard, withdrawing her hands, which at that instant were covered with cold perspiration, from the hands of the headmistress.

“I so respect your abilities,” said Mrs. Latter, looking into the pale eyes of the teacher, on whose brow a frown was beginning to appear. “I marvel at your knowledge, your industriousness, your conscientiousness.”

A cloud appeared on Miss Howard’s pink face.

“I respect your character, I am aware of the sacrifices you make for universal goals...”

Miss Howard’s face grew cloudier.

“I take pleasure in reading your excellent articles...”

At that instant something like a sunbeam flashed over Miss Howard’s face, and dispelled the thundercloud.

“I do not agree with everything,” Mrs. Latter went on, “but I devote a great deal of thought to them.”

A new cheerfulness was visible in Miss Howard’s face and bearing.

“The struggle with prejudice is difficult,” the teacher answered, beaming, “so I consider it a most important victory if readers even reflect upon what I have written.”

“Then we understand each other, Klara.”

“Completely.”

“And now may I ask you to take one thing under advisement?”

“Please...”

“Well, then, Klara, for the sake of the cause to which you are dedicated, please be more cautious in conversation with the students, particularly the less advanced ones, and... with their mothers...”

“Do you think that some danger threatens me?” Miss Howard exclaimed in a deep contralto. “I am resolved to take what comes!”

“To take what comes, yes, but surely not to take having your ideas distorted. A moment ago I had with me a person with whom you had been conversing upstairs about the independence of women...”

“Was it Korkowiczowa, the brewer’s wife? A provincial goose!” Miss Howard put in in a scornful tone.

“You see, you are in a position to make light of her, but I must take her seriously! And do you know how she turned that conversation about the independence of women to her own advantage? She demands that her daughters learn to paint with pastels and play the zither, and above all that they marry as quickly as possible.”

Miss Howard shifted restlessly on the sofa.

“I did not put her up to this!” she cried. “Why, in an article about the upbringing of our women I expressly protest against forcing girls to the piano, to drawing, even to dancing, if they have neither the talent nor the inclination. And in an article on the vocation of women I excoriate those doll-like creatures who dream that they can make a career of marriage. Finally, I did not talk with that lady about what women ought to be like, but about how they are brought up in England. There a woman is educated like a man: she learns Latin, gymnastics, horsemanship. There a woman can walk alone on the streets, take trips. There a woman is a free, honored being.”

“Do you know England?” Mrs. Latter asked suddenly.

“I have read a great deal about it.”

“And I have been there,” Mrs. Latter interposed, “and I assure you that the upbringing of Englishwomen seems quite different in our imaginations than it is in reality. Would you believe, for example, that there young women are beaten with switches now and then?”

“But they ride horseback...”

“Those who have horses or can afford the use of them ride, as they do here.”

“So it is possible to teach girls horsemanship and gymnastics,” Miss Howard said resolutely.

“It is possible, but it is not possible to open a riding academy at a boarding school.”

“But it is possible to establish a gymnasium. It is possible to teach bookkeeping and crafts,” Miss Howard retorted impatiently.

“And if parents do not want those things, but only want the girls to learn painting or dance with boys?”

“The unenlightened ideas of parents cannot constitute a program for the rearing of their children. That is the business of institutions of learning—to reform society.”

“And if the revenues of the institutions of learning suffer because of the reform?” asked Mrs. Latter.

“In that case the directors of the institutions, inspired by a sense of social responsibility, must resolve to make sacrifices.”

Mrs. Latter stroked her head with her hand.

“Do you think that every headmistress of a boarding school has the means to make sacrifices?”

“Those who do not have the means should surrender the field to those who have them,” answered Miss Howard.

“Oh, yes?” said Mrs. Latter languidly, rubbing her head again. “My head aches, I have had so much to do today... So Miss Malinowska is determined to open a school?”

“She would prefer to be a partner in some reputable establishment, and...I have urged her to speak to you.”

A deep flush appeared on Mrs. Latter’s face. It flashed through her mind that such a partnership might be the saving of the school—or, perhaps, its final ruin. A partner would have to inform herself about the financial situation, would have the right to ask about every ruble Kazimierz spent...

“I will not be partners with Miss Malinowska,” said Mrs. Latter, lowering her eyes.

“Pity!” the teacher answered dryly.

“But, Klara, you will be more cautious in conversation with the pupils and their mothers?”

Miss Howard rose from the sofa. “I alone answer for my own lack of caution, and I would not think of denying my convictions.”

“Even if as a result I lost students whose mother wants to place them in a cheaper school, organized around these reforms?” Mrs. Latter said slowly and emphatically.

“Even if I myself lost my employment here,” Miss Howard answered just as emphatically. “I belong to that class of persons who do not sacrifice ideas or social responsibilities for the sake of their personal prospects.”

“And so what, ultimately, do you want?”

“I want to make woman independent, I want to train her for the struggle with life, I want to free her at last from dependence on men, whom I despise!” said the teacher, her pale eyes flashing with a cold brilliance. “Nevertheless, if you think that I am not needed here, I can be gone after New Year’s. You find my views irritating if not injurious, and I am weary of coping with routine, of accounting for every word, of the struggle with myself...”

She bowed ceremoniously and went out, taking longer strides than usual.

“Hysteric!” Mrs. Latter whispered to herself, pressing her hands to her head again. “She would have us set up courses in bookkeeping and crafts when parents want their daughters to paint with pastels and marry as soon as they can! And for that kind of experiment I am going to sacrifice my children?”

From the outer rooms, through an open door, a conversation floated back to her.

“Here, madam, I will make a bet with you,” said a sonorous male voice, “that a month from today, at the latest, you yourself will demand that I kiss your hand. You are my witness, Helena. It’s all in having the knack.”

“But how much are you betting?” put in a female voice.

“I do not bet,” retorted a second female voice. “Not because I am afraid of losing, but because I don’t want to win.”

“So the women of our era answer,” the first voice remarked laughingly.

“Oh, that’s childishness!” answered the man. “That’s not a new era at all, but feminine fussiness, old as the world.”

Into the study walked a lovely pair: Mrs. Latter’s son and daughter, both blond, both with black eyes and dark eyebrows, each like the other. But all the womanly graces were gathered in her, while he was the embodiment of strength and health.

Mrs. Latter looked at them with delight.

“What is this about bets?” she asked, kissing her daughter.

“That is with Magda,” answered Helena. “Kazik wants to kiss her hand, and she won’t let him.”

“The usual praeludium. Good evening, mother!” her son greeted her.

“I have asked you so many times, Kazik...”

“I know, mother, I know, but I am desperate.”

“A week before the first of the month?”

“That is just the trouble—it is a week yet!” sighed her son.

“You really are out of money?” demanded Mrs. Latter.

“There are matters too serious for me to joke about.”

“Oh, Kazik, Kazik! How much do you want?” said Mrs. Latter, pulling open the drawer in which the money lay.

“You know, mother, that I give priority to no one color, but I like white, with rose and blue. It’s for love of the French Republic.”

“Please don’t joke. Will five rubles be enough?”

“Five rubles, mama? For a week?” said her son, kissing her hand and tenderly stroking her face. “Indeed, you have stipulated that I am to receive a hundred rubles a month, and so for a week...”

“Oh, Kazik, Kazik!” whispered his mother, counting out the money.

“Please, Kazik, try to hasten the emancipation of women. Perhaps when it arrives your poor sister will get a quarter of what you get,” remarked Helena.

Mrs. Latter glanced at her reproachfully.

“Surely that is not what you think,” she said. “Do I make any distinction between you? Do I love you less than I love him?”

“My God, have I said anything like that?” answered the young woman, drawing her white shawl around her shoulders. “To be sure, Miss Howard is right, that we girls are unfairly treated by comparison with boys. Kazik, for example, not having finished at one university, goes abroad to another, and stays there for four years; and I, in order to get abroad, would have to get consumption. As it was in childhood, so it will be after marriage, and until death.”

Mrs. Latter looked at her with burning eyes.

“So Miss Howard is expounding these views and making a convert of you?”

“You are hearing things, mother,” said Kazik, walking around the study with his hands in his pockets. “Miss Howard has not been inducing her to go abroad. Only she herself desires that. On the contrary, Miss Howard instills the view that women ought to work to support themselves as men do.”

“And if men do nothing, and yet a hundred rubles a month is not enough for them?”

“Helena!” her mother said rebukingly.

“Do not take what she says seriously, mother!” said her son with a smile. “Indeed, half an hour ago she was arguing that as an oak must grow longer than a rose, so a man’s education must take longer than a woman’s...”

“I said what you continually repeat to me; but I think differently.”

“I beg your pardon, I do not compare women to roses, but to potatoes.”

“Oh, you see, mama, what refinements he acquires in his social circles... Six o’clock; I must go to Ada. Anyway, be well, my oak,” said Helena, taking her brother’s head in her hands and kissing him on the forehead. “You have studied so long and you still have so much learning before you that certainly you are much wiser than I am. Perhaps that is why I do not always understand you. Goodbye, mother,” she added. “I will be here in an hour with Ada. Perhaps you will invite us to tea.”

She went out, laughing.

Kazimierz walked around the study with his hands in his pockets and said, hanging his head:

“After every such remark of Helena’s I feel pangs of conscience. Perhaps it’s true that I ought not to be educated, only to work to support myself. Perhaps I am a burden to you.”

“What has come into your head, Kazik? Indeed I live only for your hopes, your future.”

“And I give you my word of honor, mother, that I would rather go without a piece of dry bread than be a drag on you! I know very well that I spend a lot, and will continue to spend: but I do it in order to form connections. Yet how many times shame has overcome me because I find myself among wasteful, jaded people with no affinity for great ideas! But I must persist! I will be happy only when as a representative of the working classes I can throw it in their faces...”

There was a knock on the door, and after a moment a pretty girl with chestnut hair and large, dancing eyes entered the room. She blushed like the sky at sunrise and said quietly:

“Excuse me, madam, my relations weary me again with requests that I visit them...”

Her blush deepened.

“Indeed, Joanna, you are on duty today,” answered Mrs. Latter.

“I know, madam, and I am sorry about that. But Miss Howard has promised to stand in for me.”

Kazimierz looked out the window.

“Will those relations of yours be here very long?” Mrs. Latter asked a little coldly.

“For a few days, but I will make up all my work. I will not budge from here all winter.”

“So be it. Oh, go if you like, my child.”

When Kazimierz turned around, the chestnut-haired girl was gone.

“This continual gadding about does not please me,” Mrs. Latter said as if to herself.

“Well, relatives, perhaps from the country,” remarked her son.

“Miss Howard has an adverse effect upon the entire school,” Mrs. Latter said, sighing. “She has to interfere in everything. She has even turned your heads.”

“Mine!” Kazimierz burst out laughing. “Old and ugly, but wise for all that. Oh, these scribblers in petticoats, these reformers!”

“Nevertheless you want to be a reformer.”

Kazimierz caught his mother in an embrace and, covering her with kisses, said in a subdued, caressing tone:

“Ah, mama, you misconstrue me. If you see in me a reformer of Miss Howard’s sort, then I would rather go and work for the railroad. After ten years I will qualify for a salary of several thousand rubles, then I will marry, I will grow stout. But perhaps I really am a burden to you?”

“Just stop saying that. Please!”

“All right, I will never say it again. And now I kiss mama goodnight on one eye, and now on the other. I will not be here this evening for tea with you, mother. I must go. How peaceful it has been here with you all, and there—”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll drop in at the theater, and later I’ll pop round for supper. Oh, how it all wearies me sometimes!”

Again he kissed her eyes, face and hands. On his way out he blew her a kiss from the threshold and disappeared into the waiting room.

“Poor girls,” thought Mrs. Latter. “How they must go mad over him!”

From the door her glance fell involuntarily on the desk drawer from which she had taken twenty-five rubles to give her son not long before. She quivered.

“What? Will I begrudge what I give him?” she thought. “Is he going to become a railroad worker? Never as long as I live!”

Chapter II. Hearts and Rubles

The hour for receiving visitors had ended. As had been her habit of many years, Mrs. Latter sat at her desk, with its masculine, business-like appearance. From it the musing Socrates looked back at her, and the large inkstand and the still larger ledger. At such a moment in the old days she would have set about doing the accounts, and reading and answering letters.

But for a year now, more or less, the old habits had been undergoing a change. She did not review the accounts, for what would she see in them? The signs of impending deficit. She did not read letters, because today there were none at all; nor did she have the will to write letters, because she knew the result in advance: some would send the money; others would beg for an extension. So what would be the good of writing?

She felt that for some time she had had less power than formerly over the course of events; but events had had great power over her. At this very moment, instead of working at the accounts, planning for the future, devising strategies, she sat with her hands lying slack on the arms of her chair and gazed at the frightening visions her imagination was spinning out before her.

Again she saw the plump matron who wanted her daughters to be taught to paint and play the zither, but had snatched back fifty rubles of the agreed-upon fee. Then she saw the flaxen-haired Miss Howard, who, desiring to make women self-sufficient, was setting about to ruin her, a woman who had been self-sufficient for more than a dozen years! Last of all she remembered the placid face of the geography teacher, who had accepted the loss of twenty-four rubles a month without protest.

“Milkstop!” said Mrs. Latter angrily. “Not a man, just warm dumplings!”

The thought of dumplings reminded her that the baker’s and butcher’s bills would soon be due, and two thousand rubles each half-year had to be paid for the school building and grounds.

“Well, tonight I cannot think of this,” she told herself, and shuddered. “Helena is with Ada, and Kazik is surely dressing for the theater.”

But the day’s conversation with the children did not evoke pleasant memories. How could it be that Kazik had not gone abroad by now? Leaving aside that he was her son, and a handsome fellow, even the most severe judge would have to admit that he was an exceptional young man of whom all Europe would be talking after a few years.

What ambition, what maturity! How ashamed he would be of those who were his friends today, for they had no great ideas, and what ideas he must have! Merciful God, was it possible that such a boy could not go abroad only because his mother did not have thousands of rubles in cash? How could it be that society did not have institutions to disburse funds for higher education to young men of genius? She would go to such an institution directly, and, having stipulated for confidentiality, would say to its administrators:

“Gentlemen, I have brought up generations of your sisters, wives, and daughters, but I myself do not have the money to complete my son’s education. Therefore I ask for help, not for the sake of my work and merits, but because Kazik is a brave, brilliant, noble young man. Oh, if you knew him as I do, you would believe that even if he were not my son but a stranger to me, I would still find his future worthy of my concern. Because—only look at him, study his every word, glance, movement... But why go on? Only take him to your heart as I do, and you will be convinced that an exquisite soul dwells in this dear young man.”

But Mrs. Latter wrung her hands distractedly, for after all, there was no institution that could assist young men of genius, and even if such a thing were created, would its directors believe that what she said about her son was gospel truth, the fruit of cool-eyed observation, not maternal ardor? Did she not know people, did she not hear the whispers that went around about Kazik? Anyway, it was no wonder that strangers were whispering to his own sister, a girl moreover as exceptional as Helena, sometimes joked about Kazik’s deep sayings? And even she felt aggrieved that her brother’s education had cost so much!

“Do you not understand,” ran Mrs. Latter’s internal debate with Helena, “what a difference exists between man and woman? Why, you are as like each other as twins, but in spite of that—compare yourself with him: his voice, his height, his look, his every move. If you are the flower of creation, he is its lord and master. And furthermore, think: what are women’s strengths in comparison with men’s? I, at whose shrewdness and energy they all marvel, could hardly bring up the two of you and support myself. Meanwhile a man can support himself and a wife, rear several children and still operate factories, govern nations, invent things...”

At that instant the shadow of a man intruded itself on Mrs. Latter’s imagination, and her features contorted with hate. She rose abruptly from her chair and began to pace around the office, to force herself to think of something else.

So she thought about the fact that for some time, perhaps for a year, changes had taken place around her. A certain number of day students and boarders had left; revenues had decreased; several highly paid teachers had had to be replaced by others who would work for less.

At the same time she was hearing catchwords about the independence of women more and more often, as if they were being directed at her. At first the expression “independence” had been used only by Miss Howard. Then the professors and classroom teachers had taken it up, and today the older pupils and even their mothers were repeating it.

“What is that independence of theirs going to mean?” thought Mrs. Latter. “Horsemanship and painting? After all, those things are old as the world. Struggle with life? But, my God, how many years have I struggled with life... Independence from men, then? Oh, if they knew what I have freed myself from! What they are talking about I am doing, or have been doing for a long time, and

in spite of that I do not understand them, and they consider me a hindrance. What I do thousands of women in every generation have done; indeed, there were even those who went to war! So why is it that today those things are cried up as a recent invention, created, moreover, by Miss Howard, who talks a great deal but does nothing positive? She is a good teacher, nothing more..."

"Am I disturbing you?" said a sweet voice behind her.

Mrs. Latter started.

"Ah, Magda!" she said. "I'm glad that you have come."

The young woman called Magda, whom the pupils addressed as Miss Magdalena, came into the office in a cheerful frame of mind. It could be seen in her merry eyes, her laughing face, and in her whole person, which gave the impression that her pupils had just been dancing with her and smothering her with kisses afterward.

But, glancing at Mrs. Latter, Magda felt that exuberance was out of place here. It seemed to her that the headmistress was either worried or very angry. But at whom, and why? Perhaps at her, because a moment before she had been dancing with the fourth-formers—she, a classroom teacher.

"I want to give you some work, Magda. Will you assist me?" said Mrs. Latter, seating herself at her desk.

"How can you ask such a question, madam?" answered Magda. Then she blushed at the thought that such an answer might seem insolent to Mrs. Latter.

She sat on the edge of the sofa and, inclining her head, looked at the headmistress out of the corner of her eye, hoping to divine what was troubling her. Was she angry, or worried? It must be that she was angry (at Magda, naturally) because there had been dancing on the floor above. Indeed, Magda had been told so many times that a classroom teacher ought to uphold the dignity of her position. But who knew if, on the other hand, Mrs. Latter were angry because she had kissed Zosia Piasecka and might infect the whole school with some sickness or other? Or perhaps because she had interceded for Zdanowska?

"You see this, Magda?" said Mrs. Latter abruptly, handing her a packet of letter paper and a set of notes. "You must write this many letters—that is, if you like."

"Only this many? I would only be truly happy if you asked me to write all the letters!" Magda exclaimed in the tone of a soldier who wishes to devote his life to his commander.

"Oh, you incurable enthusiast! But perhaps you will be cured some day. Even faster than I think!" said Mrs. Latter, lowering her voice. Then she added, "I am using your services for this tiresome work because I believe it may be to your advantage. Do you still plan to establish a school?"

"Ah, madam, even with two grades, even with only one. That is my highest dream!" cried Magda, clasping her hands.

Mrs. Latter smiled.

“I hope your highest dream changes,” she said. “I remember several of these dreams. In sixth form you dreamed of the convent. In fifth form you thought of dying, and felt that you simply must be buried in a pale blue coffin. And in third form, if my memory does not fail, you wanted desperately to be a boy.”

“Ah, madam! Madam!” sighed Magda, blushing to the top of her forehead and covering her face with her hands. “What is the matter with me? Oh! I will never make anything of myself!”

“Indeed you will, only first you will relinquish a number of plans, and above all this school.”

“Please, ma’am, it will only be a beginners’ class...”

“Better and better!” Mrs. Latter beamed. “But before you establish that beginners’ class, write to the parents, aunts, and uncles of our young ladies. Write in this format. At the head: ‘Respected Sir’ or ‘Respected Madam,’ and below: ‘Attaching, at your request, an invoice for the first half-term, I have the honor to remind you that this sum in rubles is payable to your account.’ And write the number shown on this sheet.”

“They owe that much?” Magda exclaimed fearfully, inspecting the notes.

“They owe twice that much,” replied Mrs. Latter. “But some will pay only after New Year’s. Then there will be the sort who never pay.”

She wrenched herself out of her chair and began to walk around the study with her arms crossed on her chest.

“Here you have the school you dream of,” she said, trying to speak calmly. “Here are the fine revenues with which Miss Howard wants to set up classes in bookkeeping, crafts, gymnastics... Lunatic!” hissed Mrs. Latter.

“And I thought she was so wise,” the girl remarked in a tone of wonder. “Ah, how beautifully she speaks! How forcefully she explains that today’s woman is a burden to society and a slave to her family, that women ought to work on an equal footing with men, that they ought to have the same rights, and that their whole upbringing ought to be changed—”

Trembling with anger, Mrs. Latter stopped in front of Magda and began to speak in a choked voice:

“At least hear that—that obsessed woman’s prattle for what it’s worth! You see how many thousands of rubles they owe me, and you can guess how many thousands I need between now and New Year’s to feed the children and pay the teachers... So if today I am racking my brain... Oh, how I do run on!” she murmured, chafing her forehead. “So calculate it yourself: where, under these conditions, can the money be found for lectures on new subjects, and how can the children find time for those studies? My head aches!”

She walked back and forth several times, then, taking the intimidated teacher by the hand, said more calmly:

“I am a little ill and irritable, and I trust you, my child, so I babble. I know, however, that—”

“Madam, can you suppose that I would repeat anything?” asked Magda. And then, gazing at Mrs. Latter with eyes full of tears and kissing her hand, she added:

“Please, ma’am, I will give up my wages...”

The headmistress pressed her lips to the girl’s feverish head.

“Child! My dear child! What difference can your poor wage make to me, your fifteen rubles a month? Do not think of such a thing...”

Magda’s eyes flashed as a great thought came to her. Her tears dried.

“Very well, then, please, ma’am, I will take my wages, but you will do me one great favor...”

And suddenly she knelt before Mrs. Latter, who raised her, laughing.

“What favor is this?”

“Since my grandmother’s death...” whispered Magda, lowering her eyes, “I have... three thousand rubles. So you will be so good—so dear...”

“And take this money from you, you mean? Oh, you incorrigible! Remember: for how many purposes can this money be appropriated? You are going to establish a school...”

“I am not going to establish...”

“Excellent; you have decided quickly. You were going to lend Miss Howard a thousand rubles... You wanted to pay your own way until your education is finished...”

“You are laughing at me!” Magda burst into sobs.

“No, I am only doing calculations. Because, after all, you are still going to go abroad and take Helena at your own expense...”

“Ah, madam, madam...” sobbed Magda.

“It’s a good thing you do not have the money in hand, and that you do not have control of it. If you were as wealthy as Ada... ha!” Mrs. Latter said as if to herself.

Magda’s face regained its animation, and her eyes flashed with joy.

“Well, but enough of this, my child. Go upstairs through my bedroom, wash your face, and set about writing the letters. Only don’t stir up a commotion, you scatterbrain,” Mrs. Latter said by way of concluding their conversation.

The shamefaced girl took the paper and went out to Mrs. Latter’s bedroom, finishing her cry on the way. She was terribly sad because she had learned so suddenly about the headmistress’s financial troubles, and because she suspected herself of committing a thousand blunders.

“How I babble, what nonsense I talk! No, in all the world there is no more stupid creature than I,” she thought, sobbing.

Mrs. Latter looked after her. In spite of herself she saw two sets of features in her imagination, one beside the other: Magda’s mobile face, on which a different feeling flamed every minute, and the countenance of her daughter Helena, with its statuesque beauty. One was alive with sympathy for everything and everyone; the other was perpetually serene.

“A very good child, but Helena has more dignity. She does not let herself be carried away,” Mrs. Latter thought proudly.

Meanwhile Magda, before she settled down to write the letters, prayed that God would allow her to help Mrs. Latter, even at the sacrifice of her own life. Then she recalled many other people who also had their troubles: the sick Zosia; a watchman who had been robbed; a certain pupil in the fifth form who loved Kazimierz Norski without hope; and again she felt a need to sacrifice herself for these unhappy ones.

And because the thought came to her that the Lord God would not want to do anything in answer to the prayer of such a paltry being as herself, she sat down to write her letters, full of doubt and despair, humming in an undertone:

“Do you know the country where the lemon ripens?”

It seemed to her that precisely that melody best expressed her feeling of being fit for nothing, together with the impossibility of sacrificing herself for the world in general, and in particular for Mrs. Latter, the sick Zosia, the watchman who had fallen among thieves, and the unlucky fifth-form student with her unrequited love.

Chapter III. The Dawn of Awareness

For several days Magdalena was not herself. Her eyes lost their sparkle and became hollow. Her olive face grew pale, and her black hair almost lost its curl, all of which gave her a look of mourning.

She slept uneasily and ate poorly. If she laughed, it was only by mistake; if she sang, it was because she forgot herself, and if she did a dance step or two with one of her pupils, it was completely mechanical. Her heart was not in any of these manifestations of cheer.

Miss Magdalena knew that her spirits were devoid of merriment, and she would not have been angry if all the world had known about this curious climate of the soul that had left her full of care, serious, and secretive. This awful state of mind weighed so heavily upon her that in spite of herself she began to seek out companionship and conversation.

It was because of that that the young teacher, not knowing exactly when, found herself on the threshold of the fifth-form classroom. Not knowing exactly why, she summoned from the room the pretty little pupil who was unfortunately infatuated with Kazimierz, and at that moment was working on her German exercises. A few girls in brown dresses ran up to Magdalena, kissed her face, hair and neck, fondled her solicitously, and lamented that the soup at dinner had not been good, and that the rain was keeping them from their walk.

Magdalena spoke to them soothingly, but in a broken voice. So the girls withdrew far back into the room, and then, linking arms, went into a corner, whispered, and pointed to her with such unmistakable signs of sympathy that Magdalena felt like crying. At one moment she had a desire to disclose her great secret to the whole class, but in the next she remembered that that secret was not her secret, and she became still sadder, still more tightly locked into herself.

Meanwhile the fifth-form student on whose support Magdalena had counted most was approaching her, but she looked as though the teacher's secret did not concern her in the least, because she had a care of her own for which none of the classroom teachers could have found a remedy. In spite of that, Magdalena led her to the visitors' parlor, sat beside her on the sofa and said with a sigh:

“How fortunate you are, my Zosia!”

The fifth-form student forgot about her German exercises and burst into tears.

“So you know all about it, miss?” she asked, snuggling up to Magdalena's shoulder.

“You are fortunate,” Magdalena repeated, “because you are still too young to understand what strange states of the soul there are.”

The seventeen-year-old pupil regarded the eighteen-year-old teacher with astonishment and answered, frowning:

“You speak as he spoke when we met for the first time in the corridor, in this very... you know. I thought I would burn to a cinder with shame, and he murmured: ‘What a pretty poppet!’ Have you ever heard the like? I thought I would tear him apart, yet at that moment I felt that I would never stop loving him...”

Her speech broke off in quiet sobs.

“I tell you, Zosia, there are worse anxieties than love...”

“Oh, God, I know, I know... but they always proceed from love.”

“You are a little simpleton, my Zosia!” Magdalena interrupted her with a dignified air. “As long as a woman loves, she is happy, even though—I should not talk of such things with you... Unhappiness sets in only when a woman begins to think of serious matters, as a man does. When, for example, she thinks of money, of the interest of others than herself, of rescuing someone from grave difficulties...”

“Oh, if you mean me,” Zosia burst out with burning eyes, “no one will rescue me! From the moment when Jadzia Zajdler saw how he kissed Miss Joanna, my life was in ruins. So it was not on my account that he stopped by the classroom, not for me he was searching when he looked at our window from the courtyard. So that is why he did not pick up the rose I threw out to him. But I will not trouble them. I am dying, let it be understood, not because of that little flirt, only for him. Let him be happy with whom he likes, although ... I have a premonition that someday he will regret me...”

Having said that, Zosia burst into tears, and Magdalena looked at her, astonished.

“My Zosia, what nonsense are you talking? Who kissed Joanna?”

“And who would it be, if not Kazimierz? She led him on, that predatory creature, because of her jealousy...”

Magdalena rose ceremoniously from the sofa and said:

“Miss Joanna is a classroom teacher and a proper person who would never allow Kazimierz to kiss her.”

“Are you sure?” asked Zosia, clasping her hands.

“I am absolutely certain, and now I regret that I chose you for a confidante.”

“Oh, Miss Magdalena!” Zosia entreated her, crying and laughing.

“You are a child,” Magdalena interrupted her sternly, “so you do not understand that there can be more serious things in a woman’s life than such flights of the heart. You will be convinced of that when you begin to think of the interests of others and find yourself faced with the necessity of saving someone...”

“I am saved... I will not die, Miss Magdalena. Now I understand everything! Jadzia must be in love with him herself, so she lets fall this slander in order to discourage me. Oh, I guessed as much!”

She kissed Magdalena again and again, wiped her eyes, and fled from the visitors' parlor.

"What a silly little thing she is!" thought Magdalena. "If Mrs. Latter had told her what she told me, and if she had to think of a way to help, love would vanish from her thoughts directly. Speaking of that, Ada must lend the headmistress money; but in the meantime, what is coming over me?"

Magdalena felt sadder and sadder, more and more heavily burdened. For her it was not simply a question of sharing the great secret with someone, but of learning whether the awakening of mature awareness in every person were not connected with such anxiety. After all, in her beginners' class, and even at home, it had been necessary for her to exercise thought. For seven years her thinking had been guided by the program of the school, since she was a boarding student. Now it was a year since she had emerged from that curriculum and become a classroom teacher, and yet — no frame of mind had ever seemed so unaccustomed and singular!

She felt that after her talk with Mrs. Latter a spring had gushed forth in her soul, the spring of psychic processes which until now she had never guessed existed, even though from her first year at the school she had always been called a reflective child.

"Surely that independence Miss Howard speaks of must have awakened in me," Magdalena thought. "No, I should not avoid contact with that woman, for only she can explain my state of mind to me."

Under the influence of this idea she made her way to Miss Howard's door; but, hearing that a conversation was going on in the room, she knocked gently.

There were three people in the room. Most prominent was Miss Howard, who was sitting in an armchair with her arms folded across her chest, speaking at length. Opposite her a carelessly dressed university student with very untidy hair fidgeted on a wicker chair, a threadbare cap in his hand.

On a stool, leaning on the arm of Miss Howard's chair as if she were hiding behind the teacher, sat Mania Lewinska, a lovely sixth-former from whose childlike face shone, remarkably, the eyes of a mature woman. Magdalena saw that Mania looked at the student with an expression of serene delight, that Miss Klara was devouring him with her eyes, and that he gazed at Miss Howard but thought of Mania, hidden behind the armchair.

"Come in!" called Miss Howard, extending her hand. "Mr. Wladyslaw Kotowski, Miss Magdalena Brzeska."

Those introduced bowed to each other, and the unkempt student assumed an expression of dissatisfaction with the newcomer. However, when Magdalena seated herself in such a way that she did not obstruct his view of Mania and could not intercept his glances at the girl, he was at ease.

"Pity you did not arrive a quarter of an hour ago," said Miss Howard. "I was just reading my article, which Mr. Kotowski is taking to *The Review*. I

am developing the idea that the state should give illegitimate children names, educations and financial endowments; and the better the names and the higher the education, the more illegitimate children will be respected, and the result of that will be that the problem will be solved. Because as long as women must depend on men, even in such natural matters...”

Magdalena thought she would fall through the floor, but Mania, as if not hearing, looked with glowing eyes at the student, who shifted in his chair, blushed, and crumpled his hat.

“Do you think,” demanded Miss Howard, addressing the student, “that there is some absurdity in what I say?”

“Please, ma’am, I think nothing,” replied the student, who was nearly terrified.

“But you do think so. Oh, I read in your soul, as if in an open book, even those secrets which you would desire to hide from yourself.”

On hearing that, Mania was covered with blushes, and Wladyslaw, no less embarrassed, made a move as if to hide his head under his chair.

“You forget, however,” continued Miss Howard, “that I do not speak of men in general, only of that one whom today’s society forces on a woman, and who calls himself ‘husband.’”

Miss Howard continued in this vein for several minutes, speaking in a beautiful contralto, but Magdalena would not have been able to repeat a word. It only seemed to her that the rosy-faced and flaxen-haired apostle of the independence of women had said (in front of the student!) things so indecent that one must think of something else so as to avoid hearing them. And because her own thoughts were in a muddle, she began reciting inwardly: “Our Father...” and “Hail, Mary...” Indeed, both those prayers so absorbed her attention that as she looked at Miss Howard, she heard her mellifluous voice but understood nothing.

But the student must have understood, for he extended and retracted his legs, raised his eyebrows, ran first his right hand and then his left through his bushy hair, and in general behaved like a criminal on the rack. The thought came to Magdalena that the young man would not feel such torment if, like her, he would at least recite the Ave Maria. But because he was no doubt an atheist like all university students, and did not believe in the efficacy of prayer, the poor wretch could not escape hearing Miss Klara’s appalling lecture.

At last Miss Howard, finishing her speech, went to her desk and began to unfasten, unfurl, and then do up again and tie a roll of paper on which was written her interesting article about those... those children. During that time Mania drew near the student and began to speak softly.

“Goodbye!” said the girl. “And you will come on Tuesday?”

“Do you doubt it?”

“And bring back Krasinski?”

“With annotations.”

“You will overwork yourself... Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

The student barely touched her hand, but how they looked at each other! With such affection, but so sadly, as if they were saying goodbye forever, although they were parting only until Tuesday. Magdalena wanted to kiss them both, to laugh with them, to cry—in a word, to do everything they would demand of her, because they seemed so beautiful and so unhappy that they would not see each other for a few days.

At that moment Miss Howard gave the roll of paper to the student, who took his leave of her indifferently enough and ran out quickly, no doubt thinking he would be able to get one more look at Mania, who had gone out before him.

Miss Howard was beaming. She threw herself on the armchair again and, looking at the ceiling as if her dreams were spinning themselves out there, said to Magdalena:

“Have you come for a little *tete-a-tete*? Such an interesting young man, don’t you think? I like to observe as a sublime idea or feeling springs forth and develops in an unsullied soul.”

“Oh, yes!” Magdalena affirmed, thinking of the student and Mania.

“You perceived it as well?”

“Naturally. Indeed, it is obvious...”

Miss Howard assumed an expression of modesty distressed.

“I can hardly fathom,” she said in a subdued voice, “what it is about me that appeals to him...”

Magdalena quivered with astonishment.

“Surely, common aspirations, views...” continued Miss Howard, falling farther into a dreamy languor. “Yes, it is some kinship of the soul... But let us not speak of that, dear Miss Magdalena, let us rather speak of you. What an enthusiast! How he listens to my articles! Only since I have had such an audience have I understood that it is possible to listen beautifully. But enough about that, Miss Magdalena; let us talk about you. Perhaps you have some worry?... An unconventional young man!... So something has brought you to me? Surely also the little soul awakes. Is it true that I divined it? Oh, we women are remarkable beings: we hold the animal herd of men in contempt, yet if an exceptional man is found... But you have something on your heart, Miss Magdalena. We will speak of what you want to tell me...”

Magdalena was as confused, hearing Miss Howard’s poetic babble, as if she had found herself in an unfamiliar neighborhood. So she, that stiff, angry, sometimes rancorous Miss Howard, of whom Mrs. Latter stood in awe; she, who had spoken of indecent things in the presence of the young student; was speaking of the kinship of souls and of cares of the heart?

Magdalena could not restrain herself; the outburst that had been several days in the making would wait no longer. She fell on her knees before Miss Howard, threw her arms around her neck, and, kissing her several times, said in a tremulous voice:

“Ah, madam, how good you are! I thought that you were only very wise, and had no heart. But how I misled myself!” she added, springing up off her knees and sitting on the stool beside the chair.

“Enthusiast... you enthusiast!” said Miss Howard indulgently. “And who is the man to whom you have entrusted your heart?”

“You think that I am in love? No!”

A shadow of dissatisfaction appeared on Miss Howard’s pink face.

“I only wanted to talk with you,” said Magda, “because you are so understanding, so energetic, and I need courage very much...”

“And so you have some serious purpose?” asked Miss Howard in a masterful tone, as if she were the self-appointed instructor of everyone with a serious purpose.

“Oh, very serious!” Magdalena said fervently. “Only it is a secret that I must carry with me to the grave. Anyway,” she added, sighing profoundly, “madam is so understanding, and, I am convinced today, also noble, dear and good...”

“That is still uncertain, little minx,” Miss Howard interjected with a smile.

“Oh, very dear; I, at least, adore you... So I will disclose this great secret to you . I must—” Magdalena whispered—“even if I die for it, I must try to get money for—”

“For whom?” asked Miss Howard, amazed.

“For Mrs. Latter,” Magdalena whispered still more quietly.

Miss Howard threw up her arms. “She asked you for it?”

“God forbid! She does not even guess...”

“So she needs money, that great lady?” said Miss Howard.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Come in!”

A servant entered and informed Magdalena that Ada was asking for her.

“I will come directly,” answered Magdalena. “Obviously God prompted her to summon me at this moment. But dear, dearest Miss Klara, not a word about this to anyone. I would die, I would kill myself, if anyone found out!”

And she ran from the room, leaving her listener plunged in an ocean of astonishment.

“So Latter has no money! And I had hoped to hold serious discussions with her about the reform of education,” thought Miss Howard.

Chapter IV. The Homely Girl

Magdalena went in for a while to the bedroom that served as her living quarters. On the way she hugged some pupils, greeted a few classroom teachers, who smiled at the sight of her, and said “Good evening” to a chambermaid in a white apron. But in the meantime she pondered:

“Miss Howard, there is a woman! And I have only today come to appreciate her! Who would have supposed that she was such a good, tenderhearted creature? But Wladyslaw is a cad. There is nothing strange in his loving Miss Howard (although I would prefer Mania), but why is he leading Mania on? Ah, these men! It seems that Miss Howard is completely justified in her contempt for them...”

From the corridor, tall doors on the right and left led to the bedrooms. Magdalena opened one door and entered a large blue room with three beds standing in front of one wall and another three in front of another wall. The foot of each bed was toward the center of the room: six iron bedsteads covered with white spreads, on each one pillow, next to each a little cabinet at the head and a wooden chair at the foot. The floor was coated with oil-based paint, and on the wall over each bed hung either the Lord Jesus on the cross or the Divine Mother, or sometimes both together: the Divine Mother above, the Lord Jesus below. Only above the bed of Judith Rozencejg, who was Jewish, hung a commonplace St. Joseph with a lily in his hand.

One corner of the room, separated from the rest by a screen of sapphire blue, was Magdalena’s own chamber. In this tiny area of the bedroom, everything seemed calculated to help the boarding students to a proper appreciation of the gulf that divided them from the classroom teacher. The screen itself undoubtedly aroused their wonder and respect, and those feelings certainly intensified at the sight of the blue spread and the two pillows on the bed, not to mention the wicker chair and the little table on which sat a brown candlestick with a glass wax saver and a piece of tallow candle.

Unfortunately Magdalena, whose older friends considered her a little whimsical, undermined the glamour of her position of her own accord. She allowed students to avail themselves of the candlestick with the wax saver and to run behind the screen. She did not even forbid them to lie on her bed during the course of the day. But because everyone loved Magdalena, the other classroom teachers wrote these evidences of indiscretion up to her inexperience; notwithstanding that Mrs. Latter looked at her from time to time in a way that certainly meant that she knew about the candlestick with the wax saver, and about the students’ naps behind Magdalena’s screen.

After combing her hair, which had become somewhat tousled when she embraced Miss Howard, Magdalena took a book from the table and finally set off to meet Ada, who was waiting for her. She went slowly through the corridors and down the stairs. At moments she stopped, and, nodding her hand or putting a finger to her lips, thought:

“First I will tell her how much Mrs. Latter pays for the premises and the upkeep of the school, and how much she pays the teachers. No. First I will say that there are parents who delay payment until the vacation, and also do not pay after vacation... Oh, no! I will tell her straight out: ‘My Ada, if I had your fortune, I would lend Mrs. Latter fifty thousand rubles right away.’ No, no, that is all wrong. Oh, what is wrong with me? I think for so many days and I cannot devise anything sensible.”

Ada Solska was a very wealthy orphan. To be sure, she loved her brother Stefan more than life; to be sure, she had immediate and distant family who loved her more than life; to be sure, a year and a half ago she had finished school and could have gone into a world which, so it was said, awaited her with longing, but—in spite of all that—Ada lived at Mrs. Latter’s school. She paid a thousand rubles a year for accommodations, services and board, and stayed in Mrs. Latter’s home because in reality (as she herself maintained) she had nowhere to live. She did not like the family that loved her more than life. Her adored Stefan, a man of thirty, had a passion for continually visiting foreign universities, although he had assured her that, once she finished school, they two would not be separated—that either he would settle down with her on one of the parental estates, or she would travel about Europe with him, seeking out universities hitherto undiscovered by anyone.

But whenever Ada was bold enough to doubt that these plans would bear fruit, her brother would answer shortly:

“My Ada, we must—even if we did not want to—look after each other to the end of life. You are so rich that everyone wants to swindle you, and I am so ugly that nobody has taken me away from you.”

“But, Stefan,” his sister would answer indignantly, “where did you come by the notion that you are ugly? It is I who am a fright, not you.”

“Ada, I tell you, you’re talking drive!” her brother would say peevishly. “You are a very pleasing, completely agreeable young lady, only a little shy, and I? If I were less ugly, I would shoot myself in the head from self-loathing; but I must live with those graces which heaven bestowed on me. And in that way I am useful to people, because whoever looks at me says: ‘How happy I am that I am not like that maggot!’”

Ada occupied two rooms on the second floor. In one was a student’s iron bed covered by a white spread, with a night stand beside it. Only a suite of furniture upholstered with gray jute served as evidence that a student did not reside there. The other room, which had two windows, was quite singular, for it looked like a laboratory. In it stood a large table covered with oilcloth, several free-standing shelves filled with books and atlases, a blackboard on easels with chalk and a sponge that were obviously in continuous use, and finally a great cabinet full of instruments for the study of physics and chemistry. There were precise weights, an expensive microscope, a concave mirror, a lens a couple of inches thick, an electroscope, and a Rumkorf tube. Nor was there a shortage of retorts, jars, and flasks with reagents. There was an astronomical globe, the

skeleton of some bird, and the indispensable crocodile, fortunately very young, and stuffed.

All these objects awakened wonder in the younger pupils and vexation in the older ones, who did not always succeed in distinguishing between the microscope and the electroscope. All these objects were Miss Solska's personal property. Not only had she purchased them and kept them in good condition; she even knew how to use them. They were her ball gowns, as she said, smiling gently and sadly.

An old teacher of her brother's had wakened in her the taste for the natural sciences. The predilection was supported by her brother, himself an ardent devotee of the exact sciences, and Ada's cleverness and disinclination for the life of the salon did the rest. Nothing attracted her to wider society; indeed, her belief that she was ugly frightened her away from it. So she hid in her laboratory, read a great deal, and continually took lessons from the best professors.

The wealthy members of her family considered Ada an egotist, and the very grand took her for a sick person. For neither they nor any of their friends, visitors or acquaintances could understand why a rich young woman of nineteen preferred science to salons, and did not think of marriage.

People only began to comprehend the eccentricity of the wealthy heiress when the news spread through the salons that in Warsaw—in addition to democracy and positivism—a new epidemic had broken out, called female emancipation. Two species of the emancipated had begun to be distinguishable, one of which smoked cigars, dressed in masculine attire, and went abroad to study medicine with men, while the other type, less audacious and perhaps more moral, limited itself to the purchase of very large books and shunned salons.

Ada belonged to the second type, and because of that, resentment was rising in certain quarters against Mrs. Latter. However, because girls from that sphere of society studied in boarding schools only rarely, the wrath of the elite only came to this, that one of Ada's aunts, who visited her sometimes, began to greet Mrs. Latter more coolly than formerly. Mrs. Latter responded with yet greater coolness, rightly or wrongly seeing the source of the lady's aversion not so much in Ada's scientific pursuits as in her fortune. It seemed to her that if Ada had been a poor girl, neither her nearer nor more distant aunts would have been alarmed either at their niece's acquisition of big books or at the emancipation of women that had begun to sweep over Warsaw.

Magdalena stopped once more at the door of Ada's apartment, and once more put a finger to her lips, like a pupil who is mentally reviewing her lesson. Finally she crossed herself and, pushing the door wide open, walked vigorously in.

"How are you, Ada?" she called, doing her best to be cheerful. "What happened so suddenly? I was just about to come to you when Stanislaw arrived. How are you, my precious? Are you ill?"

And as she kissed Ada, she began to look attentively at her yellowish complexion, her slanted eyes, her very high forehead, very wide mouth and very small nose. She glanced at her thin dark-blond hair and surveyed her slight figure in its black gown, seated on a leather armchair, but discovered no sign of sickness. She saw rather that Ada looked intently at her, and that confused her.

“It is not with me but with you that something is the matter, Magda!” Miss Solska remarked slowly, in a mild tone.

Magdalena flushed from head to toe. She wanted to throw herself on Ada’s neck and whisper, “Darling, lend Mrs. Latter some money!” But she was seized by a fear that she might ruin everything, and her voice died inside her. She dropped into a chair beside Ada and looked her in the eye with mock sternness, making an effort to smile. At last she said:

“I am a little tired... but that will pass, Ada. It has passed already.”

Uneasiness came over Ada’s sallow face. Her eyelids began to tremble and her wide mouth pursed as if she were about to cry.

“Perhaps, Magda,” she remarked still more quietly, “perhaps you were offended with me because I sent Stanislaw to you? After all, I know I should have gone myself, but it seemed to me that it would be quieter down here.”

Magdalena instantly recovered her vivacity. She leaned over in her chair and seized her friend in an embrace, laughing as ingenuously as she alone in all the school could laugh.

“Ah, unkind Ada!” she cried. “How can you suspect me of anything like that? When have you seen me offended at anyone, least of all you, so good, so dear, such an angel?”

“Because, you see, I am afraid of offending. I already cause people so much pain by my person...”

Magdalena cut off a long train of confessions with kisses, and the young women’s mutual fears were dispelled.

“You see, I wanted to tell you this,” Ada began, putting her small hands on the arm of her chair. “You know that Romanowicz cannot give us lessons, since he has left the school.”

“Naturally.”

“Mr. Dembicki has taken his place.”

“The one who lectures on geography to the lower classes? How diverting he is!”

“For your information, he is a great scholar, a physicist and a mathematician—above all a mathematician. Stefan has known him for a long time and has often spoken to me of him.”

“And if that is the case”—Magdalena interjected—“still, he looks strange. I tell you, Miss Howard cannot look at him; she turns her head away.”

“Miss Howard!” Ada said with distaste. “How many persons she turns her head away from, though she herself is not beautiful! Anyway, Dembicki is not ugly. What a mild face he has, and have you noticed his way of looking at people?”

“It’s true, he has fine eyes: large and blue...”

“Even Stefan told me that Dembicki has an exquisite way of looking at one. Stefan described it very beautifully. This is what he said: ‘When Dembicki looks at a person, one feels that he sees everything, and forgives everything.’”

“True! What a wonderful description,” cried Magdalena. “And is it possible that such a gentleman lectures on geography in the lower grades?”

A shadow of sadness fell on Ada’s face. “Stefan also predicted,” she said, “that he will not have a fine career, because he is too modest. And very modest people...” she waved a hand dismissively.

“You are right! He seems odd precisely because he is shy. In the second form he was so confused that the girls began to giggle. Imagine!”

“He was here an hour ago with Mrs. Latter and me, and also appeared troubled. But when Mrs. Latter left and we started to talk about Stefan, and when after that he began to pose questions to me, I must say, he was another man. A different look, different movements, a different voice. He was, I tell you, impressive!” said Ada.

“Perhaps it will be an embarrassment to him to lecture to the three of us?” Magdalena asked suddenly.

“It will be nothing of the kind. You will even be amazed when I tell you that he not only mentioned you and Hela, but gave us his appraisal of each of you.”

“Appraisal—of me?”

“Yes. He said that you must be very intelligent, only you forget easily.”

“Is it possible?”

“On my word of honor. And about Hela he said that she does not care much for mathematics.”

“Ah, he is clairvoyant!” exclaimed Magdalena.

“Most certainly he is clairvoyant, because I am finding Hela very vexing. She has not been here all day, though she passed near the door several times, and was singing,” Ada said ruefully.

“What is the matter with her?”

“How should I know? Perhaps she is offended with me, and most definitely she does not like me,” whispered Ada.

“But — don’t be absurd!”

Ada’s lips began to tremble and her face flushed.

"I understand that it is impossible to like me," she said. "I know that I deserve no regard, but it is painful... It is only for the sake of being with her longer that I do not go abroad, though my aunt has been urging me to go since the vacation, and even Stefan mentioned it. After all, I demand nothing from her, I only want a glimpse of her from time to time. Her voice is enough for me, even if she did not speak to me. It is so little, my God, so little, and she refuses me that... And I thought that beautiful people ought to have better hearts than others!"

Magdalena listened with flashing eyes. Her resolve hardened.

"You know," she cried, clapping her hands, "I can explain it to you!"

"She is angry because Romanowicz is not tutoring us?"

"Nonsense. She—" Magdalena spoke very low, bending close to Ada's ear—"she must be terribly worried."

"About what? After all, she was singing in the hall today..."

"Just so! Because the more despair someone feels, the more they try to conceal it. Oh, I know, because I myself sing loudest when I am afraid of something."

"What is she afraid of?"

"You see, it is this way," whispered Magdalena, laying her hand on Ada's arm. "The cost of living is enormous now, and the parents of our young ladies do not pay their fees. They put off paying, and Mrs. Latter may be short of money to meet expenses."

"Yes. How do you know?" asked Ada.

"I wrote letters to parents for Mrs. Latter. But how do you know?"

"I? From Mrs. Latter," answered Ada, picking at her dress with her thin fingers.

"She told you? Then what?"

"Well, nothing. It is all right."

Magdalena moved away from her, then suddenly seized her hands.

"Ada, you loaned Mrs. Latter money!"

"Oh, heavens, and what of it? But, Magda, I insist that you not speak of this to anyone... anyone. Because if Helena found out... In any case, I will tell you everything."

"If it is a secret, I don't want to hear it!" Magdalena said defensively.

"I have no secrets from you. You see, for a long time I have thought of asking Hela to go abroad with me. I know that Mrs. Latter would let us go with Aunt Gabriela, but I am terribly afraid that if Helena heard about this... this money, she would be offended, and would not go. She would have nothing to do with me."

"Mercy! What are you saying? She ought to love you more, and she will."

“No one loves me,” whispered Ada.

“Oh, you funny old thing! I for one love you so that I would jump into a fire after you. Don’t you understand that you are good as an angel—wise, clever, but above all, so good? Anyone who would not love such a woman as you would have neither wit nor heart. My own sweetest, darling girl!” A shower of kisses accompanied these exclamations.

“You embarrass me,” answered Ada, tearful but smiling. “It is you who are the best. That is why I invited you here, and now I want to ask you to begin persuading Helena, very tactfully, to go abroad.”

“I do not think she even needs persuading.”

“But, you see—to go with me...”

“Just so, with you. Where would she find a better companion and friend?”

“She does not like me.”

“You are mistaken. She loves you very much. She is just a bit odd.”

“Perhaps she would like me if I were poor; as it is, she is too proud. So you see, Magda, how careful we must be with her. Say nothing, nothing—not a word about this unfortunate money.”

“Have no worries on that score,” answered Magdalena. “I will go to her directly and rave so about Mr. Dembicki that she will soon be here herself to thank you that we have him.”

Chapter V. The Perils of Being Beautiful

When Magdalena left Ada's room twilight had set in, deepened by clouds from which rain poured, mixed with melting snow. Lamps burned in the hall. By their light Magdalena saw her friend Joanna hurrying down the staircase, dressed as if for a ball. She wore a rustling cream-colored dress with a perfectly fitted bodice that opened in front like a door ajar, discreetly exposing a bosom like the petals of a white rose.

"And where are you off to, Joanna?" asked Magdalena.

"Now to Miss Zaneta, and later to a concert with some friends."

"You look lovely. What a dress!"

Joanna smiled.

"Ah, Magda," she said in a milder tone, "Miss Zaneta took my place, but you will help her, will you not?"

"Naturally."

"Something else, Magda: lend me your bracelet, will you, dear?"

"Certainly. Take it from the table."

"And will you not give me a fan?"

"Take everything you like. The fan is also on the table."

"Then I will take your lace headpiece as well."

"Fine. It is under the table, in the hat box."

"Thank you, my dear."

"Enjoy yourself But have you seen Helena?"

"She is not upstairs. Surely she is in her own room. Goodbye."

She disappeared around the bend in the hallway. Only the rustling of her dress was audible.

"That silly Zosia!" thought Magdalena. "As if Joanna would have allowed—"

Helena's room was empty. Magdalena was about to withdraw when a bright apparition showed itself on the threshold of the room beyond, giving her a sign with its hand. It was Helena.

Magda walked quietly across the carpeted floor to Mrs Latter's bedroom, which was half lit by the glow of a rose-colored lamp.

Helena drew Magdalena toward the door of Mrs Latter's study, which was not tightly shut, and whispered, "Look how droll he is!"

On the sofa reserved for guests a stout grayhaired gentleman with a purplish flush on his cheeks sat talking with Mrs Latter.

“Mania Lewinska’s guardian,” whispered Helena.

“I am highly satisfied, honored lady,” said the gentleman, “for it seems to me that every quarter the girl improves. Sensible, thrifty, pours the coffee, madam, and has the knack for brewing tea. When she came away to Warsaw after the vacation, I could not adjust to it. I say! Even a little slip of a woman livens up a home; only think how it would be, madam, if there were settled in it a mistress of the house in every sense of the word, a woman of judgment, mature, fine-looking.”

“Mania will be an asset to your home when she finishes school, and particularly when she marries. Because even in that event you will certainly not abandon her,” responded Mrs. Latter.

“But, madam, am I such an old duffer that I myself cannot marry? I confess that I have no plans for children—it is too late—but I do not intend to do without a wife.”

Mrs. Latter cleared her throat.

“Yes, madam, I have a considerable fortune unencumbered by debt, and I have ready cash. I have a spacious stone house by the River Bug. There is fishing, mushroom picking, hunting, bathing, madam, whatever you like. Only, on my word of honor, it is insupportable without a woman, especially when winter comes on.”

“Perhaps you would like to see Mania?” Mrs Latter put in.

“It’s no matter. Mania will not run away from me, and I will use the time, gracious lady, to do a little business of my own. Neither your wry faces nor your sophistical quibbling nor your attempts to talk things away will help, for sooner or later I will make my case outright—cards on the table, madam—and you must accept.”

Helena, covering her mouth, fled to her room. After her came Magdalena, with a perturbed expression on her face.

“Hela, how can you eavesdrop, and draw me in as well? I am sure that this would pain your mother.”

“Oh, what a comedy!” laughed Helena. “I can imagine Kazik’s face if I had told him that we shall have a third papa.”

“Hela!”

“Of course I shall not tell him, because he would spend even more money. A spacious stone house by the Bug! A palace, perhaps? In any case, Magda, I invite you for fishing, mushroom picking, swimming and hunting.”

Magdalena’s face clouded, because it occurred to her that Mrs Latter’s position could not be such a bad one if she could marry a man with such an estate.

“You have not been to Ada today,” she said, changing the subject.

Helena sat on the sofa, playing with the lace on her blue wrapper. She stopped laughing and began to yawn.

“Ada bores me with her apprehensions and her jealousy,” she said. “She dismissed Romanowicz because he fell in love with me, and engaged that ugly Dembicki, who looks like a frog.”

“You would be better off to pay attention to the lectures than to flirt with the professor.”

“But you know me! Your physics and algebra hold no interest for me, but I must flirt with someone, even Dembicki. You’ll see how sweetly he will look at me, which will probably drive Ada to despair.”

“How can you speak of Ada that way?” retorted Magdalena. “She, the poor dear girl, loves you so.”

“Quite the ‘poor dear:’ she is Miss Millions.”

“But she has put off going abroad to be with you longer.”

“Let her take me and she will be with me still longer.”

Magdalena clapped her hands for joy.

“She dreams only of that!” she cried “If you like, she will even go tomorrow, or any minute.”

“And meanwhile she waits for me to ask her. That I will not do. My company is worth at least as much as Miss Solska’s income.”

“Hela,” said Magdalena, giving her hand a tender squeeze, “you see how you misunderstand Ada. She herself would have asked you, but she does not dare. She is afraid of offending you.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! And what is there in this to be offended at? Indeed, mama will not refuse me money for the journey; it is only a matter of opportunity and proper care. For care I will depend on Miss Solska and some aunt of hers—and that is why they should come forward with a proposal. Oh, I will go abroad!”

“If so, the matter is concluded,” said Magdalena. “Ada will ask you. Only, Hela, drop in on her for a while. She so longs for you.”

Helena leaned her head on the arm of the sofa and closed her eyes.

“What a pity,” she said, “that she longs for me, and she is not a man! If an equally rich man longed for me, I would know what to tell him. Oh, Magda! If only I really could go abroad, even for six months! I am wasting my life here. There is no society for me here, there are no good matches. God, to be beautiful and have to call yourself the daughter of the headmistress of a boarding school, and, worse, to spend whole days at the school, continually taking ridiculous lessons. Ugh!”

“Then go to Ada.”

“I will go, I will go. Anyway, I know she is a good girl, and attached to me; but sometimes she bores me with her frightened glances and her everlasting grief

that I do not love her alone. How funny people are! Every admirer wants me to think exclusively of him, and with every woman friend it is the same. Meanwhile there is only one of me, and there are so many of them!”

Magdalena said a cool goodbye to Helena and slowly went upstairs. A strange feeling oppressed her. She knew Helena, she had heard her views for several years, but only at this moment had they struck her in an unpleasant way. She felt jarred by the difference between Ada’s disinterested attachment and Helena’s pretensions.

And shame swept over her at the thought that the journey of this supercilious young woman, her mother’s peace of mind, and perhaps the welfare of the school, depended today on homely Ada—Ada, who felt herself inferior to everyone, who thought that when people accepted services from her they were doing her a favor.

“What has happened to me over the last few days?” thought Magdalena “Has the world changed, or have I suddenly grown old and begun to see things as old people do? Perhaps it is some mental illness? Perhaps malaria? “

Upstairs in the classroom the students surrounded Magdalena, welcoming her, inquiring about Ada, or informing her that Miss Joanna had gone to a concert and was exquisitely dressed. Then some seated themselves on the benches, while others came up to the center of the room by turns with their textbooks and copybooks, asking for explanations. One needed help with arithmetic, another with her French exercises. Another had completed all her assignments but wanted urgently to recite the next day’s lesson to Magdalena. Each made a pretty curtsy to the teacher in the center of the hall, placed her copybook on the table, and, putting her head close to Magdalena’s, spoke with her in a low voice. Next she said, “Aha! I understand everything,” then she was convinced that she understood nothing, but in the end she returned to her place quite satisfied.

On the front bench Malwinka, a beautiful brunette with velvety eyes, amused her friends with a line of chatter about how she had completed her lessons an hour before, and always learned them faster than anyone else, because she was the cleverest. Having informed all her friends of her cleverness, she began listening to what was going forward at the teacher’s chair; and as many times as she could hear what it was about, she ran to the center of the room, grabbed the pupil who was conversing with Magdalena by the hand, and said:

“My Frania, why are you bothering miss when you know I will explain everything to you?”

“Go to your seat, Malwinka,” Magdalena ordered.

Malwinka returned to her seat, but a few minutes later, forgetting the admonition, ran up again, saying to another friend:

“My Stasia, what are you bothering miss for when you know I can tell you that perfectly well?”

“Go to your seat, Malwinka, dear,” Magdalena ordered again.

“But, please, miss, I had done everything an hour ago. I always learn fastest!”

Malwinka’s constant running back and forth was such an established part of each evening’s business that when she was absent, Magdalena and the other pupils felt that something was missing.

At last the tutoring time ended. The girls chatted among themselves on the benches or coached each other with lessons that had to be memorized. Malwinka found a pair of friends and they recited facts from world history, sometimes by turns, sometimes at random. Magdalena set to work knitting a wool scarf, glancing around the classroom from time to time.

Heavens! How wonderful it was for her at the school. What good people they all were here, and why did they love her? Because after all, she knew best that she did not deserve people’s love, she, a flawed, homely and silly creature. She had simply had a little luck, and if she were really lucky, who was to say that her dearest wish would not be fulfilled, and that a year from today she would not bring her twelve-year-old sister Zosia to the school? Zosia, poor thing, had to study in the country because it was becoming more and more difficult for their parents to lay out money for her education!

Perhaps a year from today Zosia would actually sit behind a desk opposite her, like these girls. Of course she would have a brown uniform and a black apron and be as pretty as Mania, a girl with flowing auburn hair, who was looking at a circle of lamplight reflected on the ceiling with her chin propped on her hand. But her sister would be as diligent as that blond, Henrysia, who stopped her ears and repeated her lessons so as not to miss a single phrase, a single comma. What was more, Zosia’s friends would love her, as today Stasia’s friends loved her, so that she was always at the center of a circle of girls. In no case, however, would Zosia be so shifty as Frania, who was constantly pulling caramels out of her pocket and eating them, covering her mouth with her hand so others would not see!

Suddenly her daydreams were interrupted by a pupil who inquired from the bench:

“Please, miss, what is Columbus’s egg?”

The girls began to laugh, Frania nearly choked on a caramel, and Malwinka cried:

“My Kocia, why are you bothering miss when I can explain it to you?”

Magdalena had forgotten the significance of the egg. Bending over her knitting, she listened to Malwinka’s explanation and learned that Columbus was the gentleman who had discovered America, and that in America Malwinka had a very rich uncle, who had left Warsaw not long before and made a fortune there.

When the bell rang for dinner the classroom teachers led the students to two halls in which long tables stood, covered with oilcloth. The tables were set with rows of glasses filled with tea, and plates of rolls with ham. Then began

the pushing back of chairs, the sitting down, the demands for sugar or milk, the exchanging of rolls between friends. The classroom teachers hushed the younger girls, and maids in white aprons moved around the tables with trays of rolls. Noise reigned in the dining halls.

Suddenly all was quiet. The chairs were pushed back with a rattle. The pupils and teachers rose, and bent their heads first in one hall and then in the other, like wheat in the wind. Gowned in black, calm, with a face that seemed sculpted in stone, Mrs Latter sailed through, lightly bowing to the classroom teachers at every few steps. She seemed not to look at anyone, but every teacher, student or maid felt her fiery glance. She disappeared, but in the dining rooms it was so quiet that her voice could be heard from the corridor as she demanded of the footman why the windows of the fifth-form room were not open

“Goodness!” thought Magdalena. “And was it to her, to this queenly being, that I would have liked to lend three thousand rubles? I dared to intercede for her with Ada, I, a lowly piece of dust? What will happen if she ever finds out about my conversation with Ada? Of course she will dismiss me without a qualm. She will not even need to dismiss me, because if she looks at me and asks: ‘What what did you say, you wicked thing?’ I will die on the spot.”

After dinner the students went to the recreation room and began to play, some at blind man’s bluff, some at cat and mouse. One girl sat at the piano and played a waltz, blundering at every measure. Several girls ran to Magdalena and implored her to dance with them, taking the boy’s part.

But Magdalena begged off from the fun. She went into one of the empty classrooms, which was now well aired, stood before an open window spattered with drops of falling rain, and thought in despair:

“I will never have any sense at all! How did I dare tell Ada that Mrs Latter needed money? After all, if she demanded it, all Warsaw would lay out money for her, even a hundred thousand rubles. Oh, why didn’t I die first?”

At about eleven in the evening, when all the pupils were sleeping under the care of the sacred pictures and Magdalena was reading by candlelight behind her screen, Mrs. Latter came into the bedroom. She glanced at the beds, adjusted a coverlet that had slipped off one girl, and finally peeped behind the sapphire screen.

“Surely she will dismiss me,” thought Magdalena, feeling her heart stop beating.

“Joanna is still not here?” Mrs Latter asked in an undertone.

“I don’t know, ma’am.”

“Goodnight, Magda!” the headmistress said kindly, and left the sleeping quarters.

“Ah, how good she is, how noble!” Magdalena exulted, then thought with alarm how awful it would have been to find herself out in the yard and penniless

in such a rain—which of course is what would have happened if Mrs. Latter had learned of her conversation with Ada.

“I am shameless!” she whispered to herself as she put out her candle.

The rain fell harder and harder, rustling on the roof, drumming on the windows, hissing in the downspouts, tamping on the asphalt yard. Now and again a cab rattled past, and horses’ hooves splashed in the water that flowed over the whole width of the street.

“How chilly it must be for people returning home,” thought Magdalena.

She shivered, so she wrapped herself more snugly in her coverlet and slept. She dreamed that Mrs Latter was not angry with her at all, that her Zosia was the best student at the school, and that every day she wore a scarlet cockade for exemplary conduct. She was so exceptionally diligent and polite that in order to distinguish her from the other very diligent and polite pupils, Mrs. Latter ordered her to wear the scarlet cockade even in her sleep.

That dream seemed so ridiculous to Magdalena that she burst out laughing and woke up. She roused herself and sat up in bed because she could hear a knock on the door across the hall. At the same time someone in the bedroom whispered:

“Mania, do you hear?”

“Don’t speak to me, I am terribly frightened!”

“Maybe there is a robber?”

“What are you saying? We have to wake Miss Magdalena—”

“I am not asleep, children,” Magdalena called, and turned on the light with trembling fingers.

Since the knocking could be heard again, she put on her slippers, threw on a wrapper and went to the door, candle in hand.

“Oh, miss, don’t walk into the hall! There must be murderers!” one of the girls said, and hid her head under her pillow. Others pulled their coverlets over their heads so hard that their bare feet and even their knees showed. One began to quiver and they all quivered; another began to sob and they all sobbed.

Magda summoned all her strength and opened the door. The girls were in tears.

“Who’s there?” said Magdalena, holding up the candle.

“It’s I! Don’t you see?”

The girls heard the conversation and quieted down. But when Magdalena said, “Be calm, children, it is Miss Joanna,” they began to cry and shriek at the tops of their voices.

Magdalena looked at Joanna in consternation. She looked, and did not believe her eyes when she saw that Joanna’s beautiful cream-colored dress was

drenched from the rain and stained with mud; that her hair was tousled and her face was flushed; and that her eyes were smouldering with a strange glare.

“Why are you staring at me?” Joanna demanded angrily. “I could not get here for an hour. I had to come by the footmen’s room, and now I am knocking because that whippersnapper Zosia locked the door on me!”

“Zosia?” repeated Magdalena, not knowing whether she should remain standing in the hall or calm the girls, who were crying more and more noisily.

Then from the stairway came a glow that widened, and a candle flame appeared, followed by a person in black. Magdalena withdrew into the bedroom, closed the door hard, and flung two words at the wailing girls:

“Mrs. Latter!”

In an instant silence filled the room Fear of the headmistress quelled the fear of murderers, and warded off the general hysteria. In the corridor a sharp voice could be heard:

“What does this mean, Joanna?”

For a moment someone spoke in whispers. Then Mrs. Latter answered as sharply as before, but more quietly:

“You have behaved scandalously!”

More whispering, and again Mrs Latter answered in an undertone:

“Come to my room.”

In the hall, footsteps died away. Magdalena went to her bed and put out the candle. Through the wall she heard voices from the neighboring bedroom.

A clock struck two.

Chapter VI. Some Fail...

Magdalena could not remember an event that had shaken her like that late return of Joanna's.

She could not sleep, though it was quiet in the bedrooms and the hall. It seemed to her that someone was walking; that there was a smell of burning; that a strain of music could be heard amid the thickly falling rain. But most of all the course of her own thoughts disturbed her sleep.

She dreamed that the next day something terrible would happen at the school. Most certainly Joanna would lose her place as a classroom teacher for returning late, and perhaps Zosia would be expelled for locking her out.

"Poor Joanna," sighed Magdalena, turning over in her bed, "nothing can save her. I remember, when I was still in third form, how Mrs. Latter dismissed Miss Zuzanna from her place because she went out before noon without telling anyone. And—two years ago—what happened to Miss Krystyna? Just once she did not sleep overnight in the building, and I was telling her goodbye! I do not even know if she got a place at another school.

"And what got into Zosia's head? Was she afraid? But no one could get into the corridor from outside. Perhaps she was jealous because of Kazimierz? She would be a wicked girl, of course, to do that out of jealousy... And perhaps Mrs. Latter will dismiss me, too, because I went out into the corridor? Oh, I will say that the girls were extremely frightened and I wanted to calm them."

At this instant the thought of being sent away from the school terrified her. What would she say to her parents? What would they think if she lost her place? And what would she do at home after having been dismissed and covered with shame?

She sat on the bed and caught her head in her hands.

"Good heavens!" she thought. "I am losing my senses! What would Mrs. Latter dismiss me for, and what is happening to me, that such strange things are spinning around in my head? I must be ill..."

Calming herself with the thought that they could not dismiss her for going out into the corridor, she began next to fret about her growing burden of anxious thoughts.

As recently as a few weeks ago she had thought only of her girls and their lessons, of chatting with Ada or going for a walk with her class. And today? She was uneasy about Mrs. Latter's income, she wanted to obtain a loan for her, and now she was concerned about what would happen to Joanna.

"Obviously I am in the early stages of mental confusion!" she whispered.

Three o'clock struck, three-fifteen, three-thirty. Magdalena was determined to sleep. But the more tightly she closed her eyes, the more vividly she saw in her mind's eye Joanna in a mud-stained dress, and in the depths of the hallway

the dark figure of Mrs. Latter with a candle in her hand. Then Joanna's cream-colored gown became orange, and the candle flame glowed red; then the dark figure of Mrs. Latter took on a greenish hue, and the flame turned white. Then Joanna, Mrs. Latter and her candle moved upward as if toward the ceiling, began to melt into formless splotches, disappeared, appeared again, but in other colors, and at last...

At last the ringing of a bell in the hallway reminded the sleepers that it was time to rise. The maids, as of old, carried in cleaned shoes and dresses. Several pupils ran to the bathroom to wash up. In the corridor children could be heard opening and closing doors, walking about and telling each other good morning.

Magdalena dressed, went out into the hall, and looked into the bedroom opposite hers. There were no girls, only a maid, who opened a window and said without being asked:

"Miss Joanna slept in the headmistress's apartment this morning, and has gone to the infirmary now."

"To the infirmary? What is the matter with her?"

The maid smiled so strangely that Magdalena was offended. Blushing, she went out of the room, and decided not to pursue her inquiries about Joanna. She noticed, however, that everyone around her was talking about Joanna. Standing beside the fifth-form students, Miss Zaneta told her pupils that Joanna had had to return home late last night because the lady with whom she had gone to the concert had had a fainting spell and needed someone to care for her.

But a few steps farther on, where the first-form students were gathered, Madam Meline was telling another teacher that Joanna had been late because she herself had fainted after last night's concert, which reportedly had been very beautiful. On the stairs, however, Stanislaw the footman, who served as doorkeeper now and then, was reprimanding one of the maids:

"What's it got to do with you? What tales are you carrying? Either she was in a restaurant or she wasn't. Either she got drunk or she didn't. It's none of our affair."

"Surely they are talking about the kitchen maid," thought Magda.

Lessons began at nine. Magdalena, and no doubt all the girls, forgot about Joanna. But at twelve, when Magdalena brought the newspaper to Mrs. Latter's study, she heard Kazimierz's voice in the other room saying:

"On the contrary, everyone thinks we treat teachers as members of the family..."

"But I would prefer that that not apply to you," Mrs. Latter answered sternly.

Magdalena laid the newspaper on the desk so audibly that those speaking were silent. Then they came into the study.

“Well, let Miss Magdalena be the judge,” said Kazimierz. He was flushed, his eyes glittered, and never had Magdalena seen him so handsome as today. “Let Miss Magdalena speak,” he repeated.

“I beg you, not another word!” Mrs. Latter cut in. “Very good, my child, you may go back upstairs,” she said to Magdalena.

Magdalena left the study quickly, but not without noticing that Mrs. Latter was very much altered. Her eyes were huge and darker than usual; her face was yellow. It seemed that only since yesterday she had grown thinner.

“Mrs. Latter is very beautiful,” Magdalena thought as she walked toward the stairs. But the eyes of her soul saw, not Mrs. Latter’s image, only her son’s.

Before the girls had dispersed for lunch, the strangest stories about Joanna were circulating through the school. On the one hand, some had heard from the watchman that during the night a young man heavily shielded from view had accompanied Joanna back to the school; on the other, someone from the city claimed that Miss Joanna was seen after the concert in a restaurant, in the company of gentlemen and ladies in a separate room, and that she was singing by the piano. Finally the footman who had opened the door for her whispered to one of the maids that there had been a smell of wine about Joanna when she came in.

No one at the school doubted that Joanna would lose her position if she had not already lost it, since Mrs. Latter’s strictness was well known. And so all the teachers and students, not excluding Zosia, who had locked the bedroom door, were grieved for Joanna.

Only Miss Zaneta declared that it was all gossip, and maintained that Mrs. Latter had not sent Joanna away because Miss Howard had interceded for her very vigorously.

After lunch Magdalena, with a palpitating heart, went to the infirmary to visit Joanna, whom no one had visited in spite of the general sympathy for her. She found her in bed looking very poorly, with Miss Howard beside her. Seeing Magdalena, Miss Howard rose from her chair.

“Do not think that I nurse the sick!” she exclaimed. “That is the business of grannies, not of a woman who feels her dignity as a human being.”

“How good you are, ma’am!” said Joanna, extending her hand.

“I am not good!” Miss Howard said indignantly, raising her flaxen eyebrows and lean arms. “I only came to pay homage to a woman in revolt against the tyranny of prejudice. What is this, when a woman does not have the right to return home at two o’clock, though men are allowed to return even at five in the morning? If I were Mrs. Latter, I would get rid of those wicked footmen who have the nerve to make remarks, and I would expel that little piece of work, Zosia, from the school...”

“I bear no grudge against them,” interrupted Joanna.

“But I do!” exclaimed Miss Howard. “And how I respect Mrs. Latter, because at last she has dissociated herself from prejudice.”

“What has she done?” asked Magdalena.

“Not everything, but for her a great deal, for she has acknowledged that Miss Joanna is an independent being and has the right to come home when she likes. At all events,” added Miss Howard, “I have assured her this morning that if Joanna loses her place, I will leave here for the entire night.”

“Oh, gracious! What are you saying?” Magdalena broke in with a laugh.

“I speak from my most sacred conviction. So it is. I would go out for the entire night, and—let some villain dare to make something of it!”

Miss Howard’s face turned bright red, and even her hair took on a hue more difficult to describe as she expounded her views. At last, subsiding for a moment, she turned to Magdalena and said, warmly pressing her hand:

“Well, I leave you by the sickbed, and I am satisfied that you, too, have the courage inspired by great convictions. In a year or two—three at most—there will be millions of us!”

“Us?” thought Magdalena, blushing again. “What does she think—that I, too, will be an emancipated woman?”

After Miss Howard went out, vouching for her most sacred convictions by slamming the door until the whole room shook, Magdalena sat by the sick girl. She noticed a change in her. Joanna lay with her hands limp on the bed, and her eyelashes were wet with tears.

“What is it, Joanna?” she whispered.

“Oh, nothing! Nothing! I regret nothing. Though... if you had seen me on my way through the courtyard! I hadn’t tenpence for the watchman, and I heard how he grumbled that anyone who had no money ought not to be tramping around at night. In the courtyard I tripped, and my whole dress is ruined. And how that flunkey looked at me! But do you know what? It felt good to me. Sometimes it seems to me that I would like to be constantly falling in the mud and having fingers pointed at me that way. It reminds me of my childhood. When my father beat me I bit my fingers, and it gave me the same pleasure as last night’s homecoming.”

“Your father beat you! What for?”

“Ah, indeed he did! But he never beat any confessions out of me, none, none...”

“You are very agitated, Joanna. Where were you last night?”

Joanna sat up in bed and, shaking her clenched fist, began to whisper:

“I ask you once and for all not to put such questions to me. Where I was, with whom I was: that is my affair. Let it be enough that I have no quarrel with anyone—with anyone, do you hear? Not this one, not that one. None of it matters... All roads lead to Rome...”

She fell back on the bed, buried her face in her pillow, and sobbed. Magdalena, standing over her, did not know what to do. Through her soul ran

the most contradictory feelings: astonishment, aversion, and at the same time something like envy.

“Do you need anything?” she asked a little grudgingly.

“I need nothing. Only go away and do not send any caretakers to me!” answered Joanna, not raising her face.

“Until later, then.”

Magdalena walked out slowly, thinking:

“Why did I say ‘Until later’ when I don’t want to see her? Anyway, what is there in this to concern me? I would certainly not go to restaurants with men, and not for all the treasure in the world would I want to be in such a strange state, so I do not envy her. But why did she do something that none of us do? Is she not the same as all of us, or is she better than we are?”

In the hallway she met the school’s housekeeper, Miss Marta, a tall woman in a white cap. Miss Marta was exceptionally strong, but she stooped when she walked, and was prone to cough.

“Oh, what has happened to us, missy?” said the housekeeper, folding her deeply veined hands and inclining her head more than usual. “I have been here ten years, and nothing like this has ever happened. And the poor headmistress...”

“What about the headmistress?”

“Ah! She is just sick; she looks as if she had got down from a cross, or up from a coffin. Because it’s an ugly business, and bad for the school.”

She glanced around to see that no one was in the corridor, and added quietly, putting her lips close to Magda’s ear:

“Oh, these children, these children! We are fortunate, missy, that we have no children...”

And she scurried away, shaking her big hands.

“Children? What is she saying about children? Joanna is not Mrs. Latter’s daughter, after all. Evidently Miss Marta is a little cracked...”

Suddenly she thought of Kazimierz, with heightened color and untidy hair, when he had said to his mother at noon, “Well, let Miss Magdalena be the judge.” How beautiful he had been at that moment! But here was a curious thing: in what matter had he been invoking her judgment?

Had Joanna been with him?

Magdalena went numb. It was impossible that Joanna had been with Kazimierz last night at a restaurant, impossible! He would not have done that. He—with Joanna!

She could not believe it, but at the very thought of it she felt that she hated Joanna.

Chapter VII. And Some Succeed

In the beginning of December, when Joanna was well again and had resumed her duties as a classroom teacher—when the rumors about her late return had quieted down at the school—something occurred that led Magdalena to suspect that Helena Norska did not have a good heart.

It happened to Mr. Dembicki during a lecture on mathematics in Ada's room, where Ada, Magdalena and Helena studied.

In the first place, Magdalena had noticed with indignation that from the time Dembicki's course of lectures had begun, Helena had flirted with him. She wore sleeves from which her lovely hands were conspicuously visible. She thrust out her little feet when the professor was writing something on the blackboard. Sometimes she threw him such glances that Magdalena was ashamed for her.

Magdalena was even more ashamed because Dembicki—though in the beginning he was confused in Helena's presence—later did nothing about Helena's coquetry, but even smiled at it with his good, sensible half-smile, which was tinged with irony.

“How strange of Helena!” thought Magdalena. “How can she make such faces at a gentleman over fifty, who is not handsome, who is even a little bald, and above all will never marry her? But the worst of it is that Mr. Dembicki, who is very wise, sees that she is trifling with him, and mocks her.”

Helena, whom even gentlemen in their sixties admired, began to chafe at Dembicki's behavior. She ogled him more and more challengingly, not sparing her own sneers when opportunity offered.

In the beginning of December Dembicki lectured to the three young women on Newton's binomial theory as applied to fractional exponents; and he explained it so clearly that Magdalena not only understood everything, but was beside herself with admiration. She was moved when this quiet, meek, perpetually careworn gentleman became inspired as he lectured. His sparse hair bristled; his pale eyes took on deeper shadows; his puffy face seemed to acquire chiseled features, his voice resonance. Ada and Magdalena often said to each other that these lectures of Dembicki's were true concerts, so much did the professor warm to his subject; because in his other classes, especially geography, he lectured tediously.

Dembicki, then, expounding the binomial theory of Newton, asked the young ladies if any of them cared to repeat what he had said. Magdalena could have repeated it, but out of politeness she wanted to yield the floor to Ada. However, Ada referred the question to Helena.

“When I know nothing,” Helena answered with a laugh, and shrugged her shoulders.

“You did not understand?” asked Dembicki, amazed.

Helena flung her head back, looked at Dembicki with half-closed eyes, and said:

“I was listening so intently to the melody of your voice that I understood nothing. Does that not give you pleasure?”

“Our listeners can give us only one sort of pleasure,” Dembicki replied calmly, “namely, to pay attention. Madam always refuses me that.”

“That serves her right,” thought Magdalena. But when she looked at her companions, she was bewildered. Ada looked apprehensively at Helena, then at Dembicki, while Helena flushed angrily. Her beautiful face had a catlike look as she rose from her chair and answered with a smile:

“It is obvious that I do not have the aptitude for higher mathematics, even when the professor reinforces it with lectures on morality. I will not trouble you any longer...”

She nodded to Ada, bowed to Dembicki, and left the room.

The poor professor was very upset. He dropped his chalk, stuck his left thumb behind the lapel of his coat, and began to drum with the remaining fingers. His face saddened, his eyes clouded and he spoke quietly to Ada:

“Perhaps... perhaps you ladies find my presence inconvenient?”

Ada was silent because she was close to tears. Mr. Dembicki noticed that and, taking his hat, said, “I will come for the next lesson when you send for me.”

He bowed clumsily, looking at the ceiling, and as he walked to the door Magdalena noticed that he raised his knees very high.

“Good heavens! What has happened here?” cried Ada, weeping and nestling close to Magdalena. “What am I going to do now?”

“You, Ada?” said Magdalena. “After all, he has no quarrel with you.”

“No, but I must discontinue the lessons again or Helena will be mortally offended with me. And such an excellent professor, such an unhappy gentleman, and a friend of Stefan’s... We must go away from Warsaw, because I am going to be ill here.”

Within an hour it was rumored throughout the whole school that Dembicki had said something impertinent to Helena. In the hallway Miss Howard was loudly explaining to several classroom teachers that he was a boor, an ugly toad whose bumbling appearance concealed the greatest enemy of womankind.

“Three times I examined him to find out what he thought about the independence of women, and he only smirked! I could have kicked him downstairs for those smirks,” Miss Howard declared.

And Mrs. Latter, when she met with Magdalena in the evening, said in a tone laced with anger:

“Why has that bungler tried to mend his career by lecturing here if he is going to begin speaking insolently? Unwise! Most unwise!”

Magdalena did not reply, though her deep blush betrayed the fact that she did not share the headmistress's opinion. Those few words seemed to her to presage Dembicki's dismissal, and for the first time in her life she was forced to confront the thought that Mrs. Latter was being unjust. The unfortunate professor might lose his position because he would not allow Helena to make a joke of him; but Joanna, who had caused a scandal, was still a classroom teacher, and had even begun to carry herself with an air of pride.

"Why am I thinking about this? What is it to me?" Magda reproached herself. "And what has happened to me, that I have begun to judge people and even to condemn them? Perhaps Joanna acts proud out of fear that someone will cast aspersions at her... Although she does persecute Zosia unnecessarily... And, by the way, Marta was right when she said that Mrs. Latter suffers because of her children. Helena does badly when she causes Dembicki to lose opportunities to lecture, and her mother to behave unjustly."

To the thought of Helena was joined that of Kazimierz, who had been at home less and less frequently, but whose name was more and more often linked to Joanna's. At such moments, however, Magdalena shielded herself even from the insinuations of her own imagination, and in her heart stubbornly repeated:

"It cannot be that he was in a restaurant with Joanna. It is all rumor! He, so handsome, so noble..."

In spite of Magdalena's fear that Dembicki would lose his post, the affair suddenly righted itself within a few days after the incident involving Helena. What brought about the change was the arrival of Stefan Solski, Ada's brother, which Magdalena learned of from Helena's own lips.

"You know," exclaimed Helena, drawing Magdalena into her room, "Stefan is here. This morning he arrived from abroad, and in a week – in a week Ada and her aunt and I will leave! I am going abroad, and we will spend Christmas in Rome! Do you hear, Magda?"

She began to kiss Magdalena and dance around the room. Never had she been so animated.

"An uncommon fellow, that Stefan," she said with burning eyes, "homely like Ada, but with a certain devil-may-care charm. My brain reels when I think that he has a million rubles. Anyway—anyway—today I have made it up with Dembicki. I did that for Ada and for Stefan. What energy there is in that man! He had hardly greeted Ada when he said to her, 'A week from today you ladies leave.' He said the same thing to my mama, and won her over in fifteen minutes. I tell you, there is something extraordinary about him."

Indeed, the next day porters came to the school and began to carry out Ada's books and scientific instruments, the packing of which Dembicki had helped to supervise. That same day a gentleman whom Stefan Solski had sent to attend to the formalities involved with Helena's passport called on Mrs. Latter. The classroom teachers and students spoke only of Solski, and more than one looked down from the head of the stairs, thinking that she would see that man

who was very ugly but had a lot of money and did not like for anything to stand in his way. Magdalena even heard two third-formers saying to each other:

“See, see, that is certainly the one!”

“Oh, no. That is that milksop, Dembicki.”

“Ludwisia,” Magdalena put in as she passed by them, “how can you apply such an expression to Mr. Dembicki?”

“Why, that is what Mrs. Latter calls him,” pertly replied the girl.

Magdalena pretended that she had not heard, and ran swiftly downstairs.

She hurried to Ada, and when she reached her room, found a short gentleman with broad shoulders and a large head, who was talking with Helena. At the sight of Magdalena Ada rose from her chair and said:

“Stefan...”

The man with the large head broke off his conversation, looked Magdalena keenly in the eye and said, pressing her hand,

“Madam, I am a friend of those who love my sister.”

Then he resumed his seat and turned to Helena again. His features were like his sister’s, but he had a small mustache, and a pink scar on his right cheek.

“You have not convinced me,” said Helena, smiling but looking timidly at Solski, which surprised Magdalena a little.

“Life will convince you,” he answered. “Beauty is rightly called a passport that earns the man or woman who possesses it the privilege of associating with people.”

“Yes, in the beginning. But after that?”

“What follows depends on their actions in the long run. In any case the world generously requites the merits of beautiful people, forgives them much, and very often loves them even when they do not deserve it.”

“Perhaps,” replied Helena, “but I do not understand this very well. For example, everyone says that my brother is handsome, but I never forgive him anything on that account. And... I could never be in love with such a good-looking man. A man should be energetic, courageous. That is his beauty.”

At these words Magdalena blushed, Ada lowered her eyes, and Solski was silent. But it was impossible to tell from the expression on his face whether he agreed with Helena’s theories, which to Magda were quite new and unexpected.

For a few minutes yet there was talk of the journey, after which Solski rose to go.

“And so you are arranging our departure for Wednesday, without fail?” asked Helena, throwing a glance at him.

“Can you even ask? Ada put in. “You see what he has done with my laboratory.”

“On Wednesday by the evening train, if you ladies will be so good,” answered Solski, and took his leave.

Soon after his departure Helena also left the sitting room. Ada, remaining alone with Magdalena, said,

“What do you think of it all, Magda?”

And she looked at her so sadly and strangely that Magdalena was puzzled.

“What are you speaking about, dear—the journey?”

“Oh, about the journey and not about the journey. About various things,” Ada answered. Suddenly she hugged Magdalena and, resting her head on her friend’s shoulder, whispered, “You do not even know, Magda, how good you are, how noble, how simple. And I will tell you that you surely know the world less than I, although I am only beginning to know it a little... a little...”

“Just as I am!” exclaimed Magda. “And recently—even during the last few weeks—somehow I have been seeing it differently.”

“As I am. ... Are you thinking of Joanna?”

“Of Joanna, and of various other things. And you?”

“Oh, I am as well, but there is nothing to say about that,” said Ada.

For several days before the journey abroad, Helena’s apartment was transformed into a sewing room. Mrs. Latter brought in three experts, a cutter, a stitcher and a finisher, and ordered them to conduct a review of her daughter’s entire wardrobe. A plain table was brought from the kitchen into the study, and the cutter, bending over it with a tape measure around her neck and scissors in her hand, cut and adjusted bodices and skirts all day. From seven in the morning until eleven at night the pale stitcher nodded over her whirring machine, while the finisher, sitting under the window, from time to time reminded her:

“I am waiting, Miss Ludwika.”

Or again:

“This stitch is not right, Miss Ludwika. The shuttle needs adjusting.”

On Helena’s bed and writing desk lay piles of linen. On the satin furniture were skirts and jackets. The carpet was strewn with scraps of various fabrics. On the table the scissors cut away with a grating sound, and the machine hummed to the accompaniment of the stitcher’s intermittent coughing. The prevailing noise and disorder were jarring to Magdalena, but Helena was ready to sit from morning till night and to try on every dress time after time, putting in a word to the steamstresses.

As many times as Magdalena went into Helena’s room she was sure of finding her in front of the mirror in yet another bodice or skirt, saying:

“Does it fit well? It seems to me that the band is excessively loose, and that it wrinkles in the back...” or, “Please do not shorten the skirt by an inch, because that is very important; no woman can contrive to be stately in a short dress.”

At such moments the cutter and the finisher revolved around Helena like pigeons above a nest: they measured, they marked, they drove pins into the dress, they tottered on their toes or they dropped to their knees. But Helena, martyr-like, had the starry eyes and the rapt expression of a woman who is either a saint or in love.

“Men are so foolish,” thought Magdalena, looking at the beautiful girl. “They think women only wear that fascinated look when they are present.”

It was not only during dress fittings that Magda noticed an expression of angelic dreaminess and delight on Helena’s face. Before noon on Monday Helena called her out of her class.

“My dear,” she said, “Joanna will take your place here, and you must come with me. Stefan sent a carriage for Ada, but she is staying in, so only the two of us will go to do the shopping.”

Magdalena was embarrassed to get into the carriage, and afraid to touch its satin hangings with her woolen cape. But Helena felt quite at home in it. She lowered the pane and looked pridefully at the passersby.

“It seems droll to me,” she said, “when I remember that I also walked as those ladies do, or rode in shabby cabs.”

“But it seems to me that we will ride in cabs more often than in a carriage,” Magdalena observed.

“We shall see!” whispered Helena, looking into space.

“Ridiculous girl,” thought Magdalena, recalling that Mrs. Latter had had to borrow money from Ada to keep the school open.

In town Helena had to buy two yards of silk, a pair of shoes and a gold cross for Marta. But these errands took three hours.

At the jeweler’s Helena bought a little cross for two rubles, but took the occasion to ask to be shown a pearl necklace, a set of pieces with sapphires, and another with diamonds. She asked the prices, and whether the jeweler would reduce them. At the cobbler’s she tried on more than a dozen shoes and slippers before choosing only one pair. In the fabric shop, before she bought her material, she asked to have so many pieces in various colors laid out that a rainbow of pink, white, blue and yellow silk formed around her. It was so beautiful that for a moment even Magdalena forgot what it was and where she was, and imagined that it all belonged to her! But then she came back to her senses and glanced at Helena, whose lips were trembling with excitement.

“Come, Hela,” whispered Magdalena, seeing that the older clerk was looking at Helena with a malicious smile. They paid and went out. When they found themselves in the carriage, Helena exploded with grief and anger:

“And to think that I didn’t have the money for all of it! What fine justice there is in the world! Ada is born a child of millionaires, and I – the daughter of the headmistress of a school! With one year’s income she could buy the whole shop, and I can barely afford two dresses!”

“For shame, Hela!”

“Oh, yes, people who don’t have money should always be ashamed. Oh, if the revolution in society that I continually hear about from Kazik comes at last...”

“Do you think that you would go around wearing silk if it did?”

“Of course. Wealth would belong to the clever and the beautiful, not to the ugly and incompetent, who don’t even know how to value it.”

“Kazimierz certainly does not think so,” Magdalena remarked.

“It is perfectly clear that he does not think. He only wants to enjoy life as much as he can with his resources and mine. But perhaps my turn is coming.”

After this conversation Magdalena felt still more of an aversion to Helena.

“Heavens!” she thought. “If I were going to be the sort of daughter and woman that she is, let me die, and let it be today! If she could, Helena would ruin her mother.”

Soon after their return lessons ended at the school. Magdalena stood in front of a window and looked at the courtyard, where at that minute snow was beginning to fall. She saw girls running around like a noisy swarm of bees flying out into a field; then she saw the teachers walking singly and in pairs; at last she noticed Dembicki and, wheeling around him, a foppish individual who in spite of the snow wore only a short, tight jacket and a small hat. Dembicki walked through the courtyard slowly, stopping now and then, while the absurdly dressed person ran along beside him now on the right, now on the left, then seized him by his coat buttons and began speaking intently about something.

The snow stopped for a moment, and at that instant the dandy turned his face to the window. Magda recognized him: it was Solski. In spite of herself she was conscious of the comparison between Helena, who had no money and longed for silk and diamonds, and the millionaire who went out in a skimpy jacket when it was so cold.

Still talking, the men disappeared through the gate. Magda thought:

“What are they talking about, if not Helena? If Dembicki tells Stefan about her behavior during the lectures, I, if I were in her place, would give up the trip abroad.”

Chapter VIII. Plans For A Rescue

In reality, at that very time Dembicki and Stefan were having a serious conversation about Mrs. Latter.

First they went out for dinner at an elegant restaurant on Krakowskie Przedmiescie Street, where they were seated in the most cramped room. This room was notable for its gothic chairs upholstered in green linen, and for two large mirrors, on the surfaces of which the owners of diamond rings had written slogans that were remarkably pithy and no less remarkably gross.

An elegant waiter in a frock coat and white tie, with his hair parted over his forehead, handed them menus and began to present a plan for dinner.

“First vodka and hors d’oeuvres,” said the waiter.

“I will have vodka, thank you,” replied Dembicki.

“And I, please,” said Solski.

“We have the very freshest oysters.”

“How nice,” answered Solski.

“So after vodka I can serve the oysters. A whole dozen?”

“After vodka I would like two pickled mushrooms.”

“Two mushrooms and a dozen oysters?”

“Two mushrooms without oysters,” Solski replied. “But, professor—oysters for you, perhaps?”

“Revolting things,” Dembicki muttered.

“And for dinner?” asked the waiter.

“For me—borscht. Then perhaps a piece of pike-perch... Well, a piece of venison and stewed fruit,” said Solski.

“The same, only instead of venison, beefsteak,” added Dembicki.

“And wine?”

“Half a bottle of red,” said Solski. “And—professor?”

“Soda water.”

The waiter walked out of the room, and the owner of the restaurant stopped him to ask:

“How much?”

The waiter waved a hand in a gesture of futility. “About two rubles.”

“Ah, yes!” sighed the owner. “That sort always stints, although they have money to burn. But treat him respectfully because he tips well, that Mr. Solski.”

“Which is he, sir, the older one or the younger?” a footman asked curiously.

“The younger, the younger. The one who cannot afford a fur coat in winter.”

The waiter attended to his duties with distinction. He served the dishes in timely fashion, cleared his throat discreetly as he walked up to the table, walked out on tiptoe, and addressed Solski as “your lordship.” The guests ate, continuing their conversation.

“You drink nothing, professor, not even coffee?” asked Solski. “So it was not a false alarm about the heart ailment?”

“No. Every year it grows more serious,” answered Dembicki.

“So much more reason for you to take charge of our library. That commotion on the upper floors cannot be good for you,” said Solski.

“After the vacation, after the vacation. I cannot just walk away from the school at which I was graciously accepted, especially at an unseasonable time.”

“As you like. And, concerning the school, I have a request for you.”

“I am listening.”

“People are speaking unfavorably of Mrs. Latter,” Solski continued. “My cousins complain that she has instituted a course in emancipation, that there is a Miss Howard who wants at all costs to make young women independent...”

“An overwrought old biddy,” smiled Dembicki.

“Never mind her, though her propaganda may cost Mrs. Latter several pupils. Worse yet, there is talk in Warsaw about a scandal involving her son and some governess.”

Dembicki nodded.

“That is no concern of mine,” Solski persisted somewhat sententiously, “since, women being what they are, good-looking young men will naturally seduce them. But what is troublesome is that people who know what goes on in the city size up Mrs. Latter’s position this way: she has debts, she has a diminishing income, and she spends large sums on her son, all of which together portend bankruptcy.”

“I have heard that she has a fortune,” remarked Dembicki.

“So I thought. Nevertheless our trustee knows a certain Mr. Zgierski, to whom Mrs. Latter pays six hundred rubles a year in interest.”

“I also know Zgierski. He appears to be a hole-and-corner financier.”

“There you are,” said Solski. “And with how many others of that ilk does Mrs. Latter associate?”

Dembicki raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

“I understand,” said Solski. “And I would not meddle in the business of others, if it would not for my sister, who has made it clear that she will not let Mrs. Latter fall into bankruptcy. You understand my position. I cannot go to Mrs. Latter about the matter, for she would throw me out the door, and she would be within her rights. I am afraid to use the services of our trustee or lawyer, because the situation would become even more strained. On the other hand, however

much I honor my sister for her attachment to the woman who brought her up, I will not allow Ada's fortune to support Norski in his affairs with governesses. Let him carry on his flirtations, but not with my sister's money—my sister, who, as far as my knowledge of her goes, not only would not agree to support that sort of enterprise, but even grieves for its supposed victims."

"I cannot see a role for myself in this," said Dembicki.

"But you could have a large one," replied Solski. "Since you are at the school, you will understand if the state of things is really grave, and what it is possible to save: Mrs. Latter's school, or only—Mrs. Latter. Next you will notice when the moment has arrived at which Mrs. Latter must accept help, or fail."

"What then?"

"At that time you will say the word to our trustee, and he will take care of the rest. Perhaps after conferring with him Mrs. Latter will sell the school, or agree to take a partner who would oversee the income and expenditures. I do not know what she will decide. In any case she will not have to close the school during the course of the year, and she will have no uneasiness about herself."

"It seems to me that all this is based upon a misunderstanding, because Mrs. Latter has money," Dembicki observed.

"My dear professor," answered Solski, "I will not beat around the bush with you. Mrs. Latter has money because Ada loaned her six thousand rubles, for which our trustee called me on the carpet. But Mrs. Latter's affairs must be in a muddle, because she paid a thousand rubles for her rent instead of two thousand five hundred. Finally, I see indications that her troubles are not just momentary, because Norski not only spends a lot of money, but is still to be seen at the gaming tables."

Dinner ended, and Dembicki continually nodded his head and pondered.

"Will you do me this favor?" Solski persisted. "After all, it is not necessary for you to intervene—only to be aware of the moment when Mrs. Latter finds herself face to face with bankruptcy."

"Indeed, I will do that as well as I am able. But I am afraid that I may make a mess of it, because I am not well liked there," responded Dembicki with a grimace.

"I know everything. I know about the row with Helena, and I even understand a little about Helena herself, though she does not seem to suspect it. In spite of that, I ask you to take it upon yourself to apprise our trustee of when, exactly, he can visit Mrs. Latter. However, it is not I who ask you, but my sister," Solski concluded solemnly, as if he thought a request from his sister should settle every question.

"A clever woman, Miss Ada," said Dembicki. "What does she plan to do in life?"

"Ah! If only I knew," Solski replied with a smile. "Perhaps she wants to be a professor in some American university. Because now, you know, women want

to be members of parliament, judges, generals. Well, let her do what she likes; it is my business always to look out for her interests and give advice when she asks for it.”

“Miss Magdalena Brzeska is also very clever—very clever!” remarked Dembicki.

Solski took him by the hand, looked him in the eye, and said:

“I do not know about her cleverness, but it seems to me that she would be a more suitable companion for my sister than Miss Norska. I fear that Ada will experience a painful disenchantment, but what would you have? What can we do when it is a case of friendship between women?”

They left the restaurant and Stefan accompanied Dembicki in the direction of his home. As they were parting he said:

“So, dear professor, come to the library as soon as possible. The rooms are heated, the staff is waiting...”

“At the holidays, at the holidays,” Dembicki repeated.

“That is the time you have appointed. If it were a time of my choosing, it would be this very minute.”

“So on Wednesday you leave with your sister?”

“No. The ladies go with our aunt, and I will not join them until New Year’s in Rome.”

They embraced, and Dembicki walked on. Solski looked after him and thought:

“How obvious it is that that gentleman carries within himself something precious and fragile! How carefully he steps, feeling that if he so much as slips he will fall to the bottom of a grave! It is a heavy fate when a man’s existence is reduced to nothing more than the painstaking sheltering of life.”

Suddenly his meditations took a different direction.

“Well, and what of me?” he said to himself. “What of me? What has life come to for me? That man, who is seriously ill, works to support himself, cares for a little niece, teaches girls zoology and geography, even works out some new system of philosophy. He does all that, this invalid whose heart could rupture any minute, and not from love. Whereas I am healthy as a horse; I have, or so it is said, wit and energy; I am blessed with a large fortune and a yearning for action, and – I do nothing! I can buy everything: diversions, sweethearts, knowledge... Only I cannot buy a goal for my actions.

“To have nothing to catch hold of – that is a sickness no worse than a weak heart. But also to be always ready to serve as guide where no one needs guides because no one goes anywhere... is a modern form of torture! I will either be a blackguard of the worst sort, or fritter myself away, along with my aspirations to great deeds...”

He stuck his hands into the pockets of his tight-fitting trousers and walked slowly along the street, lost in thought, lashed in the face by snow and jostled by passersby, who looked at him as though he were a pauper or a lunatic.

Chapter IX. Before the Journey

On Wednesday, the day of Ada's and Helena's departure, two messengers came for Magdalena during the interval between the morning classes: Stanislaw from Helena, and a maid from Ada.

Coming out of her classroom, Magdalena met the two rivals walking toward each other in the hallway: the student Zosia and Joanna, the teacher. Their meeting hardly lasted a second, but its brevity did not hinder Joanna from whispering, "Mean thing!"—which Zosia didn't hear anyway—or Zosia from putting out her tongue, which, for her part, Joanna did not see.

It aroused Magdalena's indignation, however, and, drawing near the fifth-former, she said in an undertone:

"For shame, Zosia, sticking out your tongue as if you were only in the first form!"

"Because I despise her!" Zosia answered loudly.

"It's very wicked, because you were the one who did her a wrong, locking the door that night. Do you remember?"

"I would have killed her, the flirt! I don't blame him for letting himself be lured by that vamp, but she is the one I won't forgive, won't forgive, won't forgive!"

Seeing that she had not succeeded in correcting Zosia's point of view or appeasing her, Magdalena nodded to her and hurried downstairs. She herself felt a dislike for Joanna, but at the same time it pained her that Zosia was infatuated with Kazimierz.

"Unbearable little thing," she said to herself. "She doesn't want to attend to her studies and get these absurdities out of her head." She sighed heavily.

She found Helena in her room, feverish and weeping. A torn handkerchief lay on the floor.

"Is she grieving like this because she is leaving?" was the question that leaped to Magdalena's mind.

"I must tell you something," Helena began in a tone that barely concealed her anger. "I will not confide in Ada, I am so ashamed of mother; but I will tell you, because if I remain silent I will explode..."

She began to sob.

"My dear Helena, I will call someone—" said Magdalena, terrified.

"No one!" Helena answered, seizing her by the hand. "It has passed."

She burst into tears a few times more, but then her eyes dried and she spoke calmly:

“Do you know how much mother has allotted me for traveling expenses? Three hundred rubles! Do you hear? Three hundred rubles! She sends me abroad like a waif! For that amount I cannot buy so much as two dresses! Nothing!”

“Hela,” Magdalena broke in, horrified, “is it for that that you have a grievance against your mother? What if she has no more money to spare?”

“She gave Kazimierz a thousand rubles,” Helena shot back angrily.

“You calculate how much money your mother gives your brother? You think of such things when you are going away for God knows how long?”

“I have the right to do that. I am my mother’s child just as he is. I have the same father, the same features, the same feelings of dignity as he has, and in spite of that I am undervalued and mistreated by comparison with him. For mama, apparently, the times when girls were not considered people have not ended – when they were sold to rich husbands, or stuck away in convents so their shares of their families’ fortunes would be left for the sons. But that has changed! We are different, and though we do not have the strength to combat injustice, we feel it keenly. Oh, Miss Howard is the only wise woman in this place. Only today do I understand the value of all her opinions.”

Magdalena turned pale, and answered mildly, though in a tone unusual for her:

“You are agitated, Hela, and you are saying things you will be ashamed of after a while. I will repeat this to no one – no one – and I will even forget it myself. Now I am going to Ada, so if you want to see me, send for me there.”

She turned and went out.

“Merciful God!” she whispered. “Now I understand what Miss Marta said about children. Mama, my poor mama! Have I been that kind of daughter to you? I would rather die, run away, go into service.”

She dropped into Miss Zaneta’s empty room, drank some water, sat down for a moment, and glanced into a mirror. She went to Ada’s apartment and found her walking around the laboratory, full of emotion but smiling.

“Here you are!” Miss Solska exclaimed.

Seating Magdalena in her chair, she began to kiss her and apologize for sending for her. At last she said, blushing:

“Ah, Magda, before I leave—you know, we leave today!—I must retract one thing that I said to you.”

Her blush deepened and she appeared more troubled.

“Do you remember our conversation on the day I introduced Stefan to you? At that time I said some absurd things: that I did not know life, that I thought of Joanna and of other things... Do you remember? It was reprehensible of me to speak in that way.”

“Reprehensible?” repeated Magda.

“Ah, yes... because, you see,” she said more quietly, “I was wrong to think badly of Helena. It seemed to me (you still do not despise me?), it seemed to me that Helena was flirting with Stefan, and that he was in love with her. Well, you understand that if they loved each other, both of them would stop loving me, and I... I would die if I lost Stefan. After all, I have only him, Magda, no one else... no parents, no close kin...” Her eyes brimmed with tears.

“So you understand why I was suspicious of Helena, but today I take it all back. Helena is a good girl, just a little cold, and Stefan—ah, you don’t know him! How wise he is! Imagine: not only is he not in love with Helena, he is even on his guard against her. He suspects her of egotism and coquetry.”

Magdalena thought that Stefan must truly be a wise fellow.

“You see how unfair I was to Helena,” Ada continued. “But do not think badly of me. I have this shortcoming, that if something strikes me painfully, in the initial moment I cannot master myself.”

“Now, now, Ada, you said nothing against Helena.” Magdalena put in.

“No, but I thought things. Anyway, let us not speak of that, it makes me ashamed. Perhaps sometime you will pardon me and believe that it is only in spite of myself that I am bad and disloyal.”

“Ada, Ada, what are you saying? You are the noblest of women.”

The kisses, confidences, retractions and assurances went on and on. At last Ada was calm, and, looking pleadingly at Magdalena, said:

“Do me one last favor. Do not refuse.”

With these words she pressed a little box wrapped in tissue paper into Magdalena’s hand.

“What is this?” asked Magdalena in confusion.

“Nothing... a keepsake. Indeed, you will not refuse it? Do you remember how we exchanged copy books in third form, before the vacation? And do you remember how you gave me a lovely picture, this red, transparent one that curls up in my hand? How much pleasure you gave me! You see, this is a watch, but such a little one that there is no point in speaking of it. Anyway, I have a self-interested motive. My name and the years I spent at the school are engraved on the case. So every time you look at it you must think of me. You see, I did it out of egotism.”

They both cried, and at that moment Magdalena was called upstairs. On the way she reproached herself for her self-seeking and lack of proper pride, and even said that it would be horrid of her to open the box before Ada’s departure. But on the next flight of stairs it occurred to her that it would be ungrateful not to look at her friend’s gift. So she opened the morocco box in which a gold watch set with diamonds quietly ticked. She was seized with fear and shame at the thought that she could accept such an expensive present; but the memory of Ada’s pleading look and caresses restored her peace of mind.

Chapter X. Farewell!

It was eight in the evening, and a mild December night shrouded the courtyard. Mrs. Latter walked around her study with her arms folded, looking now at her daughter and now at the window, beyond which could be seen the lighted bank of the Vistula. Helena sat on the leather sofa looking at the bust of Socrates as if she were saying to herself, "That fright!" Now and then she tapped the sofa impatiently with her heel.

Through the window, against a background of clear sky, appeared the dark houses of Praga, the grayish-yellow buildings on the bank of the Vistula and the black line of the iron bridge, all sprinkled with light. Lights in houses, lights on the other bank, lights on the bridge; it was as if someone had thrown a swarm of fireflies onto the river's shore. In some places they clustered in a shapeless horde; in others they formed curving lines and waited for something.

"What are they waiting for?" thought Mrs. Latter. "It is clear: for Helena's journey, to tell her goodbye. Then Helena will leave, but they will remain and remind me of her. Every time I look at those lights, which never change their places, I will think that she is here and that I will see her if only I turn my head. God, give her good fortune for all that I have suffered. God, protect her, watch over her..."

Suddenly Mrs. Latter quivered. The steps of several people carrying a load resounded in the hallway, along with the voice of Stanislaw:

"A little higher... Oh, yes... Turn now, but be careful of the railing..."

"They are already taking the trunks," Mrs. Latter said.

"You see, mama, they are only now taking the trunks!" Helena remarked at the same instant. "We will be late!"

Mrs. Latter sighed.

"You seem unhappy, mother," said Helena, rising from the sofa and embracing her. "It is useless for you to hide it, for I see it. Have I done something wrong? Please tell me or it will spoil my whole journey. My love... dearest..."

"There, there, you have done nothing," Mrs. Latter answered, kissing her.

"I am truly not conscious of anything, but perhaps you have noticed something which seems improper to you? Tell me straight out."

"Don't you understand that your leaving... your leaving upsets me..."

"My leaving?" asked Helena. "Because it is for a long time, or because it is so far?"

"A long time!" Mrs. Latter repeated with a sorrowful smile. "Half a year—is that not long? And so many things can happen during that time!"

"Goodness!" laughed Helena. "Mama begins to have premonitions?"

“No, darling, my life is taken up with too many responsibilities for me to find room in it for premonitions. But there is room for longing...”

“For me?” exclaimed Helena. “You are so constantly busy that we see each other hardly an hour a day, and sometimes not that much.”

Mrs. Latter stepped away from her, pondered, shook her head sadly and answered:

“You are right, we have seen each other hardly an hour a day, and sometimes not that much! I work, you know, after all. But even when I do not see you and your brother, I know that you are near me, and that I will see you when I find a free hour. Ah, how much I suffered when the time came to say goodbye to Kazimierz for the first time, though I knew that every few months I would have him home! With you it was still worse for me; every time you went out on the street I was afraid something might happen to you, and every minute that you were late...”

“God, how upset you must be!” Helena exclaimed with a smile, kissing her mother. “I never would have supposed so.”

“Because I have never spoken of this, since instead of lavishing my affection on my children like other happy mothers, I could only work for them. But you will see yourself, when you have children of your own, what a great sacrifice it is to be at a distance from your child, even for its good.”

They heard steps in the corridor. Helena cried suddenly, “Ada is going out!”

Again Mrs. Latter moved away from her daughter. “Not yet,” she said drily.

Then she sat in an armchair and, glancing downward, said in her normal tone:

“I will give you another twenty-five rubles exclusively for stamps. Write to me every day...”

“Every day, mama? After all, there may be days when I do not go out at all. Then what is there to write about?”

“My interest is not in descriptions of places which I know, more or less, but in you. Anyway, write when you like, and as you like.”

“In any case, twenty-five rubles will not be wasted,” said Helena in a placating tone. “Ah, this business of money... Why couldn’t I be a great lady?”

“Ada will extend you credit. I have asked her. But, Helena, be frugal. Be frugal. I know that you can be prudent, so in the name of prudence I ask you again: be frugal.”

“Do you suppose, mama, that I will throw handfuls of money around?” asked Helena with a little grimace.

“I was not thinking that, because you do not have that much. My concern is that you not run short. Our situation, you see—our financial situation does not allow for extravagance...”

Helena turned pale and grasped the arm of the sofa for support.

“So perhaps I... perhaps it would be better not to go?” she asked in a choked voice.

“You may go. By all means, go and enjoy yourself. But remember that the journey must be managed with economy. I mention our financial situation only to save you from mistakes.”

Helena threw her arms around her mother’s neck and said, smiling:

“Ah, I understand! You arouse my anxiety so I will be sensible and think of tomorrow. But who says that I am not thinking of that already, and that my journey will not reward me better than all Kazik’s schemes? I also have a brain”—she added playfully—“and who knows if I will not bring mama back a rich son-in-law? After all, I am surely worth a millionaire!”

Mrs. Latter’s face brightened and her eyes flashed, but a stern serenity returned.

“My child,” she said, “I have no intention of hiding from you that you are beautiful, and that you have the right to marry extremely well, just as Kazik does. But I must caution you: I was also like other people, I was happy...”

She rose from her chair and began to walk around the room.

“Oh, yes, I was happy!” she said in a tone dark with irony. “Well, and everything came to nothing except work and worry. Love cools, beauty passes, only work and care remain. You may count on that, that is all there is to it. In any case,” she added, stopping in front of Helena and looking her in the eye, “do nothing, do not even plan anything, without arriving at an understanding with me. I have a past so rich in experience that at least it ought to spare my children disappointment. And you have such good judgment that you ought to trust me.”

Helena embraced her mother again and, leaning her head on her shoulder, said quietly, “So, mama, there is no misunderstanding between us? You are not angry at me?”

“Where have you gotten that idea again? It will be sad for me, very sad. But if you find happiness...”

Someone knocked at the study door. A servant came in and announced that the carriages had arrived.

“And is Mr. Solski’s valet here?” asked Mrs. Latter.

“The one who is going abroad with the young ladies? He is waiting now.”

“Is Ludwika ready?”

“She is saying her farewells to the staff, but her things have gone to the station.”

“Then ask Miss Ada to sit in the carriage with Miss Magdalena and the valet, and we will come directly with Ludwika.”

The servant went out and Mrs. Latter drew her daughter into her bedroom, where a crucified Christ of ivory hung over a kneeling stool.

“My child,” said Mrs. Latter in an altered voice, “Ada is a girl with a splendid heart, and her love may mean a great deal to you, but it cannot take the place of a mother’s eye. So in this moment when you are taken from my care, I commend you to God. Kiss this cross.”

Helena touched the cross with her lips.

“Kneel here, child.”

She knelt, holding back a little and looking at her mother in astonishment.

“What am I going to pray for, mother? Am I going that far, or for that long?”

“Pray for everything: that God will not abandon you, that He will protect you from mishaps, and... that He will send me consolation. Pray, Helena, for yourself and for me. Perhaps God willingly hears the prayer of a child.”

Helena’s astonishment grew. She knelt on one knee, then, from her perch on the stool, looked uneasily at her mother.

“Is He always favorably inclined toward prayer?” she asked timidly. “What is this for, mother? After all, even without prayer, God understands our intentions if... if He hears them.”

And slowly she rose from the kneeling stool.

“Merciful God, just God!” whispered Mrs. Latter, taking her head in her hands.

“What is it, mother? Mother!”

“I am unhappy,” she said quietly, “I am the unhappiest of mothers, because I have not taught my children to pray. Your brother believes in nothing; he scoffs. You doubt that God hears prayer, and I—I cannot even succeed in convincing you. Judgment day is beginning for me, with you and with everything...”

She caught her daughter in an embrace and kissed her, weeping.

“I will... I will stay here,” Helena said in a tone of despair. Mrs. Latter pushed her away and wiped her eyes.

“Don’t dare to think of that! Go, luxuriate in the journey, and return a more sophisticated woman. Oh, if you two would find suitable situations for yourselves, I would be happy even if I had to be a housekeeper in some school. Let us go. I am upset and I myself do not know what I am saying.”

“Now, now, of course you are upset. I was so alarmed! And you were probably recalling the old times when people traveling from Warsaw to Czestochowa or even to Pruszkow paid for a mass for a safe journey. Today

there are no such dangers, nor such naive faith. You yourself know that perfectly well.”

Her mother listened to her with downcast eyes.

They went back to the study and Mrs. Latter touched the bell. In a moment Ludwika the maid appeared, ready for the road and dissolving in tears.

“Help our young lady get her things on,” said Mrs. Latter. “What are you crying about?”

“Because it’s terrible to be going so far, please, ma’am,” she answered, sobbing. “The girls were saying that the earth curves out there somewhere. If I had known that to begin with, I never would have ventured so near the edge of the world. Only this comforts me, that I have a passport and will see the Holy Father.”

A few minutes later Mrs. Latter, Helena and Ludwika seated themselves in the carriage amid the goodbyes of the students, who offered Helena a bouquet at the prompting of Miss Zaneta, and many tears of their own volition, though from no rational cause.

On the way to the station Mrs. Latter was silent. Helena was intoxicated with happiness. Traveling through avenues illuminated by two rows of street lamps and shop windows, gazing at the crush of carriages, cabs and omnibuses and the heavy streams of people on foot, whose faces and clothing could not be seen in the darkness, Helena imagined that she was already in Vienna or Paris—that her dream of so many years was fulfilled.

In the neighborhood around the railway station, and at the station itself, the traffic was so heavy that the carriage stopped a few times. At last it came to a halt before the walkway leading to the station, and the ladies alighted, or rather were swallowed up by the dark wave of humanity that boiled around the door of the lobby. Mrs. Latter was uncomfortable, since she rarely saw such a mass of people, but Helena felt a growing delight. Everything pleased her: the half-frozen cabmen, the sweating porters, the travelers weighed down with fur coats. She looked at them curiously, noticing that some rushed forward, some looked around them, and finally there were some to whom it was all one whether they were at the station or at home. How entertaining it all was: the hubbub, the crowd and the jostling, after the quiet and order amid which her life had passed until now.

“Here is the world!” she thought. “This is what I need!”

Solski’s valet intercepted them and led them to the first-class waiting room. The moment came when Ada and Stefan found a seat on a sofa for their aunt, who was enveloped in velvet and fur from head to foot so that it was hardly possible to see her or to hear anything except fitful sentences in French expressing her apprehension about whether the night would be excessively cold, whether it would be possible to sleep in the train car, and many other things of that sort.

Mrs. Latter sat beside the old lady, but Helena hardly had time to greet her, since she herself was surrounded by a group of people who wanted to say their goodbyes. The first to make his way to her was Professor Romanowicz, a good-looking man with dark hair. He gave Helena a bouquet of roses and, looking into her eyes with a melancholy air, said very softly:

“What now, Helena?”

“That’s that!” she answered, blushing and laughing.

“If so,” he began, but he had to give way to Kazimierz Norski, who handed Ada a bouquet and gave his sister a box of candy, saying, “I do not tell you goodbye, only ‘until we meet’—in a month at most.”

“Until we meet—in a month?” repeated Helena in amazement. “Indeed you are going to Berlin, not to Rome.”

“Berlin, Rome, Paris: everything is under one roof when one goes abroad.”

And he withdrew to make way for Ada, who quietly asked Helena if she were not too lightly dressed, and, blushing, whispered that Kazimierz had given her a lovely bouquet.

The first bell sounded. The second-class passengers began to swarm onto the platform, and the doors of the first-class compartments opened. Helena drew Magda aside.

“You know,” she said, speaking rapidly, “a while ago I had a scene with mama, a real piece of melodrama! She ordered me to kneel and pray, do you hear?”

“After all, we pray every night before we go to bed, let alone before a journey like this,” Magda replied.

“Oh, you and the students. Very impressive! But that is not the point. Mama seemed quite unnerved, so I ask you, watch over her and write me if...”

“Hela!” Mrs. Latter called.

Everyone began saying goodbye. Stefan, this time wearing an overcoat, handed Helena a bouquet that Romanowicz eyed gloomily and angrily, stroking his black mustache. Ada threw herself on Magdalena’s neck; Kazimierz occupied himself with conducting the velvet-swathed aunt to the car. The crowd, the rush, the tumult increased and Magdalena, wiping her eyes after parting with Ada, found herself bringing up the rear beside Romanowicz.

“Now I understand why Miss Helena makes light of her old admirers,” said the handsome professor. “She has Solski.”

“What are you saying, sir?” retorted Magdalena indignantly.

“Didn’t you see his bouquet, and her look? Good God! No such bouquet was ever seen on our railroad before.”

“It is your jealousy that speaks.”

“Not jealousy,” he replied angrily, “but knowledge of women in general, and Helena in particular. My only comfort is that Solski will seem as insignificant beside some foreign magnate as I have seemed beside him today.”

The train began to move. Mrs. Latter drew close to Magdalena and clung heavily to her arm. Solski very respectfully took his leave of both ladies, and was followed a moment afterward by Kazimierz.

“You will not take me home, Kazik?” his mother asked.

“If mama insists... though I have an engagement with the count...”

“You have an engagement... Go,” she whispered, leaning even harder on Magdalena’s arm.

Romanowicz, who was looking sidewise at her, bowed politely but from a distance, and walked away with a sigh. Magdalena was not certain what he was sighing for: for Helena—or for lectures at Mrs. Latter’s school at ten zlotys each? But right away she told herself that to wrong Romanowicz by unjust suspicions was silly and perverse, and that calmed her.

When they had gotten back into the carriage and were returning home, Mrs. Latter lowered a window and leaned out a few times as if she needed air. Then she began to speak rapidly and brightly:

“It is nothing; let the girl have some amusement. You know, Magda, she has never been abroad, and today a woman must know the world. On her travels she will live at a greater rate; she will observe people and learn the value of life. What a delight a bed is after a sleepless night in a railway car, and how a person longs for home after hotels! He wants to return more quickly than it seemed to him that he would, before the journey...”

Mrs. Latter spoke the last sentence with a smile. But every time the glare of a streetlight fell on the interior of the carriage, Magda noticed a pained expression on her face that was not in keeping with her smile or her fluent speech.

“I am very pleased that you are returning with me,” Mrs. Latter continued. “The presence of a good person brings relief, and you are a good child. If I could have another daughter, I would want you.”

Magda was silent. She nestled into the depths of the carriage, conscious that she was blushing terribly. Why was Mrs. Latter praising her, a silly, bad girl who accepted gold watches from her friends and had no great love for Helena?

Suddenly Mrs. Latter put a question to her.

“You, Magda—do you love your parents?”

“Oh, madam!” Magda whispered, not knowing what to answer.

“After all, you have not been at home for seven years...”

“But I would have liked to be!” Magdalena interrupted. “Now I do not even like to go home for holidays, because when the time comes to return to Warsaw it seems to me that I will die of grief, even though I am very well off here.”

“You cry when you are going away from home?” Mrs. Latter asked uneasily.

Magdalena caught the drift of her thoughts.

“That is, I cry,” she said, “because I am a person who cries easily. But if I had any sense, what is there to cry for? I would certainly not cry now...”

“And you do not love your parents any less because you see them so rarely?”

“Ah, madam, I love them even more. To tell the truth, I only understood what parents are when they brought me to the school and I could not see them every day.”

“Did your mother show you great affection?”

“I cannot say. But does a child only love its mother for her caresses? My mama never hugged and kissed us as you do Helena,” said Magda, trying to be diplomatic. “After all, she never worked like you. And, speaking of that, when I remember the pains she took over our dinner, how she gave us noodles and milk in the morning, how all day long she sewed or mended our clothes! She could not give us teachers or governesses, oh, no! But we loved her because she herself taught us to read. In the evening we sat near her, Zdzislaw on a chair, I on a stool, and Zosia on the carpet.

“That was such a simple carpet! Mama sewed it from scraps. In the evening she told us all sorts of things, and in this way even taught us the Bible and history. Such humble studies, not at all like the learning of the universities, but we will never forget her for that. Finally she herself looked to see if our beds had enough cover, knelt with us for prayers, and then tucked us in and kissed us and said, ‘Sleep with God, little mischief-makers!’ Because I, if you please, I was as much of a mischief-maker as Zdzis. I even climbed trees. Once I fell. But Zosia was completely different. Ah, what a dear girl!”

Suddenly she stopped speaking and looked at Mrs. Latter, who was covering her face with her hands and whispering:

“God! God!”

“Have I said something wrong?” thought Magda, terrified. “Oh, how awful I am.”

The carriage stopped in front of the school. When Magda looked at Mrs. Latter as they walked up the lighted steps, the headmistress’s face was as cold and detached as if it were chiseled from wood. But her eyes were larger than usual.

“I must have said something terribly foolish. Ah, I am wicked!” Magda said to herself.

Chapter XI. A New Disturbance

The next day Mrs. Latter called Magda to her and said:

“Bring Zosia Wentzel here, Miss Magdalena, and come yourself.”

“Very well, ma’am,” Magda answered. Her heart began to pound with fear. Obviously it was something bad, when Mrs. Latter called her Miss Magdalena and had the severe expression on her face that she wore when she reprimanded students.

“Of course it’s about Zosia,” Magdalena thought, knowing that when Mrs. Latter was delivering a reproof to a teacher, she had a different look. Not much pleasanter, but different.

When Magdalena informed Zosia of the headmistress’s order, not mentioning her own misgivings, Zosia accepted the news indifferently.

“I guessed as much,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “He has told on me.”

“Who? Kazimierz?” Magda exclaimed.

“Naturally. He has surmised that I hold him in contempt, and he is taking revenge. They are always that way. Miss Howard often tells me so.”

Joanna passed them on the stairs and threw Zosia a spiteful glance.

“There!” exclaimed Zosia, clapping her hands. “Didn’t I tell you this was the work of that she-devil?”

“Zosia, this very minute you said that Kazimierz...”

“I spoke of him, but I thought of her.”

As they knocked at Mrs. Latter’s door, they could hear noise from below; the children from the lower grades were returning from Foksal with Miss Howard. Magdalena noticed incidentally that Zosia, whose manner had been detached until this moment, grew pale and stealthily crossed herself.

“Don’t be afraid, everything will be all right,” whispered Magda, feeling fearful herself.

They waited in the headmistress’s study for about ten minutes. They were silent; neither looked at the other. At last Mrs. Latter came in. With exaggerated precision she closed the door behind her and gave Magdalena her hand, but she did not so much as look at Zosia’s beautiful curtsy, pretending instead that she did not see her at all. Then she sat down at her desk, motioned to Magdalena to sit on the sofa, and began to look for something in her desk drawers. That something, however, was neither in the right drawer nor in the middle one, nor in the lower left; so Mrs. Latter shut them again, picked up several sheets of letter paper filled with fine handwriting, and asked:

“What is this?”

Zosia, who had been pale until that moment, turned red, then went pale again.

“What is the meaning of this?” repeated Mrs. Latter, looking coldly at Zosia.

“That... that is... about Krasinski’s *Undivine Comedy*.”

“So I see. I guessed that ‘only’ and ‘dearest’ are from *The Undivine Comedy*; but who has signed himself ‘Forever yours?’ Not Krasinski, I expect, so who?”

Zosia looked glum, but was silent.

“I should like to know how these readings in literature came into your possession.”

“I can’t tell you,” whispered Zosia.

“And who is the author of these communications?”

“I cannot tell you,” repeated Zosia, a little more boldly. “But I swear, ma’am,” she added, raising her eyes and putting her hand over her heart, “I swear that it is not Kazimierz...” and tears ran down her face.

Mrs. Latter rose from her chair with clenched fists, and the room began to swirl before Magda’s eyes. But at that moment the door opened noisily and in it stood Miss Howard, fiery and menacing, holding Labencka by the hand. Labencka looked sad but obstinate.

“Excuse me for intruding,” Miss Howard said loudly, “but I have uncovered some fine goings-on!”

“What have you found that requires correction?” asked Mrs. Latter, recovering her composure.

“One of the classroom teachers,” said Miss Howard, “that Miss Joanna, is upstairs at this very moment, boasting that – to think of it! – that she pulled certain letters from under Zosia Wentzel’s pillow, and that Zosia, whom I see here, was going to be called to account for it.”

“Do you wish to exonerate Zosia?” asked Mrs. Latter.

“Your own sense of justice will exonerate her,” answered the exasperated Miss Klara. “Has Zosia admitted whose letters they are?”

“No!” Zosia chimed in energetically.

“You are a noble girl,” said Miss Howard elatedly, not noticing that the headmistress was beginning to lose patience. “Those letters,” she continued, “do not belong to Zosia, but to Labencka, who has come here with me to confess and free an innocent friend from blame.”

Mrs. Latter was confused. The sparks in her eyes went out, and a little of the hardness left her voice.

“Why didn’t Zosia tell me this herself?” she said.

“Because she felt that it was the responsibility of her friend Labencka, who has now fulfilled her obligation, as befits a woman with a sense of human dignity!” Miss Howard declaimed. “When a teacher reaches under someone else’s pillow...”

“Miss Joanna is your protegee. You took her part,” put in Mrs. Latter.

“I took the part of an independent woman, a woman who was struggling against prejudice. But I despise what she is today!” Miss Howard concluded.

In spite of Klara’s outbursts, Mrs. Latter remained calm. Motioning toward the papers, she said to Labencka:

“As far as I can see, this is a synopsis of *The Undivine Comedy*. But who gave it to you?”

“I can’t tell you,” whispered Labencka.

Miss Howard looked at Labencka triumphantly. Just then someone knocked hesitantly at the door.

“Come in!” called Mrs. Latter.

Mania Lewinska walked in. Her face was pale; her eyes were almost black, full of fright, and brimming with tears. She stopped in the middle of the study, curtsied before Mrs. Latter, and said quietly:

“Those... those are my letters. I loaned them to Labencka.”

Big tears began to fall from her long lashes. Magda thought her heart would break at the sight.

For several seconds Miss Howard looked intently at Mania. At last she drew close to her, put her large, bony hand on her shoulder, and asked,

“Those letters were written to you? Who wrote them?”

Not expecting an answer, however, she approached the desk and looked at the handwriting from behind Mrs. Latter’s chair.

“Ah, yes! I guessed it,” she exclaimed with a spasmodic smile. “That is Kotowski’s writing. I did not suppose it was for this that I introduced you...”

“Klara,” Mrs. Latter broke in, pushing the papers away, “apparently no one has been reading other people’s letters. Finally, this is not a letter, but a composition.”

“I am not reading it either,” answered Miss Howard. “I am doing more... Mania –” she turned to face the girl – “you have wounded me, but I forgive you!... Come with me, Miss Magdalena,” she added. “I feel that I need a friendly hand.”

At a sign from Mrs. Latter Magdalena rose from the sofa, and, giving her hand to Miss Klara, who was wavering like a flower ripped from its roots, led her out of the study.

“Go upstairs,” Mrs. Latter said gently to the students.

“I thought,” whispered Miss Klara in the corridor, “that I was on a higher plane than other people; but today I see that I am only a woman.”

And she blinked agitatedly, trying to squeeze a few tears from her eyes. The effort seemed very comical to Magdalena.

Stanislaw accosted them by the staircase and said to Miss Howard:

“Mr. Kotowski has gone upstairs.”

Miss Klara straightened like a spring. Instead of leaning on Magda, she jerked her hand and said in an undertone:

“Come, madam, see how I will tread this villain down.”

“But, ma’am!” protested Magdalena.

“Oh, no! You must be a witness to the way an independent woman repays those who betray her. If this fellow can live another day after what I am going to say to him, I will have my proof that he is a scoundrel whom I ought not to honor even with my contempt.”

In spite of Magdalena’s resistance Miss Howard pulled her into her room. The student, more unkempt than ever, was pacing around it with long strides. Seeing Miss Klara, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and waited for her to return his greeting.

“Look!” Miss Howard said in a deep voice. “This gentleman offers his hand to me!”

“What is this about?” asked the offended student, looking boldly at Miss Klara, who stood before him stiff and pale.

“You have been corresponding with Mania behind my back, and you ask, ‘What?’ I ought to be asking you what you are doing in the residence of a woman you have deceived.”

“I—deceived you? In the name of the Father and the Son...”

“Did you not lead me on, court me...”

“As I love God, I never thought of such a thing!” cried the student, clapping his hand to his chest.

“Then what was the purpose of your visits?” asked the irate Miss Klara.

“What purpose! Do you hear, miss?” he said, turning to Magda and throwing up his hands. “The same purpose as today – as always. I brought you the proof sheets, but...”

“The proof sheets? Of my article about illegitimate children?” Miss Howard sang out.

Magdalena was amazed at the sudden change. A moment ago Miss Klara had been like Judith beheading Holofernes, and now she was behaving like a schoolgirl.

“But if I have to deal with such terrible rows,” said the student, “I don’t want to have anything to do with this, thank you!”

Miss Howard recovered her formal bearing and her deep tone of voice.

“Wladyslaw,” she said, “you have wounded me mortally, but I am ready to pardon you if you will swear that you will never... that you will not marry Mania.”

“Well, I swear that I will marry no one but her,” retorted the student, moving his arms and legs with a restlessness that did not do justice to the gravity of the situation.

“So you are a traitor to progress. You are disloyal to our standard.”

“What are progress and standards to me!” he muttered, touseling his already untidy mane of hair.

“This is masculine logic for you!” Miss Howard said haughtily, turning to Magda.

“Masculine logic! Masculine logic!” repeated Kotowski. “In any case, women did not devise logic.”

“I see, Mr. Kotowski, that it is not possible to converse seriously with you,” Miss Klara interrupted in a tone of such easygoing camaraderie that her thoughts seemed to have taken a very cheerful turn. “But never mind,” she added. “In spite of what has passed between us, will you help me with the proofreading?”

“Such a self-sufficient woman, and she cannot even do the proofreading,” replied the student, still piqued and sulky.

“Goodbye to you both,” whispered Magdalena.

Kotowski gloomily gave her his hand. With the other he drew a bundle of papers from his discolored uniform, and looked around for a chair.

Chapter XII. Dreary Holidays

The Christmas holidays had never been so painful for Magdalena as they were that year.

Sadness and emptiness were everywhere: in Helena's room and in Ada's apartment, which no one occupied; in the bedrooms, dining rooms and classrooms; in the teachers' apartments. Miss Howard spent whole days with her friends, Miss Zaneta with an elderly cousin. Joanna was gone for several days. Madam Meline dislocated her wrist and lay in the infirmary, and Madam Fantoche gave her notice on New Year's Day itself and left for another school.

Now and then the loud echoes of her own steps in the classrooms and the halls gave Magda a fright. It seemed to her that none of the students would return, that the tables and benches would remain covered with dust, the bed frames with bare mattresses. That instead of the girls' noisy chatter and footsteps she would hear only her own steps, and that instead of the professors and classroom teachers she would meet only Mrs. Latter, who flitted down the halls with pursed lips or peered into the empty bedrooms.

Could it be that Mrs. Latter also thought no one would return after the holidays, and that the strange look in her eyes betrayed that fear?

All was not well with Mrs. Latter. Stanislaw and Marta said that she did not sleep at night, and that her doctor had recommended mineral baths and a very long rest, and shaken his head. Sometimes Magdalena found the headmistress sitting motionless, her eyes fixed on the wall. A few times she heard her run out to the hall and ask Stanislaw if Kazimierz had come back from the country, or if there were any letters.

It seemed to Magdalena that Mrs. Latter was very unhappy, both as the owner of the school and as a mother. In the face of that uncomplaining heartbreak, Magdalena more easily endured her own loneliness and the uninspiring information that came from her family. Her mother complained, without mincing words, that times were hard; her father continually deluded himself with hopes; her brother wrote about the merits of pessimistic philosophy and the benefits of collective suicide; and Zosia demanded to know when she could come to Warsaw.

But around the tenth of January there was a change. More than a dozen students arrived, and their parents began having conferences with Mrs. Latter, each of which concluded with the issuance of an invoice, so that more than a dozen money orders arrived by post. One astonished and cheered Mrs. Latter very much, although it only contained one hundred and fifty rubles. It was sent with profuse expressions of gratitude by a former pupil, who informed Mrs. Latter that she had married and was now paying the arrears owed by her parents.

The joy did not last long. The next day, when the students were busy in the classrooms with compositions and exercises, Miss Marta went to one bedroom and ordered her staff to carry out two beds. Curious on hearing the rattle of

the iron bedsteads, Magdalena hurried to the room and met Miss Howard and Joanna standing side by side. Miss Marta said in a subdued voice that both the Korkowicz girls, whose parents owned a large brewery in the country, were leaving.

“Do you remember Mrs. Korkowicz, that overfed creature who was here in the autumn and wanted her daughters to learn to paint with pastels?” said Miss Howard to Magdalena.

“This is the first thing that happens when some of our pupils engage in relationships with university students,” Joanna interposed.

Miss Howard’s flaxen hair seemed to grow yellow, and her neck reddened.

“You see,” she said to Magda, “this is what happens when some classroom teachers reach under pupils’ pillows and pilfer letters that do not belong to them.”

“I tell you, Magda,” retorted Joanna, not looking at Miss Howard, “we will lose yet more boarders and day students if Mania stays here... and those persons who spread gossip about the school around the city.”

At that Miss Howard turned and faced Joanna. Looking at her with eyes pale as ice, she said in a deep, almost bass voice:

“You are right. Persons who spread gossip should be dismissed from the school, as should those who roam around restaurants at night. I do not think of associating with those people.”

Magda covered her ears and fled from the bedroom, in which, fortunately, none of the servants remained. It struck her that for a few days something new had been in the air at the school, and that it might be a sign of trouble to come.

Mania Lewinska was in Warsaw, but was still staying at the home of friends, together with her guardian, who had twice visited Mrs. Latter. Evidently Mrs. Latter did not want to readmit Mania, for Wladyslaw Kotowski had been running to Miss Howard for three days now, no doubt asking her for support.

Magda was indeed prescient. For at that very time Mrs. Latter was sitting in her study, surrounded by books and notes, devising a plan involving Mania Lewinska and her guardian. For several days the headmistress’s thoughts had revolved around one idea which had kept her from sleeping at night, made her feverish in the small hours, wakened her before dawn, and absorbed her all day long.

Reviewing the notations she had made, Mrs. Latter said to herself for the hundredth time: “It was a mistake, my borrowing only six thousand rubles from Ada; I should have taken ten thousand.

“I was unnecessarily scrupulous. Ada is so rich, it would make no difference to her. And now what? I calculated that two thousand four hundred rubles would be left to me, and in the meantime I hardly have the thirteen hundred that I must give Kazik. For the rent I must pay fifteen hundred—from where? The Korkowicz girls have left (that’s no great pity; I would have lost a hundred rubles

for the half term on them), and how many day students may still leave? And all thanks to Mania! Her guardian has an expensive ward!

“But now—what more can I do? I cannot take anything more from the Solskis. Helena is with them, she has set her sights on Stefan (or is she only deluding herself?). Oh, careless girl! With the loans she has been extracting from Ada—after only a few weeks!—she compromises me and may ruin even her own plans. I begged her: ‘Helena, be frugal!’ So I cannot count on Ada; on whom, then? Of course I have a right, and even an obligation, to turn to Mielnicki. I will tell him straight out: ‘Sir, I will not expel your ward from the school because it would grieve me; but you should be aware that I have sustained heavy losses because of her. I do not speak in this moment as Mrs. Latter, but as the director of a social institution which everyone ought to support. I need a loan of four thousand rubles for a year. I will pay six or seven percent, but you will supply me with the money. I do not hesitate to lay my case before you, since it is not simply my personal affair, but a public one.’”

Suddenly she rose from her desk and took her head in her hands.

“I must be losing my wits! What am I thinking of? Indeed it would be worse than begging; it would be begging and threatening at the same time. He, a respectable gentleman, and with an attachment to me; what will he think?”

She walked around the study with a flushed face, shrugged her shoulders and whispered: “What does it matter to me what he thinks? I have the right on my side, and he has too much delicacy to refuse me... He has made too many speeches about his readiness to devote himself to me,” she added with a smile.

At that moment there was a knock, and without waiting for an answer, in came Miss Howard.

“Another bit of drama!” thought Mrs. Latter, looking at the teacher.

“I have come about a matter which is serious and—delicate,” Miss Klara said.

“So I see, and I am listening.”

“Please allow me to ask first: is it true that you do not want to let Mania Lewinska return to school?”

Mrs. Latter knit her eyebrows, but there was no expression of anger on her face.

“I beg you,” said Miss Klara, “do not ruin this girl. The correspondence with Kotowski, as you know, was completely innocent and limited to two letters, or rather articles—one on *The Undivine Comedy* and the other on *Irydion*. Perhaps there are side references, but do you remember the tone in which they were written? If you dismiss Mania, that poor fellow will kill himself. Such a clever boy. So honorable. He is waiting in my apartment for your decision.”

“Oh, Kotowski is upstairs? He was supposed to see Mania’s guardian here at three,” said Mrs. Latter.

“It is just for that that he is waiting in my room, and at three he will be here.”

“Of course. We will see,” answered Mrs. Latter. “I am still hesitating, but... if you know this young man, and you assure me that this will not be repeated...”

Miss Klara noticed something peculiar in the expression on Mrs. Latter’s face, but she overlooked it and gave the headmistress her hand. Then she said firmly:

“Madam, in exchange for your retaining Lewinska, you will find a most faithful friend in me.”

“That will be a great reward,” replied Mrs. Latter.

“Just now I will give you evidence of it—as a matter of fact, in two ways. First, Malinowska wants to open a school of her own after the vacation. Nevertheless I will try to induce her to make some other arrangement.”

Mrs. Latter turned pale and involuntarily squeezed Miss Howard’s hand.

“Secondly... secondly I will say something that I would not say in any other case. When I came to you just now, I intended to lay the matter before you in these terms: ‘You will choose between Joanna and me.’ But at this moment I put it to you differently.”

She drew near Mrs. Latter and, looking into her eyes, said slowly:

“Let Joanna go. It is very harmful for her to be at the school.”

Mrs. Latter sat down on the sofa.

“Have you... heard something?” she asked in a low voice.

“It is difficult not to hear something if the teachers as well as the staff and even the pupils are talking of this at the school and out in the city.”

She fell silent and looked at the headmistress.

“Oh, my head, my head!” whispered Mrs. Latter, pressing her temples. “Klara, do you ever have such migraines that the very act of thinking seems to cause physical pain?”

She closed her eyes and sat still, thinking that Miss Howard’s visit had surely lasted too long. Why did no one ring the bell, or come and speak of other matters, even of their own affairs?

“You are not well,” remarked Miss Klara.

“I have forgotten what health is.”

Chapter XIII. The Old and the Young of the Same Species

The bell rang in the waiting room, and Miss Klara left the study. Mrs. Latter breathed deeply as she saw the teacher's tall figure vanish between the portieres.

"Mielnicki!" she thought, hearing a heavy stamping of feet, then a thumping and rustling as though a large fur coat were being removed in the waiting room.

And indeed a portly, florid gentleman came in, wearing light-colored trousers and an unbuttoned frock coat, with a heavy watch chain on his vest. His flesh lay in a thick roll on his neck.

"Oh, ha! ha!" he began, wiping the frost from his gray mustache. "I kiss the hand of the divine lady... ha! ha! Oh, what does this mean? My lady looks poorly. We are not well, eh? What the deuce! I've been looking at you for three days and every day I see a change. If I were wasting away, honored madam, it would be understandable. I'm in love; it is the customary symptom. But you..."

Mrs. Latter smiled and said, looking at him flirtatiously:

"I am unwell because I do not sleep. I cannot sleep..."

"Oh, that's no good. If I did not sleep... Have you consulted anyone?"

"I do not believe in medicines."

"Another sterling quality!" the gentleman exclaimed, kissing her hand feverishly. "And I thought that in such a treasure as, without contradiction, honored madam is—that in such a treasury of merits I would surely see nothing new—until after the wedding."

"More absurdity!" Mrs. Latter broke in, shooting him glances that made him squirm as though he had been thrown into a fire.

"I cannot be sensible, honored madam, when my heart is withering. But enough about me. Here: since you do not avail yourself of doctors, I will prescribe you a remedy for sleeplessness. But give me your word and your hand on it that you will follow my instructions."

"I will see—if they are not very bad."

"They will be excellent! Because my medicine, beneficent lady, consists of two doses, like Morison's pills."

"And so?"

"And so the permanent cure for your insomnia, madam, is marriage. That is the radical remedy. Because, dear madam, your sleep is disturbed by your own eyes, which have such fire and luster that, upon my honor, I could read newspapers by them in the dark."

"And the other medicine?"

"The other, a temporary palliative, I will send around today, if you will allow me. I have several bottles of wine so excellent that you will not even find

it at Fukier. One glass at bedtime, and—be well! Cannons will not wake you in the morning.”

That advice made a strong impression on Mrs. Latter.

“But, please, madam, do not reject this little gift. I would take it as a sign that you want to break off relations.”

“There, there. I will not reject it. I accept it, and I will even try it this very day,” Mrs. Latter answered with a smile, giving him her hand, which he kissed again.

“If you would be so insistent about forcing me to accept a loan,” she thought, “oh, what an admirer you would be! Dearer than Romeo!” But she said aloud:

“It seems that that young man has come into the waiting room.”

The squire’s face clouded.

“So he has come? Bah! I see; a plucky fellow. Because when I came here I was in such a rage that I tell you, gracious madam, I was afraid of myself! It was only your sweet image—”

“I will leave you gentlemen alone,” said Mrs. Latter, extricating her hand from his grasp. Then she rang, and when Stanislaw appeared, she asked:

“Is it the young man?”

“It is Mr. Kotowski.”

“Show him in.”

Mrs. Latter disappeared into a distant room, and after a moment the student walked into the study. He was pale. His hair was abundantly pomaded, but in spite of that several thick cowlicks stood erect. Crumpling his hat in his hands, he bowed and cleared his throat.

The portly gentleman, whose ruddy complexion had now taken on an ashen tint, rose from the sofa, stuck both hands into the pockets of his trousers and stared at the figure before him, looking by turns at the student’s torn uniform, haggard face and pomaded hair. At last he said in a thunderous voice:

“Well, what do you wish to say to me, sir?”

“You summoned me, sir.”

“I summoned him! This is a cool one. Do you know, sir, in whose presence you stand? I am Mielnicki, Izydor Mielnicki, guardian and uncle of Mania... of Miss Mania Lewinska. What do you say to that?”

The student inclined his head and waved a hand, but was silent.

“I see that you are only eloquent in letters to schoolgirls.”

“Not necessarily—” replied the student, but he restrained himself and was silent again.

“Sir, you have ruined the girl.”

At that the young man suddenly raised his head and said with a clumsy bow:

“I ask you for Miss Mania’s hand.”

He bowed again and ran his fingers through his greased hank of hair, creating several gleaming streaks and yet another cowlick.

“Are you mad?” the squire burst out. “And who on earth are you?”

The young man held up his head.

“I am Kotowski, in no way inferior to the Mielnickis. And in the fall I will be a doctor.”

“A ridiculous profession!”

“Ha! If you please, there are many kinds of doctors. Not all of them are gentlemen farmers.”

“But a great many of them think of getting a share of other people’s farms.”

At that the student grew haughty. “I do not think of sharing in any farm, least of all yours. I know that Mania is poor, and I am marrying her, not the farm.”

“And if I will not allow it?”

“I will marry Mania all the same.”

The old squire shook his head. “Come now,” he said. “How can you lead the girl on if you yourself have no means of support?”

“But I will have. I will go abroad for a time—”

“Pshaw! And where will the money come from?”

“From the same fund that supported me in school and at university,” replied the irritated student.

The old man began to walk around the study singing:

“Ta, ta, ta!. He will go abroad... He has no money... Ta, ta, ta... Well,” he exclaimed suddenly, “and if I refuse Mania permission to marry you?”

“We have time.”

“But—if I drive her out of the house to the four winds?”

“She must make the best of it. Anyway, after the vacation I can begin my practice.”

“And poison the sick.”

“That is why I will study abroad: so as not to poison them.”

“And so as to take my child, whom I brought up, away from me! No, sir, no, no!” the elderly man burst out.

“Who knows what will happen in the future? Perhaps Mania and I will find a way to repay you for what you have done for her.”

The old gentleman brooded.

“How old are you?” he asked after a moment.

“Twenty-five.”

“Two years abroad! The lucky thing is that during that time you will forget about the girl, and she about you.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, No? And what if you do not finish your courses?”

“I will finish them.”

“You’re mad! After all, you could die.”

“I will not die.”

“Christ have mercy!” cried the squire, throwing up his hands. “You talk as though you had a contract with God! Anyone can die.”

“But I will not die before I marry Mania,” the student answered with a certitude that gave Mielnicki pause.

The older man walked around the study and snorted like a horse. But he could find no argument that would prevail against the young fellow who asserted with unwavering faith that he would go abroad to finish his education, that he would not die, and that he would marry Mania.

“How do you support yourself, sir?”

“I give lessons. I do a little writing.”

“Oh, what beautiful things you write, now! And how much do you get for these lessons?”

“Twenty-five rubles a month.”

“And you live on that? And pay the rent? Ha, ha, ha!”

“I even go to the theater, when I feel like it.”

The old gentleman walked away from his adversary, shrugged his shoulders, and chafed. Finally he flung another question at him:

“Where do you eat, sir?”

“Here and there. At Honoratka, at the Sign of the Parrot, at the cheapest restaurants I can.”

“And you are going abroad.”

“I am.”

“Because of this halfwit I will die of apoplexy!” the older man said vehemently. Suddenly he stopped in front of the student and said:

“I will conclude this matter in two words. Come to dinner at twelve tomorrow, sir, at the Europejski Hotel.”

“I cannot come at twelve. I must be at the clinic.”

“What time, then?”

“After one.”

“Well, come to the Europejski Hotel a little after one, do you understand, sir? I must beat this tommyrot out of your head. He hasn’t a pair of unpatched breeches, and he is going abroad... Ha! ha! ha! He wants to marry, and he doesn’t want to die! Well, as I live, I never heard the like. Keep well, sir, and don’t forget, just after one o’clock, for nobody is going to starve themselves on your account. Goodbye.”

With these words, not looking at the student, he gave him two fat fingers, and with a third lightly pressed his hand.

When Kotowski had left the study Mrs. Latter came in. Smiling and casting a sidelong glance at Mielnicki, she said:

“You must have had to read that youngster quite a lecture, because some strong language floated all the way to my room.”

“Not at all, gracious lady! Indeed, now I understand how such a beast, such an untamed animal, could turn a girl’s head. Imagine, madam: he prattles about the future as though he had an agreement with the Lord God! ‘I will go abroad,’ he says. ‘I will not die,’ he says. Did you hear? And moreover he says, ‘I will marry Mania.’ Just go and talk with such a person! Hearing that, I tell you, I knew fear, I was downright afraid, because one of two things is the case: either this fellow is blaspheming and will bring down God’s vengeance on us all, or... or he has the faith that moves mountains. And if he has that kind of faith, madam—and he has, I feel it when I listen to him—then what can we do to him? We are helpless against such people. The fellow sees that he will do what he wants, and, moreover, that he will draw others after him.”

A blush appeared on Mrs. Latter’s face, and her eyes flashed.

“Oh, yes,” she answered. “Nothing can resist a person who has faith.”

The old gentleman snapped his fingers, suddenly seized both Mrs. Latter’s hands, and exclaimed, “You’ve grasped it, madam! See: I, though I am awkward and a trifle older than that stripling, I have faith. You must marry me, and not of your own volition; I will carry you away as the Romans did the Sabines. Do not smile, madam. Lord Palmerston was sued on account of a woman, though he was twenty years older than I am... We still have a good twenty years before us, and as God is my witness, we would be fools not to take advantage of it.”

He drew her onto the sofa and, in spite of her light resistance, clasped her around the waist.

“Let us not lose time, madam, for that is a sin. I am frittering myself away, and when all is said and done, the farm is not going as it should. You are losing your health, your charm, even your sleep struggling with this school, which will bring you nothing good. Believe me, nothing good. I know what they are saying in the city.”

Mrs. Latter turned pale, and swayed as if she might faint. The old nobleman propped her head on his shoulder and said:

“Close the school at the end of the term. We will marry your daughter off. We will find her someone like Kotowski, who—the scamp—pushes forward without asking questions. Your son will go to work; that will soon blow notions of elegance out of his head. And then—one, two, three and done!”

“I cannot,” whispered Mrs. Latter.

“What is this ‘I cannot?’” the old gentleman said indignantly. “A fine figure of a woman like you? What is this? You have obligations? A husband?”

Mrs. Latter quivered and looked up at him with eyes full of tears.

“And if... and if...?” she whispered.

“If you have a husband?” he replied, somewhat taken aback. “Well, hang it! A husband who does not put in an appearance for whole ages is not a husband. What, then, are there not divorces? And if necessary I will shoot him in the head. Only tell me frankly: what is it?”

Weeping, Mrs. Latter suddenly gripped his hand and kissed it warmly.

“Not today,” she said. “Not today. I will tell you another time... Please do not ask me about anything today,” she repeated, trembling and sobbing. “No one would suppose, no one would believe, how forsaken and unhappy I am. There are probably a hundred people who move in my circle, but I have not a living soul to whom I could say, ‘See how many burdens and hardships one woman must bear.’”

The old squire’s eyes grew red.

“You see,” she said, looking at him apprehensively, “you speak to me only a little more affectionately than before, and it upsets me so that I cry. I cannot think of marriage! Oh, but if you knew how I need someone to whom I could confide my difficulties, even once in a while! You see, you would flee from me, and while you were still on the stairs you would say to yourself: ‘Why did I become involved with that unhappy creature?’”

Tears flowed onto Mielnicki’s gray mustache. He moved away from Mrs. Latter, took her hand, and said:

“I swear to God, I understand none of this; but you speak to me in such a way that I would rather they had driven a knife into my heart and twisted it. Damn it, surely you have committed no crime? Speak, lady.”

“Crime?” repeated Mrs. Latter. “Where did such a thought come from? If misfortune and work are crimes, well, yes, but nothing else.”

“Pish!” The old gentleman waved a hand. “A fellow reads too many romances and something starts floating around in his head. Forgive me, madam. But if you have a clear conscience—”

“I have! Let God judge me!” she replied, putting a hand on her heart.

“Ha! ha! ha!” the old gentleman laughed. “Then why these tears and frights? I ask no more questions, for some time you yourself will tell me what pains you, but... for shame, woman of little faith! Do you think that only whippersnappers like Kotowski have courage? That only they can say, ‘I will not die until I do this and that?’ Surely there would be no divine Providence in the world if an unhappy woman, especially such a woman as you, had no one to put her trust in.

“Throw off your worries, lady. As long as I live, not a hair will fall from your head. Marry me or don’t marry me, that is up to you. But from the time that you wept in my presence, do not say that you are alone. I am with you! My heart, my hand, my fortune, everything is yours. When you need me to do something, say so. I will do it as I hope for salvation. Well?”

Mrs. Latter sat with downcast eyes. She was overcome with shame that no more than an hour ago she had intended to borrow four thousand rubles from this man in exchange for readmitting his ward to the school. Where had such a mad scheme come from?

The old squire continued to probe. “Perhaps you need money,” he said, “because money is often the source of the heaviest troubles. Only command me: how much do you want? Two hundred rubles? Five hundred? If more is needed, I will find a thousand at your request.”

Mrs. Latter blushed heavily. For this man a thousand rubles was a serious sum, and she had wanted four thousand from him.

“How much, then?” he urged. “Because I feel that the cause of this strain is not only sleepless nights, but a shortage of money—money that is not worth one tear from your eyes.”

Mrs. Latter raised her head.

“I have money,” she said, “but what I often feel the lack of is advice, and even the sight of a person who has my interests at heart. There are worse things than a shortage of money.”

“Laugh at these troubles, and know that in me you have a servant who will follow you through fire and water. I will urge nothing today, because you do not wish it, but I ask one thing: if you are in need, even of—well, I don’t know what—call on me. My house is sufficient for us both; only give up the school, which is poisoning your life. The sooner you get rid of it, even if not a penny is left over for you, the better off you will be.”

He rose from the sofa, ready to leave.

“And if some time,” Mrs. Latter said sadly, “if some time I really did come knocking at your door? For, after all, I could lose everything...”

“Lose it quickly, and come,” he replied. “Whenever you come, day or night, you will find your accommodation ready. If you don’t want to be my wife, you can still be mistress of my house and of the farm, which needs a woman’s hand. Spit on the school! Enough of these struggles that make you lose sleep, and, no doubt, appetite!”

He kissed her hand and, grasping the handle of the door, added:

“Remember: you have your own home! You would do an old man a serious injury not to rely on me as Queen Jadwiga on her knight, Zawisza. Not only such raw lads as Kotowski have faith. Cheeky fellow! He will take Mania from me as surely as amen after prayers. But I will send the wine directly. Please drink some every day.”

“Goodbye,” said Mrs. Latter, pressing his hand.

“I am your humble servant and—please remember—what I have said has the weight of an oath. I will not change a word, so help me God.”

Chapter XIV. A Remedy

It was after four when Mielnicki left the study. The sun had set. Only a rosy glow reflected by the snows of Praga somewhat brightened the room, and cast a glow around Mrs. Latter. She stood in the center of it, resting her chin on her hand. There was a look of amazement in her beautiful eyes, and her tears had not yet dried.

She felt that something had occurred a moment earlier that her exhausted mind had no way to put into words. It seemed to her that until this time she had not cared for herself, only for others, always for others, but—see! Today an old man had come, almost comical in his protestations, who had expressly said that he wanted to care for her.

Was it possible that someone could be concerned about her? Could it be that there was a man who not only did not demand services from her, but wanted to be useful to her himself? After all, she had had to serve everyone: her first husband, then her second, then the pupils, the teachers, the staff, and above all her son and daughter.

And today, when she was long past forty and her charms had gone, when everyone was either abandoning her or exploiting and distressing her, a man had appeared who said to her... what had he said to her?

Mrs. Latter's memory had failed her, perhaps as a result of excitement. She did not recall what the old squire had said, but it was the sort of thing that, to a person beset by danger on every side, would be a way out.

She glanced around the study. There were only three doors, but she could have sworn that a while ago there had been a fourth. Of course there had been, but it was closed now, after Mielnicki's departure.

She put her hands to her head (for some time now that motion had been a habit with her). There was something she had meant to say to Mielnicki and could not, and now she had forgotten what it was.

"Aha! I know. I was going to borrow four thousand rubles from him. I would rather die!" she whispered after a moment.

Four thousand rubles: after the one number came a whole series of other numbers. Mrs. Latter sat at her desk, tapping her pencil on the paper for the thousandth time because it was impossible to write in the dim room, and calculated:

"Between now and the end of the year I need twenty-one thousand rubles for the school alone. I owe the bank a thousand. And Helena? And Zgierski? I will not even receive twenty thousand from the pupils, so where will the rest come from?"

The lights came on. At five o'clock people began streaming in on their various errands: parents of boarders and day students, ladies seeking a donation

for the renovation of a church, a teacher, an Englishwoman who wanted Madam Fantoche's position, and two ladies with tickets to a charity ball.

At seven the visits ended, and Mrs. Latter was so tired that she could hardly restrain herself from crying.

Stanislaw came in, carrying a little wooden crate.

"From Mr. Mielnicki," he said.

"Aha! Good."

She seized the crate and took it to her bedroom. She cut the cord with a pair of scissors, pried off a piece of wood, and saw bottles covered with mold as thick as sheepskin. Feverishly she jabbed at one of the corks with her scissors and pulled. It came out, releasing a pleasant aroma.

"It must be good wine," she whispered.

She took a glass from her washbasin, poured it nearly a third full and drank greedily.

"Will I go to sleep after this?" she said. "It is such a light wine."

She noticed, however, that her fatigue left her; indeed, her mind was full of thoughts that unfolded swiftly and logically. She recalled that Mielnicki had urged her most pressingly to give up the school and come out to the country, to his home.

"I cannot marry," she thought, "unless—but who would inform me about that even if it happened? I cannot marry him, but I can work for him; an old man, after all, and I not young... I feel a hundred years old inside, and I cannot help laughing when I think that I had two husbands.

"Oh, the school! Could there be worse slavery, could there be a greater curse in the world than a school? But Hela? And Kazik? Well, Hela will marry, Kazik will marry.

"And what will become of me? If Kazik and Hela are going about their business today out of my sight, will they feel a longing for me then? I am not so naive! Children grow up to live in the world, not to live for their parents; why, I managed to live without my mother.

"Yes, children are good as long as they are little; when they grow up and build nests of their own, they occupy themselves with the little hatchlings, not with the elderly... In that case I will certainly have to seek refuge with Mielnicki, and it seems that he is the only one who will not fail me. It is possible to make one's way without parents, but without camomile tea, without coffee and cream, fresh rolls and butter, it is difficult," she concluded with a smile.

A few hours later weariness and worry swept over Mrs. Latter again. Before the long vacation, and even earlier, she must borrow four thousand rubles. There was no getting around it! She could not delude herself, for the daily, weekly and monthly accounts constantly reminded her of it. Every evening she had to give money to Miss Marta, every Monday to the bakers and butchers, the first

of every month to the teachers and the housekeeping staff, every term to the landlord and the investors. So what an awful time it would be if she did not have a few thousand rubles on hand!

Around eleven Mrs. Latter drank some more wine and went to bed. True to Mielnicki's assurances, sleep began to enfold her, and at that moment the long-sought means of rescue seemed within reach.

"I will get the money from Zgierski," she thought. "He will frown, but if I promise fifteen percent he will give in. After all, my troubles must end some time! I will get the school on its feet, pupils will come to me, Helena will marry Solski. Then she will look after Kazik, and I can use all my income to pay debts. I will pay them in the course of a few years, and then... oh, how happy I will be!

"Mielnicki, that blessed man!" thought Mrs. Latter, feeling herself drop off to sleep. The bedclothes, which had been instruments of torture to her through so many sleepless nights, now seemed strangely soft. Not only did they yield to the weight of her body, they fell away and, with a movement inexpressibly pleasing, she flew deep into...

"Where am I flying?" murmured Mrs. Latter, smiling. "Aha, I am flying into the past—no, the future," she corrected herself, and felt that the expression made no sense. Then she saw that some fabled animal was emerging from the word "future," an animal that would bear her away to the country where things to come have their birth and ripen. Mrs. Latter understood that this was a dream, but since she could not resist, she consented to this preview of what was to be.

And lo! she saw herself as a woman completely free. She was alone on the street, penniless, wearing her only dress, but at the same time she felt profound, boundless delight because there was no school! She did not have to worry because the dinner had been poor, or some pupil was sick, or the classroom teachers were quarreling, or one of the professors looked displeased. She no longer feared that this or that boarding student could not pay; she did not grow pale at the sight of the landlord; she did not tremble because Miss Marta said, "Please, ma'am, tomorrow we must pay out a large sum." There was nothing to make her angry, nothing to alarm her, nothing to paralyze her powers of thought.

Only now did she see the school for what it was. It was a terrible machine that every day and every hour for more than a dozen years had driven pins, nails and knives into her body. And why? Because she had taken it upon herself to teach other people's children in order to raise her own.

Great God, was it possible that a person who called herself a mother and the headmistress of a school could suffer tortures no criminal would undergo? But indeed it had been so, and it had happened in a very simple way: everyone was her concern, so she suffered for them all.

She suffered for her children, for other people's children, for the classroom teachers, for the professors, for the housekeeping staff—for everyone. They were only obliged to work for a certain number of hours each day, and she had to

worry about their food and lodging, their health, their wages, their training and the way they were getting on together.

They knew that at the appointed time each of them would receive what was due them, but she—she did not know where it would come from. The pupils had to eat regularly, but their caretakers did not concern themselves about the fact that what was owed must also be paid regularly. The staff dillydallied with their work, but hurried to collect their salaries. The professors and classroom teachers harshly criticized the least disorder in the institution, but never thought of exerting themselves to improve its operations.

And had all that happened, truly happened? Had such demands really been placed on a woman encumbered with two children? Yes: it had happened so, and all that killing effort really had been demanded of her.

“And did I endure it for one week?” she thought. “I endured it for more than a dozen years! And no one had pity on me. No one even knew how I worked and what I put up with. No one guessed, no one even tried to fathom how I suffered; indeed, I was envied for my good fortune and judged less mercifully than criminals. For they committed offenses, while I committed none; but they defend themselves and are defended, while I am not even allowed to complain.”

Well, but today she was free. She had the right to beg, to collapse in the street, to go to the hospital, even to die under a gate somewhere, but with the sweet sense that she was free—that the inconceivable burdens that had crushed her for a dozen years and more had fallen away! Was that second birth, or resurrection?

And when she was so satiated with freedom, when it was permeating her together with the softness of the bedclothes, suddenly she saw that people were blocking her way. People wanted, were brutally determined, to turn her back to the school. And it was her own children, Kazimierz and Helena! They were silent, but their faces were stern, their looks full of reproach.

“My children... my darlings... surely you did not know how much I suffered at the school!”

“We need money... a great deal of money...”

“But you do not know... I hid everything from you. Indeed you would not have the heart to condemn your mother to that living death a second time. I would give my life for you, but spare me those torments to which the cruellest tyrant would not sentence me!”

“Money... we need money...”

Mrs. Latter woke and sat on her bed, sobbing.

“Children—my children—it is impossible!”

She remembered them when they were little. She heard their flutelike little voices and saw the tears they shed over a dead canary.

“My children?” she repeated, now wide awake and rubbing her eyes.

She lighted a candle. It was only one o'clock.

"Oh, that wine!" she whispered. "What awful dreams it brought on!"

She put out the candle and lay down again, but her distressed mind vacillated, wondering whether it was better not to sleep at all than to have such terrible dreams.

And in that same moment she found herself with a feeling that was incredible to her. Something awakened in her heart that was like aversion to her children or rancor toward them—something that more than a dozen waking years had not given rise to, but the dream had.

"Is it possible?" she whispered.

But it was so; the dream told her that even today she could be free if it were not for the children. A chill and a shadow fell on her soul, and she saw the children from a new point of view.

They were no longer children. In reality her children had ceased to exist long ago, and in her heart a moment ago, during the dream. Two persons still existed who were dear to her, very dear, but already grown; persons who threatened her freedom and peace, and against whom—who knew?—perhaps it was not decent to defend herself.

The next day Mrs. Latter awoke around eight in the morning, refreshed and serene. But she remembered her dream and felt something like a drop of ice in her heart. It seemed to her that she had shed one tear too many for herself, and that that tear had fallen to the bottom of her soul and turned to a frozen crystal.

And so the nervous uneasiness that had tormented her for some weeks was no longer to be seen on her face, but gave way to a cold doggedness.

During the next few days the pupils returned, except for four day students, and lessons began. Everything ran peacefully at the school, except that one day Miss Howard drew Magdalena to her room and said with a flushed face:

"Miss Magdalena, let us swear between ourselves that we will save Mrs. Latter!"

Magda looked at her, amazed.

"Mrs. Latter," Miss Klara continued solemnly, raising a finger, "Mrs. Latter is a noble woman. It is true that in her thinking old prejudices struggle with new ideas, but progress wins the victory."

Magda's astonishment grew.

"You do not understand me? I will not expound my views on the evolution that is taking place in Mrs. Latter's mind, because I must go to class right away, but I cite two facts which should throw light on the subject for you."

Miss Howard broke off her deep contralto for an instant, but, seeing that her words evoked her hearer's intense interest, spoke on:

"You know that Mania Lewinska has been readmitted to school."

“In fact she has been here since the day before yesterday.”

“Yes, but she owes it to me that she was not dismissed. I interceded for her with Mrs. Latter, Mrs. Latter heard, and—I am grateful to her. I am capable of gratitude, Miss Magdalena.”

It seemed to Magda just then that she had heard another voice like that somewhere. Oh, yes! One of the comic actors at the theater had spoken in a similar voice. Perhaps that was why it seemed to Magda that at that moment Miss Klara was very tragic.

“And do you know about that—that—Joanna?” Miss Howard continued.

“I know that yesterday she did not want to speak to me, and today she had no greeting for me, which at any rate hardly concerned me,” answered Magda.

“Yesterday Mrs. Latter notified that... classroom teacher, that... colleague of ours (oh, all my being shudders at the term!) that as of February first she will have no position at this school. Naturally she will pay her for the whole quarter.”

“So it was not true about Kazimierz?” exclaimed Magda, reddening. “They are always making up tales about him.”

Miss Howard glanced at her majestically and said, “Let us go, for I must hurry to class. Your naivete astonishes me, Miss Magdalena!”

She said nothing more, and Magda did not find out how much of the gossip that had been spreading about Kazimierz was unfounded.

Chapter XV. Mr. Zgierski Falls to Dreaming

It was a few minutes before one on the fifth day after Mielnicki's visit. In Mrs. Latter's dining room, and under her personal supervision, Stanislaw and Marta were preparing the table for an elegant breakfast.

"Marta, put the herring and caviar on this side, next to the vodka," said Mrs. Latter.

"Oysters on the sideboard?" asked the housekeeper.

"No, indeed. Stanislaw will open the oysters when Mr. Zgierski comes in. Here, that is surely he!" added Mrs. Latter, hearing the bell. "Is Michal in the anteroom?"

She went out to the study, and Stanislaw looked at Marta, who lowered her eyes.

"This fellow has it good," muttered the footman.

"Nobody here asked you who has it good and who has it bad," snapped the housekeeper. "The worst thing is when servants wag their tongues, because gossip breeds from that like fleas in sawdust. You should have the sense to keep your nose out of other people's business."

"Oy! Oy! Oy!" cried the old footman, who clapped both hands to his head and ran out of the room.

Meanwhile into Mrs. Latter's study came the expected guest, Mr. Zgierski. He was a man past fifty, short, rather portly. On his head a large bald spot was more and more visibly pushing aside the remainder of his graying hair. His dress was noticeable for its modest elegance, and his once-handsome face for an expression of goodheartedness which was nevertheless marred by his small, darting black eyes.

"Why, I am on the dot!" he exclaimed, holding his watch in his hand. Then he pressed Mrs. Latter's hand warmly.

"I should have no welcome for you," she shot back, throwing him a fiery glance. "Three months! Do you hear? Three months..."

"Only three? They seemed an age to me."

"Hypocrite!"

"Then let us be sincere," said the visitor with a smile. "When I do not see you, I say to myself, it is well; but when I see you, I think, after all, it is better. There you have the reason why I have not been here until now. Let us add to that that I went away to the country for the holidays. You did not go to the country?" he asked with a particular emphasis.

"Where could I go? And when?"

"Ah, madam, a pity. When I am in the country in the summer, I say to myself, the country could never be more beautiful; but now I am convinced

that it is most beautiful of all in the winter. It casts its spells, madam, there are veritable enchantments! The earth is like the sleeping princess in the fairy tale.”

When Zgierski said that, his face was alight with such sincere conviction that it was almost possible to believe him, if it had not been for the mobile black eyes which were eternally looking for something and eternally wanting to hide something. Nevertheless, when Mrs. Latter listened to him, one might have supposed that she was enraptured at what she was hearing if a spark of something very like suspicion had not flashed now and then in her dreaming eyes.

To a person of benign and trusting disposition, Zgierski would have appeared to be a guest who had come for breakfast, bringing with him a few pennies’ worth of poetry. To a more pessimistic observer he might have seemed a dark figure, casting mysterious nets of intrigue. The first would have described Mrs. Latter’s feeling for him as friendship too diffident to be love; the second would have suspected that she did not trust the man, and even feared him.

But anyone to whom the inner voices of these two persons were audible would have marveled at their monologues.

“I am certain that under this appearance of congeniality she is afraid of me, and suspects something. Well, but she is an elegant woman,” Zgierski told himself with satisfaction.

“He thinks that I believe in his shrewdness and cunning. Well, but I need money,” Mrs. Latter said inwardly.

“If you have the opportunity to go to the country, madam—and I have the feeling that you will—go even for an entire year, provided you see it in winter,” said Zgierski, accentuating certain phrases with his tone and glance.

“I, to the country? You are joking. And the school?”

“I understand,” said Zgierski, looking her tenderly in the eye, “that you have great obligations to society. I understand that so well that no explanation is needed. Well, but, my God! Everyone has a right to a little personal happiness, and you have that right more than anyone else.”

At that instant amazement, even uneasiness, was reflected in Mrs. Latter’s eyes. But then the words “I understand” flashed before her mind, and a short cry wrenched itself from her.

“But—”

And she looked at him, not hiding her astonishment.

“So we understand each other?” asked Zgierski, looking at her searchingly. Inwardly he added:

“She is caught.”

“You are a dreadful man,” Mrs. Latter whispered, adding to herself:

“I have him!”

And she lowered her eyes to hide their flash of triumph.

Zgierski gave her a look that expressed a casual affection for her and an unwavering faith in the exactitude of certain information that he possessed. Suddenly he said:

“Then I may ask...”

Mrs. Latter’s hands made fluttering motions.

“Oh, you may ask nothing! You may give me your hand and take me to the dining room.”

Zgierski stood on her left, took her by the hand as if they were dancing the polonaise, and, looking her in the eye, conducted her to the dining room.

“I will be silent,” he said, “but in exchange, you must promise...”

“Do you think, sir, that a woman can promise anything?” asked Mrs. Latter, lowering her eyes again.

“She is caught! She is caught!” thought Zgierski again, and added aloud,

“You can promise one thing, madam: that if something pleasant should happen to you, I will be the first to congratulate you... *every time...*”

One of the greatest triumphs of self-mastery that Mrs. Latter achieved in her life was this, that she did not tremble, turn pale, or betray by any other sign the agitation that overwhelmed her at that moment. Fortunately Zgierski was so sure of himself that he paid no attention to her, but thought only of showing the extent of his knowledge.

“Every time,” he said emphatically, “wherever pleasure meets you, here or in Italy, I will be the first one who congratulates you.”

They were in the dining room. Mrs. Latter delicately pulled away from him and said, motioning toward the table:

“Your favorite rye vodka. Please drink for host and guest.”

Then Zgierski, glancing at the bottle, began to marvel in earnest.

“But that is my vodka, which I succeeded in procuring from the duke...”

“Kazik just got several bottles from the duke, and gave me one. And I could not make better use of it than...”

A melancholy look accompanied her words.

Zgierski drank a little glass of the vodka. He was silent, and intended to indicate by his silence that it was a very solemn moment. But after that first glass, a new train of thought suggested itself to him.

“If she marries Mielnicki, who is a wealthy man,” he said to himself, “then she has no interest in me. And if she has no interest in me, then—what? Then... but surely she is in love with me...”

And at that moment in his soul, which was a mixture of contradictory elements, there awoke a need for sincerity.

“Excellent herring!” he said. “The caviar... the caviar is beyond admiration! Can there be anything beyond admiration?” he asked, testing with a glance whether Mrs. Latter understood what he had said. He saw that she understood.

“Stefan,” said Mrs. Latter, “I do not see that you have drunk as a guest.”

“Then in what capacity did I drink this excellent vodka?”

“I would say... as host,” remarked Mrs. Latter, looking at the tablecloth.

“Madam!” he replied, looking at her with an expression of friendship anchored securely in love, and pouring a second glass. “Madam,” he said, lowering his voice, “now I drink as a guest... as a guest who is capable of being silent even when in his heart he wishes... I would have said, to cry, but I will say, to call for a toast. Madam, if it is necessary for your happiness and peace of mind, allow me to drink this very glass... to everyone’s health!... even on the banks of the Bug... I have finished.”

He put down the glass he had emptied, and sat leaning his head on his hand.

At that moment Stanislaw walked in with a tray of oysters on ice.

“What?” Zgierski exclaimed. “Oysters?”

He shielded his eyes like a man deeply moved, and thought:

“So she, on the verge of marrying, gives me to understand that she is in love with me. That is very nice, but also very... not dangerous, but difficult. I would prefer that she were younger by twenty years.”

He fell to and ate the oysters rapidly, silently, squeezing many lemons with dramatic gestures, like a man who is suffering but wants to show that he does not care.

“Stefan,” said Mrs. Latter in the voice of one who is swooning, “indeed, we have chablis.”

“I saw it,” replied Zgierski, who after the second glass of vodka felt a need to demonstrate that he was gifted with diabolical perspicacity.

“But perhaps you would try this wine...”

She poured him a glass. He tasted it and looked at her almost sternly.

“Madam—” he said—“I could not but notice such an exceptionally musty bottle at once. You follow my meaning. But at the moment I am convinced that a woman could not choose such a wine.”

“It is a gift from Mr.—Mr. Mielnicki, the uncle and guardian of one of my pupils,” answered Mrs. Latter, averting her eyes.

“Madam wishes me to drink this wine?” Zgierski inquired solemnly.

“Certainly. Please.”

“To drink from the glass of Mr. Mielnicki, who, after all, may be a man most worthy of respect...”

There was silence. But at that instant Zgierski felt that another foot touched his.

“I could think that she has a serious interest in me,” he thought, drinking two glasses of the wine one after the other. “But if she marries a man as wealthy as Mielnicki...”

Zgierski seemed to turn to a statue; he neither drew in nor pushed out his foot, but only drank a third glass of wine, ate some fish, drank a fourth glass, began to eat some meat, and, forgetting about Mrs. Latter entirely, withdrew into a memory from the distant past.

He was lost in a daydream of a time, thirty years before, when someone had nudged his foot under a table and it had seemed to him that a thunderbolt struck. He had completely lost his composure, perhaps even dropped his fork. When the event was repeated twenty years ago, Zgierski had been less shaken, but he had felt that heaven opened above him. When it happened again ten years ago, there was no thunderbolt, no opening of heaven above his head. But he was filled with the loveliest of earthly hopes.

Today, however, he felt that he was in a troublesome position. How could a man of his age not be in a troublesome position in the presence of an amorous woman?

He kept his eyes on the table. He ate for three, he drank for four, and as he did so, beads of sweat covered his great bald spot.

“That Mielnicki is probably going on sixty,” he thought, “and he goes at everything like a man half his age. There is nothing like living in the country!”

Breakfast ended, and Zgierski was pensive, troubled, even embarrassed. Mrs. Latter was perfectly serene.

“I have drunk too much,” he said over black coffee and a very fine cognac.

“You?” smiled Mrs. Latter. “I imagine that your head is stronger than that.”

“Well, yes... I don’t know that I lost consciousness at any time, but the drinks were quite strong. They brought on strange states of mind...”

“Unfortunately, even in such states of mind you do not forget yourself,” Mrs. Latter replied with a trace of bitterness. “People who are always rational are awful.”

Zgierski nodded his head sadly, like a man who against his inclination must shoulder the burden of iron logic, and gave a hand to his hostess. They passed into the study, where Mrs. Latter lit a candle and motioned to a box of cigars.

“First-rate cigars!” sighed Zgierski. “May I—may I ask for another cup of coffee?”

Just then Stanislaw came in, carrying a tray with a silver urn, a bottle of cognac, and cups.

“You think that after an absence of three months I have forgotten your little partialities?” asked Mrs. Latter with a smile, as she poured the coffee.

Then she offered him the cognac.

Zgierski’s black eyes did not dart about uneasily. One tried to move to the right and the other to the left, and their owner had inflicted too much strain on his system to keep them clearly focused. Mrs. Latter perceived this, and in one swift motion drank a glass of cognac herself. Suddenly she said:

“By the way...Although it is not yet February, let us put our account in order.”

Zgierski reared back as if a stream of water had been poured on his head.

“I beg your pardon, but—what account?”

“Three hundred rubles for the next half year.”

He was aghast. The thought struck him that he, with all his shrewdness and devilish cunning, had fallen victim to the device of a woman! Then he recalled an old aphorism about how the cleverest man may be led down the garden path by the most ordinary woman, and finally he was confused.

“It seems to me,” he said, “it seems to me...”

But his phrases were imprisoned in his throat, and his thoughts in his head.

He felt that he had fallen into a trap which was perfectly familiar to him, but which at that moment had not presented itself to him clearly enough.

“Anemia of the brain!” he said to himself, and in order to dispel it, drank another glass of cognac.

Chapter XVI. Mr. Zgierski Shows His Business Acumen

The medicine was effective. Zgierski not only recovered his mental energies but felt an inclination for the skirmish with Mrs. Latter. So she wanted to ambush him? Excellent! Now he would show that he could not be caught napping, since always and everywhere he was master of the situation.

“Since you wish to speak of business,” he began with a smile, “and though I thought there was nothing of an urgent nature between us, let us speak systematically. Not, God forbid, that I would bring any pressure to bear, since between us...” After the briefest of pauses he continued: “But we are both accustomed to speak briefly and to the point.”

“Naturally,” Mrs. Latter interposed. “We must speak of financial matters like businesspeople.”

“I understand you, madam, and you understand me. So, then, I have a trifling deposit with you, which would not be worth mentioning between us if it were not for our mutual predilection for orderly accounts and direct speaking. This deposit, five thousand rubles, remains with you from year to year...Well, yes. But in the middle of last August I mentioned, indeed I even set forth clearly in a memorandum, my intention of taking back that sum in February of the current year. I cannot then accept interest for the next half year.”

“And if I am obstinate and do not repay you in February, what will you do to me?” asked Mrs. Latter laughingly.

“Of course I will leave the money with you until the middle of July,” Zgierski replied with a bow. “However, I must definitely have the money in July. Otherwise I will be threatened with unpleasantness, which I know you too well to believe you would ever allow.”

“But it is understood...”

“I am sure of that, and I even recall your words, which woke my highest respect and admiration: ‘Even if I should have to sell all my own and the school’s furniture, I will repay you five thousand rubles at the appointed time.’”

“Even according to our contract, it all belongs to you,” added Mrs. Latter.

Zgierski waved a hand dismissively.

“A pure formality based on your express demand, with which I would comply only in the event that that arrangement was to your advantage.”

“So you leave the five thousand rubles with me until the middle of July?” said Mrs. Latter.

“Yes. Just at that time the sword of Damocles will be hanging over my head. Do you give your pledge that my creditors may auction your furniture?”

Mrs. Latter poured him another glass of cognac.

“Forgive me—” she began after a moment, “but what if this month or next I should need—four thousand rubles more, also until the middle of July?”

“Oh, no. Surely that is unlikely,” replied Zgierski, shrugging his shoulders.

“It is quite possible, since many pupils do not pay me until the end of June.”

Zgierski brooded.

“You are in trouble,” he said. “I regret that I have invested all my funds in a sugar factory. Well, it galls me... in a manner of speaking... Did you know that sugar factories are paying dividends of eighteen and twenty percent just now? If it weren’t for that, I would have had to retrench, to cut back hard. So naturally I don’t regret that I have the stock, but that I cannot help you in the short term.”

Mrs. Latter flushed.

“Pity,” she said.

Zgierski finished his drink. He felt an irresistible inclination to impress her with his information about certain matters of great consequence to her.

“I am sure,” he began, “that you do not suspect me of any unwillingness to help you. I forbear to mention that deep amity to which one does not refer when discussing accounts, but which I am proud—I may say, justly proud—to feel toward you. I forbear to mention that, because, even if I had been the most mercenary of men, you, madam, speaking in financial terms, would have been a good investment. Please, let us speak frankly... Mielnicki’s credit is more than adequate, and a man like Solski—my God!”

Zgierski sighed. Mrs. Latter lowered her eyes.

“I do not understand you, and I do not want to understand,” she added in a low voice. “I ask you not to broach these topics.”

“I understand, and I admire your delicacy, but... can we help it if Mielnicki is complaining on every hand that he has been rebuffed, and descanting upon his love for you? At which, by the way, no one marvels, least of all I,” he finished with a sigh.

“Mielnicki is a bit of a character,” smiled Mrs. Latter. “But Solski has furnished no grounds for such rumors. And I confess that one offends me.”

“That rumor, however, came from Rome, where several Polish families live who have noticed that Stefan devotes a great deal of attention to Miss Helena.”

“I know nothing of that, nothing,” said Mrs. Latter. “It appears that our school is a fortress which rumors do not reach.”

“Hum!” muttered Zgierski. “They must have reached here, however, and from an authoritative source, since they have disturbed Dembicki.”

“Dembicki?” repeated Mrs. Latter, amazed.

“That is only my supposition,” Zgierski hastened to add, “but I mention it out of friendship for you.”

Mrs. Latter's astonishment grew.

"You see how beneficial it is to have friends who are capable of observing things. Dembicki, as is well known, has long been acquainted with Solski, and their relations are even closer because Dembicki has taken over the management of the Solskis' library."

"I knew nothing of this," Mrs. Latter remarked.

"Whereas I know, and I keep an eye on it," Zgierski rejoined with a smile. "I also know that at some time Dembicki received a sharp reprimand from Helena."

"Oh, it had to do with that miserable algebra!"

"That is it. So I may reasonably suppose that Dembicki is not especially sympathetic toward Helena, and might be reluctant to be her functionary. You see, trifles go into the making of great events."

"Still I understand nothing."

"You will understand directly. Well, now! A couple of days after the rumor that Solski was hovering around Helena reached me, one of my friends mentioned to me that Dembicki had been questioning him."

"About what?"

"Nothing more nor less than the amount that I had loaned you, and even the amount of interest. You must admit that that concern would be a strange one on Dembicki's part if we did not have reason to count him among those who are not our well-wishers."

"What an evil man!" Mrs. Latter burst out. "But who wishes us ill? You frighten me."

"There is nothing to fear. These things are natural," said Zgierski. "We know the proverb: 'Envy stalks success as shadows stalk the light.' So some (I beg your pardon; are we speaking candidly?) envy you Mielnicki. Others may be jealous of your school, though I would not number Miss Malinowska among them."

"You know Malinowska?" asked Mrs. Latter, letting her hands fall onto her chair.

"Yes. She is a good woman, and you must not consider her one of those who are not well disposed toward you. But more on that subject another time. Furthermore, there are men, and women as well, who are jealous of Helena and Solski, and finally there are those who see, through the microscope, Kazimierz's petty flaws."

"What do they have against him?" whispered Mrs. Latter, closing her eyes because she felt that under the impact of Zgierski's vast store of information her head was beginning to spin.

“Nothing much!” replied Zgierski, reeling slightly as if he were looking for a way to keep his head balanced. “They criticize Kazimierz... that is, not so much criticize as marvel, and rightly...”

“Mr. Zgierski, Stefan, speak plainly!” cried Mrs. Latter, clasping her hands.

“I shall speak briefly and to the point. That suits me. That is your style...”

“And so?”

“And so? Aha! Well, yes,” Zgierski repeated, trying to focus his attention. “They marvel, then, that your son... that is, that the respected and talented Kazimierz until now has had no definite occupation.”

“Kazik will soon go abroad,” replied Mrs. Latter.

“I understand. To Stefan Solski.”

“To university.”

“Oh, yes!” Zgierski affirmed. “Moreover, they accuse Kazimierz of indulging in love affairs. Well, love, you understand... it is the light of life, the flower of the soul... I,” he added with a foolish-looking smile, “I ought to be the last to be annoyed by the love affairs of young people... You understand me, madam. Unfortunately, Kazimierz involved the school a little...”

“That young lady is no longer with us,” Mrs. Latter interjected sternly.

“I have always admired your tactical adroitness,” Zgierski said, and kissed her hand. “But as to other criticisms...”

“Still others?”

Zgierski waved his hand.

“Not worth mentioning!” he said. “They are scandalized that Kazimierz plays cards a little.”

“Can it be—!”

“Well, yes,” he said, making motions with his hands as if he were shuffling a pack. “But, madam, he plays so successfully that one can be at ease about him. Before the holidays he borrowed fifty rubles from me for a week to pay off some debt of honor, then repaid it in three days and still treated me to breakfast.”

Mrs. Latter’s hands fell limp.

“My son,” she said, “my son plays cards? It’s a lie.”

“I saw him myself. But he plays with good judgment, and in such excellent company.”

Mrs. Latter’s features changed so that she was almost ugly.

“Have I caused you distress?” Zgierski asked in a pained tone.

“Oh, no. Only... because... I know what gaming is...”

“Surely this is something to do with your second husband of blessed memory?” Zgierski remarked piously.

Mrs. Latter rose quickly from the sofa.

“I will not allow my son to gamble!” she cried, raising a clenched fist. “I love him as only a mother can love a son—an only son—but I would disown him.”

Zgierski’s darting eyes fixed themselves on her. He took both her hands, seated her again, and said in a tone of voice that was new to him:

“Excellent! We have won! Now we can talk business.”

“Business?” she repeated, surprised.

“Yes. Be patient with me for a few minutes. My sugar factory stock, you understand—after all, it is possible to put up my stock as collateral, because, as I said, you represent a fine investment, you and Helena... Such a man as Mielnicki is wealthy enough, and Solski—that goes without saying.”

“Please do not mention those names.”

“Hum! Anyway, I would prefer to hear them from you. You need four thousand rubles until the middle of July. I understand that, and I can put up my stock. But I must have your assurance that you can secure me with other assets than the school.”

“Why?” asked Mrs. Latter, taken aback.

“My God, because—due to various occurrences at the school—it is worth practically nothing. Will you excuse my candor? The net income from the school diminished last year, and by now must have fallen to zero. Meanwhile Kazimierz constantly needs money, as young fellows do. A moment ago, however, I saw that you can hold your own with your son, which is a very important thing. Well, but even if Kazimierz took to some occupation, or in some other way got a secure berth, that would not be everything. Your expenses would go down, but your income would not increase.”

“I understand none of this, none,” Mrs. Latter put in irritably.

“Pity! Pity!” he whispered.

He rested his head on his hand and covered his eyes. It seemed to him that the room was whirling, or rather not whirling, but swaying to the right and left. But it was just that revelation that reinforced his courage and candor.

“Please,” he said, looking into her eyes, “I understand your delicacy. I understand that a well-bred woman cannot answer certain questions, especially when they are posed at an inappropriate time. On the other hand, you need four thousand rubles until July, and I can raise it, but I need security! This is what Dembicki has been inquiring about—how much interest I get on your five thousand rubles—and he is ready to call me a usurer because on certain ventures I get twenty percent. In the meantime, my capital is so small, and my expenses so limited now and for the future, that I could not exist on a lower rate of interest.”

"To what is this leading, Mr. Zgierski?"

"Excuse me, to the lending of four thousand rubles, but with certain guarantees. I understand that you may need the money very much today, and yet be able to pay it back easily in July. Only..."

"Speak plainly, Mr. Zgierski."

"And if it sounds harsh?"

"A gentle tone is nothing to the point in business matters."

"I marvel at you!" exclaimed Zgierski, kissing her hand. "So I may speak succinctly, as if I set forth an ultimatum?"

"Most certainly. Please!"

"Excellent. Then I leave aside the question of Kazimierz, although... however clever and sympathetic a young man he may be, he can nonetheless influence your position in the future."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Mielnicki, it seems to me, has heard something about Kazimierz, and—reportedly—" he paused for reflection—"certain behavior on Kazimierz's part may have an effect on Solski's plans. Do you grasp my meaning?"

"No."

"Then I will go more directly to the point," replied Zgierski, a little injured.

"I have waited an hour for that."

"Wonderful!" he smiled "And so I will be at your service with four thousand rubles until July, and even until December, if..."

"You hesitate again?"

"No. If I receive a note from you informing me either that you have accepted Mielnicki, or that Solski has proposed to Helena."

Mrs. Latter pressed her hands tightly together.

"You place great confidence in my friendship for you," she said, smiling.

"Because it is only friends whom I can help in such circumstances."

"You demand that I entrust you with family secrets?"

"I am entrusting you with half a fortune."

Mrs. Latter extended her hand, which Zgierski kissed again. She said with a laugh:

"It is irregular of you, but I excuse that. So what conclusion have we reached?"

"There are two conclusions," Zgierski replied. "I will leave you five thousand rubles until the middle of July and... I can provide four thousand more, but..."

“But?”

“But only to the future Mrs. Mielnicki, or to Solski’s future mother-in-law.”

“In what light do you wish me to regard the relations between us?” Mrs. Latter exclaimed almost angrily. “I thought we would speak of securing your money, of interest, not of marriage, to which you continually revert.”

“She must be very sure of herself,” thought Zgierski. Adopting a benevolent, grieved expression, he answered:

“Madam... since I do not dare say ‘Dear madam...’ In what light do I wish you to regard our relations? Madam, what I say will be bold, but I will say it. I wish you to regard me as a friend who leads a prisoner out of his cell and into the world, though the prisoner resists and becomes angry.

“Madam,” he continued, kissing her hand, “do not think badly of me. At this time you are passing through a serious epoch of your life. You are wavering, and there is no adviser. I will be that adviser, even executor, because I am certain that half a year from now you will be grateful to me. Although gratitude —” he sighed.

Silence ensued, and then they began speaking of neutral things, but the conversation soon broke off. Mrs. Latter was vexed, and Zgierski felt that he had stayed too long and said too much.

So he said goodbye to his hostess and went out dissatisfied with himself. He had a passion for impressing people with his shrewdness and extensive information; today he had hoped to dazzle Mrs. Latter and induce her to confide intimate things. But nothing had come of it. She was silent as a stone, and instead of marveling at him, she constantly returned to the subject of money and interest. That had irritated Zgierski, who would have preferred to be known as the craftiest demon in hell rather than as a petty financier grubbing for interest on small loans.

“Oh, these women, these women! Perverse creatures,” he said to himself, feeling that he had taken a false step.

But when he found himself on the street, cheered by the excellent liquor he had drunk and rejuvenated by the fresh air, a feeling of wellbeing permeated his heart.

“Wait a moment!” he thought. “Why am I quarreling with myself? I stipulated quite definitely for the return of my five thousand rubles. I only promised four thousand. I have the right to include in my calculations the relationship with Mielnicki, with Solski, with Malinowska; indeed, any new relationship is like a ticket in a lottery, even if the chance is only for a small prize. Good God, I am content with small winnings, provided that there are a lot of them!... It was needless for me to mention Rome, Dembicki and dear old Kazik... Well, but am I going to lose two hundred rubles on him? After all, I said nothing, I only alluded to the fact that he gambles a little and that he needs to be sent abroad. He himself would thank me for that. What did I speak of Rome for?”

The best method is to show that you know a fact and not to cite the source. Oh, there I erred..."

If Zgierski was indeed erring—was a sinner, so to speak—he was wandering not far from the road of salvation, because he continually settled his accounts with himself.

Meanwhile into Mrs. Latter's study, where her mistress was pacing feverishly, came the housekeeper, Miss Marta.

"What, then, ma'am," she said with a smile, "was the breakfast good?"

"Yes...good. That scoundrel!"

"Zgierski?" said the always curious housekeeper, trying to catch Mrs. Latter's meaning.

"Oh, never mind Zgierski. It's that fine schemer, Dembicki."

Miss Marta clapped her hands together.

"What now, didn't I say so?" she cried. "I never trust that innocent-looking sort. So mild they seem, so calm, but they're weasels! He even looks like a schemer, ma'am, and I wouldn't bet you a penny that he's not about to commit a crime."

Marta's stream of eloquence somewhat restored Mrs. Latter's capacity for rational thought, so she quickly broke in:

"But... please don't repeat this to anyone."

"Oh, ma'am, oh, dear little lady, what do you take me for? Jesus, Mary, I would rather have my tongue cut out than repeat what you tell me in confidence. What—I, repeat something? But perhaps it would straighten that rascal out, my lady, because he disgraces the school and poisons your life, the wretch."

"I beg you, Miss Marta, no more remarks. Go on your way and say nothing; that is how you will serve me best."

"I am going, and I will say nothing. But you cannot forbid me to pray that such a man will meet his end; for prayer is the conversation of the oppressed soul with God."

Mrs. Latter was alone again—and again disturbed.

"What am I to do now?" she thought, walking swiftly around the study. "So the school is worth nothing, and Zgierski will find a purchaser. I'd swear he has already arranged the price with her! Of course there must be something between Solski and Helena. God grant that there is, because she is my last hope. But that wicked Dembicki! Now I understand why he did not bargain with me when I set the fees for his lectures. The beggar had to accept it, but he held it against me. Yes, all my hopes rest on Helena."

As evening fell Miss Howard drew Magda into her room, and, vigorously pushing the door shut, cried triumphantly:

"So, then! Didn't I tell you that Dembicki is an evil man?"

“What are you saying?”

“Yes! I cannot rest after what Marta has told me. But, Miss Magdalena, let us assure ourselves that he will not be here for long.”

“What has he done?” asked Magda, taken aback.

“Everything that such a fellow is capable of. Oh, I am never mistaken, Miss Magdalena. Romanowicz was something else entirely; he was a professor of the natural sciences, energetic, progressive—well, and elegant, too. I saw him not long ago at Miss Malinowska’s, and I will tell you that he presented himself to me in a completely new light. He understands what women need. Oh, we must change many things at the school, and above all we must rescue Mrs. Latter.”

“Are you sure you are not mistaken?” said Magda, looking pleadingly at Miss Howard.

“That Mrs. Latter’s affairs are going badly?” replied Miss Howard with a smile.

“No, about Dembicki,” said Magda regretfully.

“You will always be an incurable idealist. You would be ready to doubt the guilt of a criminal caught red-handed.”

“But what did he do, please, ma’am?”

Ms. Howard brooded. “What did he do? What did he do?” she repeated inwardly, unable to fathom that someone did not condemn the man to whom she had an aversion. Then she said aloud:

“I confess to you that I am not familiar with the exact details, but Miss Marta told me that Mrs. Latter is so indignant at Dembicki, so aggrieved... that she so despises him, that it is hard to believe that the fellow has not been a trouble to her.”

“Please, ma’am, to whom has he been a trouble?” Magda persisted, holding back tears.

“To whom has he been a trouble?” thought Miss Klara. And because she did not have the answer, she lapsed into anger.

“One might think that you have a weakness for him, Miss Magdalena!” she exclaimed. “How is it that your irritation is not awakened by that bloated face, those vacuous eyes, that enigmatic smirk with which he addresses himself even to me? Believe me, ma’am, he is impertinent and — an oaf!”

She turned away from Magda, confused and vexed. She really knew nothing bad about Dembicki, and that angered her all the more.

Visibly saddened, Magdalena was on the point of leaving.

“But... but... Miss Magdalena, you do not know Miss Malinowska? We must go to her and urge her in the most pressing terms to go into partnership with Mrs. Latter. I must save Mrs. Latter. I have vowed to myself that I will, particularly because she dismissed Joanna. Insufferable girl!”

“I would like to help Mrs. Latter too, if I can, but what can I do at Miss Malinowska’s?”

“I will do everything. I have been preparing her, but she still resists. So if you go to her with me, we will convince her that the whole school wishes to retain Mrs. Latter in her role as our headmistress, and Malinowska will capitulate.”

Magda left Miss Howard’s apartment with her mind full of painful thoughts. She was beginning to have doubts about the older woman’s breadth of intellect and her sense of justice.

“What is she thinking of?” she said to herself. “What significance can I have for Miss Malinowska, I, a mere classroom teacher? And even if we all went to her, could we induce her to negotiate a partnership with Mrs. Latter? At all events I don’t know if Mrs. Latter herself would wish for that.

“And again Dembicki gets the worst of it! What do they want from him? After all, if he were an evil person, neither Stefan nor Ada would be so fond of him.”

After dinner all the classroom teachers whispered about Dembicki among themselves, deciding whether to avoid conversing with him or to greet him coldly. Their unfounded anger at the innocent man so exasperated Magda that under the pretext of writing letters she retreated behind her screen, reluctantly answering the pupils, who assailed her with questions.

She felt more and more strongly that something was wrong at the school, but she could not articulate to herself in what the evil lay, or what loomed ahead.

Chapter XVII. Love's First Imprint

The next Saturday was the last day of January. The day was deeply engraved on Magdalena's memory.

Around eleven in the morning, when the students were in class, Joanna's belongings were removed from one of the bedrooms. They were carried down the back stairs to a wagon that waited at a distance from the main entrance so as to be shielded from inquisitive looks. Pale but holding her head high, Joanna packed her things herself, and gave directions to the porters.

When everything had been carried out and Joanna had put on her hat and wraps, Magda came to the bedroom with a letter from Mrs. Latter. Joanna snatched the letter from her hand, looking her in the eye with a saucy smile.

"Aren't you saying goodbye to anyone, Joanna, dear?" asked Magda.

"To whom?" Joanna retorted harshly. "To Mrs. Latter, who sent me money by my former friends, or to that madwoman Howard?"

"And there is no one you are sorry to leave?"

"You are all fools!" Joanna burst out. "And Howard is the greatest fool! The apostle of independence for women! Ha! Ha! That woman has a weather vane in her head. Not long ago she admired me, then she began to connive against me, and now she pretends that she doesn't know me."

"Because—oh, why did you take that unfortunate letter?" Magda whispered.

"Because I wanted to! I will not allow anyone to injure me. But I take no revenge against Howard, because I know that that lunatic arouses everyone's aversion, and that she will come to ruin. She will ruin the school and Mrs. Latter."

Having said that, Joanna went angrily out into the corridor, majestically shunning Magda.

"And you will not say goodbye to me?" Magda asked.

"Because you are all fools!" cried Joanna, bursting into tears.

She ran quickly through the hall and vanished down the side stairs, from which spasms of sobbing could be heard once or twice.

At five in the afternoon the monthly meeting of the senior faculty was due to be held in the chancellery on the second floor. When the professors were gathered and waiting, but Mrs. Latter had not arrived, Miss Howard whispered to Magda that she ought to remind the headmistress about the meeting. Magda hurried to the first floor and entered Mrs. Latter's study. Mrs. Latter was not there, but Magda glanced into her apartment and found Kazimierz, whose good looks did not suffer for his being a bit disheveled.

"Mrs. Latter is not here?" asked Magda, confused.

“Mama has gone to the meeting,” he replied. But seeing that Magda was blushing and wanted to leave, he seized her hand and said:

“A moment’s conversation, please, Miss Magdalena. After all, your attendance at the meeting is not required.”

Magda was so alarmed that she could not find her voice. She was afraid of Kazimierz, but she did not have the strength to oppose his wishes.

“I want to talk with you about my mother, Miss Magdalena.”

“Ah, yes!” Magda sighed.

“Please be seated, Miss Magdalena.”

She sat down, looking him in the eye apprehensively.

“I have two favors to ask you. Would you care to grant them? Do not be afraid; both have to do with my mother.”

“I am ready to do anything for Mrs. Latter,” Magda whispered.

“But nothing for her son,” remarked Kazimierz with a bitter smile. Then he added, “Never mind about me. Have you not noticed that for some time my mother has been in a state of nervous tension?”

“We have all noticed that,” she said after a moment’s hesitation.

“Obviously one of two things is occurring. Either my mother has troubles that I know nothing about, or—she is threatened with serious illness,” he concluded softly, covering his face with his hand. Then he asked suddenly, “What do you think?”

“I think... perhaps she has troubles...”

“But what troubles? Indeed, the departure of a few pupils will have no effect on the school. What, then? Helena has gone abroad, and surely mama need not be concerned about her. She will take care of herself!” he exclaimed with a smile. “So what is left? I am, I suppose. Well, but I am ready to go away as well, and I don’t know why mama procrastinates.”

Magda looked down.

“It is true that I am disturbed about mother,” Kazimierz continued, in a tone more angry than worried. “She is nervous and excitable even in her relations with me, and she will not even speak of taking a cure. And there has been an alteration in her. For as long as I can remember she has always encouraged me to pursue a career that will bring me distinction, and so I do; I have contacts. Meanwhile today, when I should have been going away, mama read me such a lecture about work and livelihood that I was terrified. And what disturbs me most is that she preached to me about morals in a sarcastic tone. She sounded so overwrought... she was even laughing.

“Have you not observed a change in her habits? For example, have you not noticed that she ... that she ... has been using ether? Ether is used sometimes to relieve the pain of neuralgia. Anyway, I do not understand any of this.” With a

despairing gesture he took his head in his hands, but his face expressed nothing except exasperation.

“Please do not tell anyone that I mentioned ether, because I may be mistaken. But I ask you to be attentive to mama, Miss Magdalena,” he added, seizing her hand and looking her pleadingly in the eye. “Truly, I consider you a person very close to us, like another daughter to my mother. And if you do notice anything, please let me know of it wherever I am, here or abroad. Will you do that?” he asked in a sad, caressing tone.

“Yes,” Magda answered quietly, feeling tremors run through her at the sound of his voice.

“And now another request. Please write a letter to Helena to this effect, that mama is on edge, that everything is going badly at the school. Then add in a jocular tone that there is a great deal of talk in Warsaw about her frivolities and flirtations. A singular girl, I tell you! She wants to be pleasing to Solski, but she leads others on. Not a bad way of doing things, but it doesn’t work with everyone. Solski is too good a match. It will not do to alienate him by lightminded behavior.”

Magda glanced uneasily at Kazimierz and remembered Ada’s fears.

“So will you do as I have asked? This is for my mother, Miss Magdalena,” he said.

“Yes... although I cannot write to Helena about Mr. Solski.”

An expression of impatience flitted across Kazimierz’s handsome face, but disappeared in an instant.

“Very well, never mind about Solski,” he said. “But will you write me, when I am abroad, about my mother’s health?”

“I will write if anything of importance happens.”

“Only then? Ah, well, there is nothing to be done; thank you for that much...” He seized Magda’s hand again and kissed it lingeringly, looking her in the eye.

Magdalena began to quiver, but she was in no state to withdraw her hand. Kazimierz kissed it a second and a third time, each time longer and more passionately. But when he took the other hand, she pulled them both away.

“That is unnecessary,” she said indignantly. “When it is a matter of Mrs. Latter’s health, I will write even to you.”

“Even to me!” Kazimierz repeated, leaping up from his chair. “Ah, you are merciless! You must confess, however,” he added with a smile, “that I won the bet: I kissed your hand, albeit a few months later than I predicted.”

Now Magda remembered the argument they had carried on in front of Helena in October.

“Ah!” she exclaimed in a voice unlike her own. “Is that why you were talking to me about your mother? Very clever—but I am not sure that it is honorable.”

Tears ran down her cheeks; she could not restrain them. She wanted to leave the room but Kazimierz blocked her way, smiling and saying:

“Miss Magdalena, for God’s sake, do not be offended with me! Do you not hear the black humor of despair in what I say? I have no words to tell you what is happening to me. I am afraid of some disaster for mother or for Hela... I don’t know what I am afraid of. And I am so unhappy that I mock myself. You will pardon me, will you not? For I consider you a second sister, better and more understanding than the other. And you probably know that sometimes brothers like to vex their sisters. Well, you are not angry? You will have a little compassion for me? You will forget my craziness? You will, will you not?”

“Yes,” whispered Magda.

He took her hand again, but she wrenched it away and fled.

Kazimierz was alone in the middle of the room. Putting a finger to his lips, he thought:

“The girl has temperament. Strange, these women... each one a different animal! Pity I’m going away. Well, but not forever, after all.”

Magda ran to her bedroom, hid behind the screen, and lay all evening with her head pressed into her pillow. When the students came in and asked if something were the matter, they found her with a flushed face and flashing eyes, complaining of a severe headache. She herself did not understand her feelings; she was annoyed and ashamed, but happy.

At one the next day, which was Sunday, Miss Howard proposed that she and Magda should take a walk and attend an exhibition. But when they were out on the street she said:

“Did you think we were really going to an exhibition?”

“Where, then?” Magda asked apprehensively, afraid of hearing Kazimierz’s name.

“We are going to Miss Malinowska’s,” replied Miss Howard. “The time has come to bring matters to a head. At the meeting yesterday I was convinced that Mrs. Latter has become devoid of ideas and energy. She has the air of one who is shipwrecked. I must save her.”

Miss Malinowska lived with her mother in three rooms on a fourth floor in the vicinity of Marszalkowska Street. Her mother kept the house while she spent whole days conducting courses for young women. When Miss Howard and Magdalena entered her sitting room, they found her poring over her pupils’ exercises. She stopped her work and welcomed Magda without preliminaries, warmly pressing her hand.

Miss Malinowska was a slender blond of thirty with pretty eyes and smooth hair. She was dressed neatly, with no aspiration to elegance. She had a mild voice, a calm face, and the same expression of obduracy that was sometimes to be seen on Mrs. Latter's face. Then and there Magda formed a theory that every headmistress of a school must be a little obdurate and have an imposing look. And since she herself was neither imposing nor obdurate, she could not dream of opening a school.

When Miss Malinowska asked her visitors to sit down, Miss Howard remarked in a less resolute voice than usual:

"We come to you as a delegation..."

Miss Malinowska nodded her head without speaking.

"And we wish to ask you to make a final decision..."

"To go into partnership with Mrs. Latter," Miss Malinowska interrupted. "I have already decided. I will not enter into such a partnership."

Miss Howard looked at her in pained astonishment.

"Can you explain your reasons to us? Not that we have a right to know them," said Miss Howard in a tone still less resolute.

"Indeed I will—although it is a bit odd that Mrs. Latter has not proposed any such partnership to me herself."

"We would like to lay the foundation for an understanding," Miss Howard interposed.

"The foundation already exists," replied Miss Malinowska. "Half a year ago—as, I might add, you know—I was ready to form an association with Mrs. Latter. She declined. Today a partnership with her holds no interest for me."

"Mrs. Latter is a person of great experience," said Miss Howard, flushing.

"Oh, how good she is!" added Magda.

"Her reputation is firmly established," Miss Howard added a little hotly.

Miss Malinowska drew herself up a little.

"I see," she said, "that I will have to speak out about something that I ought to be silent about. In spite of these assurances that Mrs. Latter is a fine person, experienced and reputable, whereas I am a novice in the field, still—I cannot enter into a partnership with her. Mrs. Latter's role as an educator has reached its limit. She is not a woman of the new era."

Magda flinched in her chair and retorted with flashing eyes:

"Mrs. Latter has worked for over a dozen years..."

Miss Malinowska looked at her coolly.

"And do you not work as well?" she demanded. "And how much are you paid?"

Magda was so disconcerted by the question that she rose from her chair and recited like a student repeating a lesson:

“I receive fifteen rubles a month, board, lodging and time off three times per week...”

Miss Howard shrugged her shoulders.

“There. You see how women’s work is remunerated in our time,” said Miss Malinowska. “We barely scrape a modest living from it, we cannot dream of making a fortune, and it appears that we cannot have children, for who will feed and rear them?”

“Society!” Miss Howard cut in.

“In the meantime,” Miss Malinowska continued, “Mrs. Latter has an entirely different conception. She conducts her household like a great lady: that is to say, she works like one person and she spends like five, perhaps ten ordinary working women. And that is not the whole of it. Mrs. Latter has children who have been raised like the nobility.”

“It is for that that she works,” whispered Magda.

“You err,” Miss Malinowska interrupted. “She does not work, because she cannot. She worries herself to death thinking of tomorrow, because she feels that there is no tomorrow—for her. She sees that the capital she put into her children’s upbringing is wasted, not only because the children do not help her, not only because they squander her money, not only because they destroy her future, but also because they do not help themselves.”

“It is cruel—what you say,” Magda put in.

Miss Malinowska was surprised. Looking at Miss Howard, she said:

“But it is not I who say so, it is the whole city. Miss Howard is my witness. I add, however, that for my own part—because from my work I will have five or six hundred rubles a year at most—I cannot take on a partnership with a woman who needs several thousand rubles. I do have some capital, but the interest from it, when my school earns interest, belongs to my mother.”

“We would not dare place such a demand on you,” said Miss Howard, visibly troubled.

“And I am not responding to a demand. I only explain myself in order not to be misunderstood and then judged too harshly,” said Miss Malinowska. “My position is difficult, because Mrs. Latter may lose everything. I am involved in her affairs to a certain extent, and must buy the school. What is more, the school is in disarray. Many changes are needed, including changes of personnel.”

Magda was shocked and indignant. Miss Howard grew pale and then blushed as much as her perpetually pink face could be said to blush. After a moment of strained silence she rose and began to take leave of her hostess.

“In that case we must seek another means of rescue,” she said finally.

"I believe that what I have said is no surprise to you, at least, Klara," Miss Malinowska replied. "Why, you and I have been talking about these matters for months."

"Yes, but my views have undergone certain modifications," Miss Howard answered frostily.

Magda was so taken aback that she nearly forgot to say goodbye to Miss Malinowska.

When the two ladies had left the apartment of the prospective headmistress and were out on the street, Miss Howard began speaking with an exasperated air.

"Oho, my Malinowska, I see that you are a sharp one!" she said. "That was quite a tone you used to speak your piece today. Personnel! Did you hear? Does she count you and me as personnel? I will show her a thing or two about personnel... Although when it comes to Mrs. Latter, what she said was right. A working woman cannot spend so much on herself and her children, who at all events should be endowed with names and brought up by society—"

"But Mrs. Latter's children have their father's name," Magda observed.

"Yes—but what if they did not?"

"Good heavens. Good heavens," whispered Magda. "Something terrible is going to happen... So there is no way of saving Mrs. Latter?"

"Indeed there is," answered Miss Howard energetically. "We will go to her and we will say: 'Madam, however we may oppose marriage in principle, nevertheless in such exceptional circumstances we advise you to marry Mania Lewinska's uncle. He has money, and we will manage the school without Miss Malinowska.'"

"Miss Klara!" Magda cried in astonishment, stopping on the street.

"There is no way out for her except marriage to that old man," insisted Miss Howard.

"But what are you saying? What is this about marriage to Mania's uncle?"

Now it was Miss Klara's turn to be astonished.

"How is it," she exclaimed, "that you do not even know what everyone is talking about? Really, you live a life of seclusion at the school!"

And before they returned home she relayed to Magda the rumors that were circulating among various groups about Mrs. Latter. She added that the conservative set were unconditionally in favor of a marriage between Mrs. Latter and Mr. Mielnicki; the young radicals scoffed at marriage, which in the course of human advancement had to be abolished; but the moderate faction of the women's liberation party advised that for the present, marriage must be preserved as a transitional social form.

At last she acknowledged that though she herself was a radical, she was capable of respecting the opinions of honorable conservatives, and would even be ready to submit to the verdict of the moderate faction of the women's liberation

party if on the road of life she met an exceptional man. For she could never devote herself to a commonplace man, because commonplace men were either knaves or fools, incapable of appreciating a superior woman and understanding her needs.

Miss Howard had never been so eloquent, and Magda had never felt so shattered in mind, as after that walk. Images leaped through her memory like jagged bolts of lightning: images of the portly Mielnicki, of Miss Malinowska, of working women who could not have children, and of the various social circles: conservatives, radicals, and moderate advocates of women's liberation. All was burning, rocking, clanging chaos, while deep in Magda's heart lurked fear for Mrs. Latter. "Oh, God! What will become of her and her children?" she thought.

When she went to bed that evening, however, she was overwhelmed with anger at Miss Malinowska.

"Why does she say that working women should not have children?" she fretted. "Do women in the country not work? And they are mothers. Children are such adorable, precious creatures! I would rather die than have such ideas..."

She closed her eyes and dreamed—of Kazimierz.

Chapter XVIII. The Price of Infirmity

During the next few days Magda was too preoccupied with worry about Mrs. Latter's future to notice that something was brewing at the school. She saw that Miss Howard was irritable, she heard whispers from the classroom teachers, and more than once, from this or that boarding student, she heard the words, "Idler!" "Schemer!" But she did not attach any significance to these things.

She was beside herself with anxiety about Mrs. Latter, about Helena, even about Kazimierz, all of whom, according to Miss Malinowska, were threatened with ruin. So what concern was it of hers that someone was being called an idler and a schemer, or that the whole school was whispering about something? And was her own mind not full of mysterious whispers, while two statements in particular beat through her brain:

"Mrs. Latter's role is finished, and that is irreversible."

"Working women should not have children."

The words seemed cruel to Magda—the more cruel because she loved Mrs. Latter like a second mother, and loved her most of all because she had children.

"How can anyone be so terribly indifferent as to refuse the right to life to such innocent little beings, whose souls, for all we know, hover above us pleading for entry to the world, for baptism and everlasting salvation?" she thought. "How is it possible to shut the unborn out of eternity only to better our own condition?"

The memory of Miss Malinowska, who so calmly sentenced the unborn to nonexistence, filled Magda with consternation. It seemed to her that the mild-mannered but inflexible blond had declared war on God Himself.

"I would rather die than think as she does," she said to herself.

All the while those around her were whispering about some idler and schemer. But whenever Magda approached a group of students they fell silent, though their faces showed that they had been speaking of something serious.

Once Magda heard a few phrases: "Miss Howard did not give her instructions..." "She is so gentle, she would spoil everything..."

Magda glanced inadvertently at the student who had evidently been giving directives to her listeners, and the girl fled. But those statements did not engage Magda's attention; they deflected from her distracted mind like a ball off a wall.

The next Saturday Magda was on duty in the fourth-year class, where Dembicki was scheduled to lecture on botany from ten o'clock to eleven. The classroom was calm, so she sat in a chair embroidering something, lost in her own thoughts.

After the bell the German teacher left the room, and in a few minutes Dembicki came in. As usual he seemed worried, and he raised his knees very

high as he walked. He stepped around the lecturer's chair, stumbled over the base of it, which brought titters from the pupils, and signed in on the log book. Then he said in his quiet voice:

"Miss Kolska..."

A murmur ran around the classroom: "Say nothing! You are not able to answer!"

Magda glanced around. The heads of most of the pupils were lowered, but some of those on the back benches had red faces and glittering eyes.

Dembicki brooded for a minute, turned over some pages in the log book, played with his pen, but did not write in a grade for Kolska.

"Miss Siewierska," he said after a moment.

"Say nothing! You are not prepared!" said a chorus of girls' voices, this time stronger and more numerous than before.

Dembicki rose from his chair, looked at the rows of bowed heads and said calmly:

"Ladies, what does this mean?"

"We understand nothing... Boring lessons..."

"Ladies—you do not understand botany?"

"Nothing! We understand nothing!" exclaimed a high, thin voice, followed by the chorus:

"We don't understand... We don't want to..."

Dembicki's face went gray and his nose took on a bluish cast. He reeled and gasped a few times as if he could not get enough air. His eyes glittered with fear. But he recovered his composure, stepped down from the chair, stood before the front benches and, shaking his head, said with a smile:

"Children! Children!"

Then he left the room, again raising his knees very high and holding his hand behind the lapel of his coat.

When he had quietly closed the door behind him, Magda, who was stunned nearly out of her wits, asked:

"What is this?"

She was answered by sobs from one of the day students. It was Dembicki's niece.

"What does this mean?" she repeated

There was a profound silence. After a moment the crying of another girl, who was a friend of the teacher's niece, could be heard.

Then girls in other parts of the room began to cry and to exclaim:

"It was because of Bandurska!"

“Not true! It was Lange!”

“Miss Howard ordered me...”

“We must apologize to the professor...”

“Invite him back! Apologize! Invite him back, miss!”

Magda threw her embroidery on the floor and ran through the hall. Dembicki stood halfway down the stairs in his fur coat and cap, holding the railing and breathing heavily. Magda seized his hands and asked, sobbing:

“What is happening to you, sir? Why are you leaving?”

“Nothing. It only reminds me that I should take to some more peaceful occupation,” he replied with a sad smile.

“But, sir... please come back,” begged Magda, pressing his hands fervently. “They ask you. They beg you!”

“Children are always good,” he answered, “but I am ill, and I cannot be a teacher.”

At that moment his niece ran through the hall and down the stairs. She threw her arms around his neck and said tearfully:

“Uncle, dear, I will go with you. I don’t want to be here...”

“Very well, child. But take your cape.”

“I will, uncle... only wait for me. Do not go away alone, uncle,” sobbed the little girl, kissing his hand.

“Sir,” said Magda, “dear sir, I am overcome, I ...” she covered her face with her handkerchief and ran upstairs.

The murmuring in the hall had caused a stir in the other classrooms. A few teachers emerged and asked Magda what it meant.

“Nothing,” she responded. “Mr. Dembicki became ill.”

Miss Howard came hurrying out of her room, anxious and excited.

“What was it, then?” she asked Magda.

Magda pulled her into the room, shut the door and cried:

“You are an evil woman!”

“What are you saying?” Miss Howard asked, more in alarm than anger.

“What have you done? You have ruined an innocent man who has a heart ailment! Go downstairs and look at what you have brought about. You will remember it until your dying day. Whom has he injured? Whom has that poor man ever harmed?”

“A heart ailment?” repeated Miss Howard. “Is he really ill? But I knew nothing of it—”

“What do you have against him? What does anyone have against him? You have no compassion! You have no fear of God!” said Magda in a choked voice.

“If he is really so unfortunate, I can write to him... He must return to the school. I certainly did not know that he had a heart ailment. I thought he was a common slacker,” explained Miss Howard, chagrined.

“She really is a lunatic!” thought Magda. She wiped her eyes, left the crestfallen Miss Klara and returned to her class.

Fifteen minutes after the disturbance, when Dembicki and his niece were out on the street, one of the classroom teachers came to Mrs. Latter’s study by the back door and told her about the incident in the fourth form. Agitated and flushing, Mrs. Latter listened, and when the teacher asked if she would go upstairs, replied with an unnatural smile:

“What can it matter? Certainly it is irregular, but...”

She waved a hand and sat down heavily on the sofa.

The teacher, who had hoped for guidance and found none, went out dumbfounded. At that moment Stanislaw brought Mrs. Latter the mail.

Still smiling, Mrs. Latter began to inspect the letters. One fell on the floor; with an effort, she picked it up.

“From Mielnicki,” she said. “And this—from Naples. Who would have written it?”

She opened it and found a brief, anonymous note in French:

“You are a woman of understanding, or so it is said, and so you ought to warn your daughter that when she finds a suitor for herself, she should not lure admirers away from other young women who have not interfered with her in the hunt for a rich husband.—A well-wisher.”

Mrs. Latter crumpled the letter, rested her head on the arm of the sofa, and said in an undertone, always smiling:

“Ah, that Helena! Complaints about her come even from foreign countries.”

Chapter XIX. The First Sorrow

Around seven o'clock one evening in the middle of March Miss Howard, returning from town, called Magda away from her class and took her into her room.

Feverishly, with trembling hands, Miss Howard lighted a lamp. Without removing her hat or wraps, she threw herself into a chair. Her usually rosy face was as pale as her hair; only her nose was a little red because of the gusty March wind.

"What has happened to you?" asked Magda, frightened. "Did someone accost you on the street?"

Miss Howard shrugged her shoulders and looked scornfully at Magda. First, no one had ever accosted her, and if they had, what of it? Such a trifle would never unnerve Miss Howard.

So she was silent for a time, like a clever orator who wishes to create an effect. Then she began to speak slowly, sometimes breaking off to catch her breath.

"Can you guess whom I have just been with, and why? I am sure you can't. I was with Joanna."

"You, with Joanna?" Magda exclaimed. "And how did she receive you?"

"She received me very well, because it was apparent to her that I came to her as a friend."

"You a friend to Joanna? But—"

"You mean to say that she lost her position because of me. But in her condition, sooner or later that poor woman would have lost any position."

"She is ill? What is wrong with her?"

Miss Howard looked up and continued to speak, not heeding Magda's question.

"Today I met Madam Fantoche, who has carried on a continuous relationship with that unfortunate victim..."

"Are you speaking of Joanna?" Magda interposed.

"Exactly. When I asked Madam Fantoche where she was coming from and heard that it was from that unhappy person, I was shocked. Then Fantoche, that worthy woman, told me something that disarmed me."

Here Miss Howard rose from her chair, put her lips close to Magda's ear and whispered:

"Joanna is..."

And then she began taking off her hat and wraps like a person who has nothing left to say because she has spoken a truth which is a synthesis of all the

truths that have existed, do exist, and can ever reveal themselves to the human race.

“Joanna! What are you saying?” cried Magda, after a moment in which she seemed to have lost her powers of thought. “After all, she is not married!”

Miss Howard’s coat nearly fell off. It was caught only by its left sleeve, from which she had not removed her arm. The flaxen-haired lady looked at Magda with paler eyes than usual and retorted in a tone of icy calm:

“You know, Miss Magdalena, you ought to return to the first form! How can a woman your age, an independent woman, ask such a question? You make yourself simply ridiculous.”

Magda’s face turned a deep cherry red.

“Indeed I understand...”

“You understand nothing!” Miss Howard exclaimed, stamping her foot.

“I understand completely!” Magda insisted, almost crying. “But after all, I know—”

“What do you know?”

“I know that she could not have done this reprehensible thing alone,” Magda answered, blinking to hold back her tears.

“Oh, so that is what you mean. Naturally she had a partner, and it is just about him that I will speak to Mrs. Latter this very day.”

“About whom?”

“About Kazimierz Norski, of course.”

Magda looked at her with such alarm that Miss Howard was taken aback.

“What does this mean?” she asked.

“For the love of God,” cried Magda, wringing her hands, “do not do that! Kazimierz? But that is gossip...”

“Joanna told me.”

“Joanna is lying!” Magda shot back.

“Joanna might lie, but surely our own eyes do not. Kazimierz had been leading the poor girl on ever since the vacation.”

“Leading her on?” whispered Magda, feeling unsteady. She grew pale and sat down, not taking her eyes off Miss Howard, who was herself still stunned and indignant.

“It is clear that he led her on until at last he had his way. Surely you remember when Joanna returned to the school at two in the morning... Philanderer! Don Juan!” exclaimed Miss Klara. “He told her that she was the most beautiful of women, that he truly loved no one but her. He threatened to kill himself before her very eyes. And today he avoids her, and mocks... Oh, miserable race of men! And I should refrain from speaking to his mother about that unhappy girl?”

Magda clasped her hands and lowered her head so that a shadow fell on her little face. But Miss Howard did not look at her. She only paced around the room, saying:

“How is it that that poor girl is going to face this alone, with no one to attend to her, without a penny? Abandoned by her kin and acquaintance at a time when she most needs and deserves help from all society? When her seducer is throwing himself into the arms of new sweethearts, will she have no physician, not even a maid? When he is squandering hundreds of rubles a month, will she have a bowl of broth and a glass of tea? It seems to me not only that you have not awakened to an awareness of the world, Miss Magdalena, but that even your sense of justice is asleep.”

“And if this is not true?” Magda whispered.

“If what is not true? That women are put upon even when they are trying to fulfill the loftiest obligations, and that men are privileged beings even when they behave like criminals?”

“But if it was not Kazimierz?” insisted Magda. “Remember the mistake you made about Dembicki. That man was guilty of nothing, yet—”

“What kind of comparison is that?” retorted Miss Howard, walking more briskly around the room. “Dembicki is a sick man, so he gave everyone the impression of being an idler, but Norski is well known to be a ladies’ man. Only think: he wanted to seduce me! Me! And it took all the strength of my character and intellect to resist his looks, his innuendos, his pressings of the hand. ‘Be my friend, my sister,’ he said. Ha! Ha! A fine figure I would have cut in a retrograde society...”

Taking advantage of the pause in Miss Howard’s speech, Magda silently excused herself. Choking back tears, she ran to the little bedroom behind the sapphire blue screen, fell onto her bed, hid her face in the pillow and cried bitterly. Miss Howard’s phrases rang in her ears: “Kazimierz had been leading Joanna on since the vacation...” “When he is throwing himself into the arms of new sweethearts...” And he had asked Miss Howard to be his “friend and sister!”

After all, he had called her, Magda, a second sister! He might be a philanderer and a liar, but at the moment when he kissed her hands he must have been acting sincerely. If all the world and even he himself had assured her that he was not being sincere, she would not have believed it. Such things are felt instinctively, and Magda felt them deeply. In spite of her anger and fear, she had been happy.

It had seemed to her that with those kisses on the hands, Kazimierz, though he had not said so, was taking her on a long journey with him. What she might meet along the way she had not asked; it was enough that they were going to be together, always together, like a brother with a beloved sister.

But see: he had hardly led her beyond the boundaries of conventional relationships and already she was convinced that he would abandon her. For he had other women who wanted to be with him. He never had belonged and

never would belong to her alone; and in that case, what was there for her after him? Did not all the value of such an attachment lie in its not being shared with anyone else?

Weeping and trembling on her bed, Magda felt that an awful disappointment had overtaken her—the sort of disappointment that ruins the lives of delicately constituted women, sometimes leaving them mentally unbalanced, sometimes driving them to their graves.

The suffering was terrible, but by good fortune it had come upon her—a miserable, foolish creature who not only did not have the right to die because of this, but who ought not even to complain or think about it. Why was it so remarkable that a giant like Kazimierz had trodden down her heart as though she were an ant in the form of a human being, a classroom teacher? Indeed it was she who had been at fault for not getting out of his way.

And how shameless Joanna was to have leveled an accusation at Kazimierz! If she, Magda, had met a similar fate, and Kazimierz had left her, she would not have said a word to anyone; she would not even have let it be noticed that she was unhappy. She would have laughed, and left the school as if she were going for a walk; laughing, she would have gone toward the bridge and thrown herself into the Vistula as if by accident.

People would have said, “Who knows what came over that lunatic?” And Kazimierz himself would have guessed nothing, because he had not known the cause. Perhaps she would even have forestalled his suspicions by telling him about her immediate and future plans, continually giving him to understand that she was happy and had nothing to worry about.

That is what she, Magda, would have done. Because she knew that among the multitude of excellent people who value themselves and are valued by others, she was only a paltry piece of dust and not worth caring about. No one ought to care about her, not even she herself.

Having fixed on that interpretation of her role and position in the world, Magda felt calmer. She rose from her bed, said her prayers to the Mother of Sorrows and grew calmer still. Then, washing her tear-stained face, she returned to her pupils and the labor of helping them with their lessons, trying to laugh so as not to spoil their childish cheer with the sorrow that had come upon her at an inopportune time.

Around ten o'clock, when she had returned to the blue screen and said her evening prayers, she slept as tranquilly as if she had never met with a disappointment. Between her and the first great pain of life stood the most powerful of protectors: the angel of humility.

Chapter XX. Visions

At the time of the evening when the students went to their sleeping quarters, Mrs. Latter and Miss Marta were finishing their review of the housekeeping accounts. There were still several thousand rubles in the cash box, but Mrs. Latter, who was accustomed to thinking of the future, tonight had instituted what measures she could to reduce expenses and save even a few rubles each day.

Too many lights were burning in the classrooms and hallways, too much sugar and soap were being dispensed, and it was necessary to economize on such things. An excess of meat and fat had been going into the midday dinners, so it was possible to limit the amounts of meat and butter. Finally, since it was Lent, the season could be observed somewhat more strictly with the introduction of lenten dinners on Mondays. There were people who throughout the lenten season not only refused to put meat to their lips, but even declined to eat milk, cheese or eggs; so it was as well to remind the girls even four times a week that they were Christians.

That decision delighted Marta, whose carefulness about religious observances was somewhat excessive. She went out, assuring Mrs. Latter that all God's blessings would be visited on her school. But Mrs. Latter was unable to derive such satisfaction from her reforms. She knew that four lenten meals each week were being instituted not out of piety, but in order to save money. For what would happen if money ran out before the end of the year? How could she tell them—the children, teachers and staff—that the next day they would have no dinner?

For the last half-year thoughts of this sort had tormented Mrs. Latter like a swarm of phantoms, draining her vigor, preying on her mind. Large debts, small economies, diminishing revenues and—tomorrow, uncertainty about tomorrow—had almost ceased to feel like suffering and begun to weary her with their monotony. Great God! What a terrible torture for her, the daily trimming away of butter and meat by ounces, of milk by drams, and the accounts, between the lines of which she saw continually the pale yellowish-green face of deficit!

It was always the same: accounts—deficit—scrimping. It would bore the devil himself to death.

When business of that sort, lasting far into the night, so exhausted Mrs. Latter that she almost despaired, only one remedy remained for her: to drink a glass of the old wine Mielnicki had sent. The glass could not be filled to the brim, since that brought on drowsiness; but if it were not nearly full, the drink would put her on edge.

Only when Mrs. Latter measured the wine with extreme care and drank it to the last drop did she regain peace, and the strength of mind that had gained her her position in the world. Only then did the broken, desperate woman become

the Mrs. Latter of old, who at a glance sized up a situation, in a moment formed a plan appropriate to the circumstances, then executed it with absolute consistency.

This evening she fell back on the same expedient, exercising the painstaking caution of one who is afraid of being detected. She went quietly to her bedroom, closed the door, and took the mold-encrusted bottle and a medium-sized wine glass from her cabinet. She held the glass under the light and poured. Then, glancing around apprehensively, she drank the wine as if it were a dose of medicine.

“Ah,” she sighed, relieved.

Then she returned to her study. She sat on the sofa, closed her eyes and began to dream. In her troubled soul a spring of comfort opened.

First there was the confidence that, whatever happened, she would be free of the school at the end of the term. Whether Helena married or not, whether she herself went to Solski’s estate or became Mielnicki’s housekeeper (or his wife), or whatever else happened, she must by all means be free from her present occupation. And here was a strange thing: whenever she envisioned a new future for herself, she always saw herself sitting in an old park beside a river.

This vision was so lucid that Mrs. Latter could almost measure the thickness of the tree trunks. She could picture the color of their leaves and the shapes of the shadows the treetops threw on the ground. She saw a fleecy caterpillar creeping up the bark of a linden. She saw a black garden bench with a crack running along it. She smelled the fresh fragrance of the earth. She heard the sough of the river that flowed a few steps away from her as it curved through the park.

To Mrs. Latter this image, which repeated itself nearly every day, did not seem an hallucination, but a flash of clairvoyance. She was convinced that she was seeing her future, such a happy future that it was worth all the work and suffering of her life thus far. Here there was nothing and no one except a garden bench black with age, a clump of trees and a murmuring river. But in this sparse landscape such peace reigned that Mrs. Latter would have been willing to sit on that bench for all eternity, watching the fleecy caterpillar lazily crawling up the tree.

Peace: it was all she wanted from life.

After the wave of dream came a wave of reflectiveness. Mrs. Latter opened her eyes and, looking at her desk and the bust of Socrates that leaned out from behind the lamp, said to herself:

“This is the end of the school. I will give it up at the end of the term if I die for it the next day. But what park is this? Is it Solski’s park or Mielnicki’s? Ah! It was our park in Norow. What an estate, and how it was wasted!”

With the air of one who is stricken she involuntarily stopped her ears with her hands, as if she were afraid to hear the whisper of memory, the whisper that might tell her that she had squandered her husband’s, her own and above all her children’s estate. And with whom? With a former tutor. The Norski estate

frittered away with Latter! And she—had she been mad? Was it possible that she had married a second time? That she had been possessive, even jealous, in her relationship with her second husband? She, who a few years later forced him to leave her?

But Mrs. Latter had trained herself to keep these memories from mastering her. She pushed them from her like a useless scrap of paper and thought of her daughter.

Helena, or more precisely her marriage to Solski, was another source of comfort to Mrs. Latter and the foundation on which her hopes rested. After much hesitation Mrs. Latter told herself that Helena must marry Solski. For it was not a secret to anyone in Warsaw that Solski, who had made overtures to Helena in Italy, was simply mad for her; whereas Mrs. Latter knew, partly from her daughter and partly from her own intuition, that between Helena and Solski an ancient struggle was taking place which usually led to capitulation on both sides. In this battle Solski would pretend to be indifferent, and Helena would flirt with other men.

“Sooner or later, today or tomorrow,” thought Mrs. Latter, “he will declare himself in a burst of passion, and Helena will accept him. And I will learn about it first from Zgierski, who will come running with congratulations and money,” she added with a smile.

She closed her eyes and another image flashed before her. She saw someone like Helena—or like herself?—in a white silk gown with a long train, walking into a drawing room full of people. Helena looked lovely: her gown was embroidered with pearls and her beautiful head was sprinkled with brilliants. One, over her forehead, gave off a violet light, while another over her temple glowed like a greenish star. Mrs. Latter saw every glitter of the brilliants, every fold of the rich gown. She saw her daughter’s flared nostrils and proud look as every head bowed before her with admiration or envy.

Beside Helena stood Solski, an ugly chap with unrefined features but with an odd vitality in his face. Mrs. Latter looked at them both with delight, thinking:

“Could there be a finer couple? She, beautiful as a dream, and he, repulsive to look at but accomplished, masterful. And such a great fortune!”

Then it seemed to her that she said to her daughter:

“How fortunate you are, Helena, to have a husband who is homely and energetic! My two were very handsome but too weak for me, and that is why I wasted my life. Your husband will be wildly in love with you, but he will not allow any waywardness.”

Mrs. Latter opened her eyes again and saw, not an ornate room with her daughter regally presiding, but her study. Suddenly she thought:

“And if Helena does not marry Solski?”

Her face contorted and her eyes flashed with anger, almost with hate.

“She would rather kill me...” she whispered.

Mrs. Latter could not deal with the thought that her daughter would not marry Solski, and very soon. Helena must place herself in the best situation possible; Kazik's future depended on it.

Worry about Kazimierz was the thorn that nothing could remove from his mother's soul. Mrs. Latter felt that she could not be completely happy if her son did not occupy a position among the elite of the world someday, and become the equal, if not of Napoleon, at least of Bismarck. She would lose her faith in divine justice if sooner or later he did not possess not only fortune, fame and power, but all the other attributes that set a chosen individual apart from ordinary mortals. Yet it galled her, it drove sleep from her eyelids, that she could not imagine exactly how her son would attain the position she so desired for him.

Of course he ought to go abroad, and it would be best for him to go to one of the German universities, where he would mingle in the lecture halls with princes of the ruling families. Only let Kazimierz come in contact with some young potentate; they would become inseparable, and Kazimierz would have a ready-made career. Unfortunately it took money to go abroad, a great deal of money, and Mrs. Latter knew beyond doubt that she could not contrive to get it on her own.

Where, then, was the money for Kazik to come from? Obviously there was only one way to get it: Helena must marry Solski as soon as possible. Solski's huge fortune, his family connections, his acquaintance abroad, were rungs by which Kazimierz would ascend to the pinnacle he was destined to reach.

Mrs. Latter began to dream again. Was a finger of Providence not visible in this, that Ada had taken Helena to Italy and now Solski had fallen in love with her? And could such a result have come about if Ada, having become an orphan early in her life, had not come to her school, and if she herself had not lost a fortune and busied herself with bringing up other people's children?

It had been a miraculous chain of events that had led Kazimierz to such a height even before his mother had thought about it all. In her eyes this series of miracles had already fulfilled itself, so why could there not be one more miracle? After all, there were still three months until the end of the term. In three months Helena would marry Solski, and Kazimierz would go abroad when the summer vacation began.

But he could not go today, because if Mrs. Latter gave him the money, she would be threatened with bankruptcy before the school year ended.

"A miracle! A miracle!" whispered Mrs. Latter, raising her eyes and devoutly folding her hands. Suddenly hope came to her; she felt that Heaven must hear the prayer of a mother begging for her son.

Chapter XXI. Reality

At that moment there was a knock at the study door, then another. Mrs. Latter awoke from her reverie and glanced at the clock. It was eleven in the evening.

“What has happened?” she said. “Come in.”

Miss Howard entered the study. Her movements were so timid, her eyes so modestly lowered, that Mrs. Latter felt uneasy.

“What is it?” she said caustically. “Do the children want to drive away another teacher?”

Miss Howard’s face took on its characteristic flush.

“You cannot forget the case of Dembicki,” she replied quietly. “After all, it was done out of regard for you. You never could bear that fellow.”

“But, Klara, you could have acknowledged my right to dislike someone and left it at that!” Mrs. Latter burst out. “Is there anything else?”

Miss Howard’s timidity vanished.

“So that is the thanks I get for having been your supporter!” she exclaimed. “From this moment you may be sure that I will not meddle in your personal affairs,” she added sarcastically, “although...”

“Then at present you have not come to help me mind my business? God be praised!”

“You are right. What brought me here is the distressing plight of a third person, which is a serious matter in its own right and an example of great social injustice.”

“Do you think I have the power to assist in such a case?” asked Mrs. Latter.

“Power? I do not know. Rather the obligation. Joanna finds herself in a certain condition...” Miss Howard’s sentence trailed off into silence.

Mrs. Latter’s lips trembled, but without altering her tone she retorted:

“Is that so? I congratulate her.”

“You congratulate—your son.”

Mrs. Latter’s face went pale yellow. Her lips and eyelids began to tremble.

“You must have a fever, Miss Klara,” she said in a choked voice. “Have you thought about what you are saying? You will ruin a girl who is flighty, to be sure, but fundamentally not bad, by repeating such senseless gossip. After all, Joanna is always amusing herself, always gregarious. Just next week she will be supervising the arrangements for some soiree—”

“She does what she must,” said Miss Howard, shrugging her shoulders. “But a time will come...”

Mrs. Latter looked at her for a moment, quivering with anger. Miss Howard's calm manner drove her into a frenzy.

"What are you saying? What is this? Finally, what concern is it of mine? I dismissed Joanna because you demanded that I do so. She is no longer at my school, so... what does this news have to do with me?"

"But the matter does concern your son."

"My son?" cried Mrs. Latter. "Do you mean to tell me that if some governess wants to have a crisis in her life, I am accountable for it? It is a lie about Joanna, but if it were so, who has the right to turn it into an accusation against my son?"

"The one who has suffered because of his actions, of course."

"Ha! ha! ha! Joanna a victim of my son! Am I supposed to be the protector of a young person who traipses around the city for a year without my knowledge? I repeat: I do not believe what you say about Joanna. But even if it were so, I surely ought to be the last to learn of it, since my son was certainly the last to be involved in this scandalous business, if he was really involved at all."

Miss Howard was taken aback.

"You cannot talk about Joanna that way," she said. "After all, she was with Kazimierz at supper... then..."

"And how many had she been with before that? I do not believe what you have said about Joanna, but if it were true, my son would have no business trusting her, because that girl deceived me, saying that she was going to visit her relatives when she was going to meet a lover. So who can say with certainty that she did not trick my son and all her sweethearts, if he was one of them?"

"And if Joanna herself says that it was Kazimierz?"

"Says that to whom?" asked Mrs. Latter.

"To you."

Mrs. Latter grabbed a lamp from her desk, removed the globe and cast its glare on the wall above the sofa, where the portraits of her children hung.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "There is Kazimierz when he was five, and there is Helena when she was three. Those are the features of the Norski family. Does anyone think they can convince me that Kazimierz... Whoever does must show me a child who looks either like him or like Helena. Do you understand?"

"That means that they must wait three or five years," remarked Miss Howard. "And in the meantime?"

"What about the meantime?"

"What is a betrayed woman to do?"

"Not to put herself at risk. Not to go out hunting for the very thing that betrayed her!" answered Mrs. Latter with a smile.

“She is not at fault. She did not know what she was dealing with.”

“Miss Klara,” Mrs. Latter said calmly, “you are a mature woman, you are speaking to a mature woman, and you are speaking like a student. Why, everything about our upbringing has one goal: to protect women from betrayal. We are ordered not to roam about at night, not to flirt with men, to be wary of them. The whole world keeps its eye on us, threatens us with disgrace for every smile, every show of affection. In a word, a woman is protected from these things by twenty fences. So if she jumps these fences every day, voluntarily and even in spite of admonitions, can you call that betrayal?”

“So you espouse a special code of conduct for women? So women are not people?” exclaimed Miss Howard.

“I beg your pardon, but I did not create those codes. And if they apply only to women, it is certainly because only women become mothers.”

“And so in your view emancipation, progress, the highest achievements of civilization...”

“Dear Miss Klara,” Mrs. Latter interrupted, putting her hand on Miss Howard’s shoulder, “let us agree on one thing. You are free to defend your progressive values, and I—to defend my hard-earned money. I do not force you to accept my retrograde views. Please do not force me to accept, at my own expense, children of questionable parentage, if they come into the world.”

“Then Joanna will turn to your son,” answered Miss Howard indignantly.

“And he will answer her as I have answered you. If Joanna sees fit to risk being ruined, that does not mean that my son has no right to distance himself from scandal. At any rate, my son has no money.”

“Ah, true!” Miss Howard seized on the point with a derisive smile. “Your son is still a boy. He is not like Kotowski, who is capable of keeping his word to a woman.”

“Miss Howard!”

“Good night, madam!” replied Miss Klara. “And since our views are so incompatible... then... after Easter I will do myself justice by leaving this school.”

“Go to the devil!” whispered Mrs. Latter after the teacher had left. Suddenly such grief constricted her throat, such desperation swelled in her chest, such chaos throbbed in her head, that she thought she was falling victim to an attack of madness.

The information Miss Howard had brought her made her quite miserable, but the teacher’s final words dealt the *coup de grace* to her maternal pride and hopes. How contemptuously the childless woman had called her son “a boy!” And how had she dared, how had she had the heart to compare him with Kotowski at this moment?

For some time a muted feeling had been growing in Mrs. Latter, a feeling that might be described as anger at her son. Every time someone asked her,

“What is Kazimierz doing?” “Where will he go?” or “How old is he?” she felt something like the thrust of a knife. After each such question it occurred to her that her son was over twenty, that although he was clever he was doing nothing, and, worse, that he remained the same promising young fellow that he had been at sixteen, seventeen and eighteen. Worst of all, he took enormous sums of money from her, a woman worn out with work and threatened with bankruptcy.

Often she recalled that painful dream in which she felt her children’s coldness for the first time, and told herself that she could be free if it were not for them. But that had only been a dream, and in her waking hours she felt the warmest love for Kazik and Helena. She believed in their brilliant futures and she was ready to sacrifice everything for them.

Today Miss Howard had brutally ripped the veil away from the dormant secrets of her heart, and had had the temerity to say that her adored Kazik was an idler. “He is still a boy,” Miss Howard had said. “He is not Kotowski.”

And Kotowski was, after all, Kazik’s age. The difference between them was that Kotowski had finished university and was pursuing a career, while Kazik had not even decided upon one. Kotowski was supporting himself, and had such faith in his future that he had impressed Mielnicki. Here was the youthful energy that Mrs. Latter had looked for in her son and been unable to find.

And how did her beloved son, this future genius, present himself to the watching world today? This rather pathetic teacher had come to her apartment and calmly denounced her son to his mother. Did Miss Howard think Kazimierz, a “boy”—not like Kotowski—should marry Joanna, or what?

At the very thought Mrs. Latter seized her hair with both hands and wanted to beat her head against the wall. What could be more shameful than having her son be sentenced like a criminal, but to marriage? Her pride, her hope, her earthly idol, whom all the world was going to admire, would end his yet unbegun career by marrying a dismissed teacher and being blessed with a child prematurely.

What would Solski say about that, or Mielnicki and all her acquaintance, who so curiously asked: “What is Kazimierz doing?” “Where is he going?” “How old is he?”

Today all their questions would be answered at once: Kazimierz is old enough to be a father...

And what is he doing? He is still a boy, eating the bread his mother puts in his mouth, as Miss Howard said.

Mrs. Latter spent an appalling night. Something in her soul was shattered.

Chapter XXII. Why Sons Sometimes Go Abroad

The next day at around four in the afternoon Kazimierz, elegant, smiling, wearing a handful of violets by way of boutonniere, came to his mother's apartment. But his good humor gave way to dismay at the sight of her. Her face was almost like the face of a corpse. She had dark circles under her eyes and loose gray hair at her temples. Her son understood that her hair had not gone gray overnight, but that she had combed it carelessly, and that was disconcerting to him.

"Are you ill, mother?" he asked, kissing her hand and sitting beside her with one knee bent, as if he were kneeling.

"No," she answered.

"You asked me to come?"

"It happens that way more and more often because you do not come on your own."

Kazimierz looked his mother in the eye. Again he felt a suspicion that she was using a stimulant.

"Do you have anything to tell me, Kazik?" Mrs. Latter asked.

"I, mother? Why?"

"I ask you, do you not have some trouble these days... some trouble that you should confide to me, since you cannot turn to your father?"

Kazimierz blushed.

"No doubt you think I am sick. On my word of honor..."

"I do not think anything. I only ask."

"Why such a tone, mama? I dare say someone has been spreading gossip, and you believed it right away, because I feel that for some time now you have changed toward me."

"Whether I will be as I was before depends on you."

"As you were before? So it's true!" exclaimed Kazimierz, seizing her hand.

But Mrs. Latter delicately withdrew her hand and said:

"Could you go abroad... soon..."

Kazimierz's face brightened.

"Abroad? I have been waiting to go for the last month."

"And there is nothing to keep you in Warsaw?"

"What could there be to keep me?" replied Kazimierz in amazement. "Society? I will find better society there."

His amazement was so genuine that half the burden fell from Mrs. Latter's heart.

“That woman Howard is lying,” she thought. Then she added aloud:

“And how much money would you need for the journey?”

Kazimierz marveled still more.

“Why, mama,” he said, “you have already agreed to give me a thousand three hundred rubles for it.”

Mrs. Latter’s hands fell onto her lap. She looked at her son almost despairingly—the effect of the narcotic, he thought—and was silent.

“What is it, mother?” he asked in a sweet voice, taking her hand again, but unable to free himself of his suspicion that she was under the influence of stimulants.

This time his mother did not withdraw her hand. Instead she embraced him.

“What is it, my child? Oh, if you knew... A thousand three hundred rubles? Why so much?”

“You yourself decided on that sum.”

“It is true, I did. But what if such a large sum were difficult for me to part with? Only think what a large establishment I have to manage...”

This time it was Kazimierz who pulled his hand away. He jumped up from the sofa and began to pace around the study.

“Oh, God! So many preambles,” he said irritably. “Why do you not tell me straight out: I cannot carry on with my education. And you make such a show with me, as if I would be doing you a favor by going abroad. But no, no! Pity that I broke off relations with the railroad. If I hadn’t, this very day I would have applied for a position and become one of its functionaries. Then I could marry into wealth and you would be satisfied.”

“May you not marry into poverty,” Mrs. Latter put in quietly.

“How would I do that?”

“If you made... a commitment...”

“Commitment? Better and better!” laughed Kazimierz. “How much you know about men! If they were inclined to marry every woman who lays claim to them, Europeans would have to be Muslims.”

Mrs. Latter had a strange feeling as she listened to these sentiments, which her son voiced in a tone that was almost rude. She was reassured on the subject of Joanna, but their cynicism rankled her.

“That is a man for you,” she thought, but said aloud:

“Kazik, Kazik, I do not recognize you. Just half a year ago you would not have spoken to your mother in that way. But I am afraid to hear what sort of life you must be leading.”

“Let us suppose that it is not the worst sort,” he answered mildly, “but even if it were worse, how am I to blame? I am a man cut off in the middle of my career. I am afraid that it will be stunted... that I will lose sight of my higher goals.”

Mrs. Latter raised her head.

“You make excuses to me?” she asked. “You say that that is my fault?”

Her son sat down beside her again and seized her hand.

“These are not excuses, mama!” he exclaimed. “You are a saintly woman and full of devotion to us. I know that. But you must confess that circumstances have been unfair to me. Your upbringing, mother, inculcated a drive toward high, noble goals. I would like to be something... something distinguished. Fate itself favored me from the beginning, and put me on the right road. But today...” He covered his eyes and sighed. “Ah! who knows if my life will not be wasted?”

Mrs. Latter looked at her son with horror. The falseness, or perhaps the facetiousness, of his tone rang in her ears.

“How can you speak to me like this?” she said sternly. “You speak of a wasted career, you, who until now have cared precious little about it! Think of your friends, even... even that Kotowski...”

“Oh, the one who hovers around Lewinska?”

“Shame on you! That fellow has supported himself almost since he was a child, and in spite of that he is full of faith in his future.”

“That ass!” her son interrupted with a sneer. “Watchmen began to work when they are much younger, and they never doubt that they will always be watchmen. But there are careers that are like walking a tightrope, when any step, any swing...”

Not a muscle moved in Mrs. Latter’s face, but tears fell from her eyes.

“You are crying, mother? It is my fault!” he exclaimed, kneeling in front of her.

She pushed him away.

“I am not crying about your faults or about you, but for myself. Our conversation today has left a very strong impression. It has removed the blinders from my eyes so that I see the sad truth...”

“You exaggerate. You are overwrought about something...”

“See! Every word of yours, every look reminds me that you are not a child, but already a grown man—”

“That is natural, after all,” he interposed.

“And at the same time you are like a creditor who gives me to understand that I have not paid him a debt. Yes! Do not interrupt me. In bringing you both up I incurred a debt in relation to your futures, and today I do not have—that is, today I must pay it.

“You will get money. Go and finish your education. Make a career. But remember that in a year I may have no money, and at that point my debt with regard to you will reach its natural expiration date.”

Kazimierz began to stride rapidly around the study, pressing his hands to his temples.

“What have I done? I, a miserable... What is happening? You are behaving so strangely toward me, mother! I have never heard such talk!”

And then, standing before her, he added:

“I want nothing... I will not go abroad...”

“Then what will you do?” she asked calmly.

“Go to work... go to some office... how should I know? It is certain that my university studies are done with.”

Again he paced back and forth, and again he tugged at his beautiful blond hair. Mrs. Latter watched this outburst in silence. When her son had tired himself out and fallen into a chair beside her desk, she said coolly:

“Listen! I see that you are still a child, and behaving like an hysteric. Do you understand?”

As Mrs. Latter’s tone grew more determined, Kazimierz’s expression became more submissive.

“You do not know how to direct yourself, so I must direct you one more time. You will get money, and you will leave within a few days. Apply for a passport tomorrow.”

“You cannot lay out money for me —”

“I can. All that I choose. Do you understand? I will give you five hundred rubles until the end of the term. Go.”

“Five hundred?” repeated her astonished son. “Mother,” he added, “my dear, my own mother... let me stay. It is not worth it for me to go with five hundred rubles.”

“Why not?” exclaimed Mrs. Latter.

“Because I will immediately find myself in the sorts of relationships that make it necessary to have money. Perhaps after a month I will not need anything from you, perhaps... how do I know?... I will find an occupation. But at first... With the references that I will carry with me from here, I must have a little money.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“You see,” he said a little more boldly, “my acquaintances in Berlin and Vienna will not be students, but people in society. Of course that will be profitable for me, but I must present myself as a man of fashion.”

Mrs. Latter looked at him keenly.

“You have debts?” she said suddenly.

“None,” he answered, confused.

“You give me your word?”

“I give my word,” he exclaimed, striking his chest.

“So it is only to consolidate these... relationships... that you want thirteen hundred rubles?”

“Yes... relationships which will lead me into an appropriate occupation.”

Mrs. Latter hesitated for a moment.

“Ha!” she said. “You have won! I will give you thirteen hundred rubles—”

“Oh, mother!” he cried, falling on his knees again. “It will be the last time I ask for help...”

“It certainly will, because I will have nothing more for you.”

“And Helena and Solski?” he asked playfully, still kneeling.

“Oh, you count on Helena? I hope that you will not be disappointed there—and that I will not be disappointed in you.”

Kazimierz rose and his mother spoke on, in the tone of one who exercises power:

“Remember, Kazik: I am sparing you many painful confidences, because you will not help me; you need your energy to look to your own welfare. But I repeat: remember that if you disappoint me now you will inflict terrible suffering on me, and you will sever many of the ties that bind our hearts. Remember that you are no longer a child even in your mother’s eyes, and you must begin to think of me almost as if I were not your mother. For I... I am very unhappy...”

Her son took her in his arms and tried to calm her with kisses. He sat with her for another hour and left her in a somewhat better frame of mind.

But as he went out, he thought:

“Singular thing: sometimes mother seems so different, really like a stranger. How these women can change! Even mothers... and all because of money! As for Helena, let her go ahead and marry the man or marry the devil.”

Chapter XXIII. Another Goodbye

At noon a few days later Kazimierz, dressed for traveling, was saying goodbye to his mother. Both felt that there was constraint between them, that questions had been left unasked and opinions unexpressed.

That was only natural, since Kazimierz was waiting uneasily for money, and Mrs. Latter had doubts about the way he would use it. Already she mistrusted him.

“So you go today?” she asked, not looking him in the eye.

“In an hour,” he replied. “Today we go with young Goldwaser to his home in the country, and from there to Berlin. His family’s estate, Golden Waters, is just a mile or two from the station.”

Mrs. Latter listened not so much to what her son said as to how he said it. She listened as a mechanic listens to the hum of a machine in order to tell if some part of it is broken.

“With Goldwaser?” she repeated, rousing from her preoccupation. “You were going to travel with Count Tuczynski. Where did this Goldwaser come from?”

The question irritated Kazimierz, but he answered her with restraint.

“You question me as if you have no confidence in me,” he said. “I will meet Tuczynski in Berlin, and I will travel with Goldwaser, because he is very useful to me. In the first place, I can buy money orders from his father, because I would be afraid to travel with so much cash.”

“You do well to buy money orders, but what is the reason for these new relationships?”

Kazimierz laughed merrily and began to kiss Mrs. Latter.

“Ah,” he exclaimed, “the gentlewoman lives on in my mother! Counts meet with your approval, but bankers give you gooseflesh. Meanwhile, to me both are only tools. The aristocrats give me reputation, the bankers provide me with income, but my true place is with the masses, with democracy. There are my aspirations; here are the rungs leading to them...”

Mrs. Latter looked at him in surprise.

“So he really is aiming at something?” she thought. “He has a goal, a plan, energy, and he has set his sights as high as Kotowski.”

Her heart quickened. She kissed him on the forehead and whispered:

“My son... beloved child! When I listen to you, I cannot keep from believing you, and loving you. Oh, if you would tell me everything...”

“I will. What do you want to know?”

“You have—do you have any obligation to Joanna?”

Kazimierz threw up his hands and began to laugh.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! I, to Joanna? At this very minute she is flirting with an old duffer who owns a building, trying to impose obligations on him, not me.”

Mrs. Latter felt ashamed but joyful.

“And now tell me honestly: do you have debts?”

“Well, and what if I have?” he retorted. “Who has not? There is a little something of that nature that I will attend to today.”

“Were you in debt to Zgierski?”

“What?” cried Kazimierz in confusion. “That beast said something—”

“Do not speak of him in that way,” Mrs. Latter broke in, “because he admitted that you repaid him everything. But to whom do you owe money if not to him?”

“Perhaps something is owed, but I am not certain how much. A trifle.”

“So it is nothing much?” asked Mrs. Latter insistently, looking hard at her son. “Because, my child, I have always been afraid of my children’s going into debt. If you knew what a burden debts are to me...”

“You have debts, mother?” Kazimierz answered in surprise.

“Never mind about them. I incurred them out of necessity, and I am paying them. But soon after I established the school, I had to pay off notes to lenders. I paid off loans I had taken out, probably at too high a rate. Oh, Kazik, if you knew at what a difficult moment that surprise came my way! It was a matter of eight hundred rubles, but they were worth much more than that to me. I thought you and Hela and I were lost. Fortunately fate sent me good people. But from that time I have a horror of unexpected debt.”

“Was it Mr. Latter who brought that trouble on you?” Kazimierz asked sternly. “What was he doing?”

“Assuredly, nothing. No more of him,” she replied. “If I must speak frankly—pardon me, Kazik!” she added in a strange, tender voice. “If I must confess, then I will tell you, I am terribly afraid.”

“Of what, mother?”

“That you have debts, and that after you are gone the responsibility for them will fall on me.”

“But, mama... mama... Do I deserve to be the object of these suspicions?”

Mrs. Latter wept and laughed.

“So there are no surprises in store for me?” she asked. “Are you certain?”

“I swear it, mother!” he cried, falling to his knees before her. “I have my little sins. Perhaps I have wasted too much time and spent too much money... Perhaps... But you will not have to pay any notes for me. No! No!”

Mrs. Latter hugged him as he knelt.

“Go, then,” she said tearfully. “Go, distinguish yourself, show people what you are capable of. Oh, Kazik, if a mother’s love and blessing count for anything in this world, you ought to be the happiest of men, because... You do not know how I love you and how many blessings—”

Her tears cut her speech short. Then she grew calm, however, and, seeing that her son appeared troubled, recovered full power over herself.

“Must you go?” she said.

“Yes, mother.”

“Go, then. So be it. Here is the money,” she added, taking a thick packet from her desk. “One thousand three hundred rubles.”

Again her son began kissing her hands, her lips, her eyes.

“Write to me,” she said. “Write often... very often. Write about everything: how you get on, how your studies progress. Eat what is healthy, not what is elegant. Go to sleep early. Find a laundress who will not ruin your linen, and—save money, Kazik, save! You do not know, you cannot guess... But I swear to you that even now I cannot... That is the last money. I am so sorry...”

She wept again.

“Are things so bad with us?” whispered Kazimierz.

“Bad enough.”

“Well, but will Hela marry Solski?”

“All our hopes rest on her.”

That was the last conversation between Mrs. Latter and her son, who quickly left his mother’s apartment.

Chapter XXIV. Kitchen Philosophy

After her son's departure, Mrs. Latter fell into an apathetic state. She did not go out among the students. She did not leave her apartment, but sat at her desk with her head in her hands, or lay on her sofa staring at the ceiling.

Meanwhile Easter was approaching. Retreats had to be organized for the pupils. The girls had to be taken to confession and communion. Quarterly reports had to be written. On such occasions in the past, Mrs. Latter had been very active; today she had withdrawn from almost everything. Miss Howard was taking her place as manager of the school, Miss Marta as director of the housekeeping services, Magda as bursar and clerk.

Once Magda went to the headmistress's room to speak to her about the retreats. Reminding her that they were going to begin the next day, she asked:

"Certainly you will invite Father Felix and Father Gabriel to assist the rector, ma'am?"

"Very well."

"Will you write to them, ma'am?"

"Letters? Write them yourself."

Half an hour later Magda brought the letters for Mrs. Latter's signature. The headmistress lay on the couch gazing at the ceiling and only reluctantly dragged herself to her desk. Magda looked at her anxiously. Mrs. Latter noticed and, putting down her pen, began to speak calmly, sometimes derisively:

"Here you see an independent woman... for I was independent before Miss Howard ever dreamed of horseback riding or free love. Here you see... I brought up children, and I have no children. And I worked independently for more than a dozen years, only to have to tell myself today that I cannot find even a moment's leisure."

"The holidays are coming," Magda ventured. "We have nearly three weeks..."

"Are you going away?" asked Mrs. Latter.

"No," replied Magda, blushing.

"But you could go. You have somewhere to go," Mrs. Latter said, raising her voice. "And I, if I could go away, where would I go?"

Her lusterless eyes began to flash and her usually beautiful features took on a wild expression.

"Tell me: whom do I have, and where would I go? To that good fellow Mielnicki, I suppose. But loneliness and care will follow me there, so what is the use of going? He invited me from his heart, I know. He wrote that I should come

with Mania Lewinska, because otherwise Mania's grandmother will take her for the holidays, and the girl is afraid of her. But what will become of me after that?"

Magda was nonplused at this outpouring from Mrs. Latter, who was not given to disclosing her intentions or her feelings. But then she noticed that the headmistress was not looking at her, only at the window, and that she seemed to be speaking, not to her, but to someone outside the window.

"Independence... independence..." repeated Mrs. Latter, smiling. "Oh, that fool, Howard! She wants to make all the girls independent, to make them martyrs like me. But what does she understand? She does not even see, much less understand. She supposes herself to be furthering the independence of women, but she is digging the grave of the most independent woman..."

Suddenly she turned her head and, as if she had just seen Magda, asked:

"Why is that lunatic always expounding her theories of independence to you young women?"

Magda was astonished, and completely a loss as to how to answer. But Mrs. Latter did not notice. She began to drum on the desk with her fingers, and spoke again in a lower voice:

"I swear that that woman has been my undoing. She turns the little chits' heads, even Helena's. She made it easier for Joanna to roam around the city, and for trysts to take place between the pupils and university students. And that terrible scene with Dembicki! Everything happens because of her, everything."

She turned to Magda again.

"You know," she said, "Miss Howard will not be with us after Easter. She herself announced her intention to leave, and I am not stopping her. Oh, you are waiting for me to sign these letters to the priests? If only I did not have to think of these things, I could recover my health in a week..."

"Do you feel unwell, ma'am?" Magda asked timidly.

Then something unexpected happened. Mrs. Latter looked down at Magda, handed her the letters, and said in the tone of an irritable duchess:

"Address these, please, and send one of the servants out with them immediately. We have very little time."

Magda left in alarm, not daring to speak to anyone about the headmistress's remarkable behavior.

A few days before the pupils were let out for the Easter holiday, the tenor of life at the school underwent a change. Several of the students who lived at a distance had already left, among them Mania Lewinska, who went to her grandmother in Zytomierz. Classes were held irregularly. Some of the teachers did not come to the school, and there were hardly any evening activities for the boarding students, who gathered in the classrooms that were lighted and read novels.

One evening Marta, the housekeeper, saw Magda walking through the corridor. She beckoned to her and whispered:

“Come to me by the kitchen stairs, miss. I have fine sweet cream and something to tell you.”

Magda sent a sixth-former to take her place with the third-form class and hurried to Marta’s room. There she found the table set, coffee bubbling in the urn, a little pot of thick cream and a plate of frosted cookies.

“Oh, good!” she cried cheerfully. “I am so hungry!”

The housekeeper folded her hands and raised her eyes to heaven.

“Yes, yes!” she said quietly. “Everybody here is hungry now. Today the children complained most awfully about the dinner, but what was I to do? There is no money.”

“No money?” repeated Magda.

“Ah, the world is ending, miss... Judgment Day is here!” sighed the housekeeper, pouring the coffee. “I would not say this to anyone else, but to you I must. When the time comes, and indeed it is today or tomorrow, for us to pay the professors—only the professors—there will be no money for dinner. And the landlord demands his rent. I tell you candidly, he threatens us. He is stern as Calvin, not a human being...”

“How has it all happened so suddenly?” Magda marveled.

“Not suddenly, angel, not suddenly, my darling ... Fine cream, eh?... It is not suddenly, when Helena is given several hundred rubles, and the young master a thousand and a few hundred. I would not have spoken of it to anyone, but ... with a school it is not possible to do such things. It is either the children or the school. Oh, how happy I am that I have no children!”

Magda drank her coffee without tasting it; her appetite had deserted her.

“I hardly understand—” she whispered.

“I will explain it to you right now,” Marta interrupted. “Lovely cookies, eh?... Helena cannot work; she must marry money. She has been brought up as a lady, so—here you are, Helena, take a few hundred rubles, go abroad and pursue Mr. Solski. Kazik carouses for most of the year and must get out of Warsaw, so—here you are, Kazik, take thirteen hundred rubles, because you are a gentleman. Zing! on the left and zang! on the right, and—nothing left for the rent!”

Magda, holding a cookie in her hand, brooded and whispered, “It is strange...”

“What, missy?” Marta queried.

“You speak like Miss Malinowska...”

“And how would you know?” the housekeeper asked curiously, leaning toward Magda.

“I have been to see her.”

“Ah ... you have been there? Yes, yes, everyone must look out for themselves. Because Madam Meline has been there, and Miss Zaneta is going tomorrow...”

“To Miss Malinowska’s? What for?” exclaimed Magda.

“For the same reason all of us have been there.”

“You, too?”

“Why not I as well as others?” Marta retorted indignantly. “Mrs. Latter is going bankrupt; you all are saving yourselves. Why should I be left without a crust? Indeed, I have served faithfully, oy! Oy! And I have not only served the boarders, but Helena and Kazimierz. Why should I be ruined?”

“But I was at Miss Malinowska’s some time ago with Miss Howard, and I did not ask for a position at all,” Magda explained, somewhat offended.

“No? Then go to her tomorrow and ask. But it is impossible. Thirty have already applied to be classroom teachers there, and four to be housekeepers.”

Magda dropped her cookie, pushed her coffee aside, folded her hands and said:

“My God, my God! Whatever are you doing? You are killing Mrs. Latter—”

“Quiet! Quiet!” Marta broke in, trying to calm her. “We are killing her? Not we. She is ruining herself. Jesus, Mary! With an income like hers, in more than a dozen years a person could put some money aside. But everything went for living quarters, for style, for the children. Kazimierz alone cost her fifteen thousand rubles! He ate it up — and now there is nothing.”

“How do you know there is nothing?”

“Oh, how! How! I know everything, or why am I the housekeeper? I thought we could stave off the rent and expenses at least until the holidays, but so much for that! The cash box is so empty that yesterday madam sent me over the way there to Szlamsztejn...”

“Who is that?”

“The moneylender, missy, the moneylender!” said Marta, waving her hands. “But he doesn’t want to give us anything. He received me as if I had come a-begging, and he said, ‘When it was well with you, you did business with Fiszman, so go to Fiszman now.’ Naturally I slammed the door in the rascal’s face, but right away it occurred to me that after today the headmistress will not fall back on usurers. And if that Zgierski doesn’t have five thousand rubles on loan to us! And how! He even wrote into the contract that all the headmistress’s furniture, every bench, wardrobe, blackboard, belongs to him.”

“That Zgierski?” asked Magda.

“Ah, that one, that one... that rogue. He takes a hundred and fifty rubles a year on a thousand-ruble loan to a friend of mine who keeps a shop. And he loaned five hundred rubles a year to another of my friends who keeps a store in a village, and takes a hundred a year. Little Jesus! He plies his trade by lending

money only to women who are in business, because women, he says, are the best risks, and that is the truth! A woman doesn't eat or sleep until she pays her interest, and the creditor can still ogle her or her young ladies. Vile men! Miss Howard is right."

Magda looked at the window, lost in thought.

"All those things are temporary difficulties for Mrs. Latter," she said. "But after the vacation..."

"After the vacation?" the housekeeper broke in. "After the vacation we will have no day pupils or boarders."

"Perhaps not, if someone has frightened them away," replied Magda, looking sharply at the housekeeper.

Marta grew angry, but said without raising her voice:

"Upon my word, missy, you have neither eyes nor ears! How many young ladies have left us this year, and, indeed, no one frightened them away... The school has lost its reputation. That's the secret. Some think it's too expensive, others say it's badly managed. Do you think those fracasos with Joanna and Dembicki could have done the school any good?"

"Miss Howard is at fault there."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Marta shot back, waving a hand. "Kazimierz is the guilty one in Joanna's case, and Helena caused the trouble about Dembicki by drawing him into a quarrel. The children, the children did it! They are spoiled and capricious, and Mrs. Latter is no match for them. It was bad business, allowing her son to carry on with a classroom teacher and dismissing Joanna for returning to the school late at night.

"And if the headmistress had given Helena a dressing down instead of venting her anger at Dembicki, he would still be here. Isn't it a sin? A professor who taught for so little..."

Magda rose from her chair.

"So!" she said with burning eyes. "A good, wise woman is going to be ruined because of those lapses? Think how many people have work because of her... even you and I..."

Marta stood with arms akimbo, hands on hips.

"It's clear in a minute that you are behind the times, missy! Ho, ho! Miss Howard is right. What kind of favor is the headmistress doing any of us," she declaimed, waving a hand, "to pay for hard work? And how much does she pay herself? You get fifteen rubles a month for working eight hours a day, I get fifteen a month for working whole days, and the headmistress has three hundred, five hundred, six hundred a month in clear profit. And how much has she worked for it? As much as you or I?"

"But she manages the school..."

“And what of that? Couldn’t you have a school? Are there not headmistresses who teach in the daytime and at night mend their dresses and repair their shoes? But see here! Are our classroom teachers and even I serfs, while the headmistress is the lady of the manor? Why does she earn more than all of us together? And if, in spite of all this profitability, she goes bankrupt, am I suppose to cry for her? I am a woman just as she is. I could have children, too, and I could sit on velvet chairs. Fair is fair!”

“You have excited yourself,” Magda remarked.

“No, missy,” the housekeeper answered more tranquilly, “only such injustice gives me a pain at the heart. I work my fingers to the bone, the teachers wear out their lungs, we have had no pleasures, we have nothing, and no one pities us. But the headmistress spends thousands of rubles a year, she loses the school, she does not think about what will become of us, and yet we are not allowed to care about our own interests? Oy! Do not delay, but go to Miss Malinowska before what little money is left goes by the board.”

“My God, my God!” said Magda as if to herself. “She educated so many women who are well-paid teachers today, so many pupils who made rich marriages. So many of them have money, and none of them will help her...”

“They paid for their education,” Marta interrupted. “When all is said and done, how are they going to help? By taking up a collection? And after all, not all of them are like Ada Solska, who gives six thousand rubles at a stroke. Nobody is going to give us six zlotys.”

Then the housekeeper, seeing that Magda wanted to go, seized her hand and said:

“Well, but you will not mention what we have talked about to anyone?”

“To whom, dear?” answered Magda, shrugging her shoulders. “Good night.”

“What a terrible world!” she thought as she walked upstairs. “As long as a person has money, everyone is on their knees to her, but they stone her when she is poor.”

That conversation with Marta made a deep impression on Magda. She did not want to believe everything she had heard, but during that hour Mrs. Latter had sunk a little in her estimation. Until that time she had seemed to her almost a goddess, full of power, wisdom and mysterious majesty. Today the aura that had surrounded her had dispersed and a woman had emerged—an ordinary woman, like Miss Malinowska, even like Marta, only unhappier than they.

Her respectful fear of the headmistress gave way to sympathy and compassion. Magda remembered Mrs. Latter lying on the sofa and tried to imagine what a woman thinks about when she is uncertain of her children’s future and does not know how she will feed her pupils the next day.

“I must save her!” Magda said to herself. “I will write to Ada.”

But a serious objection to that project occurred to her. First, Ada had already loaned Mrs. Latter six thousand rubles, and the fact was known even at the school. Then Ada, who before Christmas had been afraid that her brother would fall in love with Helena, now that he had done so (and that was also talked about at the school) might lose her regard for Helena, and for her mother.

“Yes, yes!” she whispered. “Ada is not happy with Helena. That is clear from her letters.”

Ada’s letters to Magda were short and infrequent, but in spite of their writer’s efforts to conceal her feelings, her tone was bitter and regretful when she mentioned Helena.

“Helena treats hearts like toys,” Ada wrote in one letter. “She flirts excessively with all the men,” she remarked in another. And her most recent one, written two weeks earlier, contained this sentence: “Now and then I think with despair that Stefan will not be happy.”

No, under such circumstances it would not be fitting to call on Ada.

Suddenly it struck Magda that, after all, Stefan Solski was the natural protector of Helena and her mother.

“If he loves Helena and wants to marry her,” she told herself, “he will not abandon her mother to bankruptcy. Indeed, he ought to be offended if he is not informed of this.” And she was seized by an impulse to write to Stefan, but then was terrified at her own boldness.

“Heavens, I am an incorrigible idiot!” she whispered. “How can I give away Mrs. Latter’s secrets and intercede for her with a man I have only met once in my life?”

Dembicki! The name flashed through her mind, and she saw the phlegmatic face and blue eyes of the mathematician as if he were standing before her.

“He will not let me down. He will advise me. He will know best how to deal with this. It is clear as day! After all, he is Stefan’s friend and librarian. He lives in Stefan’s house.”

But Dembicki had almost been dismissed from the school through Helena’s fault, and Mrs. Latter had not even apologized to him. What would Magda do if he said, “I will not concern myself with Mrs. Latter?”

No, he would not say that. If it lay within his power to rescue an unfortunate woman, he would not push her deeper into ruin.

That night Magda slept feverishly, dreaming that she was speaking with Dembicki, that she was arguing with him, and then again that he was not in Warsaw. The night was a torture to her, the dawn even more so. Every moment she looked at her watch. She wanted to run to Dembicki as soon as it was daylight and tell him what was happening.

But when morning came she could not leave the school, and before luncheon she was seized by such fear that she thought of abandoning the plan.

After the meal she regained her resolve, however, and ran downstairs to Mrs. Latter's apartment.

In the anteroom she saw Stanislaw and inquired:

"Is the headmistress in?"

No sooner had she asked the question than her anxiety returned.

"She has a visitor," the footman replied, looking at her keenly.

"I would like the headmistress to know that I am going to town. I am going to buy a veil for my hat," she said, blushing.

"Go, miss; I will tell madam myself. This is an important visitor. You could go and return three times before he leaves."

"Ah! I will not go, then," answered Magda, not in the least knowing why that fact should keep her from going, or why she was filled with alarm again.

In fact she did not go out that day, but the tension caused by her failure to act on her impulse gave her a nervous headache.

"What will become of me?" she whispered. "What am I doing, meddling in other people's affairs?"

But the next minute she was seized again by the idea that she must go to Dembicki because only he would save the headmistress.

Why that was the case, however, or how he could possibly help, she did not ask herself.

Chapter XXV. One Who Was Driven Away Returns

At this time serious questions were being discussed in Mrs. Latter's apartment.

Half an hour before dinner Stanislaw handed Mrs. Latter a letter brought by a messenger who was waiting for an answer. She glanced at the address: the handwriting seemed unfamiliar. Slowly she cut open the envelope and read a few words in French:

"I arrived today. I ask the favor of a conversation concerning a matter that you know of."

"Should the messenger wait?" asked Stanislaw

"Come when I ring," answered Mrs. Latter. She read the letter again and said to herself in a mock-singing tone:

"Yes ... yes ... yes! At last! Just what I need at such a time ..."

And in her mind's eye she saw a man with the face of a drunkard, wearing stained, ragged clothing. She had seen such a man once on a street in Warsaw, and for many years she had imagined that her second husband was in a similar state. It could not be otherwise.

Her second husband, once beautiful as Apollo, had been remarkably timid. He was so terribly timid that he had not even managed to propose. For their first two years as man and wife he had behaved toward her as if he were a footman. He had brought her to ruin, or at least he had not averted it. When, during their third year of marriage, she had told him in a transport of anger that she was supporting him and had the right to tell him to leave at any moment, he had not taken offense, but had only gone away, leaving her to pay his debts.

He was a man whom Mrs. Latter hated with all her soul. For why had he not exploded with anger? Or, on the other hand, apologized to her? And if he had not found it in himself either to be angry or to apologize, why had he abandoned her and sent her no word for fifteen years?

"There are three possibilities," Mrs. Latter had thought, before the arrival of this surprising message. "Either he has died, or he is in prison, or he has taken to drinking and gone from bad to worse." What other course could a man take whom she despised so bitterly?

For days her husband's return had not seemed out of the realm of possibility to Mrs. Latter's gloom-ridden imagination. Indeed, why should fate spare her that most appalling of misfortunes?

"Perhaps he will return and perhaps he will not," she said to herself. But if he returned, it would certainly be as a pauper and a low sort of person whom she could not acknowledge to the world or her own children.

Sometimes—in her weaker moments—it seemed to her that if the husband she had driven away returned, she would kill herself from anger and shame. Now

the moment had come, and instead of taking fright, she had to rouse herself from apathy. She went to her bedroom with a vigorous step, drank a glass of wine, and wrote three words on the letter: "I am waiting." She tucked it into an envelope, addressed it to "Monsieur Arnold," and ordered it to be given to the messenger.

Then she sat in an armchair making idle motions with an ivory letter opener, and looked at the door, calmly waiting. Soon she seemed to see between the portieres the rags, the swollen face, the watery eyes of the man who had obstructed her way in the street, and who must be like her husband.

If she had been asked how long she waited, an hour or a few minutes, she could not have answered. Nor did she hear that someone had come into the anteroom, knocked at the door of her study, and then, unable to wait for a summons, opened it himself. Mrs. Latter only remembered that a shadow appeared between the portieres and drew near the desk.

She did not look the visitor in the face. Nonetheless she was certain that a ragged drunkard stood before her. It even seemed to her that she smelled vodka.

"What do you want from me?" she asked him in French.

"Is that how you welcome me, Karolina?" answered a voice as sonorous as an organ.

Mrs. Latter trembled and raised her head. A few steps away from her stood an unusually fine-looking man of medium height, about thirty, with dark hair, refined features and a rather colorless complexion. He had a small black moustache and dark eyes that were equally remarkable for their sweetness and for their melancholy. He was impeccably dressed, and on one finger of his left hand wore a ring with a large diamond.

Mrs. Latter gazed at him in astonishment. There was no sign of indigence or physical decay.

"Aha!" she thought. "So he must be an elegant rascal. He cheats at cards or pilfers from salons. But nothing has changed."

"I would like to know what you want," she said again.

Some play of feeling could be seen on her visitor's face. He was moved, but he was beginning to show surprise.

"Karolina," he said, still in French, "I have no quarrel with you, and I do not want to have, but I am, at least, an old acquaintance. It seems to me that that stone Socrates would welcome me more warmly... even the desk... the chair... aha! And the portraits of the children," he added, smiling as he looked at the wall.

Mrs. Latter bit her lip with exasperation.

"The children, and even the desk and the chairs, were my first husband's," she said, adding emphatically, "so they are very distant acquaintances of yours."

A deep blush darkened his face.

“Excellent!” he retorted in an altered tone. “You want to place our relationship on the proper footing at once. Fine! But you will not object if I sit down?”

He sat in an armchair, and Mrs. Latter retreated in aversion to the farther end of the sofa.

“A few months ago you received a letter from me,” he said, “sent from Washington, written in December of last year.”

“I received nothing.”

“No?” replied the visitor, astonished.

“Nothing. Ever.”

“Never? But I wrote to you in 1867 from the town of Richmond in the state of Kentucky.”

Mrs. Latter was silent.

“I do not understand,” he said, somewhat confused. “It is true that instead of being called Eugeniusz Arnold Latter I am now called simply Eugene Arnold, but surely that would not have caused a misunderstanding.”

“Aha, so we have a change of name!” exclaimed Mrs. Latter with a sardonic smile, striking the arm of the sofa with her hand. “That shows that you lost no time...”

The visitor looked at her in astonishment.

“Surely you heard of me—”

“I heard nothing,” she answered roughly. “But I know the slopes weak characters slide down.”

The visitor flushed again, this time with anger.

“Please let me give you a few words of explanation.”

Mrs. Latter played with a ribbon on her gown.

“As you know, I was always shy, in school, at university. When I came to this country as a private tutor my unfortunate defect intensified, and if I had had the honor to go on living as your husband, it would almost have become a sickness.”

“Which, however, did not hinder you from making romantic overtures.”

“You speak of that governess from Grenoble. I did not make romantic overtures, I only helped her as a fellow countryman. But no more about that.

“You see, when you sent me away once and for all, I went to Germany in the hope of working as a tutor there. I was advised, however, to go to America, which I did.”

He paused for a moment.

“I arrived there during the Civil War, and from financial necessity enlisted in the Northern army as Eugene Arnold. I changed my name out of fear that I would disgrace it, for I was sure that, because of my timidity, if I were not killed immediately I would flee from the first battle, perhaps even be shot as a deserter.

“Then I learned, however, that timidity and cowardice are two different things. To make a long story short, I finished the campaign with the rank of major, I received a pension of three hundred dollars from the government and this ring from my comrades, and to my even greater amazement, I learned to give orders—I, who before that only obeyed directives from everyone, even my pupils. And because the new name had served me so superbly, I kept it.”

“An inspiring story,” Mrs. Latter remarked. “I would have made a different prediction.”

“May one ask what?” he inquired curiously.

“That you would be a gambler.”

He burst out laughing.

“I never held a card in my hand.”

“But you played cards every evening.”

“Oh, here? Forgive me, but I went to play whist with friends so as... so as to be out of the house.”

“But it costs something.”

“Not much. Perhaps in the course of those few months I lost—how much? About ten rubles.”

“You left debts.”

The visitor rose from his chair.

“I have been ready to pay them for a long time. But how did you know about them?”

“I had to pay the notes you signed.”

“You?” he cried, striking his forehead. “I never thought of that! But they were not gaming debts. Once I posted bond for a fellow countryman. Another time I put a lien on some personal property to send the governess back to France. Yet a third time I borrowed money for my journey, because I was certain that I could repay it from Germany within half a year. Fate ruled otherwise, but I will pay it back—today, even. I am prepared to do that. It cannot exceed a thousand rubles.”

“Eight hundred,” Mrs. Latter put in.

“Do you have the notes?” he asked

“I tore them up.”

“It makes no difference. Even if they no longer exist, it is enough for me if I have your word that they have not fallen into other hands.”

A long silence followed. The visitor seemed troubled, like a man who is about to say something unpleasant. Mrs. Latter retreated into her own thoughts, feeling that her soul was about to be racked by an earthquake.

“He will repay the eight hundred rubles,” she thought. “He is an utterly decent fellow, if he is not lying. But he never lied. He did not have an improper relationship with the governess, he did not gamble, so... what did we differ about? Why were we not reconciled? Why?”

She roused herself and looked calmly at her former husband.

“Assuming that what you say is true...”

He drew himself up and glared at her angrily.

“Excuse me!” he interrupted tersely. “To whom do you speak in such a fashion? No one has a right to question what I say.”

Mrs. Latter was taken aback and even intimidated by these explosive words delivered in a voice with a powerful timbre.

“Why did he never answer me back like that before?” she thought. “Where did he get such a voice?”

“I did not mean to offend you,” she said, “but you must confess that there is an old, painful debt between us.”

“What debt? I will pay everything. Eight hundred rubles today, the rest in a month.”

“There are moral debts.”

He stared at her in astonishment. Mrs. Latter admitted to herself that she had never seen a look in which so much comprehension and strength were mingled with something else, something she feared.

“Moral debts? Between us?” he repeated. “And I am the debtor?”

She interrupted him, speaking agitatedly:

“You abandoned me without a word.”

The visitor’s face expressed a rising anger that made him still more attractive in Mrs. Latter’s eyes.

“What do you mean?” he said. “You, who through several unhappy years of our relationship treated me like a dog—like a young squire treats his tutor—you speak of being abandoned? My only fault is that I idolized you, seeing in you not only the woman I loved, but a great lady in a barbarous nation who stooped to marry an impecunious immigrant. Well, but during the last year, and in particular during the last exchange of words between us—when I was almost afraid that you would order me to beat your servants—during that last scene I returned to my senses.

“Today I understand you better. You are the descendant of Scythian women who were rulers for ages, women who ordered others about and who should have been born men. But I was a citizen of a civilized nation, and in spite of my

attachment to you, in spite of all the considerations that are due to a woman, and in spite of my timidity, I could no longer play a role so compromising to myself.

“Everything happened for the best. You have your profession, which has satisfied your instinct for power, which has brought you fortune and reputation, and I—I am a free man. Since we did not get on, it was best that you released me. And you did that in a most determined manner!”

“Marital discord does not invalidate the sacrament,” replied Mrs. Latter softly, looking down.

The visitor shrugged his shoulders.

“Did it not even occur to you that the children and I could fall into want?” she asked.

“The children, and even the desk and the chair, are the property of your first husband,” he retorted drily. “You yourself said that half an hour ago, and we will adhere to that principle. Concerning your welfare, however, I had no anxieties. In 1867 I met an old chambermaid of yours in Richmond. Aniela was her name, I think. She had gone there to work in a stocking factory. I learned from her that you had established a school, that you had made a fortune, and that Kazik and Helena had been excellently brought up. I was a little surprised to hear about the school, but knowing how energetic you are, I had no doubt that everything was going well.

“Indeed, that was confirmed for me a year ago by Mr. Sla—Slaski (he is called Slade there, because no one can pronounce his name), an old neighbor from Norow. He told me that you had made a fortune, that Helena had grown into a beautiful young woman, and that Kazik showed every prospect of becoming a man of genius.

“In the face of this information, any lingering regret that I might have had with regard to you died in me. It was clear to me that if I had not left when I did, I might have been a hindrance to your career and to the children. And today I tell you that what happened, although it was very painful to me, was best for everyone. Everyone gained materially and morally. The hand of God plots the best course for people.”

Hearing this, Mrs. Latter felt that the old hatred of her husband was being eradicated from her heart. But anxiety was taking its place.

“He is a noble fellow,” she thought. “But why has he come to me?”

Chapter XXVI. One Who Had Been Detained Goes Out

Mrs. Latter's visitor frowned and wiped his forehead, visibly troubled. "What do you intend to do now?" Mrs. Latter asked diffidently, with a slight blush.

Her former husband looked at her in surprise. A moment before she had spoken to him formally, as though they were mere acquaintances. Now her tone had become more intimate.

"So you did not receive my letter of December?" he asked.

"You may inform me now as to its contents."

"Oh—indeed? Of course I must," he replied, and almost involuntarily reached for his cigar case.

"Would you like to smoke?" Mrs. Latter asked in a tone that was almost meek.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed. "It is a pity that my letter was lost."

"Perhaps it contained documents?"

He did not answer. He wiped his forehead again and said suddenly:

"You do not know that I have a son... a ten-year-old boy, a very handsome and good child. An excellent child!"

Everything went dark before Mrs. Latter's eyes.

"His name is Henry," he said, "and he has such a sad look when he is lost in thought that sometimes I tremble for him. I ask myself where that sadness comes from, and what it foreshadows. But it is only momentary. Usually he is a cheerful child. Oh, how cheerful he can be!" he added, looking at Mrs. Latter.

"It would be pleasant to meet your son and embrace him," Mrs. Latter answered in a choked voice. "Pity you did not bring him."

"From Washington?" he put in. "But he is with his mother."

Mrs. Latter went white.

"You see," he said, "here is the reason for my coming..."

But it was difficult for him to go to the heart of the matter. He shifted in his chair and took yet another detour from his point.

"You see, I am one of the chief agents for the Wood factory, makers of machines and farming equipment. Until recently I traveled around America, but this year, because I wanted to speak with you, I undertook to visit Russia as a representative of my firm. Business is so pressing that I must leave Poland tomorrow. But I will return in a month and stay here longer. In the meantime my attorney will help you execute the formalities..."

"I do not understand," whispered Mrs. Latter, clutching the arm of the sofa.

“It concerns only a trivial action that a sensible woman like you can take, and is even obliged to take, after what happened between us. It amounts to this—that you apply to the College of Cardinals for a divorce.”

Mrs. Latter looked at him aghast.

“You want to marry, though you have a wife here? And you think I am going to help you do it? My premonitions are borne out. After all these heroic tales, in the end we are brought up against some criminality.”

Her visitor seethed with anger again.

“With your permission—you must recall that I am a Calvinist, and our wedding took place only in a Catholic church. So if I am not mistaken (I have not yet spoken with lawyers about this), that wedding may be invalid, given the faith I profess. Moreover, I was driven out of our home by you, so surely that is the moral equivalent of divorce, especially since a separation of more than a dozen years followed. Finally, if I had been less scrupulous, in America I would have found a perfectly legal way of marrying without appealing to you.”

“So why should I petition the College of Cardinals for a divorce, probably at my own expense?” Mrs. Latter burst out with flaming eyes. “Go back to your America and commit legal bigamy! That woman who gave you the gift of a son is either a victim of deceit or...”

Her former husband seized her hand. “Enough!” he said.

But Mrs. Latter, conscious of her advantage, said with calm sarcasm:

“Why should I want to insult her? I say only that one of two things is the case: either you deceived her and pretended to marry her, or she was your lover out of wedlock. I will be truly astounded if you show me a third alternative.”

He grew milder.

“Excuse me: there are things that seem strange in Europe, but quite understandable in America. My wife, the mother of my little Henry, served as a caretaker for the wounded during the war. In spite of the fact that she was only eighteen, or perhaps because of that, she was a feminist of the most radical type. Well bred, highly educated, with the soul of a poet, she voiced the theory that true love needs no formulas. So when I declared that I loved her, and told her the story of my life, she took my hand and said in the hall full of wounded soldiers and their kin and caretakers:

“‘I love this man. I take him for my husband, and I will be true to him.’ And she is true to me.”

“Happy man,” Mrs. Latter hissed. “You have no lack of agreeable illusions.”

He pretended that he did not hear, but lowered his head and spoke on:

“In the course of time, as our son grew, so did her attachment to me—and her scruples. For several years I saw her weeping from time to time. In vain I

asked her what the matter was. She would not answer. At last, seeing that her sadness drove me to despair, she said:

“The spirits say that if I were to die before your first wife, I would not be with you after death. She would. But they add that if you had a decree from her releasing you from the marriage, even if I died before her, you would be mine in the hereafter.’ I must explain that my wife is a spiritualist, even a medium.”

Mrs. Latter sat with folded hands. Her visitor looked at her uneasily, seeing that her eyes were smouldering with hate.

“What do you say to this?” he interjected in the tone of one who asks a favor.

“I?” she asked, jolted back to speech. “Listen, Arnold. For ten years and more you lived with a woman unknown to me. You made love to her. You have a son with her. Your military honors in that country, your work, your fortune, all are shared with her.”

She stopped to catch her breath, but after pausing a moment continued:

“During that time I had to carry the burden of widowhood without its advantages. I worked to maintain a decent situation for several hundred persons; I raised the children. I had to struggle with other people, with fear of what the next day would bring, sometimes with despair, while you were happy over there at my expense. Do you know what I have for it all today? Two children whose futures are uncertain, and, for myself, bankruptcy. Complete bankruptcy! I have even fallen behind with the rent, and if I sold the school today and paid its debts, I do not know if I would have a dress to walk out in.

“At this moment you, who deprived me of your companionship and your help, you come to me and have the nerve to say, ‘Dear madam, please approve my plan for disposing of you, because the spirits have told one of my sweethearts that she ought to be promoted and become my lawful wife!’

“Are you mad, Arnold, to propose such a thing to me? I would never agree to it, never! Even if my own children were dying of hunger at my feet.”

She rose from the sofa with clenched fists.

“Never, do you hear? Never!”

She paced around the study several times, sobbing. But slowly she grew calm and stood before her husband, wiping her eyes.

“Well?” she said tersely.

He glanced at his watch and rose from his chair. At that instant a look of peace could be seen on his expressive face.

“I see,” he said, “that you are in more distress than I could possibly have supposed. Well, but this matter is very difficult. Each party has its own stake.

“And so I give you my final word. There are four of us: my son Henry, his mother, you and I. I have a very small fortune—twenty thousand dollars. But

because I lived at your expense for a time, I will give you five thousand dollars from my estate.

“Now I am going to my attorney, and I will tell him what to do. In a month, more or less, I will receive a copy of the divorce decree, and I will give you part of the money. It is understood that that is over and above the cost of the decree and the eight hundred rubles that I owe.”

“Yes! You owe!” Mrs. Latter hissed again.

But at that instant it occurred to her that five thousand dollars at the current rate of exchange would amount to seven thousand five hundred rubles.

The visitor waved carelessly, bowed and walked out without looking back.

Mrs. Latter gazed after him—gazed until after he was out of sight—and when the door of the waiting room closed with a scraping sound and his footsteps reverberated on the stairs, she burst into bitter tears.

A quarter of an hour later she washed her face and, exuding vengefulness, began to devise plans to humiliate the man who dared to be happy in spite of her hatred.

“I forgave him—and he proposed divorce! Cad, perjurer, bigamist! How I wish that now I had a great, enormous fortune. I would go to America, to that woman, and I would say: ““You can marry each other; you can commit sacrilege. But in the sight of God, woman, you will always be his mistress, and your son an illegitimate child. You will never be husband and wife before God, you will never be joined even after death, because I will not release him from his vow.””

Then she regained her judgment and was astounded by her own outburst.

“When all is said and done,” she thought, “what am I fretting myself about? The child is guilty of nothing except that he is his father’s son. And the woman over there, whose name I do not even know, is worthy of her partner. I drove him away, he found a creature fit for him, and that is how I must continue to treat their relations: with contempt, not with dramatics.

“Oh, if Solski would finally propose to Helena! That volatile romance has gone on too long, with everyone talking and compromising the girl. Then I would have had money, and I would not have had to accept even those eight hundred rubles from that wretched man, though he owes them to me. Then I would have shown him the door, because what, in a proper state of things, can this Arnold have to do with me?”

Mrs. Latter recalled the conversation that had just ended—the strong voice, the play of expression on Arnold’s face, his unexpected show of anger—and came to the conclusion that this man would not allow himself to be trampled on.

“In any case I am sure of eight hundred rubles in a month,” she thought, “so today I can borrow six hundred. But—the villain! He gives me seven thousand rubles as severance when he is not worth seven pence. That sum, it is clear, I will never in this world receive!”

She ordered Marta to be called, and when the housekeeper came in, said to her:

“So Szlamsztejn refuses?”

“What does such a person—pardon me, madam—what does he know? Does he know about something? It’s as if he is angry that Fiszman makes something off us,” answered the housekeeper with a grimace.

Mrs. Latter was puzzled.

“Fiszman? You have just mentioned him for the second time. I know no Fiszman. Perhaps he is the one who brings us butter?”

“No, ma’am. Berek brings us the butter. Fiszman is a financier. I even know where he lives.”

“He must be brought here tomorrow,” Mrs. Latter replied, looking out the window. “There is always a shortage of cash at the end of the quarter, but in a month there will be money.”

She nodded as a signal for the housekeeper to leave and resumed her feverish pacing around the study. She smiled to herself, feeling that anger at her husband had tapped a new store of vitality in her soul.

“I will not give up! I will not give up!” she repeated, clenching her fists.

She did not think about how long this newfound strength would sustain her, or whether it was the last of her reserves.

Meanwhile Marta, emerging from Mrs. Latter’s study, was propelled to the end of the corridor by Stanislaw, who followed her into her room and furtively closed the door behind him. Then he drew out his wallet, took a golden ten-mark piece from it, and said:

“Aha! Only guess who gave me this. Quite the gentleman! Men well supplied with rubles have been here before, but I have never had something like this.”

“True!” answered the housekeeper, whose eyes glowed as she looked at the gold. “The real thing! My God, nowadays you don’t see that anywhere, and yet I remember that in my mother’s time...”

“The real thing! But what about the man who gave it to me? If I told you, you would drop dead, upon my word!”

“Oh, what an informer! You drag out all my innermost secrets and then balk when it’s your turn. Who could throw money around except Mr. Solski? Surely he has come to ask for the girl’s hand. God be praised!” she added, raising her eyes and hands toward heaven.

But the grave face of the footman gave her pause.

“Well, speak up or get out.”

“Such a thing does not cross a person’s lips easily,” he answered. “What I am going to say I say only to you. God preserve us...”

“You’re crazy! So who was it?”

“The departed master.”

“In the name of the Father and the Son! What departed master?”

“Latter.”

“I swear, you are a complete lunatic!” whispered the housekeeper with her eyes riveted to Stanislaw’s face. “Did you know him?”

“I did not, but I heard a little of what he and the mistress were saying. I did not understand much because it was in French.”

“So did you understand at least a little?”

“Well! All these years at a school... I did not hear everything, I did not understand much, but still I know that it was her husband, Latter. Some time ago I heard that he was traveling around the world, but I had no idea that he had filled his pockets. Indeed, it’s not just anyone who can go around throwing out gold pieces.”

“Thank you, Lord!” sighed Marta. “I have always been praying for the welfare of our mistress, and I was sure that something would come of it.”

“Hum! Hum!” grumbled Stanislaw. “But I see nothing good in this. First they quarreled, and the mistress even said something about criminality. Then he went out and she cried terribly, and finally... finally, it is never good when a man everyone believes is dead reappears. There will be trouble of some kind.”

Marta was precipitated from extreme optimism to the deepest pessimism. So she clasped her hands against her bosom and said:

“Aaah... I thought so. What is a husband for who was not here? He was not here—and all once he shows up, as if from under the ground? Certainly when they separated madam had to establish the school, so there must have been nothing holding them together. But if he has returned now, and he is rich...”

“And what a fine-looking man! Oh, oh! He certainly looks younger than our—”

“Oh!” Marta interrupted. “There’s the trouble. A young, handsome husband and an older wife... uh, oh! Here’s a bad business. The poor wife worn out with work, and he handsome and rich. Vile men!”

“Only, madam, you must not breathe a word to anyone, for the consequences could be bad for me,” said Stanislaw, shaking his finger.

When he was ceremoniously beginning to make his exit, Marta, irritated at his admonitions, grabbed his arm and pushed him out the door.

A quarter of an hour later Marta ran upstairs with the quick, soft steps of a cat, looking for Magda. But instead of Magda Miss Howard appeared, so Marta seized her by the hand, pulled her into an empty classroom and began to whisper:

“Do you know what happened? But swear that you will not tell anyone!” she added, raising a warning finger. “Do you know, Latter has returned!”

“What Latter?”

“Latter, the headmistress’s husband!”

“But he died years ago!”

“Indeed he has been alive all those years, but was in prison for some crime.”

“What? What?”

“He committed some crime,” Marta whispered. “But how handsome he is! Oh, madam, an absolute god, a true Napoleon!”

“Napoleon?”

“Yes, this Latter, beautiful as a god. And rich! Madam, he gave Stanislaw a couple... what am I saying?... He gave him several, perhaps more, golden ten-mark pieces. He is a millionaire!”

“Where did he get that kind of money?” Miss Howard asked with a skeptical shrug of her shoulders.

“No doubt from his criminal activities.”

“Is he here?”

“He has just gone out to register with the police, but he will be back.”

“And will he stay here tonight?” Miss Howard inquired, raising her voice.

“A man who has a wife is not going to spend the night in a hotel.”

Miss Howard clapped her hands to her temples.

“I am leaving here this minute! A handsome husband who was involved in criminal activity wants to stay here overnight! Never, not for anything—”

“For the love of God, Miss Klara,” begged the horrified housekeeper, “what are you doing? This requires the utmost secrecy. We must be quiet as the grave.”

“What concern is that of mine?” said Miss Klara indignantly. “Handsome and... involved in criminal activity... I could be in a pretty mess tomorrow! After all, such a fellow will stop at nothing.”

“But, madam... but, Miss Klara...” whispered the housekeeper, “I will tell you everything. He will not stay here overnight, because Mrs. Latter cannot stand him. He had hardly come in when they quarreled, and the headmistress cried herself into fits. Nothing is going to come of their meeting. She won’t let him over the threshold. Perhaps they will never even see each other again.”

Miss Howard began to shake her head.

“There!” she said. “Is it true that women ought to marry? Did it do Mrs. Latter any good? So many years of work and servitude! So many years without her husband, and when he returns, she will not have him! Ah, marriage! For some time I have noticed that something was the matter with her; she has been

pale, melancholy, apathetic. And I don't wonder at it, since she was waiting for this fine bit of manhood. I must save this unfortunate—”

“As you hope for God's mercy,” moaned Marta, “please say nothing.”

She seized the teacher's hands and pushed her against the window casing as if she meant to throw her out onto the street.

“You are tiresome!” the teacher gasped, wrenching herself free. “Of course I will not give away the fact that I know her husband has returned. I will only pull her out of her apathy, draw her back into involvement with the school.”

“What is there today of the school?” the housekeeper put in. “Most of the pupils have left for the holidays, and the rest will leave the day after tomorrow. What will she have to do?”

Miss Howard threw her head back angrily.

“What nonsense are you talking, Miss Marta?” she demanded. “Do you say that there is nothing to do? These ten little hoydens have me drowning in work, and is there nothing for Mrs. Latter to do? Of course I am far more energetic...”

Someone came down the hall, so the ladies quickly went their separate ways. The housekeeper resumed her search for Magda, and Miss Howard began to think of ways to help Mrs. Latter shake off her apathy.

“When she is occupying herself with business and with the girls again, as I am doing, even thoughts about a handsome husband will evaporate,” she said to herself. “Today I understand all the unhappy woman's inconsistencies. Of course she was afraid her husband might return. Aha! And now I know why she is threatened with bankruptcy. All the money that poor slave worked for she had to send to her husband in prison. And see! He is a wealthy scoundrel, and she cannot pay for the place she lives in. Such are the benefits of marriage!”

Chapter XXVII. News of a Daughter

At around eight in the evening Miss Howard invited Magda to her room. She seated her on a chair, sat down with her back to a lamp, crossed her arms on her chest and, staring into space with her pale eyes, asked in a tone of pretended indifference:

“Well—do you know about the headmistress?”

“Ah, I know,” Magda rejoined, sick at heart.

“That her husband has come back?”

“Yes.”

“That he is handsome... that he was in prison...”

“That he is very rich,” Magda put in.

“And that they have separated again,” continued Miss Howard.

“I know everything.”

“Who told you? Marta, no doubt. What a gossip! She cannot keep a secret for five minutes.”

“But she begged me not to tell,” said Magda.

“So I have no more particulars to give you, but—listen to me,” Miss Howard said with an upraised hand, in the tone of one who wishes to inspire her hearer.

At that moment there was a knock at the door and Stanislaw’s voice interrupted them.

“The headmistress is asking for Miss Brzeska. The post has arrived.”

“I am coming,” called Magda, thinking, “Surely there is a letter from mother.”

“Listen to me,” said Miss Howard, fixing Magda with her look. “Mrs. Latter’s life serves as new evidence that marriage is disastrous for an independent woman.”

“Oh, yes, certainly!” whispered Magda, thinking, “Perhaps I can leave for the holidays.”

“Because Mrs. Latter was and is the first emancipated woman among us,” Miss Howard went on. “She worked, she exercised authority, she made a fortune like a man.”

“How very interesting!” Magda remarked, shifting in her chair.

“Yes, she was the first emancipated woman, the first independent woman,” Miss Howard declaimed, burning with zeal. “And if she is unhappy today, it is only because of her husband.”

“Oh, certainly!” affirmed Magda, thinking, “How long must I listen?”

“Her husband poisoned her working hours; her husband drove sleep from her eyelids. Her husband sullied her name with his crime. Her husband bled her of her fortune though he was not even here.”

Again there was a knock at the door.

“I must go,” said Magda, rising from her chair.

“Go. But remember that if Mrs. Latter, an advanced woman, a woman of the future, can meet with such awful catastrophe in these times—”

Magda quivered. “God forbid!” she whispered.

“Yes, if such a woman meets with such terrible misfortune, it will be because of her husband’s return. Because for an independent woman, a husband...”

Magda ran out and hurried toward Mrs. Latter’s apartment.

“A letter from mother! A letter from mother!” she thought, springing onto the stairs. “Perhaps she will tell me to come home for the holidays. How good that would be, because it would be terrible to me to stay here. Poor Mrs. Latter, with that husband!”

She went into the study and found the headmistress sitting beside her desk with a letter in her hand.

“Ah, Magda, how long you have been!” Mrs. Latter said almost maliciously.

Magda blushed, then turned pale.

“I was delayed,” she said with trepidation. “Surely there is a letter from my family...”

Mrs. Latter waved a hand impatiently.

“You have a letter from Ada Solska. Do not deny it! It has a Venetian stamp, and it is addressed by her.”

Magda was dumbfounded.

“See here,” Mrs. Latter said, looking at Magda, “I should like to ask you to let me read the letter in your presence. But do not be alarmed. What a child you are! I want to read the letter because I have had no news from Helena for a week, and I am uneasy. Oh, how they tear me apart! Anyway, read it yourself, but read out loud. Here is a letter opener. Cut the envelope... Her hands are shaking! Child, child... ah, well, go ahead and read.”

Stunned by the headmistress’s impatience, Magda began to read without understanding anything.

“My dear, my precious,” Ada wrote, “at this moment I would like to hug you—to hug all of you—to hug all the world. Can you imagine such happiness? Yesterday Stefan left Venice, whispering to me as he departed that he has been cured of his attachment, and Hela—received the news of his leaving with a laugh! At this very moment I see her from the window, as she sails along the Grand Canal with the family of Mr. and Mrs. L., with the Misses O. and a group

of young people. They travel in three gondolas, and they make enough noise for a Turkish flotilla. Oh, Magda..."

Magda broke off and looked at the headmistress, who sat motionless.

"Give it to me, then," Mrs. Latter said roughly, tearing the paper from Magda's hands. She read the opening passage a few times, then crumpled the letter and struck the desk with it.

"Oh, it's horrid!" she gasped. "One kills me and the other rejoices in it! Has someone torn out my brain?" she cried. "Has some evil spirit torn the human hearts out of people and put tigers' hearts in their place?"

"Perhaps I could..." Magda put in.

"What?"

"You are so changed, ma'am! I will give you a glass of water," Magda offered, trembling all over.

"Oh, you silly girl!" Mrs. Latter said tersely. "You want to revive me with water at the moment I receive the news that Solski has abandoned Helena? Evil man! Though why would he be better than my child, my own daughter? That monster, that... I brought her up—no, I pampered her—to my own undoing, I robbed myself for her, and how does she repay me? She ruins her prospects, she digs a grave for her brother's future, and she puts me at the mercy of a man I hate and despise more than anyone on earth... Why are you staring at me?"

"I... nothing..." Magda whispered.

"Of course you know that Solski was mad for the accursed girl, and she threw him over! And you probably know that I am rui—that I am in a difficult position, that I need to have a rest. To rest even for a week. And with one capricious act that—that daughter of mine has disrupted everything, not only my plans but all our prospects."

She began to pace around the room, wringing her hands.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" sobbed Magda, feeling that something extremely unusual was going on.

Suddenly Mrs. Latter stood over her chair, apparently calm. She put a hand on Magda's head and said gently:

"Well, darling, don't cry. Forgive me. You see, even a horse rears when the spur wounds him. I am a little impatient just now... I am painfully wounded, so I lashed out... but not at you..."

"I don't mind about that," Magda wept. "It hurts me so—it hurts me so terribly that you are..."

"In such a position," Mrs. Latter concluded, shrugging her shoulders and smiling. "Do not take what I said literally, dear. I am suffering, it is true, but nothing will break me, oh, no! I still have reserves which will allow me to restore the school to viability and finish Kazik's education."

“But Helena must accept the consequences of her waywardness,” she added drily. “She did not want to be a woman of wealth. After the long vacation she will be a classroom teacher.”

“Helena a classroom teacher?” Magda echoed.

“What is so strange about that? You are the beloved daughter of your mother, yet you work. We all work, and Helena will work, and it will bring her to her senses. I will not be coping with two children, and Kazik—Kazik must complete his education. He must win a position for himself because some day he will be the mainstay for me, for Helena, and perhaps for others. That is what makes a man in every sense of the word.”

Magda listened with downcast eyes.

“Well, go now, my child,” Mrs. Latter said calmly. “Forgive me, forget what you heard, and take your letter. It was not a glass but a bucketful of water that has put me right. Helena and Solski! A millionaire and the daughter of a woman who keeps a school: what a model couple! I must admit that Helena has more *sang-froid* than I have, or she would not have been out for a sail after such a disaster.”

When Magda had left, Mrs. Latter walked restlessly around the study with her hands crossed on her chest, thinking:

“So, Arnold, I will give you your divorce, but not for five thousand, only for ten thousand of those dollars of yours. For ten thousand dollars I can even give you my blessing. If you have a right to be concerned about a name for your offspring, I have a duty to be concerned about my son’s career. I will not allow his future to be blighted! I will not!”

Magda returned to her room with an aching head and threw herself on her bed without undressing. The room was nearly empty; apart from herself there were only two pupils, and they were sound asleep, having worn themselves out talking about the holiday journeys to come.

Later in the night the door of the bedroom opened with a grating sound and Mrs. Latter appeared, shielding a candle with her hand. She wore a dark wrapper fastened with cord. Her face was pale as a corpse. Her dark hair was tangled and bristling, and her eyes, which seemed to be fixed on something imaginary, were full of fright.

A wild thought flew through Magda’s feverish mind: Mrs. Latter wanted to kill her! She covered her face with her hands and waited, feeling her heart sink.

“Are you asleep, Magda?” Mrs. Latter whispered, leaning over the bed.

Without uncovering her face Magda cautiously opened one eye and saw the headmistress’s hand, with the rosy glare of the candle bleeding through between her fingers.

“Are you asleep?” the headmistress repeated.

Suddenly Magda sat up. Mrs. Latter drew back and her eyes lost their terrible expression.

“How peaceful it is here, with you all. Only two girls are sleeping in this room... What was I going to say? What did I want? I cannot sleep. I know! Show me the letter.”

“What letter?” Magda asked.

“The one from Ada.”

Magda opened the drawer of her little table and pulled out the letter, which had lain on top of everything else. Mrs. Latter held it near the candle and began to read:

“Ah, yes, this is it. Venice... Here, my child, here is your letter. Goodnight.”

And she left the bedroom, again shading her light so as not to wake the girls. But they were not asleep.

“What did the headmistress come for?” asked one of them.

“She came, as usual, to look in on us,” Magda replied, trying not to shudder.

“It’s good that I am going away tomorrow,” whispered the other student. “I would not be able to sleep here.”

“Why?” asked the first.

“Didn’t you see how awful Mrs. Latter looked?”

They fell silent. Magda began to undress, promising herself that the following night she would move to another room.

For the next week there were no classes at the school. Several pupils were preparing for their holiday journeys, while those who were going to stay at the school took advantage of the April weather and went for a walk with Magda.

The streets looked cheerful. Ladies had put aside their winter wear and hurried about smiling, parasols in hand. The recent snow was gone without a trace, and the spring sun blazed from a cloudless sky. The students were so delighted with the bright, warm weather that for a while they forgot that they were not going away for the holidays.

But Magda was despondent. Vague fears had awakened in her heart, and her mind was a jumble of disconnected thoughts.

“Poor Mrs. Latter! Why did I not write to Ada about her? Why did I not go to Dembicki? He is the only one who would help us.”

Then it occurred to her that if Solski had broken off with Helena, he would not be able to lend her mother money, and that Mrs. Latter herself would not be able to accept any favors from him. But in spite of these considerations a stubborn voice within her whispered that she should speak with Dembicki about the situation at the school.

What advice could come from a poor teacher whom the school had treated so shabbily? But something drew Magda to him, and she decided to go immediately, even if it were only to inquire about his health and tell him about everything that for some time now had torn at her heart and preyed on her mind.

She would go—but she was ashamed.

“What sort of rumors will it give rise to?” she asked herself as she passed under the windows of the house in which Dembicki lived.

“It is not proper. It is not fitting,” she repeated to herself, suppressing a feeling that the idea that it was “not fitting” would cost someone dearly.

At that same hour Mrs. Latter, sitting in her study, was settling her accounts with the professors. As each one came in she spoke with him about what a beautiful day it was, then presented for his signature an invoice listing the classes he had conducted. After that she handed him a sealed envelope containing money with a request that he count it, and finally commended herself to his kind regards after the holidays.

None of those who came on business, including the prefect and Dr. Zaranski, who were the last to pay her a visit, noticed anything unusual about Mrs. Latter. She was tired and sickly but serene and smiling.

In the courtyard the prefect met the doctor. Again they talked about what a beautiful day it was, and the prefect asked if the doctor were going away for the holidays. Then he said suddenly:

“That woman holds up well against these troubles.”

“Who doesn’t have troubles?” replied Zaranski. “Anyway, something about the school always makes me think of a factory—a very troublesome factory.”

“You put it well, doctor,” smiled the prefect, “comparing the school to a factory. Yes, we manufacture human souls! Incidentally, Mrs. Latter has begun to look a little over the hill lately.”

“She is nervous and agitated,” murmured the doctor, looking at his trousers. “I would have sent her to the seaside for a vacation, but she does not believe in medical treatment. Goodbye, canon!”

“Pleasant holidays, doctor,” replied the priest. “And you must send me away for a vacation, but to a place where it is cheap and cheerful, remember!”

“To Ostend!” the doctor called back as he started across the street.

“A poor man like me?” the priest answered, laughing. At that moment he bumped into a messenger whom he knew; the man kissed his hand by way of apology.

“Oh, what a careless fellow!” said the priest. “Where are you hurrying, brother?”

“I am taking a letter to the school, to Mrs. Latter.”

“From whom?”

“From a lawyer. I kiss your hand, sir...”

“From a lawyer?” thought the prefect. “Well! Better to have business with a lawyer than with a doctor and a priest...”

And he walked along the street, smiling in the sunlight.

Chapter XXVIII. Revelations Concerning a Son

A few minutes later Mrs. Latter received a letter from an attorney who was well known in the city. It informed her that Mr. Eugene Arnold had entrusted “the aforesaid matter” to him and left at her disposal eight hundred rubles, which could be drawn upon at any time.

Mrs. Latter smiled.

“My husband has been diligent,” she whispered, “but he must wait a little.”

She pulled out the drawer and counted her money.

“That for the staff,” she thought, touching one packet. “That for the teachers... that for the holidays. If I had another six hundred rubles, I could keep the landlord at bay for a few weeks.

“What if I took the eight hundred rubles from the lawyer right away? He would immediately notify my husband, and my husband would tell his mistress. No, lovers! Suffer for a bit.”

Suddenly she rose from the desk with clenched fists.

“And dreadful Hela, confounded girl! To force me to play into Latter’s hands, to hamper your brother’s future! No, I have only one child: my son. You, you little beast, will be a governess. And perhaps the final outcome of all this will be that you will earn money by teaching the children of that miserable Solski, who should be your children. It is gospel truth that everyone forges his own destiny.”

She rang and ordered that Marta be called. When the housekeeper came in, walking on tiptoe and giving herself the air of a schoolgirl, Mrs. Latter said:

“What about the Jew?”

“What Jew?” asked Marta. “Fizzman?”

“Well, yes. Fizzman.”

“I thought he was not needed,” whispered the housekeeper, avoiding Mrs. Latter’s eyes.

Mrs. Latter was overcome with amazement.

“Why?” she demanded angrily. “Didn’t I tell you after lunch yesterday to bring him here? Do you think I won a lottery last night?”

“I will summon him immediately,” answered the shamefaced housekeeper. Once again she curtsied like a student, and went out.

“What is this all about?” thought Mrs. Latter. “What airs is that cook putting on? Do they all know about my husband’s return, and about the money?”

She called for Stanislaw and said sharply:

“Listen. Look me in the eye.”

The gray-haired footman looked steadily into her flashing eyes.

“Someone is tampering with my papers,” Mrs. Latter said.

“Not I,” he answered.

“I expect not. You may go.”

“They all spy on me,” Mrs. Latter said to herself, walking briskly around the study. “He does, too. In fact, I have caught him eavesdropping more than once. I am sure that he was eavesdropping yesterday—but we were speaking French!

“How unhappy I am.... My poor head!” she added in an undertone, pressing her hands to her temples.

Then she went to her bedroom and drank a glass of wine, her second glass that day.

“Ah, how that calms me!” she whispered.

Fizsman arrived at one. He was an elderly Jew, a little stooped, wearing a long frock coat. He bowed low to Mrs. Latter and looked out of the corner of his eye at her furnishings.

“I need six hundred rubles for a month,” she said, feeling the blood rush to her head.

“When do you need it?” he asked after a moment’s reflection.

“Today... tomorrow. In a couple of days.”

The Jew was silent.

“What does this mean?” asked Mrs. Latter, disconcerted.

“I do not have six hundred rubles today, but perhaps I will have them in two weeks.”

“Then what have you come here for?”

“Because I have an acquaintance who would lend the money today, but he wants collateral,” the Jew replied.

Mrs. Latter sprang from her chair.

“You are mad!” she cried. “So I cannot have six hundred rubles on my signature? Do you know who I am?”

Fizsman was at a loss. He said in a more conciliatory tone:

“Indeed madam is aware that more than once I have loaned money on madam’s signature. But today I do not have it, and my friend wants collateral.”

Mrs. Latter drew back and stared at him without understanding what he was saying.

“On whose signature?” she asked.

“On Madam Karolina Latter’s, when madam guaranteed loans for Mr. Norski.”

Mrs. Latter saw everything go black. She seized him by the lapel of his coat and cried hoarsely:

“You are lying! You are lying!”

“What is madam saying?” he answered indignantly, wrenching himself from her grasp. “Madam never guaranteed notes for Mr. Norski?”

Mrs. Latter turned pale and hesitated, but after a moment said firmly:

“Yes, I guaranteed notes for my son sometimes. But I do not remember that they were made out to you.”

Fizsman looked at her from under his red eyelids.

“That is of no consequence. I was buying them.”

“Do you still have any?” she asked quietly.

“No. Mr. Norski paid off the last one on March twenty-fifth.”

“Ah, yes. How much was it for?”

“Three hundred rubles.”

“Oh. And when was it taken out?”

“In January,” the Jew answered.

“Oh, that one? I was not aware that you charge so much interest.”

The Jew looked at her pityingly. The note had not been for three hundred rubles, only for two hundred, and it had not been taken out in January, but in the end of February. That meant that Mrs. Latter knew nothing, and therefore could not have countersigned the notes.

“That happens,” he muttered.

“What?”

“That the guarantor does not always know the name of the creditor. It is all one, as long as the note is paid,” said Fizsman.

Mrs. Latter sighed heavily.

“You may go,” she said.

“And the six hundred rubles that madam wanted?”

“I will not put up collateral.”

“Perhaps by tomorrow I can get it without collateral,” he said. “I will come again tomorrow.”

He went out, leaving Mrs. Latter stupefied. If it had not been for the smell, like the odor of old putty, that had hung about him and still lingered in the study, she would not have believed that a moment earlier a man had stood before her who was in possession of notes from her son, guaranteed, as it appeared, by herself!

What she had imagined her former husband to be guilty of, her son had actually committed—the son she idolized, the child upon whom her last hopes depended, whose great actions and reputation were to have compensated her for all the pain of her embittered life.

But this thought did not fill her with rage at Kazimierz. She only felt that her strength was exhausted and that she wanted peace at any price—even for a short time, even for a few days, to see no one, to talk to no one, to forget everything. If there were any way to sink into oblivion, she would take it.

“Peace! Silence!” she whispered, lying on the sofa with her eyes closed. “If only I could sleep!”

Stanislaw, who was sitting in the waiting room and knew his mistress’s every movement, was alarmed at the long silence and stepped into the study. She trembled for a second and asked:

“What do you want?”

“I thought madam called.”

“Go away, and please do not think,” she answered in a softer tone.

Stanislaw went to consult with Marta. Within a quarter of an hour Mrs. Latter heard a knocking at the outer door.

“Who is there?”

“It is I,” a student from the fourth form answered, walking into the study. “I am leaving in a moment, and I have come to say goodbye.”

Still pale, Mrs. Latter rose from the sofa and kissed the girl.

“I wish you happy holidays, my child.”

“Mama wishes me to tell you, with apologies, that she will pay for this quarter after the holidays...”

“Very well, my child.”

“And she also wishes me to ask...”

“That is enough for now, my child...”

“... about those music lessons...”

“You must excuse me! We will discuss that after the holidays,” Mrs. Latter broke in, gently moving her toward the door.

The girl burst into tears and ran from the study. Mrs. Latter fell onto the sofa again.

Around two o’clock Marta entered quietly.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” she whispered. “I will order a cup of bouillon for your lunch, and...”

“Merciful God, Marta,” Mrs. Latter burst out, “leave me alone!”

“Today there is potato soup, madam...”

"I want peace and quiet, Marta, peace and quiet," moaned Mrs. Latter.

When she was left to herself, she covered her eyes where she lay and thought:

"Why did I order Fiszman to be brought here? Who arranged it so that he was just here, talking about the notes? Marta brought him here. Why? Marta went to Szlamsztejn... because I was short of money, because I gave Kazik thirteen hundred rubles to take abroad! A terrible chain of events... minor events, which, however have overwhelmed my spirits.... Hail, Mary, full of grace...."

She got up and cast her wandering gaze around the study as if she were afraid of seeing something strange and terrifying in it. She sank onto the sofa again. She lay for several minutes without stirring, without feeling, without thinking, but another flood of painful imaginings came over her.

"He is not the guilty one. I am. Why did I not bring him up to work as that other one—Kotowski—was brought up?"

"When all is said and done—a youthful error; one can make even a worse one and still mend his ways. Such a youngster says to himself: 'My mother and I are one, and I am signing for her, knowing in advance that she would not refuse me.' Of course it is foolish, but why did the Jew tell me this? After all, the notes were paid, none of that remains, so why speak of them, why? God! What a world You have created, in which everything conspires to destroy our peace. Even this morning it was well with me..."

Suddenly the door opened with a clatter and in rushed Miss Howard, bristling with irritation.

"Please be so kind as to go upstairs and explain to those little geese that they must eat potato soup if I can eat potato soup!"

Mrs. Latter struggled to sit up. The room darkened before her eyes and there was a ringing in her ears. Her hands fluttered like those of a person who is falling.

"What is it?" she asked after a minute, overwhelmed with fright and unable to see Miss Howard beyond the black spots.

"Those little chits staged a revolt at lunch and don't want to eat potato soup," said the scholarly lady. "Please go to them and exert your authority."

"I?" asked Mrs. Latter, who was pale as the wall. "But I am ill... so ill..."

"You are coddling yourself! What is this, more weakness? You must shake off your lethargy and hold your head up as befits an independent woman. Overcome this sickness, I beg you," said Miss Klara, extending a hand to her.

Mrs. Latter snuggled into the depths of the sofa like a frightened child.

"For the love of God," she said in a quivering voice, "leave me in peace. I am suffering so that at moments I am hardly conscious."

"In that case I will send you a doctor."

"I don't want a doctor."

"But something must be done. You must master yourself," said Miss Klara in the tone of one who feels her superiority. "Such a state of despondency..."

"Get out!" Mrs. Latter shrieked, motioning toward the door.

"What?"

"Get out!" Mrs. Latter repeated, seizing a bronze candlestick.

Miss Howard's face went ashen.

"I will leave," she said, almost spitting with fury, "and I will not come back until you are gone!"

She slammed the door behind her and Mrs. Latter collapsed on the floor, choking with sobs and tearing at the carpet.

Stanislaw ran in. Behind him came Marta, one of the teachers, and, last, Magda. They picked Mrs. Latter up and her mind began to clear. Slowly she grew calm and ordered everyone to leave except Magda.

"Wait here," she said to Magda after a while.

She went into her bedroom and returned in a few minutes, so much recovered that Magda cried out in astonishment. No sign of hysteria remained. Only her crumpled dress and eyes dimmed with tears served as reminders that she was the same Mrs. Latter who a quarter of an hour ago had lain on the floor convulsed with anguish.

"Jesus, Mary! What a strong woman!" thought Magda.

Mrs. Latter drew close to her, took her hand, and said quietly:

"Listen. But swear that you will not betray me."

"What—what do you think?" Magda stammered, terrified.

"Listen to me," said Mrs. Latter. "I am going away. I am leaving here immediately. And you must help me."

"But..."

"Do not protest, do not argue... For as I wish for my children's happiness, I will kill myself before your eyes," Mrs. Latter said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"No matter. Anywhere. To Czestochowa, to Piotrkow, to Siedlece. I will not go for long, only for a few days, but... even if only for one day, I do not want to see the school and the people in it. I tell you, if I stay here even a few more hours, I will kill myself or go mad. And so I will go away for a day or two. I will tear myself away from this torture... collect my thoughts..."

She began to hug and kiss the teacher.

"You will understand me, Magda," she said. "After all, sometimes they even release criminals from their shackles and let them out for fresh air. I am

not a criminal! So help me as you would help your mother. You are the only one in this hell who has the pure heart of a child. You are the only one I can tell that God must be punishing me.”

“What are you saying? Please calm yourself,” Magda begged, trying to fall at Mrs. Latter’s feet.

Mrs. Latter helped her up and seated her close to herself.

“Have compassion on me, my child, and try to understand. I am in a difficult situation and I have no one to consult with, no one to whom I can even give vent to my pain. I have only my own wits and will, and I will lose my wits if I stay here. So! And at the moment it seems to me that the walls in the room are bending... that the floor is giving way under me. I am so afraid... I have such an aversion to these rooms and these people that I must run away somewhere. For one day, Magda for one day, set me free, and I will bless you on my deathbed. Will you help me?”

“Yes,” Magda whispered.

“Come, then.”

They went to the bedroom, where Mrs. Latter hurriedly changed into a cord dress. Then she put a blouse and a large handkerchief into her traveling bag, and finally a bottle of wine and a small glass.

“Look at my distress, Magda,” she said, wiping away her tears. “If I do not drag myself away from here, I will not rest. I will be in danger of becoming a drunkard! I am so exhausted that without wine I cannot get about as well as a man who is ill with typhoid. Unfortunately there is no narcotic strong enough to deaden the bitterness with which people poison us.

“Oh, what a miserable animal man is! When he is born into the world, your words to him are like prayers to a cherub, but after a dozen years or more he grows into a monster. Is there a child whose mother would not bathe it in her tears, not envelop it in caresses? For her it is heaven, eternity, God—and what then? Sooner or later it turns out that the mother does not recognize her offspring, and is as astonished as a dove whose chick is stolen and a toad put in its place.”

“You should not talk that way,” Magda broke in, but then fell silent, embarrassed at her own temerity.

Mrs. Latter fixed her with a look that was both curious and pleading.

“Speak, speak,” she said. “Why should I not?”

“Because, after all, it is not a crime that Helena does not want to marry Mr. Solski if she does not love him. Without love...”

“Without love, you say, it is no good to marry?” Mrs. Latter broke in. “And with love, you think, it is? Oy, child, child! I know women who married for love, and what came of it? They traded away their prospects for husbands who became enemies when they were successful, traitors in the struggle for bread,

and scoffers in adversity. I will tell you what love is: marry a rich man and get a prenuptial agreement...

“Jesus, Mary!” she whispered suddenly, putting her hand out in front of her.

“What?”

“Wait! It is passing. Ah, how terrible! For a few moments I thought the house was collapsing. If you saw those walls when they bend! I must get away. I cannot endure it here.”

She sat down, rested a moment, then said in a broken voice:

“I know these are delusions, but I cannot fight them off. I understand the state I am in, but I cannot master myself. One would have to be insane to be angry at a pupil who comes to say goodbye, at Marta when she tries to indulge me with bouillon, at the people who run into my room every half hour. After all, it has been going on for over a dozen years, someone always dropping in. But today I could not endure it. Every sound, every word, every human face is like a burning stiletto stabbing my brain. I must go, for nothing else can save me.”

At around six the sky clouded over and twilight fell. Mrs. Latter hastily wrote several lines to Zgierski and ordered Stanislaw to send them. Then she quickly put on her hat and wraps and asked Magda to carry her bag out by the back stairs.

In a few minutes, unnoticed by anyone, they met not far from the monument to Copernicus. Mrs. Latter sprang into a cab. She ordered Magda to sit beside her, and the driver to take her to the Warsaw-Vienna station.

“Here is the key to my desk,” she said to Magda. “Ah! what a relief. There are several hundred rubles there. You will say that I have gone away for a day or two. I also want to have a vacation. Only at this moment am I beginning to feel that I will be well, though the buildings still seem to be bowing to me. But that is a trifle! When I have caught my breath and returned, everything will change, and I will have something to propose to you, Magda. Who knows? Perhaps you will be the headmistress some day.”

“God forbid!” thought Magda.

“That is all,” said Mrs. Latter. “And now, goodbye! Get out of the cab, do not return to the school right away, and when you do, say what you like. My little trick has worked beautifully.”

She ordered the driver to stop, then hugged Magda.

“Get out, get out! Be well!”

In a moment the cab disappeared. Magda was left on the corner, transfixed with astonishment.

Chapter XXIX. Help Stands Waiting

Magda did not remain in a daze for long, particularly since a young man had begun to roam along the street, probably with the intention of offering her his services and his heart. Her powers of thought returned, and two ideas outlined themselves vividly in her mind. The first was that Mrs. Latter's school was ruined, and the second—that at such a juncture she must go to Dembicki.

What advice could he give? Absolutely none. But Magda felt that it was a very dangerous time, and at such times it was necessary to find shelter in the counsel of a person of deep integrity. In her eyes Dembicki was the most honorable of the people she knew in the city. This poor, sickly, perpetually troubled teacher had grown, morally speaking, into a towering rock. If she found him at home she would be saved; if by chance he had gone out, nothing would be left for Magda except to drown in the violent crosscurrents of her apprehensions.

At this moment it was not a matter of the school or of Mrs. Latter, but of herself. She needed to hear a wise word from the lips of someone who inspired her confidence, or at least look into a face and into eyes that were full of truth and honor. Just now Dembicki was the wisest, the best, the most beautiful in spirit—the only person who, in such a situation, could be trusted without reserve.

She got into the cab and ordered the driver to take her to the Solski palace. She rang the bell, and no one opened the door; so she went on ringing until she could hear someone coming slowly through the front hall. A key turned, and in the partly opened doorway appeared a diminutive elderly man with thick eyebrows and several tufts of gray hair on his head.

“Is Mr. Dembicki in?” she asked.

The old man threw up his hands in amazement, but pointed to a door on the right. Magda entered and saw Dembicki in a large room, writing at a table on which sat a lamp with a green shade.

“Oh, professor,” she exclaimed, “I am so glad you are here!”

Dembicki raised his pale eyes and stared at her as she threw herself into a chair and began to sob.

“Please do not be alarmed,” she said. “It is nothing. I am a little out of sorts. Please do not let this make you ill. I have this moment seen Mrs. Latter off. She has gone away!”

“For the holidays?” asked Dembicki, looking at Magda and thinking, “These women are always playing out some farce!”

“Not for the holidays. It is almost as if she has run away!” Magda answered.

And with a terseness that astounded Dembicki, she told him of Mrs. Latter's sudden illness, the return of her husband, and the possible bankruptcy of the school.

Dembicki shrugged his shoulders. He heard everything, but understood little of it.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, “but all this has nothing to do with me. I almost never go out, and I am not in the habit of inquiring into the business of others. But there is money for Mrs. Latter.”

“What money?”

“Four... five ... as much as ten thousand rubles. At Ada Solski’s request, Stefan Solski placed that amount at Mrs. Latter’s disposal in case she should find herself in financial difficulties. Well, but I—as you might think—had no way of knowing about her situation.”

“Stefan left this money? But he has broken off with Helena!” Magda exclaimed.

“He broke off!” Dembicki repeated, but waved a hand dismissively. “A week ago he reminded me that this money was to be loaned to Mrs. Latter if she needed it.”

“She would not accept it from Stefan,” said Magda.

“We would have found someone else—some partner or purchaser. But where Mrs. Latter is concerned, there is a serious issue.”

She looked at him inquiringly.

“My dear Miss Brzeska,” he said with a troubled air, “the issue is serious because Mrs. Latter does not take anything into account except her own will.”

“She is an exceptional woman!”

Dembicki began to tug at his remaining hair.

“Yes, she is a woman of great energy,” he said, looking at the table, “but—my apologies, madam—energetic in the way of women. It seems to her that what she wants ought to be the law of nature. But that is not possible.

“It is not feasible to maintain an expensive school when the country is sinking into poverty and a host of cheaper schools have started up. It is not sensible to send one’s children abroad when one cannot afford to. It is not possible for one woman to support three people when each of them spends a great deal.”

“But Stefan Solski will lend her ten thousand rubles?” Magda interposed.

“Yes... yes. That can be done at any minute, tomorrow, even today. But he, or rather the person who will make the arrangement with Mrs. Latter, will impose conditions.”

“Dear God! Why did I not come to you a week ago?” asked Magda, clasping her hands.

“In my opinion that makes no difference. The trouble consists, not in the lack of money, but in Mrs. Latter’s disposition. She is really a little too energetic and likes to force her way through life. That is impossible. A person must

acknowledge universal law in nature and in other people, or there will be disaster sooner or later.”

“Are you saying that women should not be energetic?” Magda put in timidly.

“Indeed, madam, all people must have intellect, emotion and energy, but—not too much intellect, not too much emotion, not too much energy. Otherwise one is either giving in to everything and everyone, or imposing her own personality on the nature of things and on other people. One is either taking refuge in apathetic passiveness, or refusing to acknowledge any law apart from one’s own interest or caprice.”

It was painful to Magda to hear Mrs. Latter spoken of in that way. But she believed Dembicki, and above all she felt that he had described Mrs. Latter accurately if rather harshly. In every word, attitude and movement, even when she was in her mildest humor, the headmistress seemed to say: “I am here, things must be as I will.”

But if she had a different character, perhaps she would not have been able to take the responsibility for a hundred people.

“And so—excuse me—the ten thousand rubles,” Magda persisted.

“Well, ten right off!” smiled Dembicki. “First, shall we see how much is needed? Pity I did not learn of this sooner, but—nothing is lost. After Mrs. Latter returns, someone will contact her with a proposal and all will be well.”

Much heartened, Magda took her leave. How proud she was that because of her, a mere piece of dust like her, Mrs. Latter could prosper again, and without even guessing who had been of service to her. But how she grieved, how she reproached herself, because she had not come here earlier!

“And, by the way,” she said to herself, “if Dembicki were still a professor at the school, these troubles would not have happened.”

At that moment fear engulfed her because she understood the inexorability of facts: that nothing in the world ceases to exist, and minor errors, even after they are forgotten, in time cause repercussions that weigh heavily in the balance of life.

When she returned to the school, she hurried into the dark bedroom and took refuge behind her screen of sapphire blue. Then she genuflected and tried to thank God that he had made her an instrument of grace for Mrs. Latter. But nowhere in her agitated soul did she find a word of thanks, so she beat herself on the chest and whispered, “God, have mercy on us sinners.”

Her absorption in her prayers ended abruptly. The door to the dark bedroom swung ajar and a little stream of light rushed in. Against its glow she saw the outlines of several heads, large and small, and heard voices say, “Bring the lamp.”

“Perhaps she will be angry...”

"Is Miss Magda here?"

Magda emerged from behind her screen, and when she drew near enough to the door for them to see her, a group of people who had been standing in the corridor quickly moved back toward the stairs. Then Marta's voice sounded:

"And Stanislaw, that coward... Supposed to be a man, and he runs away first!"

"What is it?" Magda asked in confusion, stopping at the threshold of the bedroom.

Then they all ran back toward her and in a moment she was surrounded by students, classroom teachers and the housekeeping staff, all looking at her with frightened eyes and talking so disconnectedly that she could understand nothing.

"Where is the headmistress?" asked one of the students.

"Do we deserve no consideration?" put in a chambermaid.

"What will I give the girls to eat tomorrow?" cried the housekeeper.

"The landlord's agent and the constable were here," added Stanislaw.

Magda's legs trembled beneath her. "Do they suspect me of something?" she wondered, feeling terrified.

Fortunately Miss Howard, wearing a white peignoir and with her flaxen hair streaming over her shoulders, rushed up from the other end of the corridor. She pushed those who were gathered in the hall apart and took Magda's hand.

"Come to my room," she said. "And you," she told the others sternly, "to your places! I am acting for the headmistress, and when it becomes necessary I will furnish explanations."

In Miss Klara's room Magda collapsed into a chair and closed her eyes. Like Mrs. Latter, she seemed to see the walls bending and the floor shaking under her feet.

"Well, and what about that unhappy woman? Where is she?" Miss Howard began in a quieter tone.

"Mrs. Latter has gone away."

"Do not tell me that, Magdalena."

"But she has most assuredly gone away."

"Where to?"

"How do I know? Probably to Czestochowa, but she will be back in a few days."

Miss Howard reflected for a moment.

"That cannot be. She is in Warsaw. I understand why she left the school, and I alone can induce her to return."

"You ?" asked Magda.

Miss Howard stood in the center of the room and assumed a dramatic pose.

“Listen!” she said in a deeper contralto than usual, raising her eyes to the fanlight. “When those little fibbertigibbets revolted today because of the potato soup, I went to Mrs. Latter and tried to rouse her from her apathy. She became overwrought, we quarreled, and I told her that I was leaving the school and would not return as long as—as she was here. Now do you understand? Mrs. Latter found herself with two alternatives: either to apologize to me, or to go away from the school. Well! She chose the second. A mad but proud woman...”

Magda’s eyes and mouth opened wide with disbelief. Miss Howard began to walk around her cramped apartment, still speaking.

“As you will guess, having won such a victory, I will not allow myself to appear cruel. I have no desire to humiliate an independent woman who, whatever her errors, is far above the common level. So I do not ask where she is hiding away at present, but I do ask you, if you see her, to tell her this:

“Miss Howard is still at the school. Miss Howard says that all is forgotten. She believes that both you ladies occupy such elevated positions that when you are in conflict with each other, it contributes to the triumph of prejudice!”

“Tell her that, Miss Magdalena. And when she returns to the school, I myself will meet her and, without speaking, offer her my hand. There are moments in human life, Miss Magdalena, when silence becomes the most exalted form of speech.”

At that moment, suiting action to the word, Miss Howard advanced toward Magda, pressed her hand firmly and—was silent. But she was silent only for a few seconds. Then she began telling Magda that a kitchen maid who happened to be looking out a window had seen Mrs. Latter leaving; that a messenger had seen Mrs. Latter in a cab with a trunk, accompanied by another lady; that from these clues Marta, the housekeeper, had surmised that Mrs. Latter was taking flight; and that as a result of this information, within fifteen minutes after Mrs. Latter’s departure people throughout the building and in two neighboring buildings believed that Mrs. Latter had run away from her creditors.

At that moment Magda’s head began to spin. Fear overwhelmed her and Marta, Miss Howard and the school itself became repugnant to her. Now she was feeling Mrs. Latter’s suffering, and her uncontrollable desire to take refuge in a place so far away that even rumors about these people and their dealings with each other could not reach her.

Chapter XXX. When the Queen Flees, the Bees Swarm

That night Magda did not sleep at all. She was disturbed by evil premonitions about her own future that soon seemed to be confirmed.

In the morning the constable came to her—to Magda herself!—and began to make inquiries. Where had Mrs. Latter gone? At what time had she left? What was the number of the cab? Was it certain that she had been driven in the direction of the Warsaw-Vienna station? The constable put his questions mildly enough, but his broadsword and curling mustache Magda took as irrefutable evidence that she had committed a crime for which she would be put in irons and thrown into a dungeon as deep as the tower of the city hall was high.

The constable had hardly gone, pretending that he had no intention of putting Magda in irons and throwing her into an underground cavern, when the landlord's agent appeared. This man also turned to Magda and began to interrogate her. Where did Mrs. Latter go? Did she say that she intended to return? Did she mention eligibility for a passport or payment of the rent? True, the landlord's agent did not have a mustache or a broadsword, but he squinted, which suggested to Magda that they would surely take her to court for payment of the rent and seize every penny of the three thousand rubles her grandmother had left her.

The agent had still not finished his queries when the anxious landlord himself appeared. He also directed his attention to Magda, but without asking where Mrs. Latter had gone began at once to complain that he would lose part of the rent, because all the furniture was said to be the property of Stefan Zgierski, with whom there might have to be a complicated lawsuit.

Magda was extremely disconcerted at this revelation, and certain that she would not only lose the money from her grandmother, but that the insatiable landlord would order her dressing table, doily, and bronze candlestick with glass wax saver to be attached as payment for the rent.

During those hard hours, Magda often recalled what Dembicki had told her: that at any time Mrs. Latter could have Solski's money.

"What would poor Dembicki advise if he were here?" she thought as she imagined that Mrs. Latter's school and the whole building and the whole world were collapsing on her curly head.

But around one in the afternoon the situation changed so drastically that Magda rose from the deepest despair to the pinnacle of optimism.

First of all, when she handed Miss Howard the keys Mrs. Latter had left with her, the desk was opened as everyone in the school stood by, and several hundred rubles were found in the drawer. Marta, the housekeeper, flew into such ecstasy that at first her powers of thought appeared to be giving way. She began jumping about, weeping and exclaiming:

“Enough to run the house! There will be dinners! I swear, madam is coming back! She surely went to Czestochowa to confide in the Most Holy Virgin about what she has suffered because of that criminal—”

“Please be quiet!” scolded Miss Howard, who at the sight of the money felt that her authority over the school had a genuine foundation.

Disregarding the admonition, Marta did not cease to express her joy. The classroom teachers began to enumerate Mrs. Latter’s sterling qualities, the servants expressed confidence that they would not be deprived of their wages, and the students, who had been threatened with hunger, wiped their eyes and hugged each other without quite knowing why.

The study, which had been full of gloom a short time ago, became so cheerful that Magda’s spirits rose. She began to believe that she would not be clapped in irons and thrown into a cave underground.

At the noisiest moment Zgierski came into the study as quietly as a shadow, rotund, sleek, and modestly but elegantly dressed. His bald spot seemed enormous and his black eyes smaller and keener than usual. He glanced first at the furniture, then at the girls; then furrows of sadness appeared on his forehead, but his face expressed hope. Finally he noticed Miss Howard and made his way to her with an elaborate step, as if the gathering in the study were a contra dance. Tenderly taking her hand, he said:

“What a beautiful assembly!—I cannot refuse myself the pleasure of kissing madam’s hand.” And he delicately touched it with his lips.

“There is money! There is money!” chanted the housekeeper, clapping her hands.

Fear showed on Zgierski’s face and in his piercing eyes, for he had leaped to the conclusion that they expected him to help the failing school.

“Here, now!” he broke in harshly. “Mrs. Latter owes me five thousand rubles.”

“But madam left money in the desk,” replied the housekeeper.

Zgierski’s face brightened and his complacency returned.

“So I expected,” he said. “Mrs. Latter is too noble a woman...”

He broke off, however, judging that it would be better to investigate the situation further before deciding which was appropriate, praise or censure.

At a sign from Miss Howard, Marta, Stanislaw and the students quickly filed out of the study. The classroom teachers followed sedately, as befitted the dignity of their positions.

“Will madam be so kind as to introduce me to these ladies?” Zgierski whispered to Miss Howard, looking at Magda.

“Mr. Zgierski, Madam Meline,” Miss Howard said ceremoniously. Zgierski gave his hand to the matronly Frenchwoman with a flourish and said:

“I have heard so much about you from Mrs. Latter, madam, that really...”

“Mr. Zgierski, Miss Brzeska.”

A new, yet more orotund gesture of the hand was reinforced by an elegant click of his heels and a tender look.

“So often,” Zgierski said to Magda with a simper, “so often have I heard of you from Mrs. Latter that in fact... Madam certainly, not long ago...”

“Only imagine: what a terrible state of affairs!” Miss Howard interrupted.

Zgierski regained his gravity.

“It is unheard of,” he agreed. “Only yesterday I received a note from Mrs. Latter in which she reminded me to visit her at Easter, and today I find that at that very hour my respected correspondent was leaving Warsaw! Not for long, I expect...” he added in a knowing tone, glancing at each of the ladies in turn.

“Mrs. Latter will be back in a few days,” Magda put in.

“So I believe,” he said.

“Who knows?” Miss Howard said skeptically.

“And that is why we should be prepared for all eventualities,” rejoined Zgierski.

Then he cleared his throat and said, not without difficulty:

“It so happens that I have a contract in which Mrs. Latter has made over all the furniture in her apartment, the equipment in the school and the kitchen accessories to me. I only accepted this contract unwillingly and at Mrs. Latter’s urging. Today, however, I see that Mrs. Latter, whose friend I am honored to call myself, in this contract gives evidence not only of her noble nature but of her great understanding...”

“She had been extremely overwrought lately,” Miss Howard interposed.

“You understand, ladies,” Zgierski continued, “that the contract I possess will save the school. Because even if Mrs. Latter resigned... or did not return... Miss Malinowska could take her place, and everything would be the same as always—if we do not sell up the furniture.”

Magda felt a pressure at her heart at the thought that Mrs. Latter had hardly torn herself away for a short rest when they had begun speaking of her as though she were dead.

In the waiting room the bell sounded violently, and after a moment a flushed, breathless Mielnicki walked into the study with another man in his wake.

“What is this I hear?” exclaimed the portly squire. “Where is Mrs. Latter?”

Zgierski walked up to him with his mincing steps and said:

“May I introduce myself, sir? Stefan Zgierski, friend of our dear lady...”

“Well, if you are her friend, speak. What is going on here?”

“She has gone away, unfortunately...”

“Mrs. Latter has gone away for a few days,” Magda put in.

“Ah!—speak up! How, with whom, where?” demanded Mielnicki, gripping Magda’s hands.

A bit out of countenance, Zgierski approached the man who had come in with Mielnicki and said:

“Attorney, sir! What brings such a respected practitioner of the law here? Do you also—”

But the person he addressed as “attorney” gave him no explanation apart from hearty handshakes and friendly smiles. So Zgierski turned back to Miss Howard.

Meanwhile Magda, delighted that Mielnicki had come, told him the particulars of Mrs. Latter’s departure.

“But why did she go so suddenly? Why? And still only God knows where,” repeated the frantic old gentleman.

“She went away for a few days’ rest,” said Magda. “She was in a frightful state of nervous exhaustion... frightful.”

“But I told her it would happen. I said, to the devil with the school, settle down in the country... Mania wrote me that she was having a rough go of it, Mania—you know—Lewinska,” he added, looking at Magda. “Well, no sooner did I receive the letter than I came for her, for Mrs. Latter. After all, I am almost kin to her, even—very close kin.”

“There were serious—very serious financial problems here,” Zgierski observed, smiling ingratiatingly and rubbing his hands.

“Finance be damned!” Mielnicki exploded. “Mrs. Latter still has so many friends that no one need worry about finances.”

“And I am her greatest friend,” said Zgierski, bowing.

Miss Howard stepped forward.

“In my opinion,” she said in her usual contralto, “Mrs. Latter’s difficulties are grave, but they are not financial. They are moral.”

“Oh?” Mielnicki said in surprise. “Go on!”

“Imagine, gentlemen,” Miss Howard continued, “an independent woman, a superior woman, a woman who was the first in our country to raise the banner of emancipation...”

More and more astonished, Mielnicki looked at her with his right and then with his left eye, like a turkey.

“In the course of a dozen years that woman brought up children, wore herself out with work, expended—on what, it is not known—a large income. And in the moment when she found herself at the height of her vocation, when

the ideas she espoused were being widely adopted and creating a new host of dauntless disciples...”

Mielnicki continued to stare, not only with widening eyes but with fingers spreading farther and farther apart.

“At such a moment there came suddenly to the quiet locus of this distinguished woman’s work, like a destructive ghost, her second husband...”

“Husband?” echoed the squire.

“Yes,” Miss Klara intoned, raising her voice. “Her second husband, who abandoned her twelve years ago and more, probably drained her resources through all that time, and what is worse—was in prison for some dirty dealing. Can anyone wonder that a woman facing this sort of menace left her home, her children, her obligations? I ask you, gentlemen: Do you find it shocking that she took flight?”

During this speech Magda withdrew to the recessed window, Mielnicki went livid, and even Zgierski was visibly shaken—not because Mrs. Latter’s second husband had returned, but because he, Zgierski, had not known about it.

Chapter XXXI. Zgierski Is Satisfied

Suddenly something unexpected happened. The man Zgierski had called “attorney,” who was now standing near the heating stove, spoke up.

“With your permission,” he said. “I must put in a word now, because I have something in hand that pertains to this matter.”

The others turned and faced him.

“With reference to what you have said, madam,” he continued, nodding to Miss Howard, “one thing is true: that Mrs. Latter’s husband was lately in Warsaw. But it is not the case that he drew on Mrs. Latter’s resources at any time, or that he was in prison. Mr. Eugeniusz Arnold Latter was a major in the army of the United States of America, he presently draws a military pension, he travels in Europe as agent for a machine factory and is, as far as I know, a perfectly decent man.”

“In any case he is her husband! Where is he?” exclaimed Mielnicki, now seizing the lawyer’s hands. “Out with it! What was he here for?”

The advocate frowned, but took Mielnicki aside and began to whisper something.

“How?” asked the squire. “Aha! Well?”

The lawyer whispered again.

“So she should sign! She should sign at once!”

There was another series of whispers.

“Eh—offended? What of it?” answered Mielnicki. “She will be angry... and then she will sign.”

More whispers, then Mielnicki’s conclusion:

“Yes! And let her take five thousand rubles. It will come in handy for the children.”

“So I may count on your support?” asked the lawyer.

“That is understood,” answered Mielnicki. “If I can only find the woman, I can talk her out of her crotchets. It’s a matter of two people’s happiness, for God’s sake! Why hold on to a man who doesn’t want you? Better to take one who does...”

Then whispers started up in another corner. Miss Howard said softly to Zgierski:

“Was I not within my rights to say that Latter is no good? Even that person who defends him does not dare speak the truth out loud. There is some secret here. Looked at that stout squire’s face...”

In the meantime Zgierski gazed at Mielnicki as he would have gazed at a beautiful woman. His black eyes expressed regret for Mrs. Latter, admiration

for Mielnicki, a desire to know about everything, and an inflexible intention to profit from it all.

He leaned toward Miss Howard and whispered with a sweet smile:

“For the love of God, madam, do you not see that a drama is being played out at this moment? Mrs. Latter will of course demand a divorce; that gentleman who is speaking with Mielnicki is the attorney who deals with the College of Cardinals, and old Mielnicki has wanted to marry Mrs. Latter for a long time. A fine imbroglio—and one from which our friend will profit.”

“Whose friend? Who?” asked Miss Howard sternly.

“Why, Mrs. Latter.”

“I am no friend of a woman who can so far forget her dignity as to be ready to marry a third time,” she retorted.

“But I am her friend,” said Zgierski in an undertone, and, bowing and smiling, he walked toward Mielnicki with steps like a dancer’s.

“Of course everything is working out as well as can be,” he said, though neither of his hearers had asked his opinion. “Mrs. Latter has done excellently, going away for several days. She will recover her composure and sign... she will sign...”

And he threw a triumphant glance at the ecclesiastical lawyer, who did not seem to be impressed by his perspicacity.

“Who is that old man?” Mielnicki asked the lawyer, glancing at Zgierski. “Why is he meddling in our affairs?”

“It is his habit,” muttered the lawyer.

Nestled in the alcove, Magda looked anxiously at the scene that was being played out before her. She had heard much, she had guessed more, and she had reached the conclusion that Mrs. Latter had nothing to gain by coming back to the school. In spite of her inexperience she felt that a cannon had been loaded in the study and would send rumor flying through the city, destroying the headmistress’s reputation.

“Jesus, Mary!” she thought. “What luck that that portly squire is in love with Mrs. Latter! In fact, Helena and I heard him when he proposed to her. Otherwise that poor woman would have nowhere to lay her head.”

Another ring in the anteroom heightened the drama. Miss Malinowska came into the study in the company of a rather short gentleman with a grizzled beard and bowed legs. Zgierski hurried up to them with his most ingratiating air, but they greeted him coldly.

Miss Malinowska bowed to those who were assembled in the room. Then, obviously noticing that something serious was going forward, she turned to Miss Howard and asked:

“What of the school? I assume that all is well.”

Miss Klara looked at her in consternation.

“You must not know of Mrs. Latter’s departure.”

“I do know, and that is why I ask about the school. Yesterday I received a letter from Mrs. Latter in which she asked that I take her place temporarily. There is money for current expenses in the desk, while for other necessities...”

At this point Miss Malinowska glanced at Zgierski.

“...for other needs,” she continued, “I have access to funds, so please bring all requests to me.”

As if in support of these assurances the bowlegged gentleman bowed to the bust of Socrates.

“But such a sudden departure!” remarked Miss Howard, recovering from her astonishment.

The bowlegged visitor spoke up:

“As far as I can guess, Mrs. Latter went away to deal with some financial issue that she only became aware of at the last minute, so there was no time to lose. It seems that she had to act swiftly in order to save something.”

“Perhaps we should go upstairs to the girls, Miss Howard,” said Miss Malinowska. “Oh, you are here, Miss Brzeska?” she said, turning to Magda. “How ill you look! You must rest over the holidays.”

Her bandylegged companion bowed to Magda with a very friendly expression.

“Mr. Solski’s trustee, Mr. Mydelko,” Zgierski whispered to Miss Howard.

Miss Malinowska turned toward the door, but the old squire blocked her way.

“Pardon me, madam,” he said, “I am Mielnicki, uncle of one of the students here, and friend—almost a relative—of Mrs. Latter. Today I came to take Mrs. Latter, willy-nilly, to the country. Well, but I did not find her... and you referred to a letter from her...”

“Yes,” replied Miss Malinowska.

“Did the letter say where she was going?” the squire asked in a tremulous tone.

“I do not know about that. I received the letter around ten in the evening from a messenger from the railway station—the Petersburg line.”

“Aha!” shouted the squire, snapping his fingers.

“You said she went to the Vienna station,” Miss Howard said angrily to Magda.

“I saw her,” said Magda, flushing.

“She went to my home! To my home, to the country!” cried Mielnicki. “I will go to the station this minute, and in a few hours I will see Mrs. Latter. We must have passed each other on the road!”

Stuttering for joy, the old squire began rushing around the study. His hands trembled and his face took on a purplish hue.

“In a few hours,” he repeated. “In a few hours...”

“Allow me to offer you my services,” said the ecclesiastical lawyer.

“Yes, of course!” replied Mielnicki. “This is a matter of the utmost importance. Give me your address, then, sir.”

Quick as a magician, the lawyer gave him cards with several addresses.

“Please be so kind as to tell Mrs. Latter to be completely at ease,” Miss Malinowska put in. “All is well, and will be well. She must have a rest in the country and not hurry back.”

“God will reward you, dear lady!” replied the squire, violently squeezing her hand and the hand of her companion, who bowed as if to express agreement.

“Yes! Yes!” added Zgierski, moving in among them. “Let Mrs. Latter rest as long as possible. Her friends are watching over things. Please be so good as to mention that Zgierski said so, Stefan Zgierski. Her friends are tending to everything!” Then, turning to the lawyer, he continued:

“And I assure you that after she returns, the matter you have in hand will reach a successful conclusion. I will use all my influence...

“... all my influence, to persuade Mrs. Latter to agree to a divorce,” he said to Magda, because while Mielnicki was running out of the study, the lawyer was exchanging farewells with the Solskis’ trustee.

Miss Malinowska and her companion went out into the corridor with Zgierski behind them.

“I will go to the landlord now on Mrs. Latter’s behalf,” said the bowlegged gentleman.

“Of course,” said Miss Malinowska. “These debts must be put aside until she returns.”

“But not mine!” Zgierski interjected. “I will show you a contract, madam, on the strength of which the school’s inventory belongs to me, and you will proceed...”

“Oh, please!” Miss Malinowska interrupted impatiently. “In any case, your five thousand rubles have to be paid first.”

“But I will leave that sum for you or Mrs. Latter or whomever you ladies designate,” said Zgierski, discomfited.

Miss Malinowska said goodbye to the Solskis’ trustee and went to the third floor with Miss Howard. Zgierski was about to hurry to the city, but he stopped on the stairs when he heard the trustee talking with Magda.

“Mr. Dembicki apprised me of this development yesterday,” said the bandy-legged gentleman, pressing Magda’s hand. “So be easy in your mind, and go to the country yourself for the holidays. I am not a doctor, and I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, but I see that you need to rest. Here,” he added quietly, “there are so many different conflicts yet to be resolved that it is better to be out of the way for a while. Are you faint?”

“No, sir,” answered Magda, who was pale as paper.

Zgierski could no longer listen in silence, so he returned and offered to accompany Magda upstairs, as an old friend of Mrs. Latter’s and supporter of the school. But Magda thanked him and went up alone, holding tightly to the railing. The Solskis’ agent also disappeared and Zgierski was left alone, thinking that he ought to make an overture to Magda.

“I see that that little angel has a relationship with Solski. After all, she is most agreeable,” Zgierski said to himself. “Only I will have to humor her, because there is a bit of the wild doe about her. Well, perhaps another time...”

And he rushed away to the city, gloating now at his recollection of Magda, now at the thought that he was in possession of a body of absolutely first-class information. News like this could even get one an invitation to dinner with the president of a bank.

Chapter XXXII. Chaos

Magda could hardly make her way to the third floor. Her heart raced; her legs trembled. Things were growing dark before her eyes. She noticed that the classroom teachers and students who were remaining for the holidays had gathered in one of the lecture halls. She understood that she should go there, but she did not have the strength. So she turned and went into her bedroom, intending to lie down, if only for a short time.

Suddenly she felt someone awaken her from sleep. She saw her colleague Joanna, who had been dismissed from the school. Joanna caught her in an embrace.

“You see, Magda,” she said, “didn’t I tell you that God would not forgive her shabby treatment of me?”

Rosy-cheeked, elegantly dressed, she smiled, showing her white teeth.

“Are you coming back to us?” Magda asked in surprise.

“Are you right in the head?” laughed Joanna. “Am I going to go back to being a classroom teacher? To wear myself out in the daytime hearing lectures that bored me when I was in school myself, and in the evening supervise study hours and report to someone every time I go out for a walk?”

“So what will you do?”

“I will make the most of what the world has to offer, as I am doing today! Why, am I so ugly or stupid that I have to kill myself with working?”

“Joanna!” Magda scolded.

Joanna sat on one of the bare mattresses, laughing all the while.

“Oh, you... you child!” she said to Magda. “Do you even know what happens with our pupils? Some forget what they have learned in school right away, and if they are rich or pretty, live to have a good time. Others go on learning, repeating lessons, remembering things, only to waste time as we did, and plague growing girls. A person does not live for that!”

“I do not understand you, Joanna,” said Magda, who really did not understand what her friend meant.

Joanna shrugged her shoulders and drew circles on the floor with the point of her parasol.

“You live here like a person in a convent or in prison, so you do not know what goes on in the world. You do not know, so you grow sour and bitter doing work that does no one any good. Meanwhile, this is how it is in the world: to work, to listen to others, to accommodate everyone, is only for stupid men and homely women. But a smart man finds himself a pretty woman and they enjoy themselves. They live in a nice place, they eat and drink well, they dress elegantly. In the evening they go to a ball or to the theater. In the summer they go abroad, or to the mountains or the seashore. Oh, if you knew how different the

world seems when there are no troubles, and how much better and more cheerful a person is when he is not worried!”

Magda blushed, looked down and said:

“You probably have no reason to be happy about your prospects.”

“I?” Joanna interrupted, astonished. “What is the matter with my situation? I read to an old lady. I have three hundred rubles a year, I have every comfort, I get mountains of presents...”

“So you work.”

“Not much.”

“But they said that you...”

“That I—oh, I know!” exclaimed Joanna, snickering. “Yes, that bit of gossip was very useful to me!”

She tried to take Magda’s hand but Magda pulled away, saying:

“I must go to the lecture hall.”

Joanna’s flippancy fell away. A blush covered her face and she rose from the bed. Propping herself upright with her parasol, she said:

“Oh, you, you... ugly little duckling! No one starts rumors about you, and what do you get for it? Look at your dress! And what good do you do anyone? You cram lessons into girls’ heads while I, because of a rumor that everyone laughs about today, got an excellent berth, I harassed old Latter, and I helped poor Kazik to go abroad. I am sorry for the fellow, but I am glad that my devotion served him well—just as the wrong that was done me made it possible for me to come here and see Latter, the old witch, go bankrupt,” she concluded in a hard tone. “I hear they are selling you up?”

Magda ran out to the hall and, without looking back, took refuge in the visitors’ parlor. She leaned against a wall and began to cry bitterly. Miss Malinowska found her there and said with a solicitous frown:

“Oh, my dear, enough of this! You must go away for the holidays and have a complete rest. What a strange school! Some teachers cause unpleasant incidents, while others work themselves into nervous illnesses.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” said Magda, holding back her tears.

“Dear Miss Magdalena,” answered Miss Malinowska, “I have no fault to find with you. But I know both from Miss Howard and indirectly from Professor Dembicki that you take everything that has happened here too much to heart. Everyone exploits your feelings. Everyone shifts a portion of their troubles onto you. That is why you look like someone just taken down from a cross.

“Today at six we will do the accounts, and tomorrow you will go home to your parents. You will return in ten days, after the holidays, and then we will become better acquainted. Well, and do not be surprised if you find only half

your colleagues when you return. With a staff of this size the school could go bankrupt a second time.”

She kissed Magda on the head and went out. Obviously she met someone else, for through the closed door Magda could hear a conversation in the corridor. It reached its climax when Miss Howard said in her resonant voice:

“At the school you will be operating, ma’am, only chambermaids will remain, not an independent woman who values her dignity!”

Following the afternoon dinner, which was brought from a restaurant, Madam Meline took a small group of students out for a walk, and something like Judgment Day began at the school.

The whole corridor and the stairs to the second floor swarmed with people. A frightened baker could be seen clutching his account book, a florid butcher flailed with his fists and threatened to ruin Mrs. Latter, and finally the dealer in soap and lamp oil said his wife had predicted long ago that the school would go bankrupt. They were the noisiest creditors, though the total due them was only about sixty rubles.

Apart from them, some Jews wandered around the halls, inquiring about whether there was to be a liquidation sale. Some former classroom teachers came to find out whom Mrs. Latter had gone away with, and some new ladies arrived, wishing to talk with Miss Malinowska. An elderly woman from a domestic service agency assured the maids that she would find them excellent new jobs. Marta was wringing her hands and asking everyone whether Miss Malinowska would keep her on as housekeeper, and Stanislaw, Mrs. Latter’s attendant, was walking around as if he had lost his wits, with a small rug and a carpet beater in his hands.

At four Miss Howard arrived from the city with some errand boys and ordered everything brought down from her room. She did not exchange greetings with Magda, but she did have a word with the staff, whom she told that she was no longer going to be a teacher, but a woman of letters.

“I shall write a definitive article about what has happened here,” she said angrily, speaking at the top of her voice. “Now Europe will just see what sort of schools and headmistresses we have!”

In conclusion she declared that she would move to furnished rooms on Nowy Swiat Street, where she could receive visits from all independent women and everyone who sympathized with the cause of emancipation for the female sex.

Only when Miss Malinowska returned from town in the company of the bowlegged gentleman did the crowd that had gathered at the school grow quiet. The managers of domestic service agencies disappeared. Those who had applied for positions as classroom teachers were sent away with no agreements, but the baker, the butcher and the purveyor of soap and lamp oil received their money. They were very meek and satisfied as they took their leave of the

new headmistress, and most pressingly offered their services, which were not accepted.

The landlord also rushed in and in elegant language assured the person with curved legs that he had never been apprehensive about the rent, even though Mrs. Latter had fallen into arrears with it. As evidence of his conciliatory spirit, he promised to line the stoves at his own expense and share the cost of repairs to the bathroom. But when someone proposed that he renovate the headmistress's apartment, he threw up his hands and swore that such an expense would make a beggar of him. He also assured his hearers that in these times buildings brought no income, only losses, and that he could give his building away if he could find a person brave and heedless enough to take it.

When the students returned from their walk, it was quiet at the school. It was at this time that Miss Malinowska called Magda to the study and paid her three months' back wages, which amounted to forty-five rubles.

As Magda was signing the receipt, Miss Malinowska said, nodding:

"After the holidays I will offer you employment on new terms, and in the meantime you will move to the room Miss Howard occupied."

"Miss Howard is not coming back?" asked Magda.

"It is still the case that she told Mrs. Latter that she would leave the school at Easter."

"But Mrs. Latter will return?" whispered Magda, looking apprehensively at the new headmistress.

Miss Malinowska raised her eyebrows.

"Does that depend on me?" she replied. "This journey of hers has not served the school well, not in the least. Frankly, I will be glad if we do not lose half our pupils as a result of these events."

Magda felt the hot blood rise in her cheeks at the thought that Mrs. Latter's fate had already been decided.

Late in the evening Magda moved to Miss Howard's room. Without lighting a lamp she sat in the window seat, gazing at the illuminated streets of Praga and dreaming.

She wanted to think about her departure the next day, and about how the day after that would reunite her with her parents and Zosia. She wanted to be glad but she could not, because new anxieties were filling her mind, and because everything around her reminded her of Mrs. Latter.

Under the apartment in which she sat was Mrs. Latter's bedroom. Where was she now? Somewhere beyond the swarm of glittering lights that was Praga? Even farther, beyond the belt of the horizon, where the lights of earth merged with the stars? Was it possible that Mrs. Latter was not downstairs, in the apartment where she had lived for so many years? Magda heard a noise. Perhaps Mrs. Latter had returned? No, it was a mouse gnawing something under the floor.

“Oh, how wearying it is,” she whispered, “to think constantly about the same thing!”

And she decided to think of something else, even if only of the past. A year ago she had still been a child, and when she had been told that everyone ought to think seriously about their own lives and the world around them, she had not understood what thinking seriously meant.

But for half a year now she had begun to think seriously about Mrs. Latter’s situation, and about Helena, Ada, Kazimierz, Miss Howard, Joanna. At first she had found it alarming to have her time and thoughts taken up with other people and their affairs, but in time she had become accustomed to that newfound responsibility, and even took a certain pride in it.

For after all, as everyone had explained to her, a person who does not reflect deeply is like a rudderless boat, a plaything of chance. Only the person who thinks soberly about himself and the world can steer his ship, avoid misadventure and sail toward the destination he chooses.

Yet all this now seemed false. Mrs. Latter knew how to think (yes, indeed!), to make her way, and her efforts had ended in bankruptcy. Some quiet storm, invisible to anyone else, had overtaken her and driven her onto the rocks, though she had great intellect and a host of friends.

How horrible to be clever and thoughtful and finally, after more than a dozen years of struggle, to leave one’s own home like a fugitive! Of what use were intelligence and effort if a person were surrounded on every hand by powerful secret forces that in one moment could overthrow the work of a whole lifetime?

“This is wearing me out! Why am I thinking about it?” she whispered.

She closed her eyes and tried with all her might to turn her attention in a different direction. She thought of Joanna.

“Well! Look at Joanna,” she told herself. “She laughs at work and never thinks seriously about herself. Her life is not respectable, people condemn her, and—what of it? Mrs. Latter fled in despair, and Joanna is triumphant and cheerful. So what is the use of being decent, moral, sensible, if only frivolous creatures get on well in the world?”

At that moment a memory from her childhood leaped to her mind. Once she had seen a poplar cut down. The tree fell with a crash into a puddle of water, throwing up a shower of muddy droplets that shone in the sun with the colors of the rainbow. Then they fell and dissolved into the ground, but the tree, though severed at the trunk, remained.

Was Mrs. Latter not a fallen tree, and Joanna, with her superficial happiness, just like one of those drops that rose for an instant and looked down on the supine giant?

But what would happen next?

“Will I ever be free of Mrs. Latter?” Magda said to herself in desperation. “After all, one could go mad!”

A strange struggle began in her soul. Her exhausted imagination wanted at all costs to forget Mrs. Latter, but her heart told her that it was a sin and a shame to forget a person who had hardly been gone for twenty-four hours. Just yesterday the person had been loved and admired, and today even her memory seemed such a burden that everyone wanted to be rid of it.

“Oh, how ungrateful I am!” thought Magda. “And to condemn others for profiting from her misfortune when I myself turn away from my memories of her—I whom she trusted, loved, made a classroom teacher.”

She lighted a lamp and began putting her trunk in order in preparation for the next day’s journey. It did not take very long, though she folded and packed the same things over and over, only to take them out and fold them again. But the continual running from the little table to the trunk, the continual bending and kneeling, gave her thoughts a new direction. Now she marveled at her recent uneasiness.

“Why am I worried about Mrs. Latter?” she said to herself. “Am I afraid she has lost the school? But she has wanted to be rid of the school for half a year. She is certainly at Mielnicki’s house this minute, and may even be in an excellent humor, knowing that the debts are paid and all is well... and that her husband still wants a divorce, so she will surely marry Mielnicki and be a *grande dame* again. Perhaps she will even be ashamed that she ever kept a school!”

Magda went to sleep considerably calmer. And because the thought of leaving for home made her impatient that she still had so many hours to wait, her thoughts turned to Mrs. Latter again. She closed her eyes and saw all the people who had played a role in recent events. It seemed to her that she was watching an opera in which the people she knew best were appearing, dressed in gorgeous theatrical costumes.

Here was Mrs. Latter in a wine-colored gown with brilliants in her black hair.

“Ah, how it sets off her face!” Magda marveled. And there was Helena in a sea-green dress sprinkled with gold and silver spangles. And here was Kazimierz in a white satin costume like Raul in *The Huguenots*.

“Just so!” thought Magda. “There are the soprano, the contralto and the tenor. They need the bass.”

And then the bass appeared: portly Mielnicki in a black, slightly stained coat.

“What fun!” she thought, gazing at the figures standing in a row as if on a stage, with raised hands. “Wine, sea-green, white—oh, how beautiful!”

Suddenly the figures standing in line began to dissolve. Mrs. Latter disappeared, then Helena, Kazimierz and Mielnicki. For a moment everything darkened, and after a while Miss Malinowska’s serene face was outlined against

that background. Behind her a gray mass of figures could be seen: the anxious baker with his bill, the ruddy-faced butcher waving his fist, Stanislaw with the little rug and the carpet beater, Marta wringing her hands.

Now, at a faster and faster tempo, the pictures changed before Magda's sleepy eyes. There were Mrs. Latter in her purplish-red gown, Helena in sea-green, Kazimierz in white satin, and they were singing or saying something with their arms raised. They disappeared again and in their place appeared Miss Malinowska in a gray dress, the baker with his bill, Stanislaw with the carpet beater... One! Two! One! Two! Faster and faster, one after the other, until at last everything vanished.

"What nonsense!" Magda whispered, smiling. "I will always be a scatterbrain." And she fell asleep.

She slept, breathing quietly, with her hands folded on her chest and a smile on her parted lips. She did not dream that less than twenty miles away someone else was sleeping, face turned to the sky, with hands clenched and eyes that would never see again.

Chapter XXXIII. In Flight From Herself

When Magda had said farewell to the headmistress and alighted from the cab on Nowy Swiat Street, the driver took Mrs. Latter to the Warsaw-Vienna railway station. He reined in the horses in front of the main entrance, but his passenger did not leave the cab. He glanced around and noticed that she looked back at him as if she were in a trance. At last, when a policeman motioned to him to move on, he leaned out of the box toward her and said:

“The station!”

“Ah!” Mrs. Latter replied and got out, too distracted to take her bag or pay for the ride. Fortunately a porter appeared and removed the bag, and the cab driver reminded her of the fare.

Mrs. Latter gave him forty pence, but when he raised his voice and told her it was not enough, she added a ruble. Then she started up the stone steps, looking around at the square on which the station stood and asking herself:

“What am I doing here? How did I come to be here?”

And she thought she must have fallen asleep in the cab, because she could remember nothing that had happened after she had said goodbye to Magda.

The porter roused her from her brooding.

“To which waiting room should I carry the bag?”

“To the first class waiting room, of course,” answered Mrs. Latter. At that moment she thought she was walking into the station with Helena, who was leaving to go abroad with the Solskis. But then she remembered that Helena had been abroad for a long time, and that it was she herself who was going away this evening, to some place as yet unknown.

The first-class waiting room was already lit, but empty. When the porter had gone out, panic engulfed Mrs. Latter because the walls began to bend again before her eyes, the floor reeled under her feet, and a crowd of apparitions surrounded her. She saw Helena with a lovely bouquet from Solski, Kazik beside Ada Solska, the Solskis’ aunt swathed in her fur coat, handsome Mr. Romanowicz—everyone who had come to see Helena off last winter.

The more people she seemed to recognize, the more frightened she became. It seemed to her that at any minute Fizman, the Jew, would come in, reeking like old putty and telling everyone that Kazimierz Norski had given moneylenders notes guaranteed by his mother, Mrs. Latter.

The walls and the floor reeled more and more violently, and again Mrs. Latter felt an irresistible desire to run away. To run away! To flee somewhere, as far away as possible from these places and these people! To ride! To ride as fast as possible, since the very movement of the train, the rattle of the wheels, the views flashing past, were a relief to her anguished soul.

She ran out into the corridor and asked a caretaker what time the train would leave.

“Nine-twenty,” he answered.

“Why so late?” Mrs. Latter exclaimed, and walked farther down the corridor, feeling an impulse to burst out crying, to throw herself on the caretaker and ask him why it would be so long before the train left.

“Two hours to wait!” she thought in despair. “I will surely die here.”

Then her glance wandered absently to a large poster on the wall that said “Warsaw-Petersburg Railroad.”

Mrs. Latter regained her alertness.

“The Petersburg route,” she said to herself. “Malkinia. Czyzew. But Mielnicki lives there. Why am I here? That is where I must go... to him. My rescue, my health, my peace are there, with the one person I can trust.”

And as clearly as if she were listening to a phonograph record, she recalled the old squire’s words:

“Spit on the school! If you don’t want to be my wife, you can still be mistress of my house and of the farm, which needs a woman’s hand. What I have said has the weight of an oath, and I will not change a word, so help me God.”

Mrs. Latter’s energy returned. She ordered the caretaker to carry her bag out of the building and call a cab. A few minutes later she was driven to the Petersburg station.

“A lunatic, or what?” said the caretaker to the porter.

“Oh, perhaps some stranger to the city. She must have forgotten something,” answered the porter.

At around eight she arrived in Praga. At the station she asked an attendant when the train would be leaving.

“Quarter past eleven.”

A tremor ran through her.

“Three hours to wait,” she whispered.

The thought of Mielnicki reminded her that she had brought some of his wine. So she crossed over to the third-class waiting room, huddled in a corner and poured out a glass.

“I do not know how many I have had today,” she fretted, feeling refreshed nonetheless.

A need for movement tormented her. She wanted to walk or ride somewhere, to do anything except be confined to one place, and she would have given the rest of her life to be at Mielnicki’s house. The man seemed to her like Moses’ brass serpent: she felt that one sight of him would heal her.

Putting her bag in the care of an attendant, she went out in front of the station, making her way toward the bridge—toward Warsaw, where the lights were burning. She looked across the Vistula toward her school, and remembered the October evening when she had gazed out at Praga from her study window. The sun had been setting then, bathing the earth in reddish-yellow light, and against that background she had seen the smoke of a locomotive that was moving out of the city. She had thought then that the ruddy light was appalling, like the departing train, which seemed a reminder that everything passes in this world, even success.

And, see! Her success had passed. She herself was not on that side of the Vistula, which she now thought of as the Styx, but on this side. She was not looking out at Praga from her lofty apartment, but wandering among indifferent buildings that were not in the least homelike. And black clouds of smoke were rising from the locomotive that had thrown her out onto this unknown shore.

No more than six months ago, up there, where at this moment someone was carrying a lamp (who could it be? Magda, Miss Howard, perhaps Stanislaw?), she herself had clearly described her position and foreseen her future. “Paying the lesser debt will bring on greater debt, then still greater, so that finally it must be the end of everything,” she had thought then, and today the prediction was fulfilled. In the end she had nothing: neither power nor fortune, neither home nor children nor husband—nothing. She was a being thrown beyond the compass of society; she was like a lost dog.

“A fine conclusion!” she whispered. “But what will become of the school? After all, I have nothing to return for. Tomorrow the news that I have run away will be all over Warsaw...”

Swiftly she turned back toward the station. When she found herself there once more, she called for paper and an envelope and wrote to Miss Malinowska, placing the school under her supervision and mentioning that she had left money in the desk. A messenger who had lagged behind with his evening’s work happened along and she entrusted the letter to him haphazardly, not asking him his number, not even noticing what he looked like.

“Finished! Everything finished!” she thought, nevertheless feeling that she was a little calmer.

She peeked into her purse and found about ten rubles.

“By railway to Malkinia,” she said. “From there by horsecart to Mielnicki’s. An awful thought: if Mielnicki died suddenly, I would not even have enough to come back, while at this moment I have no place to come back to and no reason to come back.”

Around ten o’clock the station came to life. Carriages and cabs arrived. Passengers began to stream into the large waiting room. It seemed to Mrs. Latter that some of the new arrivals were staring at her, particularly a policeman who walked around the corridor as if he were searching for someone.

"They are looking for me," she thought, and hid in the third-class waiting room among the poorest passengers. It seemed to her that at any minute someone would call her name out loud, and she almost felt the weight of a hand seizing her arm. But no one spoke her name.

A poor family came and took its place beside her: a mother with a two-year-old child in tow, and a ten-year-old girl who was keeping watch over a boy of six with a big kerchief around his head and down his back. Mrs. Latter made room for them all on the bench and asked the woman:

"Are you taking that little one very far?"

"We are going to Grodno, thank you, ma'am, I, my husband and the brood here..."

"Do you live there?"

"We live where we can, thank you, ma'am. Our home is in Plock, but we are going to Grodno because my man is going to be a gamekeeper there."

"For whom?"

"We do not know yet, ma'am, but we are going because there is no work for him at home."

"Then what will you do when you reach Grodno?"

"We will stay in some hostel until my husband finds the man who said that it was easier to find work in Grodno than where we were."

While they were speaking the woman's husband, bearded and bewhiskered like a grandfather and wearing a denim overcoat, took some boxes, bundles and baskets from among their belongings. He drew out a pot and went to the buffet for hot water, and when he returned with it the woman set about preparing a simple meal. She threw a little salt and butter in the pot, crumbled bread into it and began to feed the children.

First the mother appeased the hunger of the two-year-old; then the older girl gave the six-year-old his share and ate all that was left. The woman and her husband ate nothing. She constantly gave directions to the others, and he hurried about buying tickets and rolls for the journey, repacking parcels and tying bundles.

The sight of this impoverished family was an unutterable torment to Mrs. Latter. She compared herself to this mother, who had no roof over her head but was much happier than she. Only now did she feel the full weight of this truth, that to be poor is to suffer, but to be lonely is to be maimed in spirit.

"She has children and a husband," she thought, looking at the woman. "She has a man to help her, she has little ones for whose sake she forgets herself. Even the little girl assists her. Whatever they meet with, even death, they could press each other's hands at the last minute, they could say goodbye with their eyes. And who would say goodbye to me if, for example, the train derailed?"

Then she recalled the day when for the first time she had drunk wine to calm herself, and the dream that had come to her afterwards. She had dreamed that she was alone, as she was today—alone on the street and without a penny, as she was today—but that she was completely happy because she was free of the school, as also she was today. And then even in her misery she had been overjoyed at the thought that she was free—free from the housekeeper, the pupils, the classroom teachers and professors.

But at that moment Kazik and Helena had blocked her way and tried to induce her to return to the school!

Then, in that dream, for the first time in her life she had resented her children. But at this moment, on the hard bench in the station, something worse seethed in her heart. She glanced at the mother who, though homeless and in want, was surrounded by children, and the fact bore in on her that she, also miserable and homeless, did not have her children with her—that at that very hour Helena might be sailing around the canals of Venice with an elegant companion, and Kazik, for all she knew, was somewhere signing promissory notes with her name on them. They were amusing themselves abroad while she was suffering, suffering like all the damned in hell.

“Puppies!” she whispered. “But it serves me right. That is how I brought them up,” she thought, feeling something like hatred.

A bell rang. The passengers began to crowd toward the gate. Mrs. Latter put her veil over her face and, picking up her bag, carefully made her way toward the third-class car.

It still seemed to her that the train, after several rings and whistles, had just begun to move. Some lights passed by outside the windows and a line of cars loomed out of the dark. Then she saw nothing.

But after a moment (or so she thought) someone awakened her and asked to see her ticket.

“I have a ticket to Malkinia,” she answered.

“And so madam must give me the ticket, because we have already passed Zieleniec.”

She shrugged and gave him the ticket, understanding nothing. When she was left to herself, she became lethargic.

After a while someone accosted her again, saying:

“Madam, you have a ticket to Malkinia.”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you not get off?”

“Indeed, we just left Warsaw,” she replied, astonished.

Here and there other passengers began to laugh. A conductor came, then a second, and they conferred. In the end Mrs. Latter was ordered to pay thirty kopeks and to get off at Czyzew.

Again she fell into a lethargy, and again she was awakened. Someone took her by the arm and led her out of the car. Someone else gave her her bag—the man, it seemed, who was traveling with his family to Grodno. Then the door slammed, the bell rang, the whistle sounded and the train moved slowly out of the station. Mrs. Latter remained on the platform, alone in the night. By the light of a lantern she saw a bench under the wall and sat on it, not caring where she was or what was happening to her.

There was light in the sky when, chilled to the bone, she roused herself. A Jew stood before her, telling her that he had a wagon and asking where she wanted to go. Mrs. Latter imagined that he was Fiszman in disguise, so she started up from the bench, clenched her fists and began to scream:

“Why are you hounding me? I don’t want anything... I signed!”

The carter became irritated and raised his voice. Fortunately a railway worker intervened in the dispute and, hearing that Mrs. Latter wanted to go to Mielnicki’s estate, said:

“Oh, madam has gone out of her way. From Malkinia it is much closer. But here is a chap from those parts. He will take madam.”

A villager came onto the platform and agreed to take Mrs. Latter to the River Bug, where there was a ferry, for ten zlotys.

“For madam to get on the ferry is the same as to go to the manor, for the manor is directly across the water,” he said.

“Do you know Mr. Mielnicki?” Mrs. Latter asked.

“Of course I know him, in a way. As long as I had no land of my own, I had to work for him. Not a bad squire, only a little headlong in his ways. He’ll hit a fellow in the mouth as fast as he can drink a shot of vodka. Quick off the mark, but fair.”

“Then let us go!” said Mrs. Latter, feeling a desperate desire to see Mielnicki as soon as possible.

“If he were to die now,” she thought, “I would kill myself or go mad.”

Faster, faster... for peace, for health, perhaps for life! The peasant phlegmatically took the feed bags off his draft horses and harnessed them to his cart. She sat in it uncomfortably; the cart jounced and the sheaf of straw slid from underneath her, but she thought nothing of it. She held onto the side of the cart as her eyes searched the fog from which Mielnicki’s manor—and rescue—must emerge.

“Faster! Faster!”

In Mrs. Latter’s mind, Mielnicki now embodied all that was left to her in the world. Had he not said: “Close the school at the end of the term. We will marry your daughter off, and your son will go to work”? Had he not declared that he was ready to undertake the business of obtaining a divorce for her, provided that she decided to marry him? And had he not said: “Remember, madam, that

you have a home of your own. ... You would do an old man a serious injury not to rely on me as Queen Jadwiga on her knight, Zawisza”?

And had he not concluded with these words: “What I have said has the weight of an oath, and I will not change a word, so help me God!”

So she was not a vagrant or an orphan; she had someone to trust in the world. And that person and that home were there, not far from where she was. In an hour, perhaps sooner, she would walk into that house. She would stand before her one true, honest friend and say to him:

“I have lost everything, and now I come knocking at your door!”

And he would say:

“Lose it, as long as you do it quickly. Whenever you come, day or night, you will find your accommodation ready.”

“My accommodation, in my house!” Mrs. Latter exclaimed so loudly that her driver looked around.

“And what will I say to him then?” she mused. “I will say, ‘Give me a corner where I can sleep for a day... two days... a week... for I feel madness overtaking me.’”

Suddenly the cart stopped where a side road met the highway. A carriage drawn by two sturdy bays appeared on that road, and in it a stout man bundled into a short coat, with a hood covering his head. The man was undoubtedly dozing; it was not possible to see who he was. His driver, in a sand-colored overcoat, cracked his whip. The horses flew like the wind onto the road by which Mrs. Latter had come from the station.

“What are you stopping for?” she asked the peasant impatiently.

“I thought Mr. Mielnicki was passing us,” he replied.

“Mielnicki? Stop!”

“No, that is certainly not he,” said the villager after a moment’s thought. “He would not go from his house to the station by that road, but by the one we are taking now.”

He lashed at his horses and the cart rolled on. A quarter of an hour later they drove onto a low hill with a view of the Bug.

“There is Mielnicki’s place!” said the peasant, pointing with his whip across the swollen river, where the red roof of the manor gleamed through a dark cluster of still-leafless trees. “And that building there is the inn for passengers coming and going on the ferry. You get it there, and by the time you say Hail, Mary, you will be at the manor.”

It seemed to Mrs. Latter that she would not reach the end of the next stretch of road. At moments such anxiety, such desperate impatience seized her that she wanted to throw herself from the cart onto the highway and beat her head on it. By luck she remembered that she still had a little wine in a bottle. She drank the rest of it and felt a bit calmer.

“On to Mielnicki’s, and then to sleep,” she said to herself.

Ah, Mielnicki! If only he knew how Mrs. Latter clung to the thought of him. She would find temporary shelter in his house, and sleep, which had abandoned her long ago. Then Mielnicki would go to Warsaw, arrange with Miss Malinowska for a transfer of the ownership of the school, get what he could for it and pay the debt to Zgierski.

Oh, Mielnicki would do even more for her: he would bring her to agree to divorce Latter. He would take her in his arms like a father and beg her for the sake of his happiness not only to sign the necessary decree, but to hurry through the proceedings. Then Mrs. Latter would not be a rejected woman, but one who had rid herself of an ingrate in order to make an honorable man happy.

And when they had arranged Mrs. Latter’s affairs; when she was calm and rested; when she had emerged triumphant from the contest with her husband, then Mielnicki would do the most important thing: he would urge her to pardon her children.

“What children?” Mrs. Latter would answer him. “I have no children! The young woman ruined her prospects and her brother’s of her own free will, threw away a splendid match, and now amuses herself, sails around canals in Venice and sings, while I have no refuge but a peasant’s cart and a wisp of straw. And the young master, that playboy and spendthrift, who is long past twenty and has not yet begun to make his way in life! How much he cost me, how much money he has already spent this year in order to hurry out of the country and pay off notes on which he had forged my name! No, I have no children.”

“Well, what of it?” Mielnicki would say, looking lovingly at her. “There is nothing to be angry about. Helena is a beautiful girl. Solski is ugly, so she didn’t like him. What, would you rather have had your daughter sell herself for his money? Such a pearl among young women, a girl the whole neighborhood would lose their heads for! We will find her a better husband than Solski.”

And on the subject of Kazik Mielnicki would say:

“That’s foolishness! There is nothing here worth speaking of. Every young man is a playboy and fritters away money because he doesn’t know its value yet. But this fellow has genius, so don’t worry about him. I will give him two thousand rubles a year for four years; let him finish his education. When he makes his fortune I will get it back.”

This was the role Mielnicki played in Mrs. Latter’s dreams, and this was the role he must play in reality, since he was a decent man and had an attachment to her. For when a man truly loved a woman, there was no sacrifice that he would not make—that he would not consider it a privilege to make.

“And in return, I will sew him warm jackets and brew him the sweetest camomile tea,” thought Mrs. Latter with a smile. “For, after all, the dear old man will need nothing more, only camomile tea and peace. He will be the best of my husbands.”

Chapter XXXIV. What She Met on the Way

At that moment the cart bumped into a stone and stopped in front of a hostelry. Several other carts stood there, and a group of people engaged in conversation.

Mrs. Latter roused herself, looked around, and, making an effort to collect her scattered thoughts, asked:

“What is this?”

“The ferry landing,” replied the driver. “But during the night the water overflowed its banks and the ferry did not run.”

With the help of the driver and the innkeeper’s wife Mrs. Latter alighted from the wagon, blushing at her equipage and at the surroundings in which fate had placed her.

“I have lost my mind,” she thought. “Giving up the school.... roaming through hostelryes...”

It was ten in the morning. Mrs. Latter paid her driver and looked with embarrassment at the dilapidated inn, the carts, the people standing in the mud, and above all at the red roof that loomed like a mirage through the bare trees on the other side of the river.

“Why am I so unfortunate as to have come here?” she thought. “And what if Mielnicki is surprised, and treats me like a stranger? After all, he is a stranger to me!”

Still holding her bag, she turned to the innkeeper’s wife and asked:

“Doesn’t Mr. Mielnicki live there?”

“Just there, across the river.”

“And is he at home?”

“He must be. The holidays are coming, and his caretaker is attending to the house. And with the river still flooding...”

“I want to go there... to Mr. Mielnicki,” said Mrs. Latter.

“It is possible to go there, only our ferry is gone. But they will bring it back soon. Just watch.”

“And you have no bridge?”

“We never had a bridge. This is how people cross the river: on the ferry. But last night our ferry was caught in the flood and carried down the river, and our men have just gone for it on horseback, so they will bring it here directly,” explained the innkeeper’s wife.

“What will happen to me...”

“Nothing. You will wait here for the ferry, madam, and the ferry will whisk you to the other side.”

Mrs. Latter began to walk about restlessly, trying to avoid the disgusting mud into which her shoes were sinking.

“Do you have a dinghy?” she asked.

“No. There must be one at the manor, but not here.”

“And when will the ferry be here?” she asked, feeling her anxiety mount.

“By noon at the latest...”

“Or—perhaps not until evening?”

“It is possible that there will be a delay until evening. They rode out for it, but whether they have been able to get hold of it—who knows?” said the chatty hostess.

Again Mrs. Latter felt the earth swaying under her feet. She was afraid to go into the hostel, afraid to look at the sky, since it seemed to her that at any moment the blue firmament would chip like plaster and fall to the ground in pieces. There was a loud ringing in her ears, and her eyes flashed.

The innkeeper’s wife, though she was an untutored woman, noticed an unusual expression on Mrs. Latter’s face, but attributed it to exhaustion.

“Come inside, ma’am,” she said. “You can sleep here, perhaps eat something, and they will be right along with the ferry.” She led Mrs. Latter to her bedroom, where there were two beds with thick mattresses and a sofa covered with percale. The walls were hung with pictures, some of battle, some with religious subjects.

Mrs. Latter sat on a sofa and fixed her gaze on one of the pictures, an image of some saint embroidered with woolen thread. From the adjoining bar the smell of vodka reached her, together with pipe smoke and the noisy conversation of people waiting for the ferry. She looked at the picture and thought:

“Malinowska must already be at the school, and with her her partner, Zgierski. I wonder if they will fight over the division of the spoils. And how Howard must be gloating! Well, now her regimens and reforms will begin. When evening falls the whole city will say that I have run away, and tomorrow that blunderer, Dembicki, will hear about it. I can see his insipid face! He is sure to think that God has vindicated him by punishing me.

“Of course Helena is resting after the serenades, and Kazik... Oh! Is it possible that such innocent beings as children grow into such monsters as people?”

The hostess came in.

“Has the ferry come?” Mrs. Latter asked, starting up from the sofa.

“Not yet, but it will be here directly. They are just not within sight yet. May I offer you some scrambled eggs? Perhaps some tea with arrack?”

“Let me have some arrack,” Mrs. Latter said quietly, remembering that she had no more wine.

The innkeeper's wife brought a little vial of arrack and a glass. After she had gone out again, Mrs. Latter poured all the arrack into the glass and drank it at one draught. She quivered; its fire went straight to her lungs and her head.

She looked at her watch. It was two in the afternoon.

"Where has the time gone?" she thought, thunderstruck. It seemed to her that a quarter of an hour at the most had passed in the hostess's room.

Uneasiness swept over her again, so she walked out in front of the hostel to look for the ferry. But nothing was to be seen on the yellowish, rapidly flowing water.

She turned her head toward the opposite shore and her gaze fell on the roof of the manor, with its red color almost glowing between the trees. As if hypnotized by the sight, she began to walk along the river in order to stand opposite the house and see it, even from this far bank. Perhaps Mielnicki would come out of the manor at that moment and catch sight of her. Indeed, she was so near...

In this way she wandered a little more than a quarter of a mile from the inn, with her eyes fixed on the opposite bank. Suddenly she thought she would throw herself forward into the river and swim across. A few hundred paces in front of her was a park full of old trees, and on the shore where the river curved, under a huge linden tree she could see a bench, black with age. Even the bark of the linden was split.

Mrs. Latter's vision had come true. Here was the park she had seen in so many daydreams. Here was that sparse landscape in which silence reached from earth to heaven.

She began to run along the bank.

"God," she prayed, "send..."

Were her eyes playing tricks? On a low rise between the trees she could see a white dinghy turned upside down, and about a dozen paces farther on a man was walking slowly.

"Hallo! You there! You there..." she called feverishly.

He turned around

"Take the boat and come here..."

"I can't! The boat belongs to the manor." He waved a hand and walked on.

"I will give you a ruble! My watch!" she cried distractedly.

He turned away and disappeared among the trees.

"You there—oh, you..."

And spreading her arms wide, she threw herself into the river.

The force of her fall and the penetrating cold brought her to her senses. She did not understand where she was, but she felt that she was drowning. With a desperate movement she fought her way to the surface and screamed:

“My children!”

The current seized her and threw her to the bottom. For a time she could not breathe; her heart began to beat like a cracked bell, and that was the most agonizing moment. But then such a great lethargy took possession of her that she did not even want to move a hand. It seemed to her that some unknown power had carried her away to an endless, bottomless ocean, and that at the same time she was waking from a painful dream. In the twinkling of an eye her whole life appeared before her, but it was only a drop in the measurelessness of some fuller, more expansive life.

She began to recall something... but something she had never seen on earth... and amazement overwhelmed her.

“Then it is so,” she thought.

She felt a branch under her hand, but she did not want to grasp it. Yet she did open her eyes, since it seemed to her that through a layer of yellowish water she was beginning to see another world, free of worry, hate, heartbreak.

Within a few minutes, on the other side of the river, the man Mrs. Latter had talked with and another man came back to the dinghy with oars. They began to look up and down the far bank, and to call out. At last they slowly turned the dinghy right side up, pushed it into the water and rowed it to the other side.

“You saw her!” said the second man. “Well, there is no one here.”

“But I did see her! I tell you, she promised me a ruble,” replied the first man.

“Probably she had second thoughts about the ruble and went back to the inn. But what’s that?”

They saw a parasol on the bank. Quickly they tied the dinghy to some bushes and got out. They both began looking anxiously around. But though the prints of shoes could be seen on the damp ground covered with the past year’s grass, they found no one.

“Could she have stumbled and fallen in?” said the first man.

“Oy! Jesus, Mary, what kind of trouble are you getting me into, lad?” the first man lamented. “And if she drowned, they will haul us into court.”

“That’s as it may be. Let’s row to the landing; maybe she cleared off and got back to the inn already.”

They rowed to the inn and spread the word that an accident had happened to an unknown lady. The innkeeper, his wife and a group of men and women waiting at the landing ran along the bank looking and calling, but they saw nothing.

At around six in the evening, when the long-expected ferry returned, two of its crew got into the dinghy and rode up the river, where they caught sight of a leg entangled in the bushes. There lay Mrs. Latter's remains, little more than a dozen yards from the linden tree and the bench that would have fulfilled her dream.

They carried her to the landing and tried to revive her. At last they laid her in the ditch beside the inn. Her open eyes frightened people, so the innkeeper covered her with an old sack.

And so she lay quietly with her face turned toward heaven, looking only there to find the lovingkindness that she had not been able to wait for on earth.

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At that very hour Magdalena received her quarterly wage from Miss Malinowska while Mielnicki was riding post haste from the railway station to the ferry landing, certain that he would find Mrs. Latter.

"Now that woman will not slip from my grasp," he thought. "I will obtain a divorce for her and marry her. She will be mistress of my house! She will put life back into it!"

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Boleslaw Prus

EMANCIPATED WOMEN

(Emancypantki, 1894)

Book I

Volume 2



Chapter I. The Awakening

It seemed to Magda that she was drowning in a measureless fire. Her hands and feet were already ashen; her breath was like a flame. Her head was like a sphere of red-hot iron, and a burning coal was where her tongue should have been.

She did not want to live; she only wanted this suffering to end. So when sleep fell on her, heavy as a river of molten lead, she moaned, but not from fear. Indeed, she was glad when the fires that had fatigued her sight gradually paled, then reddened like the sunset, and she herself flew into a bottomless abyss in which it grew darker and darker, but cooler and cooler.

Was this the end? Not yet. For the disagreeable smell of vinegar assailed her. Evidently, instead of an abyss, she had fallen down a chimney into a place where an English stove splashed with vinegar had been heated for days.

“Oh, how... how... how sour!” she thought.

There must have been a great deal of vinegar, because thick clouds surrounded her, an ocean of clouds in which she sailed high above the city. Of course it was the city, for she could hear bells ringing: in her ears, her head, her neck, in her chest, hands and feet. A strange ringing!

“They are ringing for me,” thought Magda. “I am Mrs. Latter, and I drowned... So they ask me with a mournful ringing: ‘Why did you do that? You left your children, your school...’”

The cloudy white haze dispersed and she saw a face. It was the good face of a man with gray hair and short side whiskers.

“Who is that old man?”

And the thought came to her that someone else was lying beside her in a cloud of the acrid steam, and that the old man was a doctor and the father of the other person.

The bells went on ringing in her head, her neck, her hands, some in bass, others in violin tones, and they talked among themselves.

“Felix, I beg you, bring in Brzozowski!”

“Never. I will not allow my child to be poisoned.”

“Surely you see that this is...”

“Light... very light...”

“Then send for the priest...”

“No priests, no quack doctors.”

“Oh, what can I do? I am miserable!” sobbed the violin.

“Calm yourself and leave her in peace. After all, she is my child too. Peace—just peace and quiet.”

She longed to answer the fearful bells, or rather the grieving people—to say, “I hear everything!” But she did not want to open her lips.

That white cloud was not a vinegar vapor, but a very delicate down or snow, which was nevertheless not cold but warm. Now and then it seemed like folds of lace that parted slightly... parted... and she could see a clump of ivy, and on one of its leaves a tiny man, no bigger than a finger, swaying. Then a sparrow flew down and wanted to peck the little man in the head. But he laughed and hid his head under a leaf, and the amazed sparrow flapped its wings and buzzed like a bee.

The ivy disappeared and she was alone. God, how she was growing! Her hands and feet touched the horizon, and the horizon vanished. Still growing, she lay on a boundless azure plateau with gold and rose-colored clouds floating around it and thought:

“What am I? Am I nothing? Am I a cloud, one of these clouds here? Am I really Mrs. Latter, who drowned? But perhaps she did not drown, for why should she have drowned?”

And after that thought came to her, she saw that one cloud standing to the side began to take on human features. It was a woman with a face that looked as if the color had been drained from it and big, sunken eyes that showed alarm. Was it Mrs. Latter? No, it was Miss Marta, the housekeeper at the school. But no, this was a blond head sprinkled with gray. Oh, now she remembered. Sometime, sometime this woman, long, long ago, had lifted her, poured something into her mouth, pressed something to her head, and sometimes knelt before her with tears and kissed her feet.

“Who is it? Who is it? It is someone familiar.”

The pale female face drew near her own face. The anxious eyes looked at her with love, and at that instant a tear fell on the sick girl’s face. It ran onto her cheek, her neck, then her chest, and suddenly it seemed to her that a thick dew of cool, soothing tears began to fall on her burning body. Where they fell, pain and fire vanished and torpor was dispelled. With every tear there awoke thought, memory and a calm happiness for which human language has no expression.

The ailing one shifted on the bed and stretched out a damp hand, but the hand fell on her bosom.

“Mama,” she whispered.

“You know me, Magda?” cried the graying woman. “You know me? Magda, my life, my treasure! Oh, merciful God, who has given you back to me...”

“Be calm, mother, be calm,” said a gentle masculine voice.

“Look, Felix,” said the woman, sobbing. “She knew me! How she perspires...”

“I expected that she would pass the crisis today. Come, mother. Let us leave her in peace.”

They went out, and Magda was alarmed. She had recovered her consciousness only to feel that something ominous was happening to her. She thought they were crying. Then her hearing dulled, and fog and darkness clouded her vision.

She wanted to cry, "I am dying!" But her voice failed as darkness and weakness overwhelmed her.

When she woke again, her first feeling was one of joyful astonishment.

"I am at home," she thought, "but I had a horrible dream!"

Lying on the bed, she began with difficulty to look around her. Of course it must be early morning, since the windows were shielded from the light, and only between the wall and the carpet that covered the glass door was there a streak of sunshine from the garden.

"But why am I sleeping in the parlor?" she asked herself.

Yes, it was the parlor. There were the cabinet, the large mirror covered with a sheet, the furniture upholstered with fading sapphire blue damask, the two windows facing the street and the glass door leading from the garden. Even the piano stood in the corner, covered with gray canvas.

"But why am I sleeping here?" she whispered.

Slowly, as if through a mist, she began to recall the journey from Warsaw after the telegram from Mielnicki came, telling her that Mrs. Latter had drowned. (So it would have been true?) Then she remembered that she had returned home on a rainy day, and that she had been greeted by her sister Zosia and two men, one young, the other older, but both agreeable. Moreover she remembered that her mother had looked at her apprehensively and asked: "Are you unwell, Magda?" And her father had taken her pulse, examined her tongue and ordered her to bed.

"She is exhausted and wet to the skin," her father had said.

"Perhaps we should send for Brzozowski?" her mother had asked fearfully.

"No quacks. No poisons," the father had retorted. "Give her a little peace and she will be well."

And she was well, except for the awful dream!

The parlor door made a scraping noise and Magda heard a conversation.

"Excellent wine, madam, a sweet wine from Hungary. Eisenman swore that only to your family would he give a bottle for three rubles," said a man's voice.

"For you, not for us," answered Magda's mother. "Excuse me, I must return to..."

"What is so urgent, madam? Indeed it would be very pleasant for me if..."

Magda opened her eyes so as to see the man, but saw only her mother, who tiptoed to the cabinet and took out a purse. In a streak of light from the garden Magda noticed that it was her purse.

“No doubt mama has no change,” thought Magda.

“Will you give me change for ten rubles?” asked her mother.

“I am at madam’s service—although it would be pleasant for me if I had the honor of offering it to Miss Magdalena,” the man said quietly, standing outside the door. “So she is past the crisis? Good! Yesterday I was at church and I prayed for her through the entire mass.”

Magda heard the rustle of bank notes, the scraping of feet, the shutting of the door. The man went out.

“Another admirer!” whispered her mother, standing over the bed.

Magda was conscious that her mother was looking at her, but her eyes had closed the moment before and she did not have the strength to open them. She felt a light kiss on her forehead, then fell asleep again.

From that time the terrible visions left Magda, though she slept several times a day. Her sleep was so deep and came over her so suddenly that sometimes she awoke ready to continue a conversation that had begun a few hours before.

Every new awakening was a surprise for her. The most ordinary things seemed novel, as if she had just arrived in this world or returned from another. She could not take her eyes from the morning glory that climbed the outside wall between the two windows, and she found pleasure in pondering about who had made it, and if it were possible that its supple stem and dark green leaves grew by themselves without the help of a master hand, even though the hand were unseen. She was still more delighted by the sight of a fly that now and then sat on the pique counterpane. She asked herself in astonishment how that tiny mass of energy could run, even fly, and be hungry, curious or frightened.

“Of course she feels the same as I do. Perhaps this minute she looks at me and marvels that such great, awkward monsters as people exist,” she thought, moving her colorless fingers toward the fly.

But the insect flew away, and above Magda’s bed a man’s voice resounded:

“Well, well, well! Are you remembering your flair for the piano?”

“No, papa,” she answered. “But the fly was amusing me.”

“What are you saying, Magda?” put in her mother, who was standing beside her father. “A grown woman amuses herself with flies?”

“Very good,” rejoined her father. “This shows that her strength is returning, not suddenly but by degrees.”

“How do you feel?” he asked after a moment.

“I would like to eat.”

“You will eat, darling, every hour,” said her mother. “Milk, broth, wine...”

“Give her milk and broth every three quarters of an hour,” said her father.

“And it is a bit tedious, papa. Why is the room still darkened?”

“Tedious? That is very good, my child. Today the shutters will be partly open. And we should leave the door to the garden ajar.”

“But, Felix, that will be bad for her!” the mother objected.

“Go on!” said her father. “It will be a fine thing for mankind when people begin to think that sun and fresh air are bad for them.”

Her parents went out, but then Magda called:

“Papa! Papa!”

“What, darling?”

“I still have not kissed you or you me... That is not possible...”

Her father returned, sat on the bed, took the sick girl by both hands and said, kissing her:

“Indeed, we have kissed each other twice today.”

“I do not remember,” she whispered, alarmed.

“And do you remember,” he said, bending over her, “when I sat over your cradle in your mother’s room? And do you remember how I dandled you on my knee, or how you played with my watch? And do you remember how, here in this room, you ordered me to retrieve the cat from under the table when he had gotten away from you? You do not remember, for you were just a little thing. And today you are a small child who sleeps twenty hours a day and drinks milk in its sleep. Only at that time you had to grow whole years, and today you will grow in the course of a few days and once again become a grown lady, on whose door eligible men begin to knock.”

“Felix!” her mother reproved him.

Another time Magda was roused from sleep by a conversation that was being carried on in the open doorway.

“Is it polite to steal into a young lady’s room?” her mother said to someone with a smile.

“Oh, madam! A hundred apologies, but I give you my word of honor that I did not even glance in. I found a container in the garden, I poured some water into it and put it down... and when I saw that the door was open, I wanted to put it on the floor. Well, but Miss Magdalena could receive visitors, she looks so wonderfully well,” said a man.

“She is pale and thin.”

“Madonna—a true Madonna!” the man sighed, folding his hands.

“You are a flirt, Ludwik! I will tell Eufemia.”

“Oh, Miss Eufemia! I certainly cannot compete with a postal official!”

At that moment Magda was conscious of a lovely aroma. She opened her eyes and on a small table not far from her bed saw a little earthenware bowl full of violets. She also saw that in the doorway leading to the garden her mother was

talking to a grizzled gentleman with thick whiskers and a monocle. She noticed that the man wore a short jacket and had thin legs, and that he moved as if he had a pain in the small of his back.

“And then my sister told me to ask you if you need it,” said the gentleman.

“Oh, thank you, no... though this coming week I may ask... You would not believe how much trouble we are having with our debtors. Everyone delays until the last minute,” said Magda’s mother, walking farther out into the garden with the visitor.

“What does that mean?” thought Magda, sensing that this conversation would end with dismaying information about her parents’ financial resources. She was so alarmed that sweat broke out on her forehead, and she recalled Mrs. Latter’s financial troubles.

“Oh, dear, what if mother is short of money?” she thought, frightened. But she remembered the three thousand rubles she had from her grandmother and was calm again.

“Mama, what violets are these?” she asked in a voice that was no longer weak when she saw that her mother had returned from the garden.

“Aha, you noticed the flowers? Mr. Krukowski brought them.”

“I do not know him.”

“You met him when you returned from Warsaw... though it is true that you scarcely recognized anyone then, poor darling. Oh, what we have been through! Well, but, thank God, it is over; you are well. You see, several years ago Mr. Krukowski moved here with his sister. She is a wealthy widow, she has two hundred thousand zlotys, and her brother lives with her and will inherit everything some day. They became friends with us because she, a woman past sixty, suffers from rheumatism and is being treated by your father. Then, too, her brother is in love with Femcia and continually talks to me about her.”

“Why does he not marry her?”

“I do not understand why,” answered her mother, shrugging her shoulders. “He is a good man but a bit odd, or changeable. He has become more and more attracted to another young lady. His sister would like for him to marry, but it seems he has not yet settled his affections on anyone,” she added musingly.

Magda recovered her health so quickly that her father ordered the shutters to be opened, and allowed the convalescing patient to eat chicken fricasee and even receive short visits.

“You may receive visitors,” he told Magda, “only do not speak at length yourself.”

Chapter II. Old and New Acquaintances

The magistrate's wife and her daughter Eufemia were the first to pay a visit. They were welcomed heartily, like old friends. Their arrival reminded Magda that when she had left home for the school in Warsaw, Femcia had been nineteen, and her mother had directed Magda to call her Miss Eufemia.

"For you see, my deah," the magistrate's wife had said affectedly, "you are still a ch-child, and Femcia is old enough to marry."

And for years, whenever she returned home for holidays, she had treated Femcia as a grown woman and called her Miss Eufemia.

Only during the past year, since Magda had finished school, had the magistrate's wife suddenly said to her, pursing her lips as usual: "Deah Magda, why do you call Femcia 'Miss?' Simply call her F-Femcia, for indeed you are equals." And she made a vague, circular motion with her hand.

Magda did not dare call Femcia by her given name at first, but her equal said, kissing her warmly:

"Well, say: 'You... you... you, Femcia.'"

"You... you... you, Femcia!" Magda repeated, blushing to the roots of her hair.

"There, you see! That is very good!" said Femcia. "I do not know why people establish so many divisions between them: this one is young, that one is old, the other is inferior in position. The effect of it is that people dislike each other, and young women do not marry."

During the visit the magistrate's wife sat on the sofa with Magda's mother, while Femcia, kissing the convalescent for the tenth time, said:

"I know that it is not permissible to carry on a conversation with you, so to avoid temptation I will go and sit by the window, and you can nap."

And she sat down by the window, through which a shadow could be seen passing between the flowers.

"You do not expect Zdzislaw for the holidays?" asked the magistrate's wife.

"I very much doubt that he will come," Magda's mother answered with a sigh. "When he had just finished at the Technological Institute—"

"With a go-ald medal!" put in the other lady.

"—immediately he began an apprenticeship at a factory, and now he is earning his living."

"A cousin of my husband's (he works in the Ministry of Justice) wrote me from Petersburg that Zdzislaw has a splendid careeah before him. He invented a machine..."

"A new dye," interposed the doctor's wife.

“Yes, he invented some d-dye that made him famous in P-Petersburg. My husband’s cousin wrote that an exceptional future awaits this young man, but that he is withdrawn and does not m-mingle in society.”

“He works!” said his mother, sighing again.

“Yes... and dabbles in Chopin...”

“Schopenhauer, mama,” Eufemia called from her seat by the window. “Schopenhauer was a philosopher, a pessimist, who maintained that life is unhappy, and hated women,” she explained, plucking a few leaves from a branch and throwing them out the window.

The magistrate’s wife nodded her head.

“Do you hear?” she said quietly to the doctor’s wife in a tone that meant that her daughter was a highly educated person, and that advanced education was not valued in a small town.

But at that moment the doctor’s wife was not thinking of Eufemia.

“Zdzislaw,” she said with a sigh, “was pessimistic as long as he felt that he was a burden to us. Now that he is supporting himself he does not have the old despair, so his letters grow shorter and shorter.”

As a sign that she was far less interested in Zdzislaw than in Eufemia, the magistrate’s wife, instead of listening, turned her eyes to the window, which overlooked the street. Unfortunately, behind a curtain of flowers she saw a shadow which was to all appearances the shadow of a postal official.

“Femcia,” she said, “it s-seems to me that you are throwing something out the window.”

“Leaves, mama.”

“Deah child,” said her mother, again affectedly, “a woman in your position should not look out the w-window or throw leaves onto the street. For you do not know who might pick up the leaves, and what unfounded hopes might be aroused. Go out to the garden, Femcia, and wander a little among the flowers.”

Her obedient daughter went out with the air of Marie Antoinette going to the scaffold.

“I have sent her out so that she will not be a w-witness to our conversation,” said the magistrate’s wife. “I do not want that innocent girl even to g-guess what impertinence and folly are circulating around her.”

The doctor’s wife felt like observing that Magda was an also an innocent girl who should not be hearing all this. She restrained herself, however, upon seeing that Magda was lying peacefully with closed eyes.

“You are a true f-friend of our family,” the magistrate’s wife began with a deep sigh, “so I will confide my unhappiness to you. Just imagine: the keeper of records at the post office, that Cynadowski, has fallen hopelessly in love with Femcia. I sympathize with his madness, and perhaps I would have found it less shocking if this p-person did not occupy such a low position.”

“His father is wealthy, it seems,” said the doctor’s wife.

“The manager of some estate! Meanwhile, Femcia is a s-superior woman. Would you believe, madam, that, unbeknownst to her father and me, for twelve years she subscribed to the *Weekly Review*? Well, and the continual receipt of that journal gave rise to the relationship with Cynadrowski.”

“How many people spend time at the post office... anyway, who can forbid a young man to fall in love?” remarked the doctor’s wife.

“I agree, and I might even have had compassion on the unhappy fellow if it were not for a certain—c-complication. You know that Krukowski pays serious attentions to Femcia. Because that was a suitable match, I was ready to sacrifice my maternal feelings and entrust Femcia to him. But in the meantime Cynadrowski began to pursue Femcia, though only with sighs and g-glances, and—Krukowski has not visited us for three weeks!”

“From the time he saw Magda,” thought the doctor’s wife.

“It is not appropriate for me... Femcia and I would rather d-die than make such an advance to a man,” said the magistrate’s wife, lowering her eyes. “But you who were so good to us, who so nursed the love of two beings who were made for each other...”

“What can I do?” replied the doctor’s wife, vowing inwardly that she would do nothing to further relations between Eufemia and Krukowski.

“He is c-constantly visiting you. His sister so loves you all... So if the opportunity arose to tell him that Femcia and I were offended at Cynadrowski, and that both of us were favorably disposed toward Ludwik...”

“It seems to me—I beg your pardon—that the matter hinges on that very thing,” said the doctor’s wife. “I cannot confront Mr. Krukowski about the matter, for he knows that there is a close relationship between our family and yours. The issue is best left to time.”

“Perhaps you are right. At any rate, if Ludwik is beginning to feel j-jealous, the matter ought to clarify itself after a while.”

“Of its own accord,” chimed in the doctor’s wife, who from the beginning had sympathized inwardly with her visitor’s disappointment.

“I have noticed that he has been most attentive to Magda since her arrival,” she thought. “I will not chase after him—but I will not return him to Femcia.”

The magistrate’s wife soon remembered that Magda and her mother both needed rest, and took her leave of the doctor’s wife. On her way through the parlor, Eufemia drew close to Magda’s bed and blew a kiss into the air just above Magda’s hair. Then she put a white flower on the counterpane and, always exuding poetic charm, disappeared through the door.

“Oh, Eufemia is growing older,” Magda’s mother said to herself, not without satisfaction. “Her manner is overdone; the skin on her neck is showing its age. Twenty-seven years have passed.”

Magda had already begun to raise herself, to sit on the bed, even to read a book. In the course of the last few days she had made an interesting observation. It was this: whenever the time drew near for the noon meal, at which broth, shaved steak and a glass of wine were brought to her, strange things happened in the garden. It was not possible to tell from where the little stones fell that bumped the branches of trees and sometimes rolled around the roof.

That phenomenon Magda interpreted in a way that was as simple as it was pessimistic. Her parents' brick house was old and, naturally, crumbling into ruins because her parents did not have the money to repair it. But why did the process of disintegration only occur at noon? Magda also had an answer for that. Nature itself was saying to her, through the rattle of the stones:

“Eat, unnatural daughter, eat strong broth, drink wine, while your poor father does not have a sound roof over his head.”

Sometimes Magda felt like telling her mother that she did not want such costly fare, and that for the most part she had no desire to eat anything. But her appetite was so strong and the smell of the beefsteak so alluring that she could not master her hunger. She ate—with a heart full of contempt for herself.

One night there was a short but violent storm. It seemed that water was flooding the earth, lightning was flaming in the sky, thunderbolts were shaking the town, and nothing would be left in the world. The next morning, however, Magda was convinced that everything was safe in its place after all and that the day was exceptionally beautiful.

That was a memorable day. For around ten o'clock her father looked at her and said:

“Today the young lady will get up.”

What joy ran through the house! The hired boy cleaned her slippers until they gleamed like mirrors. Her mother opened the wardrobe and took out a percale house dress that a mysterious person with a crystal ball had laundered and trimmed with fresh lace at thirteen pence a yard. The maid heated up the washing and the cook promised to braise a whole plate of beefsteak.

Soon Magda was dressed and the glass door was opened. Her father took her by one hand, her mother by the other, and they led her to the garden. Two sparrows who had been quarreling over a feather that lay on the ground stopped their sparring at the sight of Magda and began to watch her. Then they flew away and undoubtedly summoned other birds, because in an instant the garden filled with twittering. A chestnut tree exploding with emerald leaves brushed Magda's head as if it wanted to attract her attention.

At the same time an open summer house greeted her, and a bench, black with age, pushed one foot forward as if desiring to run out and meet her. Every cherry, apple and pear tree, every raspberry and currant bush, every strawberry patch hidden at that moment by flowers remembered Magda; and being unable to call out to her, they lured her with their fragrance, or stretched out branches hidden by greenery. Even a stone that Magda had rolled into a corner of the

garden with her brother when she was a small girl seemed to emerge from the shadow of the fence and look at her like an aged man trying to recall an old acquaintance.

People began to gather. The cook kissed Magda's hand, the hired boy provided her with a chair, and the nursemaid covered her with a shawl. The wicket gate that led to the street opened with a scraping noise and the oldest friends of Magda's parents came in one after another: the eighty-year-old major with an enormous pipe on a curving stem; the vicar who had christened her; the magistrate. The vicar presented her with a little gold medal, the magistrate kissed her on the forehead, and a young man with a cropped head and a bristling blond mustache offered her a half-pound box of English sweets, saying:

"Perhaps madam will be so bold as to try these, for Eisenman swears that the colorings are entirely harmless."

Magda did not know what to do: whether to take sweets from a stranger, welcome the beloved guests, or escape deeper into the garden, which seemed to be calling her. Nevertheless, when the major, who was shaggy as a gray-haired bear, pressed her head to his chest without taking his pipe from his mouth and growled: "You had us worried, my girl," she burst into tears, followed by her mother, the nursemaid and the cook.

"Oh, ho! Ho!" cried the major, "now the women are starting in. No way to stop it... Give us the chess board, doctor."

"I do not know that we should be so hasty," said the vicar.

"Of course you must play," Magda's mother declared. "After all, you gentlemen have missed several weeks."

"In that case," replied the priest, "I recall that it is my turn to play the first match with the major."

"Excuse me..." the magistrate faltered.

"The vicar is right," the major broke in.

And they went to the doctor's study, from which after a while resounded the clatter of chessmen scattered on the table and the boisterous voice of the major, who insisted that he should play with the white pieces.

"Let us draw lots, dear major, let us draw lots," the vicar urged.

"The luck of the draw only helps the stupid. No drawing lots! You played with the white men yesterday!" shouted the major, as angry as if the vicar had attacked his honor or his purse.

The garden gate opened again and a conversation could be heard on the street:

"Do not go in, Ludwik... Oh, dear!" moaned a woman's voice.

"But you have come in this way so many times," a man's voice answered.

"But... oh, heavens! Ludwik..."

“A figure is not placed on four squares, only on one!” roared the major.

“Major, if you don’t mind!” complained the vicar.

In the gateway to the garden a singular couple appeared. A thin woman with yellowish skin sat in a wheelchair, holding a parasol in one hand and a basket of flowers in the other. She wore a gold chain, a sapphire brooch, a huge gold watch at her belt, and two gold bracelets on each wrist. Mr. Krukowski, who was familiar to Magda by now, pushed her chair through the gate, his monocle falling from his eye every now and then.

At the sight of this pair the young man with the bristling mustache suddenly withdrew to the parlor, and then to the room where the chess game was going forward. In the meantime the wheelchair moved into the garden with its rider, who was scrutinizing Magda through a gold-handled lorgnette.

“An unexpected visitor!” exclaimed the doctor’s wife, hurrying out of the house.

The wheelchair stopped beside Magda. Krukowski, bowing gracefully, handed the convalescent a little basket of lilies of the valley and violets.

“How happy I am to see you well!” he said, tenderly kissing Magda’s hand.

“Very pretty!” said the lady in the wheelchair, squinting and staring at Magda through her lorgnette. “I should have waited until you came to me, Miss... Miss...”

“Magdalena,” Krukowski supplied.

“But Ludwik so urged me, so continually spoke of you...”

“Sister...” moaned Krukowski.

“Have I not said that she is pretty?” his sister interrupted impatiently. “A face in the style of...”

“Raphael,” whispered her brother.

“Murillo,” his sister corrected him. “But you find that boring in other cases.”

“Sister!” her brother exploded, but, withered by a look, took refuge with the chess players in the study.

“You had typhus?” began the lady in the wheelchair, rotating her lorgnette. “It is a serious illness, but not like mine. For six years I have not been able to take a step under my own power. I am immobilized, dependent on people’s whims. If it had not been for your father, I would moreover have lost the use of my arms and legs, and even my life, which, I think, would have evoked no great grief. Madam, might I ask for a glass of water with a drop of red wine?”

“Perhaps some soda water?” asked Magda’s mother.

“Indeed!” sighed the lady. Then, when she and Magda were alone, she said:

“Perhaps we might go over there, near the chestnut tree.”

In spite of her weakness, Magda rolled the wheelchair to the tree.

“Sit by me. Take a chair,” the lady continued in a whining voice. “Let us know each other better before... Oh, dear!” she cried as a stone fell near the wheelchair.

“Another piece of the house coming down!” thought Magda, glancing at the sun, which was in fact indicating that it was mealtime.

Another stone came flying down among the branches of the chestnut tree.

“Good heavens! They are killing me!” shrieked the paralyzed lady.

Magda covered the woman’s head with her hands, shielding her with her own body.

“Horrors! What is this?” cried the lady.

A third stone struck the roof, slid noisily into the strawberry patch, and—at that moment a miracle occurred. The paralyzed lady, pushing Magda aside with surprising strength, jumped out of the wheelchair and ran swiftly into the parlor, screaming at the top of her lungs:

“Ludwik! Doctor! They are killing me!”

At the same time the crying of a little boy resounded from beyond the garden, together with the shout of the man who had offered Magda the box of English candy.

“Here he is! I have you, you ass!”

If a volcano had erupted on the town square, there would not have been more of a commotion in the doctor’s house than the one caused by this extraordinary development. In an instant the master and mistress of the house, the servants, and even the gentlemen who had been playing chess found themselves in the parlor beside the paralytic, who recovered from her sudden fright, seized Magda in an embrace, and cried:

“Look, gentlemen! Look, Ludwik, here is the heroine! With her own body she shielded me. Because of her I have recovered the use of my legs. Ludwik,” she added, grabbing Krukowski’s hand, “she or no one, do you understand? I am telling you now!”

“Are you wounded, madam?” called the major, lunging at the sick lady with his great pipe.

“On the contrary, she is healed!” answered Mrs. Brzeska. “She herself got out of her chair and ran in from the garden.”

“She was always well. Oh, these women!” said the major angrily.

“And do you say that there are no miracles?” the vicar put in. “It is a miracle that has happened before our eyes, ye of little faith,” he went on, tapping his finger on the head of the supernaturally healed woman.

“That is a fairy tale, vicar!” retorted the major, surrounding himself with a cloud of smoke. “Let’s get back to business.”

“Yes, go now, go,” the doctor agreed, then gave the lady his hand. “Support your sister from the other side,” he said to Krukowski.

At that moment the young man with the bristling mustache came into the parlor, pulling by one ear a boy who was protesting at the top of his voice.

“Here he is,” said the energetic young man. “The son of Flajszman, the hospital attendant... the ass! Because our greatly respected doctor does not allow the villagers to do bloodletting, he, this whippersnapper, throws stones into the yard.”

“No!” the boy wept. “I was throwing them at the weathercock on the roof! I always hit the weathercock! Other people flung them into the yard.”

The doctor took the boy by his chin, looked him in the eye and said, nodding,

“Oh, little Flajszman! Stop sniveling and get along home. Tell your friends not to throw stones into the garden or I will make them come and gather them all up.”

“Yes, sir,” sobbed the boy.

“And we will go for a walk,” said the doctor, addressing the lady who was now restored to health. “Krukowski, quickly now! One, two!”

“I cannot! They are killing me! Oh, I have lost my strength again!” moaned the lady, scurrying between the doctor and her brother, who were walking at a fast clip.

“The respected doctor is excessively lenient,” the young man said to Magda’s mother. “Young Flajszman ought to get a hiding for such a prank.”

“Why?” Magda said in a tone of surprise. “After all, the stones healed a serious ailment.”

“Ailment? She is healthier than both of us,” retorted the young man, shrugging his shoulders. “Please allow me to refresh your memory: I am Mientlewicz,” he added with a bow, “proprietor of a commercial brokerage. I am indebted to no one but myself; I have no rich sister to support me and pay my debts.”

“Sir... sir... what are you saying?” put in the doctor’s wife, shocked at hearing the young man speak disparagingly of Krukowski and forming her own idea as to the cause of his aversion.

“On my own, all on my own, I give you my word,” Mientlewicz went on. “I said to myself, I will be educated, and I was educated.”

The doctor’s wife sighed quietly.

"I told myself, I will leave my employment with the county and I will make a fortune. And I am making one! Whatever decision I make, madam, I carry it out. I know how to be patient."

Magda grew a little pale and leaned limply against her chair. Her mother noticed this, made Magda's excuses to Mientlewicz, and led her daughter to her room.

"Mr. Krukowski is a very kind man, a good man," she said to Magda. "Considerate, sensitive... You will like him when you know him better."

But Magda was so wearied by the day's events that at that instant she was unable to take an interest in Mientlewicz or Krukowski or the miraculous healing of Krukowski's sister.

Meanwhile the former paralytic, drawn along by the doctor and her brother, had been around the garden several times, admitting that she could walk. Yet when she was released from this compulsory exercise and had come into the parlor under her own power and collapsed on the sofa, she worked herself into effusions of praise for Magda, to whom she insisted that she owed her life and health. Krukowski heard these praises with delight, Mientlewicz with a dour expression.

But when the doctor's wife returned from her daughter's room and the former paralytic began to speak to her in an undertone, motioning toward her brother with her lorgnette, the abashed Krukowski went out to where the chess match was going forward, and Mientlewicz exited through the garden and back to town without so much as a goodbye. He was so out of temper that just outside the wicket gate he pulled the ears of two little boys who were peeking through the fence into the doctor's yard.

Chapter III. The First Plan

Magda quickly regained her health. In the middle of May she even went to town a few times to do some shopping. At one such time her mother reminded her that the next day was Sunday, and that it would be appropriate to thank God for His goodness to her.

“It seems to me, dear,” her mother added gently, “that you have neglected your prayers a little.”

Having said that, she went out, leaving Magda ashamed.

Until this time Magda had prayed irregularly: when sorrow overtook her; when she saw that someone was unhappy; sometimes when the sun set, bathing the clouds in purple light; sometimes when the ave bell sounded in church. Once she had even said a prayer when she saw a sparrow put four smaller sparrows on a fence and feed them crumbs that she had thrown them.

It had seemed to her that that kind of prayer, which calmed her heart, was enough. But her mother’s remark made an impression on her. So although she doubted inwardly that it was possible to pray more fervently in church than under the open sky, she ran immediately to her boxes to take out the velvet ribbons that would be most becoming to her the next day.

On Sunday morning she was ready before ten. But she was filled with alarm at the thought that she must walk through the middle of the church amid a crowd of people, any of whom would have the right to say:

“Look! There goes Magda, whom the Lord God rescued from death. But one cannot see whether true piety brings her here.”

For it could not be denied: Magda was going in order to fulfill her mother’s wish, not at all from heartfelt inspiration. She was still more disturbed because even her father put on a black coat (a little frayed at the seams) and took a cane with a silver knob from the corner.

“Oh, how wicked I am!” she told herself. “This saintly, aging man, so good, such a philosopher, will pray for me, and I, perverse creature, hesitate...”

When the bell sounded to call the village to mass and her mother put on her hat and Turkish shawl, Magda suddenly said:

“Mama, dear, I will follow you a little later. I am afraid to go in among all the people too quickly. I would like to go into the chapel where grandmother’s stone is first, mama, dear!”

“Come, my child, when you like and as you like,” her father answered.

“Oh, Felix,” her mother put in with a warning finger.

“Believe me, mother, the Lord God will spy her in the dark chapel more quickly than us before a large altar. At any rate, the girl is right to avoid the fashion plates. Oh, look—”

And he pointed through the window to the street corner, where a handful of children gazed in wonder at Mientlewicz in a light-colored suit and spanking new top hat.

The parents went out, the mother holding the great Dunin prayer book in both hands, the father brandishing his cane. Hidden behind the curtain, Magda saw how Mientlewicz blocked their way and saluted them with a flourish of his hat; how he asked about something and made as if to hurry toward their house; how her father took him by the arm and everyone walked toward the square, escorted by a group of children who kept their distance.

A moment later Krukowski appeared on the other corner, dressed in a navy blue suit and Panama hat, walking beside his sister in her wheelchair, which was being pushed by a servant. Then the chair and Krukowski took a hurried step or two and caught up to Magda's parents, as the disorderly covey of children did also, creating something like a chain made up of lines of bare feet and shod feet. There were children in hats and caps with visors and caps of lambskin; children in long cloaks and short jackets; children in long shirts without breeches, and in breeches with shirts hanging out.

"What a lot of children!" Magda thought.

As she approached the church by the side streets, a crowd of village women like varicolored, low-growing flowers were kneeling in the old cemetery. On the other side of the great church door a group of farmers and laborers in dark coats stood with bent shoulders, while between the men and the women a handful of the educated people of the region gathered: a few county officials, the recordkeepers for the police and the court, the notary's assistant, the dispenser of medicines and several others who held less significant positions. They all looked around the square, eyeing the young women, single and married.

Magda took a wide detour around them all and went in through a gate to the small cemetery. Then she squeezed between the women, reached the side door of the church, and, with a pounding heart, entered the chapel and hid in its darkest corner. It seemed to her that all the intelligentsia of the county, sporting lorgnettes, wearing dark green gloves and carrying canes and parasols, would swarm in after her, begin to stare at her from under the brims of their hats, and make remarks that would produce loud laughter but would not be funny to the casual listener.

Magda huddled timidly between the confessional and a pillar and looked toward the center of the church. Mientlewicz stood, shifting from one foot to the other, near the pew in which her mother sat piously nodding her head and reading her prayer book. Her father was resting his head on his hands and looking musingly at the window over the great altar, from which streaks of light were falling. The major sat with military erectness in the last seat in the pew.

In a pew closer to Magda the magistrate's wife was pointing out a certain prayer to Krukowski's sister, while Krukowski looked through his monocle in every direction. The magistrate was dozing, and Eufemia, sitting at a slight angle

that put Krukowski in her line of vision, gazed at the painting of Christ in the River Jordan on the vaulted ceiling. A few steps away, at the center of the church, stood a blond young man with a curling lock of hair on his forehead, wearing the uniform of the post office. He looked gloomily now at Krukowski, now at Eufemia.

At the altar the vicar was chanting the mass in a quavering voice, and after each brief pause the old organist responded from the choir loft, playing the accompaniment on a harmonium that had one key out of tune and two more that did not sound at all. Nevertheless, after a longer chant at the altar and a longer silence at the instrument, a quite harmonious choir of male and female voices suddenly burst forth:

*Praise to Thee, eternal praise, God our Father,
Who created all worlds and ruleth over all...*

A muffled murmur came from the congregation. People prostrated themselves, beat their chests or raised their hands toward Heaven. From the door resounded the sobbing of babies, who, since they could not speak, praised God with their crying. The twittering of birds could be heard through some broken windows. Even the magistrate roused himself, the rigid major took out his small missal, and Krukowski stopped looking around. It seemed that a wave of ecstatic devotion had rushed through the crowd, but without touching Magda.

“Oh, how wicked I am!” she thought. “After receiving so many blessings, I have not offered one prayer.”

The song from the choir loft died away and the people composed themselves. Here and there someone stood up. Krukowski put his monocle between his eye and the world again. The young man in the postal uniform looked disdainful. At that moment two gentlemen next to Magda began conversing in whispers.

“Do you know how much he charged Rubinrot for a consultation? A ruble! Did you hear?”

“That is nothing new!” retorted the other. “That crackpot always does such things. Not only is he always without a penny to his name; he harms others.”

“Brzozowski ...”

“Brzozowski and his assistant and me. After all, I would be walking around without shoes if I were reduced to selling one dose of castor oil a day, and sometimes a little quinine.”

“He cares nothing for other people’s interests.”

“He cares nothing for his own children, you should say. In fact, if all three of them were here, I do not know that he could give them dinner.”

Magda thought she would faint. It was her father they were speaking of, saying that he could not pay for dinner for his children if they were all together. “Oh, God! Oh, God!” she whispered, feeling her eyes fill with tears.

Alarm went to her heart like a blow. Her deceased grandmother had paid for her schooling, but her parents had spent three hundred rubles a year on her brother's education. Today Zosia's expenses amounted to nearly that much, though the poor girl did not study in Warsaw, only in the capital of the province. So where was the money to come from? From the family's nine acres, though half the crop belonged to the farmer who tilled it? From her father's practice? But her father accepted only a ruble apiece from the wealthiest patients. His office was filled with the poor, who could pay nothing. Sometimes he brought back a handful of pennies or tenpenny pieces from the town, sometimes nothing at all.

Under such difficult circumstances, was it any wonder that her mother had borrowed money from Krukowski's sister, and while Magda was ill had taken thirty rubles of Magda's own money to defray expenses?

In this way the little store of money Magda had brought from Warsaw had been exhausted. Where did her mother get the money now for her wine, broth and beefsteak? Where? From frugalities at home, for Magda had noticed that her mother never ate meat at all, and her father very rarely, on the pretext that peasant dishes were the most wholesome fare.

Why, then, did they not feed her that healthiest of diets?

Mrs. Latter's fate was never far from her thoughts. In that case as well there had been a gradually increasing deficit. In that case also there had been the necessity of incurring debt—because of children!

Ah, that evening when Mrs. Latter had begged Magda to help her get away! The nervous unease that had marked her behavior, the disconnected phrases, the madness in her eyes! And the next day that awful death—death, because she loved her children!

Despair overcame Magda. If a woman who had a fortune valued in the tens of thousands of rubles and only two children had met with such an end, what might happen to her parents, who had three children and no fortune?

She pressed her hands together with fingers entwined, like a defenseless man on whom a blow is about to fall. She raised her eyes to the great altar and saw through her tears the image of the divine mother, painted in dark colors and wearing a silver crown.

"Save me... enlighten me, most holy Virgin," whispered Magda, barely restraining herself from sobbing aloud.

Suddenly something occurred that cannot possibly happen to the wise, but often happens to simple souls. The most holy Lady, who until that time had gazed at the crowd of country people kneeling at her altar, glanced to the side. Her eyes of infinite depth rested for an instant on Magda. Then they turned to the sanctuary full of people again.

Magda went numb. "Am I losing my senses?" was the question that ran through her mind.

But she could not doubt that her heart's cry of pain had been heard in the kingdom of eternal peace. From there some reverberation had come in answer to her prayer, and after her despairing outburst, a deep calm reigned in her soul.

"I will find a way to deal with this," she thought, feeling her spirits rise although as yet she saw no way.

At that moment the doctor's wife whispered something to Mientlewicz, who was still standing beside the pew. That interesting young man nodded, raised his shiny top hat and with an effort began to squeeze through the crowd in Magda's direction. Unfortunately Krukowski noticed this maneuver. For a long time he had kept a vigilant eye on the doctor's wife's pew and on the movements of her neighbor in the top hat. And because he stood closer to the chapel, a few quick steps brought him to Magda's side, where he whispered:

"Your mother is asking for you."

Magda rose from where she was kneeling. The elegant Krukowski gave her his arm and conducted her to her mother, making a half circle as if he were driving a carriage and four. Then, seating the young lady by her parents, he stood modestly beside her with his Panama hat tightly rolled.

Stunned, Mientlewicz stopped dead in the middle of the church. None of his antagonist's adroit movements was lost on him; he saw how Krukowski gave Magda his arm, which he himself would never have thought of doing. He saw how he pushed the crowd aside with his left elbow, how he hovered solicitously over her at every step (forgetting that he was, after all, in church!), how he kept his body at a distance but leaned his head toward her.

He saw everything, and yet he thought Krukowski was wearing that modest, delicate expression in order to belittle him—to make light of Mientlewicz, who was a self-made man!

If Mientlewicz's feelings could have transformed themselves into dynamite at that moment, the church in Iksinow, the buildings around it and perhaps a part of the market square would only exist in memory today. Since he could not actually smash Krukowski to atoms, however, he decided to stab him in the heart metaphorically. So he began to push his way through the crowd toward the chapel again. He drew near the magistrate's wife's pew and, turning his back to Krukowski, started an animated conversation with Eufemia.

Krukowski, standing beside Magda, behaved as if neither Mientlewicz nor his bold attack on Eufemia were of any concern to him. The fair-haired young man in the postal uniform, on the other hand, was disturbed by Mientlewicz's actions. He rubbed his eyes and tousled the lock of hair on his forehead as if he distrusted not only his own senses, but his ability to draw conclusions from what they told him.

And when he saw Mientlewicz speaking more and more intimately with Eufemia, and looking at her with growing tenderness; and when moreover he noticed a tinge of gratification on her beautiful face; he gave a bitter laugh and stalked angrily out of the church.

Magda noticed none of these developments, which were following upon each other as fast as lightning. She was immersed in her vision, and the everyday world had disappeared. She did not hear that in the choir loft, through some incomprehensible mistake, the men's voices began another song and the women's voices still another, which created such a muddle that the organist put his hands to his head, the worshipers began to peep at the choir and even the vicar looked around, scandalized.

She did not see that the major suddenly jumped up from the pew, that an old man in a scarlet tippet woke the magistrate, and that at the great altar a canopy in the form of an umbrella appeared. It was carried by the notary, an elderly gentleman with a long nose, a mouth that seemed to express perpetual astonishment, and an exceptionally high collar framing a huge white neckerchief with its ends gracefully knotted. Every now and then the pearly glow of the neckerchief, the smoke of incense and the light falling on his face from the window made the notary look like an aged cherub with very small wings. At least that was the impression he made on his wife, who went into ecstasies every time her husband raised the canopy over the priest, displaying his astonished face first from one side of the gilded shaft, then from the other.

The vicar removed the monstrance from the altar and, surrounded with blue clouds of incense, intoned:

“I stand at your door, oh Lord...”

“I stand at your door, oh Lord...” repeated the stronger voice of the congregation. The wave of people rippled between the choir and the great altar and beat against the door for an instant as it moved backward before surging forward. For a moment the space before the altar was empty. Then the human flood engulfed it; again it was empty, and again a wave so wide that its edges reached the side walls poured over the steps of the altar. The center of the church emptied again and the vicar was visible, flanked by the major and the magistrate. Then the human tide poured into the empty space again, swelling at a distance from the priest and his elderly companions.

Sometimes it seemed that the teeming sanctuary was a real wave, shrinking and retreating before the golden monstrance, as ages ago the stormy lake grew quiet under the foot of Christ.

Magda and her mother joined the procession. They moved forward several steps, but the crowd pushed them a few steps backward as it constantly surged forward and pulled back to the rhythms of hymns and the ringing of bells.

At that moment Magda heard a childish voice beside her:

“Go, Antek!”

“Rrr!” answered another boy, and with his head bent like a charging bull he threw himself into the thickest part of the crowd with his friend after him, pushing people aside with his hands like a diving frog.

“Rrr!” exclaimed a third voice a little farther on, and again the people began to separate as though someone were jostling them hard.

“Oh, hellions! Good heavens! Out, sinners, antichrists!” an old woman said in an undertone. “Why does such hooliganism go unsupervised, uncontrolled...”

A crowd of children filled Magda’s mind. Here was the blubbering boy who had thrown the pebble into her family’s garden; there were the ones who ran behind Krukowski’s sister’s wheelchair, and those who had so admired Mientlewicz’s top hat. Then there were the ones who could be seen every day on the branches of trees or the tops of fence posts, and others who wallowed in the dirt of the streets, waded in puddles with their pants legs rolled up to their knees, or took shelter under roof gutters in the pouring rain, fighting for the best place. All these were neglected children, and a thought came to Magda like a flash of lightning:

“I will establish an elementary school—here!” A warm tide of joy ran through her. “I can get at least a hundred children,” she told herself. “If each one pays even a ruble a month, I will have a hundred rubles a month, and that will cover expenses. And I can still help mama and send Zosia to Warsaw. Oh, thank you, Holy Mother, for inspiring me!”

“What is it, Magda?” whispered her mother, looking around at her.

“With me?”

“You are so radiant.”

“I am praying.”

Her mother wanted to commend her, but at that moment she noticed the former paralytic, who was supported by the doctor on one side and Krukowski on the other.

“Oh,” thought the doctor’s wife, “obviously the poor thing is taken with Krukowski and cannot contrive to hide it. Certainly he is older than she,” she sighed, “but he is well bred and wealthy... Let God’s will be done! I will neither force it nor forbid it.”

Magda, for her part, had just realized that she could not teach a hundred children by herself. In that case she would have to make do with fifty rubles a month. But whatever was to be done with the rest of the children who, no question about it, would flock to such a school?

“I know!” she told herself. “I will take Femcia as a partner, because she, unhappy creature, has often complained that she has no profession and is a burden to her parents. Oh, thank you, most holy Virgin! It is you who have sent me this idea!”

Chapter IV. Hearts in Ferment

Magda emerged from her reverie. She stood with her mother in the little cemetery beside the great church door. The procession turned back into the church and the people began to disperse. The dispenser of pharmaceuticals, the clerks, the notary's assistant and other less prominent young men sporting canes and umbrellas eyed the single ladies and made remarks in whispers. Not far away the blond young man in the postal uniform stood gloomily, waiting for someone.

Magda was not intimidated by these men. Their intrusive glances did not grate on her. How could such things concern her? After all, she was going to establish an elementary school. She wanted to make herself and her parents financially secure. Let these gentlemen stare, let them tease if they liked.

"Indeed, I am an independent woman," she thought, gratefully remembering how Miss Howard had labored to make women independent beings.

Her father came up, still supporting, along with Krukowski, the former paralytic.

"Ludwik—doctor—a little pity! I do not think I can take another step. I have lost all power of movement."

"No, dear lady, you must go home under your own power," answered the doctor. It was clear from Krukowski's expression that he would willingly have put his sister in the wheelchair and sent her home under the care of her maid.

The magistrate's family appeared in the great doorway, and behind them Mientlewicz. He had just put on his gleaming top hat, but on seeing the doctor's family he took it off again and began to approach them with graceful movements. But the moody young man in the postal uniform called to him:

"You, sir! You, sir!"

"I have no time!" Mientlewicz called back, caught off guard by this too-hearty greeting in front of so many people.

"But I have time, and I have business with you," replied the other man, seizing Mientlewicz by the arm.

No sunrise or sunset had ever been so purple as Eufemia's face at that moment. She hurried to Magda, took her arm and whispered:

"Let us walk on, my dear. I am afraid there will be a scene. That Cynadrowski..."

And they walked out of the gate, accompanied by the melancholy glances of Krukowski, who was left, along with the doctor, to escort his sister.

"What happened, Femcia?" Magda asked.

"Nothing... nothing... Please, talk to me," answered the magistrate's daughter.

“Oh, yes, and I even have something important to say to you,” said Magda.

“And I to you, but some other time... Has Mientlewicz proposed to you?”

“To me?” Magda asked in astonishment, stopping in the square. “What would he propose to me for?”

“So that you would marry him!”

“You are beyond everything, Femcia! As if I could think of marrying...”

“Not even of marrying Krukowski?” asked Eufemia.

“I could not think of marrying anyone,” Magda replied in a tone of such heartfelt sincerity that Eufemia could not keep from kissing her in the very center of town.

“What do you have to say to me, then? Did you leave someone in Warsaw?” asked Eufemia.

A delicate blush covered Magda’s face.

“My Femcia,” she answered, “I give you my word that I have no attachment to anyone... to anyone in the world. I only want to propose something to you. But I do not have time just now, so come to us after dinner.”

At that moment Mientlewicz, accompanied by the young fellow in the postal uniform, passed within a few yards of the ladies. It appeared that feelings were running high between the two men; they spoke so loudly that Magda heard snatches of their conversation.

“So you say that you do not?” asked the younger man.

“On my honor, no!” answered Mientlewicz.

Eufemia brooded. Then she laughed in an unnatural voice and spoke rapidly to Magda:

“Answer: yes or no?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Magda, puzzled.

“Yes or no?” Eufemia insisted, impatiently tapping her little foot.

“No, then,” Magda rejoined.

“I agree,” said Eufemia. “Men are miserable beings! Except for those who occupy modest positions,” she added, lightly sighing. “Anyway, be well!”

Magda was amazed. But the next minute her mind was so preoccupied with her plan for an elementary school that she forgot about Eufemia’s extraordinary behavior, and even about Eufemia herself.

At around three o’clock two gentlemen caught sight of each other from opposite ends of the street in front of the doctor’s house: Krukowski in a navy blue suit and Mientlewicz in a light one. In his fingers Krukowski held a small object covered protectively with paper; Mientlewicz carried a large paper-wrapped bundle under his arm. Both were equally distant from the doctor’s gate, and each stopped where he was.

Krukowski thought:

“I will wait until this boor goes in so I will not have to give way to him.”

And Mientlewicz said to himself:

“Why is he standing there, that snipe on skinny legs? I see that he is lugging something, probably for Magdalena. Let him unload his present first, and then we will see which of us is the better man.”

He began to read the signboard above the bakery, then to gaze at the plaque in the window of the barber-surgeon’s office. Finally he turned back and disappeared around the bend in the unpaved street.

“He sees me and retreats. Good!” thought Krukowski, and with a look of triumph he went in through the gate.

The Brzeskis had finished their Sunday dinner. The doctor was smoking a cheap cigar in the garden. The major was playing chess with the magistrate in the summer house. The doctor’s wife was taking her ease in a chair in the parlor, and Magda was walking around every room, impatiently waiting for Femcia. When she glanced through the open door to the garden, Krukowski suddenly stood before her, and with an extremely elegant bow handed her a small bouquet of roses. Several were white, two were tea roses, one was yellow, and one was deep purplish red.

“My sister hopes you will accept these flowers,” he said, executing graceful movements with his legs and leaning forward slightly.

A blush crept over Magda’s sallow face. She was so happy with the bouquet and so disarmed by the modesty of the gentleman who offered it that she almost forgot to murmur, “Thank you.”

“What diffidence! What delicacy,” she thought, and her heart began to beat faster.

The doctor’s wife brought a vase with water and helped Magda set the bouquet in a place of honor in the parlor. Then her mother left, and Krukowski was alone with Magda.

“How sad you were today as you stood near the confessional!” he said, looking her tenderly in the eye.

“I?” she replied, blushing again. “You saw me?”

“I had that pleasure, and even an incomparably greater one: it seemed to me that I shared your sadness.”

“Oh, no. Indeed, I was cheerful enough,” Magda assured him, not wishing him to discern that she was worried about her family.

“Perhaps it was that state of contemplation, then, to which our church is so conducive? Beautiful souls are often given to reverie.”

“What courtesy!” thought Magda, feeling grateful to the most elegant man in Iksinow.

Just then Mientlewicz, his face gleaming with perspiration, came into the garden with a vigorous step. At the sight of Magda he took the big parcel from under his arm and handed it to her.

“Real Torun gingerbread,” he said. “Please accept it, madam. It is a delicacy, and very healthy.”

Magda was confused, but Mientlewicz was even more so, for he noticed that Krukowski’s thin lips were forming a smile, and inferred that he had made a blunder.

He held the unfortunate gingerbread in his hand, not knowing what to do with it. His lip trembled, he stared, and his forehead perspired more profusely.

“How upset he is, poor man!” Magda thought. She took the gingerbread and said:

“Thank you very much. This is a lovely surprise, for I am very fond of it.”

The light of victory glittered in Mientlewicz’s eye, and that keen observer Krukowski thought, “An angel, not a woman. It will be she—or no one.”

Mientlewicz recovered his spirits too quickly and made yet another false move.

“It is a beautiful day,” he said, trying to edge Krukowski out of the conversation. “A very fine day, is it not, madam?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Perhaps we might stroll around the garden. The garden looks very pretty. I am at your service, madam,” said Mientlewicz without stopping for breath, ostentatiously offering Magda his arm.

This time Magda’s eyes widened with astonishment, and Krukowski, who was very perceptive, bit his lip.

“Oh!” Mientlewicz murmured involuntarily, sensing that he must have done something most improper. So he stood with his arm extended, not knowing whether to offer it or withdraw it, and extremely large beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

“Very well, let us go,” she answered, quickly taking his arm.

“Poor man, he is ill-mannered in company,” she thought. “What torments he must suffer!” And her compassionate heart began to beat faster, this time for Mientlewicz.

Then a lady’s gown rustled on the garden path. Eufemia hurried up, a little agitated at the sight of the two men, one of whom had been her admirer while the other should have been.

“Oh, bad Magda! Traitor!” she exclaimed. “You promised to wait for me. I have so much to tell you, and you are out for a walk with Mr. Mientlewicz?”

The ladies fell into each other’s embrace, and Mientlewicz took the opportunity to move far enough from Magda that she could not take his arm.

“These days it is the fashion to walk arm in arm only in church, not in the garden,” he thought unhappily, wishing every disaster he could think of on Krukowski.

The women took each other’s arms and began to walk at a sprightly pace. Krukowski was forced to turn his attention to the combatants at the chessboard, and Mientlewicz to follow his example.

Chapter V. A Partner

At the end of the garden, under the chestnut tree, stood a bench. Eufemia drew Magda to it.

“Well, tell me now,” she commanded, “what business do you have with me? We got rid of the gentlemen with no difficulty,” she added in a tone that betrayed dissatisfaction.

“Perhaps they are offended?” Magda asked apprehensively.

“You cannot be serious!” Eufemia retorted, gracefully extending her feet in their little shoes and fanning herself with a chestnut leaf. “Krukowski pretends that he is indifferent to me, so he must avoid us, and Mientlewicz is afraid to pay me attentions in Krukowski’s presence.”

“Are they both in love with you?” asked Magda.

“They, and others... That postal clerk who—you know, the one with the disagreeable name—is mad with jealousy. It is even said that... the vicar... But never mind. Tell me what you wanted to,” Eufemia finished.

“But, Femcia, it is a secret!”

“Have no fear. After all, whom could I tell?”

“Your mother...”

“Oh!” said Femcia in a way that meant that she did not share secrets with her mother.

Magda reflected for a moment, then said:

“You know—I am going to open an elementary school here.”

The chestnut leaf fell from Eufemia’s hands. She opened eyes as beautiful as the sky and pushed her small feet out still further.

“You, Magda?”

“I. What is wrong with that?”

“Mercy,” said Eufemia, lowering her voice. “We already have an elementary school teacher in town, and his wife, you see, weeds the garden and does the washing!”

“And what of it?”

“She works like a servant, and no one in good society has anything to do with her.”

Magda’s eyes flashed and an indignant flush appeared on her face.

“You know, Femcia, I am surprised to hear you say such a thing. Do you think my mother does not weed the garden or do washing? She herself washed out my wrapper.”

“It is different in your mother’s case. Everyone respects her.”

“People ought to respect a woman who works, and works so hard,” Magda said hotly. “Today it is the aspiration of every woman to work... to work as hard as she can, and not depend on parents or on a husband’s income.”

“So you do want to marry,” Eufemia remarked somberly.

“Not all! I swear to you, I only want to keep from being a burden to my parents, and to help Zosia finish her schooling in Warsaw. At any rate, I could not sit at home with nothing to do. I would burn with shame. The food I ate at my father’s and mother’s expense would choke me. And how could I look my friends who work for their living in the eye?”

Eufemia blushed and began to kiss Magda.

“You are emancipated!” she said. “Oh, I have heard a great deal about Mrs. Latter’s school, and I understand what you have said. I would like to be an independent woman, too, but... is it possible to be one in such an out-of-the-way place?”

“I am certain that it is.”

“Oh, do not think that I have been growing stagnant here,” said Eufemia. “I wanted to work as well. I even learned to embroider. But what do you think? When I told mama that I was going to sell my work, she had a fit!”

Eufemia sighed heavily, then continued:

“I wanted to give piano lessons to the daughter of the chief official of the county. But again mama made a scene, and from then on we have broken off relations with the family. Try to be emancipated around here and see what happens!”

“I will,” Magda retorted stubbornly.

“Do you think that I am not what you call emancipated?” said Eufemia more quietly but more fervently. “For example, when that... that postal clerk bows to me, I respond so discreetly that mama does not guess. I will tell you something more, but, Magda, this is a great secret...”

“You have heard mine.”

“I know, and I believe you,” replied Eufemia. “So listen: I am not only emancipated, I am a radical. Do you know what I do? I do not go to church with the prayer book, but I read Pascal’s *Pensees sur la religion*. I ordered it bound in black leather with a cross and gilt-edged pages, and I take it to church. Do you understand?”

Magda went cold. Today she herself, several hours earlier, had felt the nurturing care of the Holy Mother. But because there had been freethinkers (Miss Howard had been the first) among the independent women she had known, she did not challenge Eufemia.

“Perhaps you are displeased?” Eufemia asked, looking her in the eye.

"I respect your convictions," Magda answered. "Anyway, let us change the subject. I have something to propose to you. Let us be partners and establish an elementary school. I could not manage it alone."

Eufemia hesitated. "But, Magda, my dear," she answered, "what will the world say about this?"

Suddenly her face shone with energy and eagerness.

"Yes, indeed!" she said, giving Magda her hand. "I am your partner. It is done. I do not want to be eternally controlled. I do not want to haggle with mama over every penny for the most trifling purchase, over every bow to someone on the street. We will establish a boarding school. There are headmistresses of schools in society..."

"Not an elementary school?" Magda queried.

"Better a school for young women of good family. Many will come. I even say: tomorrow we will begin to search for quarters. We will live at the school, for I cannot endure it at home."

"Yes. A location is the first thing. We will take two spacious rooms..."

"And two small ones for ourselves," added Eufemia.

"We must buy benches like the ones at Mrs. Latter's school, so the girls will not hunch over or strain their eyes."

"And we will have all the walls elegantly papered," Eufemia put in. "Mientlewicz can supply us."

"Two blackboards... two chairs for the lecturers. Oh, the most important thing: drawings and specimens so the students may learn through direct sensory contact."

"I have very nice furniture for my room," said Eufemia.

"But still I forgot the most important thing: I must obtain permission from the authorities."

"Excellent! There will be a dreadful row with mama, but she will give in. I am certain that my father will support me," Eufemia said, giving Magda a hug. "To emancipation, yes?" she whispered in her friend's ear.

Just then the ladies heard a rustling outside the fence, as if someone were forcing his way through the shrubbery. Magda looked around fearfully and saw a flashing eye through the space between two pickets.

"Someone is there," whispered Eufemia, clutching Magda's arm.

"It must be the boys who are always throwing stones."

"No, ma'am," said a muffled voice from beyond the fence. "There are two letters for Miss Magdalena and one for Miss Eufemia," the voice continued with a quaver.

Two letters were shoved through the chink in the fence.

“Cynadowski!” Eufemia whispered into Magda’s ear, alternately turning pale and blushing.

“This one I will hand only to Miss Eufemia,” declared the voice from behind the fence.

Eufemia feverishly grabbed the third letter.

“What madness!” she exclaimed. “You will ruin my reputation.”

“You must pardon me. I am very unhappy,” answered the voice. “I will go away now.”

Both the women had gone pale and were trembling as though they had a fever.

“Did anyone see from the summer house?” Eufemia asked.

“The flowers shield it. But what a strange man!”

“Where is this letter from?” Eufemia fretted. “There is a stamp...a seal. Heavens! How awful I must look. If mama had come along just now, the cat would have been out of the bag.”

“Let us leave here,” said Magda.

She gave Eufemia her hand and led her stealthily along the fence, circling the house to her room. Since the major was raising a terrible hue and cry in the summer house, demanding rectifications and declaring that he had no intention of taking the castle, Magda felt certain that the new form of postal communication had not been noticed.

That was even more tranquilizing to Eufemia than soda water. She stood in front of a mirror, took a tiny powder box from her pocket and toned down her too-vivid blush.

“But what about this letter?” she said, tearing open the envelope. “There is no signature.”

“I am sure that he wrote it himself,” said Magda, looking over Eufemia’s shoulder as Eufemia began quietly reading the letter and commenting in an undertone.

“‘My idol...’ What next? ‘Madness hovers over me. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep, I neglect my responsibilities and at night I toss and turn in bed like Tantalus!’ Mythology, no less! ‘For a voice within tells me that you are not indifferent to me, madam. I have multifold evidence of this...’ What a fool! He has evidence? ‘Heavenly creature’—what presumption!—‘you broke off with Krukowski, and when we met in the square, your sweet glance made visible your passionate feelings...’ Oh, that is too much!” Eufemia burst out, closing the letter.

“Read on, now that you have begun.”

“‘So if now you turn away from me, you, my heaven, my earth, my air, my eternity, I must understand your behavior’—hear how he continually addresses me with such familiarity, this clerk—‘I must understand your behavior in this

way, that someone has basely slandered me. If the inspector general were to come here, the commissioner himself, or even the board of inquiry, I would not explain myself, for I come of a noble family for generations and I am proud in spirit, head unbowed. But before you, angel...'

"Ass!" Eufemia sniffed, folding up the letter a second time. But after a minute she began to read again:

"Let me take root in the earth, let sudden death strike me if at any time in my life I have detached a stamp from a letter, whether it was for a kopek or for ten kopeks. Perhaps, due to the unremitting absentmindedness of love, I have let some letter fall to the ground, and Josek or some postilion swept it out with the trash. But I never tainted my honor in any way, because I know what is due to my name and yours, imperial goddess..."

"Poor fellow!" Magda remarked.

"Say idiot instead. How dare he make his case to me in this way?"

"But he loves you."

"To love is permissible," Eufemia answered angrily. "It is my fate that they are all mad for me. But to write in such an intimate tone ... does he really think that I have paid him attentions?"

"You yourself said that you responded to his bows."

"Ah, yes! Once I even threw him a dead leaf. But that was alms, and he should have accepted it as such."

Magda felt a little pain for the poor man who knew better how to love than how to express it. She did not answer Eufemia, but began to open her own letters.

"Oh! From Miss Malinowska!" she said, skipping quickly through the text. "And here—from Ada Solska. She is in Zurich. My precious Ada!"

"She is the millionaire?" Eufemia asked, alive with interest.

There was a knock at the door.

Chapter VI. Two Rivals

Young ladies, please come to tea," said the doctor's wife, stepping into the room. "Is it polite to abandon our guests?"

"I received letters, mama," Magda answered. Eufemia tugged lightly at Magda's sleeve.

"Well, but the letters can be put aside," said her mother, "because the coffee will be cold. Mr. Krukowski's sister has arrived."

Magda and Eufemia went to the summer house. Inside, on a table with visitors sitting all around it, were coffee with cream, home-baked rolls, cheese with caraway seeds and several kinds of preserves. Krukowski's sister greeted Magda warmly and Eufemia coolly. Then, obviously continuing a conversation previously begun, she said:

"But why should he take lodgings or search for a position if he has a fortune of his own? I cannot take my money to my grave, and I will leave him enough to support a wife and bring up children..."

"Sister, may I pass you the sugar?" Krukowski interposed, looking as if someone were choking him.

"Then send him to Warsaw, madam. Let the fellow look around him. Let him get a fresh start," said the major, as clouds of smoke from his gigantic pipe enveloped the company.

"Thank you kindly for that advice, major," replied the former paralytic, beating back the smoke with an embroidered handkerchief. "I remember his last excursion to Warsaw..."

"Perhaps you would like to put some jam on your roll, sister?" Krukowski interrupted, looking ill at ease.

"Thank you, Ludwik," his sister replied. "It was in 1866. He wanted more than anything to go to Warsaw, so I gave him two thousand zlotys. In a few days they drained him, so he wanted to win back what he had lost. I had to pay out six thousand!"

"Sister..."

"Do not interrupt, because this very incident attests to the nobleness of your nature. When the young rascal returned to the village after this affair, he fell at my feet—"

"Sister, please!" moaned the young rascal, now forty-five.

"He cried like a child, he swore that he would never go away from home again, and he has stuck to his word, major!"

"Because you never give him money, so he stays put," retorted the major.

"Why give him money?" the old lady asked in wonder. "Is he in need of anything?"

Krukowski turned gray in the face, but Mientlewicz looked smug.

“It is the eternal history of men, that they are taken captive by women!” the major expostulated. “She ties the fellow to her apron strings for a dozen years or more and she saps his energy. Better to give him something, give him something out of hand, and let him learn to rely on himself, not on your fortune.”

“Oh, yes! So he can come to ruin before your very eyes!” exclaimed the lady.

“Nobody comes to ruin before people’s eyes. In fact, they will help him shake off the last traces of the apron strings you have wound around his neck,” shouted the major.

Krukowski was ready to expire, and the entire company was so at a loss that the doctor tried to steer the conversation in another direction by saying:

“Mr. Mientlewicz had no fortune, but he is creating his own business.”

“And with the help of good people!” added Mientlewicz, patting the doctor on the shoulder. “Yes, people made me what I am! The good doctor here always told me: go to work for yourself, because your powers of thought will be completely destroyed by this clerical work at the county offices.”

“Not much remained even then,” muttered the major, viciously scraping his pipe with a piece of wire.

“You had the knack for business, so you could abandon office work,” the magistrate remarked.

Mientlewicz seized on that point.

“I had the knack, without question. But good luck and good people brought it to the fore. I remember—” he began to elaborate amid the general silence—“that I was sitting in front of the logbook at the office, and Mr. Bielinski came in and said to the sequesteror, ‘I’ll be hanged if I wouldn’t sell my sorrel mares for four hundred rubles if I could find a buyer.’ I heard that. The next day Mr. Czerniawski was in the office, and he said to one of the assistants: ‘I would give six hundred rubles for Bielinski’s sorrel mares, I like them so much!’

“I heard that. So when he went out, I ran after him and said: ‘Squire, will you give me five hundred and fifty rubles for the mares?’

“‘I will,’ he said.

“‘On the table?’

“‘On the table.’

“‘Word of honor?’

“‘Word of honor.’

“Then I ran to Eisenman, promised him twenty rubles’ interest for one day, got the money and went to Bielinski.

“‘Sir,’ I said, ‘will you sell the sorrel mares for four hundred and fifty rubles?’

“‘Sure as God made you, my man,’ he said. ‘But are you putting me on? You county hacks...’

“I showed him the money. He took it. He gave me the horses and threw in fifteen rubles for my trouble. Then I gave the driver a ruble and off we went to Czerniawski. Well, the squire bought the mares, but I lost ten rubles, since he only paid five hundred and forty rubles. He said the deal smelled of profiteering. But the upshot was that Bielinski made thirty-five rubles, Czerniawski saved sixty, Eisenman got twenty, and I got eighty-five rubles for one day’s work!

“Then everyone was cross with me, the Jew and the two gentlemen. But I had a nest egg, and when I began to operate my business, Jews and everyone came to me, because they all knew that they would profit by dealing with me, though I would not shortchange myself.”

“Pity you didn’t live in my day,” observed the major. “I would have made you the quartermaster of my battalion. But for buying those mares that way I would have given you forty lashes, not forty rubles.”

“Ha! Too bad, major!” answered Mientlewicz, looking around proudly. “Those were older times; these times are different. Other countries, other customs.” And he laughed at his own wit.

The teatime refreshments were eaten and drunk. The guests dispersed throughout the garden. Eufemia whispered something to her father, the magistrate. Krukowski made his way to Magda, who had been left by herself for a moment, and stood near her in a posture of painful humility, as if his back hurt. He whispered agitatedly:

“What contempt you must feel for me, Miss Magdalena!”

Magda was startled.

“I? Good heavens! Why? You are so good, so considerate.”

“But this demeaning relationship to my sister... even Mientlewicz laughs at it. And to be defended by the major, who sometimes makes light of me so that I quite... But look at it from my point of view: could I demand satisfaction from an old man or abandon a sick sister? This everlasting state of childish dependence is insufferable! I feel that people judge me harshly, but what am I to do?”

He spoke breathlessly, wringing his delicate hands and struggling to keep from weeping.

“Is it true, madam, that I am ridiculous, incompetent?”

Tears filled Magda’s eyes. Carried away by a kind of daring that was novel to her, she gave him her hand and pressed his.

“Do not distress yourself,” she said. “We women understand heroic actions that the world does not acknowledge.”

And moreover, if by sacrificing a few years of her life she could have extricated Krukowski from the situation that required such heroism, she would have done it.

In an unlucky moment Mientlewicz came toward them with a stick in his hand. Krukowski barely had time to whisper:

“I will never forget as long as I live... as long as I live...”

And he kissed Magda’s hand tenderly.

“Mr. Krukowski! Your sister wants you,” exclaimed Mientlewicz.

Krukowski moved away, throwing a soulful glance at Magda, and Mientlewicz came up to her. He looked very grave.

“Am I really doing something improper?” he began. “A minute ago the major called me a yokel.”

“I... heard nothing,” Magda answered uncomfortably.

Mientlewicz seemed genuinely worried. He sat on a bench beside Magda, tapping the tips of his spats with a stick, and said:

“Oh, madam, I know that I am a yokel! My mother was a shopkeeper, I had no education, so people scoff at me and call me a bumpkin, especially the gentry. Do you think that I do not see it? Oh, how I feel it! Many times I would have cut out a piece of my flesh to have such pleasant, engaging airs as Krukowski. He is a gentleman among gentlemen; I was a pauper among paupers. He has time to stand in front of the mirror; I often cannot eat or drink in peace.”

He stopped speaking. He was perspiring and breathing heavily.

“Miss Magdalena,” he said with a pleading look, “do not think badly of me. I ask for nothing from you, I swear to God. You have been to such a school! I would only like to look at you sometimes, because when I look at you it does me good. And if I ever annoy you unwittingly—oh, what can I say? I would rather break a leg than offend you.”

The intense emotion in this speech filled Magda with compassion. Without a word she gave Mientlewicz her hand and looked him in the eye so sympathetically that his face brightened, and he was even a little surprised.

Then Magda’s mother summoned her.

“Poor man, so high-minded, so uncultured!” Magda thought as she walked away from Mientlewicz. “What I would give to put him at ease and convince him that not everyone judges only by appearances!”

The guests began to disperse. Eufemia was out of sorts. Krukowski brooded; Mientlewicz looked somber. At the gate the major was arguing with the magistrate about the next day’s weather. On the street, Krukowski’s sister set up a cry that her wheelchair was turning over. Finally all was quiet.

Left to herself at last, Magda began reading her letters. Miss Malinowska wrote that Eugene Arnold, Mrs. Latter’s second husband, had set aside a great

deal of money for Helena and Kazimierz, and that he intended to leave America and settle in Warsaw with his wife and son. She also mentioned that the old squire, Mielnicki, had been stricken with apoplexy at the sight of Mrs. Latter's remains. At present he was living in the country, deeply depressed, only alluding every now and then to the dead woman's children.

She concluded the letter with a request that Magda notify her immediately if she wanted to resume her work as a classroom teacher after the long vacation, since there were many candidates for the position.

Magda decided that she would not take the post Miss Malinowska had offered. Why should she take it? Why, she would open a school here, and in that way support herself and help her parents.

Ada Solski informed Magda with great delight that in Zurich she was taking courses in natural science that kept her very busy. Indeed, she was convinced that the purpose of her life was to be a botanist, and that in that work she would find true happiness. She added that Helena Norska was living in an Italian convent, but that it was not yet certain whether she would become a nun or return to the world.

The greater part of the letter concerned Kazimierz Norski. He was also staying in Zurich, studying social sciences. He was an unbelievably serious, hard-working man, gifted, possessed of great intentions. As far as Ada could allow herself to speculate about his plans, he envisioned a complete reform of the position of women. He must accomplish that; he must do it in memory of his unfortunate, sainted mother, who had lost her life in a struggle for independence.

Kazimierz hardly talked with Ada about his ingenious plans, only about botany, which she explained to him. But he spoke of his aspirations to other students, and the female students in particular admired him. Unfortunately Ada had not been present on those occasions and did not even know any students, since she found it uncomfortable to leave her house. But she knew all about Kazimierz's triumphs because he himself informed her of them.

Magda read Ada's letter several times and finally placed it in an elegant little medicine chest. She was agitated, distracted. For an hour she walked around the garden under the stars, then finally sighed and return to her room.

As she lay down she saw, almost in a dream, Krukowski in a navy blue suit and Mientlewicz in a light one. The one (exactly as in reality) wore a Panama hat, the other a new top hat. Both looked grieved. Both pleaded for her compassion.

And Magda grieved for them: for the one because he was so sensitive, for the other because his mother had been a shopkeeper, and for both of them because they were very unhappy. What she would give to help them regain their peace of mind!

As her sympathy for them grew, the images of both men seemed to draw closer and closer to her. The light suit blended with the navy one, the top hat with the Panama, and the two men became one.

Magda raised her eyes to his face and saw—Kazimierz. She was so terrified at the sight that she woke, and for a long time could not sleep.

Chapter VII. Dreams

Three days of rain gave Iksinow a gloomy aspect. Armies of gray clouds advanced from west to east. They were so dense that people could hardly remember the colors of the sky, and so low that some seemed to be impaled on the church steeples, or to weave themselves among the branches of old lime and chestnut trees.

The major put on his long boots and hooded overcoat and looked like a guard in a sentry box. The magistrate was almost invisible under his umbrella, and was only recognizable because his trousers were rolled up around his ankles. Mientlewicz wore a southwester and such high boots that they seemed jarringly out of proportion to the size of the village.

Fortunately, no one saw them. Instead of paying visits everyone sat at home, for no elegant lady could walk along the street while water from all the roofs trickled onto the sides of it and something dark as chocolate and thick as jam was flowing down the middle. Only in a few places on the square were there large, glittering puddles instead of mud. Little boys splashed in troughs and wash tubs there, enlivening the gloomy town with their smiles and cries.

Because Krukowski's sister begged him, for the sake of her attachment to him, not to expose himself to the weather, he also stayed at home, fighting his boredom by looking out the window in the daytime and in the evenings giving the gardener permission to rub his aching muscles with spirit of formic acid.

Krukowski's sister explained to him that her rheumatism was flaring up, and anyway Krukowski did not resist, since he himself felt twinges of pain in his legs and a dull ache in his lower back. In his thoughts he roamed around the doctor's house, where Magda had shut herself into her room and was reviewing courses for her school, or writing something on sheets of paper and tearing them up.

And because Krukowski was completely unable to hazard a guess as to what Magda was doing, his frustrated imagination shifted to the other end of the town, where the magistrate's family lived. He knew how they would be occupying themselves. The magistrate would without fail have made his way out of the house to a gathering of friends; his wife would be sleeping; and the beautiful Eufemia would either be reading the popular editions of the works of Comte and Darwin or playing the piano.

Krukowski remembered with a bitter smile that in days not very long past, Eufemia had accompanied him on the piano as he played the violin, and her mother had not ordered lights to be brought into the room, because, she said, she liked music best in the twilight.

Where was that music? That twilight? Where were those feelings? But there was nothing to regret. Magda was a thousand times more alluring than Eufemia, who moreover appeared to be a coquette. Had he not seen the glances she threw at Mientlewicz and even Cynadrowski?

“Oh, the hearts of women!” he whispered.

He rose from the window seat, opened the mahogany box that held his violin, and took the instrument from under its little embroidered coverlet. He rubbed the bow with resin, touched the strings with it, and gave one of the pegs a turn. A moment later his delicate fingers brought forth the strains of a barcarole.

He played and played, shifting from one foot to the other, his left palm and his head trembling, his dreaming eyes fixed on a cabinet in a corner of the room. Then the door open quietly and his sister stood on the threshold. Krukowski stopped playing.

“Am I disturbing you?” asked the crippled lady, leaning on her cane. “How long it has been since you have played! Since the days of duets with... the magistrate’s daughter. I am only a little surprised that your first selection was this barcarole. Do you still remember—”

“Oh, must you say that, sister?” he interrupted indignantly. “That was... an involuntary farewell to old dreams which today I can hardly believe I cherished once.”

“Play a song to welcome the next dream, then. Only I beg you, let it be the last such welcome,” she added soberly, “for you are not so young as you were. Remember, if you do not marry this year, I will not speak to you. It is not even healthy...”

“Ah, dear sister!” he broke in.

Again he assumed a classic pose, shook his head, put one foot forward and struck the strings with the bow. A melody flowed from them:

*If when the sun rises
I could soar with the lark...*

“Yes! Yes!” his sister chimed in. “Magda is the lark. But, my Ludwik,” she added after a moment, “when you have finished, play another piece for yourself, and then no more. My head aches a little, and music is not good for your nerves.”

She went out, tapping her cane, and immediately began scolding the maid.

“Good heavens!” Krukowski thought despairingly, tucking the violin into its case. “What would I give to have my sister remain in the same frame of mind for fifteen minutes! She herself ordered me to play the violin, she herself commended me for beginning to play again, and a minute later she will not allow me to fray my nerves with music! Good God!”

At last sunny weather returned to the half-drowned village, and the streets were dry enough that ladies could be seen walking along them, holding their skirts above the mud. Among those who ventured from their houses was Magda, who first mailed some letters at the post office, then went to the magistrate’s house.

“Oh, heavens!” cried the magistrate’s wife, wringing her hands with dramatic flair. “But Femcia left us half an hour ago, saying that she was going to you. Has something d-dreadful happened?”

With some difficulty Magda explained that she and Femcia must have passed each other on the way, and that Femcia was undoubtedly waiting for her at her house. The magistrate’s wife, however, was not quickly reassured, so Magda promised that she herself would conduct Femcia back to her worried mother.

“For you see, deah Magda,” the magistrate’s wife said as Magda was leaving, “a young girl is like a fragile flower: any strong breath of wind may d-damage her, to say nothing of evil tongues. That is why I am always begging Femcia, on my knees, my deah, not to go to town by herself. With her beauty, with her position in society... Keep well, deahest child!”

Eufemia really was at Magda’s house, but she wanted to meet Magda without a long wait, so she stepped out again in the hope of intercepting her. Then she was seized by a desire to stay out in the fresh air, and thanks to that, Magda met her between the post office and the square. No doubt by accident, Cynadrowski happened to be standing in front of the post office without his cap. He had one hand in his pocket and the other over his heart, and was looking with an expression of speechless delight at the beautiful Eufemia as she shielded her lovely little feet, now set off by very high Hungarian shoes, from being splattered with mud.

The ladies greeted each other heartily and began speaking at the same time.

“You know, I ordered the wallpaper for our school from Mientlewicz.”

“And I sent our request for permission to open the school to the ministry directors.”

“By post? You should have gone with me. Mr.—the clerk would have given us faster service.”

“You were at the post office?” Magda asked in spite of herself, adding hastily: “Oh, dear, you spoke to Mientlewicz about the wallpaper...”

“But I made him swear not to mention it to anyone. Not a word. At any rate, he will think I want it for a birthday present for father. Where shall we go, to my house or yours?” asked Eufemia, turning toward the doctor’s house.

“We will go to my house,” answered Magda, “But first, do you know what? We will go to a carpenter who is a patient of my father’s, and we will find out how much the benches for our school will cost.”

“Oh, yes... Indeed... Well, let us go to the carpenter, though I warn you that the side streets must be terribly muddy,” said Eufemia, looking at the street by which Krukowski usually made his way to town. In a moment she added, in a tone of icy indifference: “What, has Mr. Krukowski not been at your house?”

“No.”

“Aha! Father said that the day before yesterday Ludwik played his violin. He played the barcarole that we used to play together. He was recalling old times.”

“He was in love with you?” asked Magda, looking out for dry places in the muddy lane.

“Was he in love with me! He was simply mad about me, as, for that matter, they all were. But he is a creature of whim and likes to flit from flower to flower, so I took him on trial.”

It occurred to Magda that Eufemia was not giving a very precise description of her relations with Krukowski, and she was pained for her friend. But not wanting to think badly of her, she decided to forget about the speech she had just heard. She did so without difficulty because the road was becoming more and more muddy. Eufemia observed:

“My dear, we will not cross here.”

“Oh, but you see, there is the carpenter’s house. We will cross through that yard,” answered Magda, hurrying to the gate, which hung only by one hook.

“Good heavens! Magda, what are you doing?” called Eufemia. “Even if I were headmistress of the grandest school, I would not walk among such hovels to get to it.”

The carpenter’s house was old and dilapidated. The roof was overgrown with moss. The house had settled so far into the ground that it was possible to enter from the street through a large window without raising one’s foot very high. The rhythmic pounding and grating of a hammer and saw could be heard in the main room, together with the whining voice of an eight-year-old girl who was rocking her two-year-old brother in her arms.

In a yard heaped with boards and strewn with wet sawdust, the carpenter stood next to a small catch basin with a crane for ornament. He was talking with a Jew whose smock was very dark in front, very faded in back, and very muddy on the bottom. Through the open window of the house a newly made coffin could be seen. A haggard-looking young fellow with a liberal sprinkling of chips in his hair was beating nails into it.

Magda shivered. Eufemia covered her nose with an extraordinarily pretty handkerchief. The Jew and the carpenter, whose backs were turned to the young women, continued their conversation.

“I will give you eight zlotys, Mr. Gwizdalski, and I myself will take the rest,” said the Jew. “And it will be better that way, because if you take the money, I will not see a penny.”

“It will never do,” the carpenter answered. “Tell me yourself: whoever heard of one of the Mosaic confession carrying away a Catholic coffin? I would not even get absolution.”

“And for my money you will get absolution?”

“Ah! You have already had your money twice over,” muttered the carpenter, spitting at the trough.

“Good day, carpenter!” called Magda.

The two men noticed the young ladies and broke off their conversation. The Jew vanished into the entryway of the house, and the carpenter approached the fence. Under his dirty shirt his curved, sunken rib cage was visible, and the veins in his hands were distended.

“We came to ask you about the price of school benches,” Magda said. “You know: the sort of benches that children sit on.”

“I know. A desk for writing, and the bench in front of it.”

“Exactly. And they must be painted black or yellow, as you like. How much would such a bench for four children cost?” Magda asked.

The carpenter brooded.

“I don’t know,” he answered, hanging his head. “About fifteen rubles.”

“Jesus! Mary! Carpenter—sir—for twenty-five benches we would have to pay nearly four hundred rubles, then!”

“Twenty-five,” the carpenter repeated, beginning to tousle his hair. “I don’t know. Maybe it will come to ten rubles apiece.”

“Why, Magda, there is no use continuing this conversation,” Eufemia put in impatiently. “We will go to Holtzmacher and he will do it for us.”

“To the Jew?” asked the carpenter, looking at her with his hollow eyes. “He will manage to turn a profit as well. Well, if there are twenty-five benches, that is... that is five rubles each. I will not take less.”

The ladies looked at each other, exchanged a few words in French and went on their way, announcing that they would think the matter over and return. The carpenter leaned heavily on the fence and looked after them; the Jew poked his head out of the hall, obviously wishing to finish their conversation. He resumed it, however, by asking:

“Well, well... so the doctor’s daughter and the magistrate’s daughter want benches. What for? Didn’t they tell you?”

“What tricksters our tradesmen are!” Eufemia complained, again affording passersby a view of her Hungarian shoes. “Just then he wanted fifteen rubles, then ten, then five. He intended to cheat us—let me see, by how much? By two hundred and fifty rubles! Oh, father was right when he said that our tradesmen... Look, Magda, there goes the man from the notary’s office.”

The man from the notary’s office made a charming bow and stopped in the street to admire Eufemia’s shoes.

“That carpenter is a poor man,” replied Magda. “He speaks from such poverty that he does not know what he is saying. You know, Femia, we must

put the matter of benches aside for now and look for a building. I hear that there are two very large rooms in the old inn.”

“But, my dear, not today,” Eufemia answered in a determined voice. “I would die if I had to look at this muck in the streets any longer.”

“You have been for a walk, ladies?” said Mientlewicz, coming suddenly around the corner on which stood the house of Eisenman, the best-known dealer in groceries, hardware and yard goods in Iksinow.

“Say rather from Dante’s inferno!” exclaimed Eufemia. “What awful mud... what terrible people! Please give me a hand. Oh, not that way! Only the tips of the fingers, to help me along. Walk on, Magda, and Mr. Mientlewicz will show us the way, because—oh... oh... Mr. Mientlewicz, please support me!”

And the beautiful Eufemia, making her shoes more and more clearly visible, gave Mientlewicz the ends of her fingers as in the minuet. Sometimes she tottered even when the ground was quite level, and Mientlewicz glowed with delight, feeling the pressure of her little fingers on his chubby ones.

They walked onto the square and at that very moment Krukowski ran out of the apothecary shop, waving his white hat and calling, “Good day, ladies! What luck!”

“Ahhh... I would not have expected you to be so discourteous, Mr. Mientlewicz. Please give a hand to Miss Magdalena... You see what an unfortunate path she chose,” said Eufemia in an undertone. And she must have had a feeling of triumph as she saw her order speedily carried out. For in the twinkling of an eye Mientlewicz stood beside Magda, and with skill equal to his devotion began to help her pick her way on pebbles to the other side of a large puddle.

“Mr. Krukowski, please conduct Miss Eufemia!” said Mientlewicz to Krukowski, who was approaching the magistrate’s daughter with an astonished air.

“Perhaps it would be an imposition?” said the lovely Eufemia, blushing. “In that case I will go around, or ask Mr. Mientlewicz.”

“Oh, madam!” whispered the urbane bachelor, and, gracefully touching his hat, he began to lead Eufemia over the pebbles.

If Krukowski had had any doubts about the treachery of the masculine heart, during that brief crossing he reached a state of certainty on the subject. He had left the apothecary’s for Magda, he had dashed to the square to be near her, and had set his heart on conducting her through the puddle.

He suffered greatly as he saw Mientlewicz offer his hand to his idol. Reluctantly he approached Eufemia, to whom he had been indifferent for six weeks. And yet, when he glanced inadvertently at Eufemia’s little Hungarian boots, when he noticed the dainty trim around the hem of her skirt, when the apprehensive maiden involuntarily squeezed his hand several times during the crossing, Krukowski returned pressure for pressure. Indeed, with each stepping

stone he himself began to press her hand, feeling more and more tenderness overwhelm him at the sight of her shoes and the snowy whiteness of her flounces.

True, when they both found themselves on firm ground, Krukowski boiled with anger on seeing Mientlewicz speak to Magda with a very intimate air. But as he accompanied Eufemia to the doctor's house, his irritation did not lessen his admiration of her heightened color or keep him from melting under her glances.

And it was no wonder that when both ladies hurried onto the porch together a little ahead of their escorts, Eufemia whispered to Magda:

“Krukowski and I have made it up.”

“Oh, thank God!” Magda exclaimed in a tone of such sincere joy that Eufemia first looked at her incredulously, then threw her arms around her neck.

“How dear and good you are, Magda!” she said. “It is perfectly natural that Mientlewicz is mad for you!”

Chapter VIII. A Room in the Inn

Within a few days Magda, being unable to induce Eufemia to look around for a location for the school, went to the old inn by herself. It was a long brick building under a tile roof, with stables and several large rooms. There was room in the stables for forty horses or more, and each room was large enough for more than a dozen people to dance in the evenings. At one time it had been cheerful and full of people; today it was empty. Only the very poorest travelers stopped here, and even they did so rarely.

In the big stable, where now there were no racks or mangers but many holes in the roof, Magda saw a hen rummaging in a little clump of garbage, then a yellow cur who was lying against a wall but growled and ran away at the sight of Magda, and last a ragged Jew who for a promise of fourpence undertook to search out the owner of the inn. The door of one room stood wide open, so Magda went in to wait for the hostess.

Suddenly her heart beat faster. From behind the high door that connected that room to the neighboring one—or divided them—she heard a spirited conversation. Two voices reached her: a woman's pretty contralto and an unnaturally stifled male voice.

"If you love me at all, you will not do that, Franek!" the woman said pleadingly.

"Sure and I will!" said the man belligerently. "That jade will learn once and for all what it is to offend an artist who with loftiness of soul, subtlety of feeling, talent—"

"I beg you, Franek, go tomorrow, when you are calmer."

"No! I shall descend on them today—directly—immediately—like a thunderbolt."

There was the noise of something like a scuffle, then the soft sound of embraces, and the woman spoke again:

"All right. Today, then! But if you love me even a little, first do as I ask you."

"Tell me... though it will not ward off catastrophe..."

"Go to her in an hour. Give me your word: only in an hour, Franek."

"Think, woman! How can I go 'only in an hour' when I have no watch?" the man hissed as if he were being smothered.

"Then do this: go to town, to the church, where you so beautifully recited 'In Switzerland' yesterday."

"Quite a speech, with such a frog in my throat!"

"You spoke exquisitely, I tell you. Go there, then come back, and in the meantime I will prepare your dinner."

“With what?” the man asked in a tone of wonder.

“We have a zloty and seven pence. I will buy eggs, rolls... There is salt and tea.”

“And sugar?”

“Perhaps the hostess will lend us some. Just go, and then you will do as you like, but after dinner.”

“I will teach this harridan a lesson! I will give her a shaking! I will write about it in the newspapers!”

“Oh, why did I tell you?”

More kisses, then a rustling as if someone were getting dressed. After a moment the man went out into the hall, declaiming in a hoarse voice:

“The shaggy chest to the pure, comforting bosom...”

The owner of the hostel, an elderly Jewish woman wearing a silk wig, appeared on the threshold of the room where Magda was waiting.

“Oh! A young lady here with us! What are you doing here, miss? Are you well?” she said by way of greeting.

In a few words Magda explained to her that someone wanted to rent the two large rooms in the inn for an entire year, and she was there to look over the premises.

“Certainly, if you please, miss,” the hostess replied. “There are five rooms. A prince, a dignitary could stay here for a whole year. Even Mr. Bielinski stayed here.”

As was soon apparent, one room in these princely apartments was a cowshed, another had no floor, and a third was without doors or windows. The only ones worth renting were the one in which Magda had waited for the landlady and the neighboring one from which she had heard voices.

“Is it possible to look at that room there?” asked Magda, feeling the fear of meeting an unknown person struggle against irresistible curiosity.

“Why not? Please, miss. That is the most beautiful room! Mr. Bielinski stayed there.”

“But a couple is occupying it,” Magda put in.

“It makes no difference. They are actors; they are going to perform here for a little. They are going to present some little comedies. Everyone wants to live, my dear young lady. Oh, please come in,” said the landlady, opening the door.

Magda stood aghast. In the center of the room she saw a young woman covering her eyes with a handkerchief that was none too clean and sobbing her heart out. The sight of tears always pained Magda, but this time it jarred her to the depths of her soul. She thought the woman who was crying so must be very unhappy, and it seemed to her that she already knew this stranger, that she was

like a kinswoman, and that she ought to comfort her. So she hurried to her and took her hands.

“What is it?” she asked. “What has happened?”

The old Jewess withdrew into the hall, closing the door behind her.

The unknown woman was frightened. But as she looked at Magda’s sweet face and eyes full of sympathetic tears, she regained her composure. She was a young, slender blond with a wan complexion and blue eyes. She looked at Magda and answered with childlike simplicity:

“Alas, we are in serious difficulty, ma’am! We wanted to give a concert here. But Franek—that is, Ryszard—had to leave his cello at the place we came from, and here we cannot get a piano.”

“Indeed, there are pianos here.”

“I know, and an hour ago I was even with the magistrate’s wife to ask for the loan of a piano. But she—” the young woman began to sob again—“but she... she ordered me out of the room.”

“The magistrate’s wife?” repeated Magda, astonished.

“Oh, what a heartless woman! Why, it is not fitting to drive even a beggar out of the house that way, and that is not all,” the stranger said, crying. “I did something foolish: in the first rush of my resentment, I told Franek, that is, Ryszard, who is terribly offended with her. Of course, if he speaks even a word to her the concert will be off, and then I do not know what we will do.”

Magda embraced her and, seating her on the ragged sofa, began to speak:

“My dear, do not distress yourself. There will be a concert. There must be. I will lend you our piano, my father will find you a hall in the refectory, and all will be well. I am Magdalena Brzeska, the daughter of a local doctor. I want to start a little school...”

“And I am Marta Owsinska, but I am known as Stella,” her new acquaintance replied. “I sing, and Fran—Ryszard—accompanies me on the piano. Then he plays the violincello and I accompany him. Things are going badly with us, though it used to be better for him, for he was famous for his recitations.”

At that moment the door opened with a rattle and in came a man wearing a dark, threadbare overcoat and a neckerchief. When he reached the center of the room and took off his broad-brimmed hat, Magda saw a pale face, black eyes and thick locks of dark hair falling onto the neckerchief. He walked through the room with a tragic air, catching sight of Magda immediately and toying with a soiled glove. Finally he stood still, looked at Stella with burning eyes, and asked in a choked voice:

“*Qui est cette demoiselle?*”

“A poor teacher,” Magda answered without knowing exactly why.

“Oh, then you have come to the right place!” the man hissed.

Stella rose from the sofa and said hastily:

“Franek... this is the daughter of a doctor in the town.”

“Oh?” he rejoined carelessly.

“She will lend us a piano.”

“Oh!” he hissed again.

“She says that she will arrange for the concert.”

“Ah!” and he made Magda a low bow with a hand on his heart as if he were on the stage. The singer, a little embarrassed, introduced him:

“Mr.—Mr. Franciszek Kopenszteter.”

“Sataniello, actually,” the man said hoarsely. “Sataniello, pianist, cellist, professor of speech, and poet famous in his time.”

He bowed again, describing an arc in the air with one foot, and since Magda was looking at him in wonder, he continued in the same vein:

“But do not be troubled, madam: I am capable of friendship. At any rate,” he added with a sigh, “I never have been proud, and am even less so now that I must go roaming around the provinces. The provinces; they are the grave of talent. My voice grew harsh, the Jews took my cello, and inspiration visited me less and less frequently. What—” he whirled around suddenly on Stella—“is there a dinner? Irony! Sarcasm! There is no dinner! A few eggs for two people!”

Magda looked at Stella’s frightened face, nodded to the great artist and whispered to his companion:

“Come with me.”

When the two women found themselves in the stable, she began to coax and admonish Stella to borrow a few rubles from her.

“Repay me after the concert,” she said as if it were she who was the supplicant.

The singer was worried at first, but in the end she agreed to accept the loan. A few minutes later, as Magda passed by the artists’ door in search of the owner of the inn, she heard Stella’s joyful laugh and a light stamping as if two people were dancing a waltz.

“They are as playful as children,” she thought.

Magda had gone through a good deal in her life, or so she thought. But she had never found herself in such a state of nervous excitement as at that moment. If anyone heard, would they believe that she, Magda Brzeska, whom Miss Howard had now and then called a child, was going to take it upon herself to arrange for a concert? A real concert, with real artists?

“Stella and Sataniello,” she whispered. “Amusing names, but they sound well. She petite, he handsome in every aspect... even fascinating. And why did he look at me that way?”

She turned quite red, perhaps because she was walking rapidly, perhaps at the thought of how he had looked at her. He had eyed her strangely; he was not called Sataniello for nothing.

“I would not like to meet him in the forest,” she thought, knitting her eyebrows.

When all was said and done, she was full of joy. She imagined the whole village watching her, imagined herself not just running but flying as high as the clouds, like the dove she saw at that very moment. The matter was urgent to her; she was infused with a sense of its importance. She, an unworthy, insignificant person, would arrange a concert for two impecunious people, two great artists, who had nothing to eat. Providence had called her to this work, as fishermen and publicans had once been called to spread the gospel.

When she reached home she dropped into her father’s study. The doctor was seeing patients and looked on with surprise as Magda, her face aflame, brushed the next patient aside in order to speak to him.

“What is it?” he asked with some misgiving.

Magda began to tell him in an undertone, rapidly and not very coherently, about Stella, Sataniello, the refectory, the piano, the concert, Krukowski, her mother and Mientlewicz. A few minutes elapsed before the doctor understood the drift, questioned her and learned that she wanted to lend the piano to persons by the names of Sataniello and Stella.

“Ask your mother for it, then.”

“No, papa. Only you can speak of this to mama. Finally, you must obtain permission for them to use the refectory.”

“To use the refectory?”

“I told you—for the concert.”

“What concert?” the doctor asked in despair.

“I told you, papa: Stella’s and Sataniello’s. They are staying in the old inn. Go and meet them right away and you will see how poor they are. I tell you, they had nothing for dinner today. But I have no more time now. I am going to Mr. Krukowski...”

The doctor put his hands to his head.

“Wait—you are mad—”

“Honestly, papa, I have no time, for I must still speak to Mr. Mientlewicz, and I am very much afraid for mama to find out too soon, for she would forbid me.”

Her father took her arm to detain her.

“Tsk! tsk! tsk! ‘I have no time!’” he teased her. “But tell me, now: what benches are these that you have ordered from the carpenter?”

“You see, papa,” she said more quietly than before, “Femcia and I want to establish a school here.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows and spread his arms.

“Why a school? Have you nothing to eat at home, that you want to take bread from other people?”

“Is that all you have to say?” said Magda, amazed. “So you and mama work, Zdzislaw works, and I am going to sit idly by? Really, I am withering from boredom and depression because I am doing nothing.”

“And what do you need work for?”

“So that is the way it is: I am not an independent person, I have no responsibilities, I have no right to be of service to society? I cannot make my contribution to the common good, to progress and the happiness of the younger generation, to the elevation of women from their degrading position?”

Her trembling voice, her gray eyes brimming with tears, went to the doctor’s heart. He took her chin in two fingers, kissed her and said:

“Well, you shall have the piano, the refectory, the school. Only stop this crying. My patients are waiting. Oh, you, you...emancipated woman!”

When she heard the word “emancipated” from her father’s lips, it seemed to Magda that someone had suddenly opened a door in front of her. At that moment the word seemed to have a particular value, but because there was no time to lose, she did not reflect on what she was feeling. She threw herself on her father’s neck, kissed his hands, and stealthily made her way from his study to town so as not to encounter her mother.

Chapter IX. Magda Sets to Work

Fate was so well disposed toward Magda that at just the right moment it dispatched Mientlewicz to the square.

“Oh, what a good thing it is that we have met!” she exclaimed. “You know, we are going to have a concert. Mr. Sataniello and Miss Stella—”

“Aha!” muttered Mientlewicz, looking at her in surprise.

“Yes. They will have our piano, my papa will arrange for the refectory hall, and you, kind sir, will see to the other arrangements—”

“For a concert?” inquired Mientlewicz.

“Yes, dear friend... I will be very, very grateful if you will help organize their concert.”

She said that in such a lovely voice, she pressed his hand and looked him in the eye so sweetly, that Mientlewicz felt giddy. As a matter of fact, he saw that the square was beginning to whirl counterclockwise around them, and that the tower of the church was reeling.

“Would you do it—for me?” Magda insisted.

“I?” Mientlewicz returned. “And what would I not do for you?”

A little Jew was passing by, and Mientlewicz felt an impulse to seize him by the collar as evidence, but he remembered himself and asked:

“What are your orders? I will have the hall decorated. I will have chairs set out. I can see to the sale of tickets. But this Sataniello does not have his cello.”

“Really! Pity.”

“No!” Mientlewicz repeated firmly. “But I will bring his cello here, and I will even keep it in my possession so he will not pawn it before the concert another time.”

“Is he that sort?” Magda asked involuntarily.

“You do not know him?”

“How should I know him?”

“From Warsaw, I thought...”

“No. I met them by chance in the inn.”

“You were with them at the inn?”

“Yes. They are so very, very poor, Mr. Mientlewicz. They ought to give the concert...”

“And they will give it,” he answered. “But you are truly an emancipated woman!” he added with a smile.

“Why do you say so?” Magda asked, caught a little off guard.

“Because none of our ladies would visit a pair of wandering actors, or put themselves out to arrange a concert for them, even if they were dying of hunger. Our ladies are aristocrats. But you are an angel,” Mientlewicz concluded, looking at Magda as if he wanted to eat her there on the square.

Magda said goodbye in some confusion and hurried away to see Krukowski’s sister. Mientlewicz stood—stood—and still stood, looking after her. When her gray gown and the little plume on her hat had completely vanished beyond the fence, Mientlewicz sighed and went to the old inn to pay the itinerant artists a visit and talk with them about the concert.

In the meantime Magda, walking quickly toward Krukowski’s house—or rather his sister’s—thought:

“He called me emancipated and papa called me emancipated. There must be something in it. Perhaps I really am emancipated! It is all one to me; where is the harm in it? Anyway, let them call me what they like as long as the concert is arranged.”

If Magda’s mission was to rouse the dormant souls of the intelligentsia of Iksinow and evoke some signs of vitality in the life of the county seat; if she believed that it was incumbent upon her to excite, to astonish, to shock these very tranquil people; then her enterprise began on the fifteenth of June, 187-, when the idea of organizing the concert occurred to her. For on that day, in a little less than an hour, she astounded her own father, she completely turned Mientlewicz’s head, she terrified Krukowski and finally won him over—and all without the slightest intention of producing such effects.

It was, as mentioned above, a day in June: a fine day, very warm. The hour was four in the afternoon. It was the sort of time when anyone without a pressing obligation to work, and with a garden beside his house, sits under a shade tree, breathes the aroma of flowers and listens to the hum of insects. And if he cannot gaze at images created by his own fancy, he looks at the earth, where, thanks to delicate breezes, the shadows of leaves become like cheerful living things with strange shapes, jumping about, kissing each other, hiding, then popping out from another direction in such altered forms that they seem to be new creatures.

Krukowski’s sister had no occupation, and she had a beautiful garden. But precisely because it was the kind of day that called people out into the fresh air, the ex-paralytic decided to shut herself into her house. She put on a satin dress, stuck a lace cap on her head, decked herself with half her brooches, chains and bracelets—and sat on a chair, or rather on a cushion, with another cushion at her back and a third under her feet.

Next she ordered the doors to be shut to keep the flies out and the shutters to be closed against the heat. Because it was stuffy, she directed her brother to freshen the air with cologne.

As Magda came into the drawing room, she heard a quiet hissing sound and saw Krukowski. He was sitting, with his monocle in his eye and resignation in his posture, opposite his sister as she lounged among the pillows. Just then

he squeezed the bulb of the atomizer hard and released a reviving fragrance into the air.

“Not so violently, Ludwik,” said the former paralytic. “More slowly... slowly... Oh, is it you, Magda? An awful day, is it not? Is your mama well? Your father? How wonderful for them! I am certain, Magda, that if it does not grow cooler I will not live to see the sunrise.”

“Really, sister!” interposed Ludwik, pumping the spray bottle without stint.

“Do not interrupt, Ludwik! I will die, and no one will mourn for me, no one. Indeed, everyone will be glad. But what is the matter with you, Magda? How flushed you are!”

“I have been in a hurry, madam.”

“You seem ill at ease to me. Perhaps something has happened and you are concealing it from me?” cried the invalid.

“No, madam. It is surely the heat.”

“Ah, yes, the heat. Ludwik, sprinkle Magda.”

The obedient Ludwik adjusted his monocle and aimed such a heavy stream of cologne at Magda that his sister exclaimed:

“But not so hard, Ludwik, dear! Enough. Now a little for me.”

At this moment the former paralytic burst into a paroxysm of loquacity. Like a boat that unfurls more and more sail as it rides out onto the open sea, the sick lady drew forth one narrative after another from the past, the present, the future, and the realm of possibility. Ludwik came close to fainting. Magda was afraid she herself would go into an apoplectic fit, or, at the very least, choke with impatience. She had come to confer with Krukowski about the concert; meanwhile, after half an hour of chatter, his sister only seemed to be spreading her conversational wings, like an eagle who rises ponderously from between the rocks and only when he sees their summits beneath him begins to soar.

“I must find a way to let him know that I am here on business,” thought Magda. She remembered reading in stories about mesmerism that it was possible to use one’s sight to communicate intentions to another person, so she began eyeing Krukowski intently.

These lightning glances were not lost on him. In the beginning he took them for symptoms of feverishness. Smiling sweetly, he aimed a new stream from the atomizer at her with a graceful motion. But when a blush began to deepen on her cheeks, when her gray eyes burned more and more brightly and her moist, parted lips took on a brighter carmine hue, Krukowski himself blushed and modestly lowered his eyes.

“What passion!” he thought. Memories of various ladies who had exhibited tender feelings for him crossed his mind, and he felt that Magda had found herself in one of those moments that were customarily followed by a declaration.

"I really cannot allow her to confess her feelings to me!" he said inwardly, and decided to throw Magda one of those glances that express hope, serenity and reciprocity—in a word, perfect harmony of the soul.

So he looked at her. But who could describe the terror he felt when he perceived that Magda was winking at him and sending him signals with her eyes? Krukowski loved Magda so that at that moment, for the first time, he felt the pain of it.

"Why is she doing that?" he thought.

Her glances were so fiery, her face such a picture of passionate impatience, that Krukowski felt something extraordinary touch his heart.

"Good heavens!" he thought with alarm. "Shall I lose every vestige of self-possession?"

He understood that he had lost it, but at the same time there awoke in him the desperate madness that must come over people bent on suicide.

"Let come what may—" he thought, and rose from his chair, full of resolve.

"Miss Magdalena," he said, "perhaps you will take a turn around the garden?"

"Oh, certainly!" she exclaimed joyfully.

"I must declare myself to her," thought Ludwik. "The die is cast."

"Why are you going to the garden at such an awful time?" stormed the invalid, whose interesting tale had just been interrupted.

"I will take a stroll with Miss Magdalena, sister, because I see that her color has completely changed. It is hot and stuffy in here," answered Ludwik in such a firm voice that the sick lady was silent as a lamb.

"Wait! Take me with you," she said in a sweetly reproachful tone.

"I will send someone who will bring you after us. Mrs. Walent!" he called from the porch. "Come to your mistress."

They had hardly gone into the garden when Magda seized Krukowski's hand and whispered:

"You know, I thought I would die..."

"You are a treasure!" returned Krukowski, pressing her hands.

"There will be a concert!" Magda thought, adding aloud:

"It seemed to me that I would never be allowed to speak to you. Never!"

"Is it necessary?" whispered Krukowski. "I know everything."

"You know? But who told you?"

"Your eyes. Oh, those eyes!"

Magda stood still on the path, pulled her hand away from him, and clapped.

“What luck!” she cried in a tone of genuine surprise. “Well, upon my word, all day I was thinking: will he guess what I want to tell him? Perhaps you even know their names?”

“Whose names?” exclaimed Ludwik, spreading his arms in a gesture of perplexity.

“Indeed, the people who are going to give the concert: Stella and Sataniello. He is called Sataniello and will certainly play his cello, because Mr. Mientlewicz is going to buy it back.”

“Of whom are you speaking, Miss Magdalena?” asked Krukowski. At that moment he felt like a man who is walking at full speed and suddenly loses his sight.

“What is happening to me?” he thought, wiping his forehead.

“I am talking about the concert,” answered Magda.

“What concert?”

“But you know nothing!” she burst out. “Why did you say that you knew?”

And she began again to talk disconnectedly about the concert, about Stella, about the refectory, even about Mientlewicz, who was so dear, so good that he had undertaken to arrange everything. At last she concluded:

“But the whole concert will come to nothing if you will not help us, dear Ludwik. You are so noble! I wanted to come to you first, because I know that you will feel the situation of those poor people more keenly than anyone. Do you know that they have nothing to eat? You will help, will you not? You must!”

And she pressed his hand, and looked into his eyes, and almost hung on his neck, so that for a moment a thought flashed into his mind: seize her, flee to the end of the earth, and then—die.

“Will you? Will you?” asked Magda in a voice so sweet, so anxious and pleading, that Ludwik, almost dizzy, replied:

“I will do anything! After all, you surely understand that I must do as you wish.”

“Oh, how good... how noble you are, how dear...”

Dear! That expression, which Magda had already once used in connection with Mientlewicz, stung Krukowski to the quick. Luckily the thought came to him that she had spoken just then in a different tone, and that he, Ludwik Krukowski, had the right to attach a different meaning to the word.

“What must I do?” he asked with a smile. “Let madam command me!”

“Yes, what?” Magda mused. “We will have the refectory, we will have the piano, we will have the cello... Listen. First we will sell the tickets.”

“You and I? Excellent.”

“Later you will give Stella the bouquet when she walks out into the hall. Ladies cannot make their appearance on the stage without a bouquet, I know very well.”

“No, madam. I can present a bouquet only to one woman... no other. But if you wish the singer to have a bouquet, I will order it, and one of the young men from the town will hand it to her.”

“Very well,” Magda agreed. “But in addition, you must do one thing.”

“I am listening, and I am ready.”

“You see,” she said meditatively, “this concert will be quite lacking in variety. There will be only the cello and the singing, which means that it will seem peculiar if we set high prices. Is that not so?”

“It is clearly the case.”

“It has just occurred to me that that would not be a good thing. And so, do you know what we will do? You—will play the violin! You play so beautifully. Femia told me.”

“I?” Krukowski rejoined, taking a step backward.

“Dear Mr. Krukowski... indeed, I know that you play beautifully. Wonderfully. Everyone will weep.”

“I—with roving actors?”

“For a philanthropic purpose, after all. They are so poor. Oh, you must play, if you have even a little regard for me.”

At that Krukowski went pale and answered gravely:

“Regard for you? Miss Magdalena... until this time the Krukowskis have stood in front of cannons, pistols and swords, but none on the stage beside wandering actors. But if in this way I can offer proof of my attachment, I will play at the concert.” And he bowed.

“Ah, that is very good. You are the noblest gentleman I ever met in all my life! You know, we must set the prices: three rubles for the first row, two for the second and one for the rest.”

A melancholy smile crept over Krukowski’s face.

“Well, we have done enough. Thank you. Thank you very much,” said Magda, looking him in the eye and pressing his hand. “Thank you once again, and I will hurry away, or I will get a scolding from my mother.”

Without speaking Krukowski kissed her hand. When she had taken leave of his sister, he accompanied her to the porch and kissed it again.

When he returned to the garden, the invalid began to gaze at him through her gold lorgnette.

“My Ludwik,” she said sternly, “what does this mean? Magdalena is on edge and you are not quite yourself. Something has happened in town, I’ll vow!”

Who has died? The vicar? The major? Do not keep anything from me, for I know... I had an awful dream during the night..."

"No one has died and nothing has happened."

"Ludwik, do not frighten me," she said in a quavering voice. "Ludwik, tell me everything. I have forgiven you a great deal. Something is happening to you."

"Nothing. It is simply that I am happy."

"In God's name! Happy? An hour ago, when I told you to shut off the balcony and close the shutters, you said that there was no unhappier being than you, and now... Have you received a letter? Perhaps a message by courier?"

"I am happy because of Miss Magdalena's visit," he answered wearily.

The sick lady burst out laughing.

"Oh, so you proposed to Magda and were accepted? Tell me. But marry! Marry! Let me see a young face in the house; with you all a person could go mad. There is a wife for you! She would be able to nurse me. And what goodness, what unselfishness, what a delicate touch! No one helps me up as lightly as she does. No one else, when they are leading me by the hand, watches so carefully to be sure there are no stones in the road so I will not hurt myself."

"But, sister, this matter is not concluded. It is hardly begun!" Krukowski interrupted impatiently.

"So she has not accepted you?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"She gave me to understand that she knows that I love her, and for the sake of that love she asked me to make a particular sacrifice."

"In Heaven's name! What sacrifice?" she exclaimed in a fright.

"She wants me to play the violin in a concert," he replied in a stifled voice.

"Is that all? Play, then! A woman has a right to demand sacrifices from a man because she herself is making sacrifices, and not small ones. I know something about that," she added with a sigh.

"So, sister, you would like for me to perform at a concert?"

"Certainly... Would you believe it, Kacki did not play the violin in public, but he had a fine reputation... Moreover, people will find out that you can do something."

He did not want to mention the most important thing: that he would be appearing with itinerant actors. So he sat silently and the sick lady prattled on:

"Give a concert when she wants you to, and marry quickly, for I feel that I will die among these wrinkled faces, and what is more, these withered hearts. I

do not know what to do: give you the other half of the house, or, better, have you live in this part with me.”

“Is that proper, sister?”

“What do you mean, is it proper? The room you occupy next to my bedroom is spacious enough for four, even if they were not a young married couple. I certainly cannot stay alone at night, without a living soul near me. Someone would murder me.”

“Come now, sister!”

“Well, yes!” the lady answered after a moment’s reflection. “Yes, the two of you must have a separate suite. I understand that. But I tell you, I will not stay by myself in this great void. One or the other of you, you or she, must watch over me. So you must agree that one night you will sleep in the room beside mine, and the next night she will. That will not burden you, and it is even suitable that the couple who share my income also share the responsibility for me.”

The former paralytic’s tone had grown so sour that Krukowski, not wanting to be drawn into a dispute with his sister, took advantage of Mrs. Walent’s entrance and withdrew to the depths of the garden to dream of a beautiful future.

Thanks to Mientlewicz’s vigorous strategies, before the day was over the news of the upcoming concert had spread throughout the town. The younger set immediately took the two artists under their wing. One group paid a visit to Stella, taking the occasion to offer several sprays of flowers and a few boxes of inexpensive sweets. The others made Sataniello’s acquaintance and helped him arrange for a small loan.

The result was that around nightfall a seamstress and a washerwoman appeared at the artists’ lodgings. Moreover, around midnight Sataniello was having such a rousing good time at Eisenman’s in the company of the young men of the town that he suddenly recovered his voice and with glass in hand began to recite “Funeral March” as someone played the Chopin air. The impression he made was overwhelming and his listeners might have carried the famous orator around the room on their shoulders if his voice had not given out in the midst of his performance.

“Damned air vent!” the actor wheezed. “I have a cold again.”

“It could be the smoke. Too much smoke here,” someone remarked.

“I would have thought it was the punch,” chimed in the notary’s clerk.

“When all is said and done, he has drunk too much,” Mientlewicz whispered. “But in a couple of days that will pass, and at the concert he will declaim like Trapszo himself.”

“Long live Trapszo! That’s an orator for you!” someone exclaimed tearfully from behind a cloud of smoke—someone it was impossible to see, but who was inclined to cry any time he was sitting at a table at Eisenman’s.

The next day Eufemia called on Magda. Her face was a little pale, but it made a charming contrast to her flashing eyes.

“Magda, dear,” she said in an injured tone, “what does this mean? They say in the village that you are arranging a concert without me. If we are going to be partners, after all, we must be partners in everything.”

“I did not dare to bother you because they are traveling actors,” Magda replied.

“Did they say anything to you about us?” Eufemia asked apprehensively.

“I heard... nothing,” Magda answered, blushing at her untruthfulness.

“Because, you see, she, the singer, was with mama yesterday, asking for the loan of our piano. Mama did not know her and so, you understand, she could not give her a definite answer. But today I have come to tell you that we will certainly loan her the piano.”

“They wanted to take our piano, but yours is better.”

“Of course! Incomparably better,” said Eufemia. “I also heard that Krukowski has agreed to play the violin. I do not know if it is quite the thing for some itinerant artist to accompany him. It would be more suitable for someone with a proper position in society to do it. We have played together now and then for many years, so all would go beautifully with me as his accompanist. If he is too diffident to ask for accompaniment, please drop a hint that I am quite willing.”

“Oh, that will be perfect!” cried Magda. “So you will play at the concert?”

“With Krukowski... yes.”

“I will tell him right away, and he will come to you with a delegation. Whom do you prefer: the major with the notary, or the major with my father?”

“I am speaking of Krukowski,” Eufemia countered. “So the major is involved as well?”

“Oh, yes. He will even be selling tickets, he and the vicar, because I will give a small share of the revenue to the church,” Magda explained delightedly. “You see, it will be even more appropriate for you and Ludwik to perform if it is for a philanthropic cause.”

“Yes, oh, yes. You are exquisite!” exclaimed Eufemia. “I tell you—” she said in a quieter tone, “only do not say that you heard this from me—Mientlewicz is mad about you. He says that at your command he would jump into a fire. Have you heard?”

“A very good man, Mr. Mientlewicz,” Magda replied serenely.

Eufemia waved a warning finger.

“What a flirt you are, Magda! You know how to lead the men around by the nose. Only do not lure Ludwik away from me, and you may have all the others as my present.”

Chapter X. A Concert in a Little Town

Preparations for the concert in Iksinow went on for a week. All the flowers in the vicar's garden were reserved for ladies; seamstresses, paid like sopranos, did not sleep at night; a wagonload of hats and fans was brought in from the provincial capital. Eisenman, a dealer in dry goods for the time being, added a couple of pages of new accounts receivable to his books.

Young women did not go out of their houses; they were too busy furbishing up their gowns. The apothecary's wife telegraphed for a cape trimmed with swansdown. Her husband, standing on the threshold of his shop, complained loudly about the low fees in his business that made it impossible for him to indulge his wife.

And amazing things were said of Eufemia's new dress, and her exertions on the piano.

Only Magda did not have time to think of her toilette. She had hardly finished accompanying Stella at her singing (Sataniello lay sick in bed) when Mientlewicz hurried in with a box of tags to be numbered and attached to the seats. No sooner had she finished writing the numbers than she had to thread the tags with small loops of cord. No sooner had she finished these tasks at home than she was called to the refectory to give her opinion as to whether the improvised concert hall would pass muster.

If the matter of her costume had been left to her alone, no doubt she would have gone to the concert in her everyday gray dress. But her mother had taken it under consideration and quietly, without a great to-do about fittings, made her a gown of cream-colored gauze. On the evening of the concert the doctor's wife herself arranged Magda's hair and took another stitch here and there in her gown. When Magda walked into the hall on her father's arm around eight o'clock with a yellow rose in her hair and a wine-colored one on her bodice, Mientlewicz was transfixed, and a murmur—"How lovely!"—ran around the room.

The empty refectory of a once-famous monastery was changed into a theater. Its walls were festooned with oak leaves and paraffin lamps. From the vaulted ceiling hung two chandeliers with twenty candles each; the chandeliers were made of unidentifiable material but also decked with greenery. At one end of the hall stood the magistrate's family's piano, a couple of chairs and a pair of tables with flowers, while a few feet from the piano and all the way to the main door the room was filled with rows of chairs: armchairs, chairs with fabric covers, stools, bentwood chairs, even garden benches.

This conglomeration of household chattels would have seemed odd to anyone who had had time to notice it. Fortunately no one paid any attention to the furniture because the assembled residents of Iksinow were too intent on looking at each other.

First each one glanced at one of the four mirrors in the hall and admired his own reflection, which seemed, if not absolutely novel, at least very much

rejuvenated. Next he darted a look at his kinfolk and friends and noticed the same thing: everyone was so beautiful and in such good spirits, so polite and interested in all that was taking place, so refreshed and restored, that the onlooker was carried away with astonishment.

Was that really the apothecary's wife, and that—the postmaster, and that—the wife of the notary? Every young woman looked like a beam of light; every matron exuded the grandeur of a high holy day; every older gentleman looked like a count or diplomat; every young man seemed an Apollo in tight trousers.

Looking at these wonders and graces, one could imagine that Eisenman, on Mientlewicz's advice, had exchanged the commonplace Iksinovians for some higher race of beings from the capital of the province, or—who knew?—perhaps from Warsaw.

The surprises continued and even intensified. As soon as Krukowski conducted his sister into the hall, she began to move as freely as if she had never complained of paralysis. Then Eufemia sailed in with her parents, and at the sight of her Cynadrowski exclaimed, "Aaaaah!" while the major added under his breath, "Fie!"

The room had hardly quieted down after Eufemia's entrance than a candle on one of the chandeliers leaned sideways above the recordkeeper for the police department, and began to drip on his frock coat. Then Magda entered the room and the general enthusiasm seemed to reach its height when suddenly a loud cracking of whips could be heard through the window, and from the hall a frightened voice called:

"The gentry are coming!"

Presently there appeared the honorable Mr. Bielinski with his wife and daughter, and the honorable Mr. Czerniawski with two daughters and a niece. After them came a string of well-known and universally respected honorable Abecedowskis, Bedowskis, Cedowiczes, Efowskis and Feckis with their wives and daughters, and the vigorous young men who hovered around them.

This company took its place for the most part in the first several rows of armchairs and other upholstered seats. Everyone in it had three-ruble tickets; all the ladies were chatting in French; and some of the young gentlemen were eyeing each other through the lorgnettes they used at the horse races. Eufemia, sitting resplendent in the first row, noticed that the greater share of these lorgnettes and glances were directed toward the fourth row, where Dr. Brzeski was sitting with his daughter. With a wan smile she whispered to her mother:

"How Magda is compromising herself! Everyone is looking at her."

"I notice that someone is looking quite intently at you," rejoined her mother quietly. "There—by the wall. But I cannot see if it is young Abecedowski or young Cedowicz... Good matches!"

Eufemia darted a look in the direction indicated and quickly turned her beautiful head again.

“Who is it?” asked the magistrate’s wife.

“I do not know,” the lovely young woman replied reluctantly as she caught sight of Cynadrowski.

In order to emphasize the difference between the amateur and the professional artists, the concert committee had decided that the amateurs would appear first, and, secondly, that the amateurs would walk to the front of the hall from among the spectators and return among the spectators, while the professionals would walk in and out of the hall through the side door that once connected the refectory to the monastery kitchen.

For a moment before the concert began, the honorable Mr. Czerniawski, who as a sign of respect and fellow feeling was sitting by Krukowski’s sister, presented a bouquet to Eufemia with that lady’s compliments. This act of homage delighted the magistrate’s wife, but did nothing to dispel a melancholy smile from the face of the young lady herself, who noticed that Krukowski had personally handed Magda a far more beautiful bouquet. As he did so he was conversing with her so eagerly that Mientlewicz had to remind him that it was time for the performance to begin.

Then Krukowski remembered himself, approached Eufemia with a bow, gave her his arm and conducted her to the piano.

A murmur ran through the hall, for Eufemia in her trailing white gown seemed like Venus condemned to exile in Iksinow. She sat down elegantly at the piano and so gracefully began to take off her gloves, which were as long as eternity, that Krukowski himself, in spite of his boundless love for Magda, thought:

“It is curious that a Christian may not have two wives. Femia is exquisite!”

Eufemia began to play something as beautiful and elegant as she was herself, but what it was Mientlewicz did not know. Standing beside the first row of seats, he noticed that the magistrate’s wife’s eyes were overflowing with tears of maternal delight, and that Cynadrowski looked as if he wanted to throw himself under the piano pedals. But it was the fragments of a conversation being carried on in an undertone between Krukowski’s sister and the honorable Mr. Czerniawski that completely absorbed Mientlewicz’s attention.

“Beautiful woman!” Czerniawski said, glancing at the piano. “Beautiful woman! What bearing ... what an eye ... what a bosom ... the line of her figure as she sits... And such a dainty foot, the little filly... a slender ankle... Ah, it is no wonder that Ludwik wanted to marry her.”

“It is too late now,” countered Krukowski’s sister, who leaned toward her neighbor and whispered a few words to him.

What did she whisper? Mientlewicz did not hear. But he saw that the honorable Mr. Czerniawski turned and began to observe Dr. Brzeska very closely. Then he said to the former paralytic:

“Ah—cousin, you are right: she is wonderful! It is no wonder that Ludwik...”

Mientlewicz nearly choked with grief and chagrin. He was so afraid of weeping in the middle of the hall that he withdrew to the end of it, to the wooden chairs, even to the garden benches.

What did he care if Eufemia received a hearty round of applause, or if that detestable Krukowski played two mawkish airs on his whimpering violin? Those occurrences paled by comparison with the fact that during the intermission Krukowski introduced Magda to the honorable Mr. Czerniawski, and then to the honorable Mr. Bielinski, and then to all the worthy and respected Abecedowskis, Bedowskis and Cedowicz, young and old, with boutonnieres or with great lorgnettes in cases hanging from their arms.

At that moment he, Mientlewicz, should have made his way to the kitchen where the two artists were waiting and spoken a few words of encouragement. But what did Stella and Sataniello matter to him now? After all, it was not for them that he had made the rounds of the country manor houses selling tickets at three rubles each; not for them that he had been up on a ladder like a cat, hanging festoons of oak leaves on the refectory walls; not for them that he had bought ten pounds of tallow candles—forty candles in all—with his own money.

The entire concert was lost on Mientlewicz. He hardly heard what Stella sang or what Sataniello played on the cello. The reason the two were applauded and received curtain calls was lost on him. In all the hall he saw only a yellow rose, and beside it Krukowski, who, against all the proprieties, instead of serving as Eufemia’s escort attached himself to Magda like a cocklebur.

As soon as the musical performances ended, a hum of voices roused him from his painful musings.

“Sataniello is going to recite! Sataniello...”

Indeed the great artist stood by the piano, shoved a hand through the long locks that fell onto the collar of his rented frock coat, raised his pale face and flaming eyes and in a husky but piercing voice began:

*At last I came, my wanderings done,
from kingdoms that the living shun.
Yet still that deathless woe I see—
the damned driven on with devil’s prods—
and at hell’s threshold fled from me
the memory of the sunny gods.*

The candles in the chandeliers burned down and some went out. The hall was as quiet as if all the assembled listeners had relinquished the right to breathe.

*I left behind the dreadful doors
the tokens of my love and strife.
Love glimpsed the anguish of that place
then vanished in despair’s embrace*

*and I did not return by force
to save her life who was my life.*

Suddenly there was the sound of a man's voice sobbing, and Mientlewicz saw Cynadrowski running from the hall. Several people turned their heads away from the speaker. White handkerchiefs appeared in ladies' hands, but no one else broke the silence.

The long-haired actor spoke on. Every word sent a sharper pain through Mientlewicz's heart.

*So ask no song from me. No. I
will not stand by you cravenly,
forswear the past I ought to bless,
embrace the lewd world's changefulness
or bow before your gods and tear
from my heart what it holds most dear.*

As he spoke the word "your," Sataniello pointed to the first row of chairs, so he seemed to be pointing at the honorable Mr. Bielinski or the honorable Mr. Czerniawski—in any case, at one of the gentry. Considering the way Mr. Abecedowski coughed, the townsfolk thought their highborn neighbors had felt poisoned darts enter their chests.

*All your desires and all your goals—
all that caresses and excites
the shameless merriment of your souls,
mocking and jeering at my plight—
your lying pleasures I despise
and spurn the powers you idolize.*

The artist grew hoarse, bowed, and ran out toward the kitchen door. There was silence. Then the honorable Mr. Czerniawski cried "Bravo!", the honorable Mr. Bielinski beat his fat palms together, and, following their lead, the entire party of aristocrats and all the young people of the town—secretaries, dealers in medicines, day laborers, assistants and clerks—began to applaud.

Sataniello turned back, bowed, and motioned toward his throat. The young men of all ranks were waiting for a signal, and the honorable Mr. Bielinski had spread his hands for another round of clapping, when suddenly a voice exclaimed:

"The wax is dripping!"

The applause died out. Everyone ran from his seat. Then another voice rang out, a voice suffused with indignation:

"Why applaud him? Because he insulted us? Because he pointed his contemptuous finger at us?"

The outburst came from the apothecary. It was accompanied by supporting snorts from several very important Iksinovians.

"What claptrap, eh?" the honorable Mr. Czerniawski whispered to the honorable Mr. Bielinski.

“Indeed!” said the honorable Mr. Bielinski to the honorable Mr. Czerniawski.

“The wax is dripping on our heads here,” added the famous and universally respected Mr. Abecedowski the elder.

After this exchange of opinions the party of gentry, including the ladies and the young people, began to move toward the door. Only the younger Mr. Cedowicz lingered for a moment because his enormous lorgnette refused to close. But soon he hurried after the others.

Krukowski and his sister, and Dr. Brzeski and Magda, also went out. But the apothecary and his wife and a large group of their friends stayed behind.

“What is this?” expostulated the apothecary, shifting as far as possible to avoid the dripping wax. “What is this? Did you not hear, ladies and gentlemen, how that actor taunted you? Did you not notice how he pointed at us? ‘Your shameless merriment,’ that tramp said! Is it shameless when a man eats a piece of meat once a day? And when he said, ‘Your lying pleasures,’ didn’t he look at my wife?”

“He looked at me,” the notary’s wife put in.

“And did he not jibe at the revered Dr. Brzozowski?” the apothecary persisted. “I do not remember his exact words, but they were offensive. It was in conjunction with his pointing at someone...”

“Why would he have done that?” the magistrate asked timidly.

The apothecary lowered his voice.

“Do you still not understand, judge? Miss Brzeska arranged the concert for him, so as an expression of gratitude he insulted Dr. Brzozowski.”

The magistrate wanted to say something in answer, but his wife took him by the arm.

“Do not dispute it,” she said under her breath. “He is right.”

The magistrate noticed that his wife and daughter were very indignant, so he did not even try to examine the cause. He only lowered his head and went out, pretending to scrutinize his white gloves, which were decidedly too large.

Mientlewicz marveled, and began to feel uneasy as he heard another group of Iksinovians chatting in the corridor.

“Who are those performers?” a lady asked. “Are they a married couple?”

“Married, but without holy water,” a man answered with a smile.

“How did they come to be such good friends with Miss Brzeska?”

“It is because Miss Stella is an emancipated woman and Miss Magdalena is also an emancipated woman. Emancipated women stick together like Jews or Freemasons.”

On the street Mientlewicz met Cynadrowski. The postal clerk had a feverish air. He seized Mientlewicz's coat and said:

"Did you see Miss Eufemia today? I swear to God I will shoot either Krukowski or myself in the head if he plays another concert with her."

"You imbecile!" Mientlewicz retorted with a sigh. "Krukowski thinks of Eufemia about as much as I do."

"Are you sure?" asked Cynadrowski, not quite suppressing the joy in his voice.

Mientlewicz shrugged and let the question go unanswered, but said as if to himself:

"What has this Sataniello done to them? And what do they have against Miss Magdalena?"

"Sataniello has done nothing to them," Cynadrowski broke in, "nor has Miss Magdalena. This has been brewing for several days. Some of the ladies are furious with her because she organized the concert without them. And as for the apothecary, he would drown Dr. Brzeski in a spoonful of water. The Brzeskis are good-hearted people, so everyone is throwing mud at them. It is always the way," the clerk concluded with a despondent sigh.

Mientlewicz said goodbye to Cynadrowski, who was walking toward the magistrate's house, and made his way to the old inn. In the dark hall he bumped against someone. It was Fajkowski, the dispenser of medicines.

"What are you doing here?" Mientlewicz asked him.

"Nothing. I was relieving myself. For the love of God, just don't tell anyone."

"It was quite a scene that employer of yours made this evening at the concert."

Fajkowski clinched his fist and whispered:

"That stupid man. That old huckster. He ought to be selling soap or dealing in herring, not running a pharmacy! He doesn't know what a declamation is, or a song! Miss Stella sang like a nightingale, like Dowiakowska, and he said she is poorly trained. Did you hear? He talks about voice training, a fellow who barely finished school. God, how I'd like to get out of here!"

He was in such despair that Mientlewicz did not try to calm him. He said goodbye and knocked on the door of the artists' room.

"Come in!" Sataniello called hoarsely.

The big room seemed enormous in the faint glow of two candles. They reminded Mientlewicz that he had bought ten pounds of candles for the concert with his own money. But they lit the room well enough that he could see Sataniello walking around with long strides and Stella sitting on the sofa beside the bouquets, which were a little faded. A laurel wreath made of tin and

painted green lay on a chest of drawers, between the candles. It had been a gift to Sataniello from his admirers in Sokolow or Wegrow.

Stella was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. Sataniello asked Mientlewicz roughly:

“And so—how much will we have from the concert?”

“Around a hundred rubles,” Mientlewicz answered.

“And do you think we could give another concert?”

Mientlewicz shrugged. He had no desire to arrange yet another concert so Krukowski could cover himself with glory and be all the more brazen in his attentions to Magda.

“You see!” Sataniello exclaimed, turning to his companion. “I told you that we have had enough of Miss Brzeska’s unwanted attentions. We have incurred the displeasure of a stronger faction, and now we are suffering the consequences.”

“But, my dear, it is with you that they are angry. Your gestures were too vehement.”

“What, then? I recited badly?”

“You recited brilliantly, but your gestures created such a forceful impression that the people thought you were reviling them.”

“It is the mission of an artist to create an impression!” Sataniello shouted. “It is only then that I have them in the palm of my hand. I raise them to the skies; I throw them into the abyss; I caress them with the melody of my speech or I lacerate them with sarcasm.”

Suddenly he swung around toward Mientlewicz.

“We will not have the money until tomorrow?”

“Around noon tomorrow.”

“And to think,” Sataniello rattled on hotly, “to think that we might have had two concerts at a hundred rubles each, and a third, even if only at fifty. Three months’ rest!”

“I doubt it,” Mientlewicz remarked. “The town is poor. The interest is lacking.”

“But more people would come from the town, from the surrounding area,” Sataniello said. “One person said to me today, ‘I would pay what I had to, sir, to hear your recitation again.’ But our patroness was Miss Brzeska, and she is not well liked.”

“Be quiet, Franek!” Stella burst out. She had noticed that Mientlewicz, who had been a little preoccupied when he came in, was beginning to listen intently and with astonishment. “Be quiet. After all, if it had not been for Mr. Mientlewicz, Mr. Krukowski and Miss Brzeska, we would have done nothing here. You would not even have had a cello, nor I a piano.”

Mientlewicz looked at her with glassy eyes, took his leave, and went out.

Chapter XI. Echoes From the Concert

Mientlewicz understood little of what the artists had said. He only felt that all their quarrels and complaints were trivial by comparison with his profound grief and resentment.

He walked through the quiet, unpaved streets, which were lighted by two smoking lanterns, and thought:

“Why did I become involved with this? What was this concert for? For Krukowski to turn Magdalena’s head with his violin, and introduce her to various great men who are, supposedly, his friends? He takes her from under my nose, he, rich, elegant, well born, and I, a boor with no fortune—always to be toyed with by the great and cursed by the riffraff!”

As the streets grew darker, the thoughts that churned through Mientlewicz’s mind took on a gloomier cast. It seemed to him that a flood of hopeless sorrow had engulfed him, and that its waves were beating at his heart with their combined force, washing away all his goals, plans, visions of the future. What was his brokerage to him, what use were his relationships with Eisenman and with the gentry, what good were his wits and his money, if with all that he could not win Magda? Along had come a humbug with a violin who lived on his sister’s charity, and he had walked away with the girl.

For the girl, it was clear, preferred a large house, a pretty garden, thirty thousand rubles and the acquaintance of the gentry to the harder road to affluence that he, Mientlewicz, had had to take.

For the first time he felt an aversion to business, even to life. When he had been nothing but a worker for the county, he had dreamed of rising beyond his station. When he gained position, he began to think of building a fortune, of moving to Warsaw, of a great brokerage that would connect all the Eisenmans to all the wealthy aristocracy. Suddenly Magda, with a yellow rose in her hair and a deep red one on her bodice, had crossed his path, and all his good intentions had scattered like a flock of birds.

As he approached his house in the gathering darkness, he noticed someone near the door.

“Is that you, Mientlewicz?” the other man called.

“Ah, Cynadrowski! What are you tramping around in the dark for?”

“I am waiting for the mail coach.”

“Aha! It is changing horses at the magistrate’s house.”

The clerk drew nearer to Mientlewicz and said in a smothered, passionate voice:

“If you knew how I want to blow my brains out sometimes! You should not be surprised if I did one of these days.”

“No one knows who is on the brink,” Mientlewicz replied.

“And you, too?”

“Ah!”

They parted without further conversation, like two people in a state of mutual antagonism.

All through the day that followed the concert, Magda was troubled by a peculiar feeling of uneasiness. She was continually looking out the window like one who expects to see something unusual. Every time someone came in she went pale, for she thought some painful news must be arriving. Her father was very quiet and shrugged his shoulders once or twice for some reason that was not disclosed. Her mother avoided her.

At noon Mientlewicz arrived, either not well rested or angry for some reason unknown to Magda. He presented the account from the concert, gave her the church's share of the money, and said goodbye to her coolly. An hour later a servant of Krukowski's brought a beautiful bouquet and a letter in which the sender apologized to Magda for being unable to pay his respects because he was attending his ailing sister.

At last, toward evening, the major appeared. He wanted to play chess, but he did not find the magistrate. Indeed, he learned to his astonishment that the magistrate had not been there that day.

“Sick or crazy!” mumbled the major. He did not even nod to Magda, but hurried out without lighting his pipe.

“Good heavens! What is going on?” Magda thought, too frightened to ask anyone for an explanation, for everyone seemed to be at odds with her. Sataniello and Stella did not appear either, but Magda would have thought nothing of their absence if her mother had not said to her in a peevish tone:

“What fine thanks you have gotten from your proteges!”

“What has happened? Why did mama say that?” she wondered apprehensively. But Mrs. Brzeska went out to the kitchen, clearly intending to offer no enlightenment.

The worry-filled day and the sleepless night that followed, in which every fifteen minutes seemed longer than an hour, were burdensome to Magda.

The next day Krukowski sent a bouquet that was remarkable for the red colors that predominated in it. Mientlewicz passed by the doctor's house but did not enter; in fact, he looked at the opposite side of the street.

Before the afternoon dinner an animated conversation took place between the doctor and his wife in the doctor's waiting room. A couple of times the doctor even raised his voice, which was not his habit. Magda quailed.

At around four the major and the vicar arrived for chess. They took the board and pieces to the summer house, where Mrs. Brzeska brought them black coffee, and sat down at once to their game.

“Are you gentlemen not waiting for the magistrate?” Magda asked in surprise.

No one who did not see the major at that moment would have believed what a change came over him. He took his gigantic pipe from his lips. His eyebrows beetled; the veins swelled on his forehead. He looked like an old dragon.

“I do not know any magistrate!” he blustered, beating his fist on the table until the chessmen jumped and the glasses tinkled. “I do not play with a henpecked nobody whose womenfolk have everything mixed up like dishwater in their heads!”

Magda had not had time to get the better of her astonishment at the major’s hatred for the magistrate when the maid handed her a letter.

“From Femcia,” she thought, walking farther into the garden and opening the envelope with trembling hands.

The letter had indeed come from Eufemia, and its contents were as follows:

“Madam! I consider it my duty to tell you that from now on our plans to establish a school will have no more support from my side. I am withdrawing because in my judgment, if one person has no respect for the most solemn pledges, the other cannot be bound by them. I am also of the opinion that further friendship between us is out of the question.—Eufemia.”

Above the body of the letter, on the left side of the paper, was a picture of two doves kissing. Eufemia had written an X over this pretty symbol of friendship or love in order to make it clear that everything between them was irrevocably ended.

When she had read the letter, and still more when she had felt what the crossing out of the doves implied, it seemed to Magda that a thunderbolt had struck the garden. For one breathless moment she closed her eyes and waited, certain that the house was about to fall on her and the ground to open under her feet. But the house, the ground and the garden were still in their places; the sun shone; the flowers gave off their aromas; and the major and the vicar were playing chess as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened either in nature, in Iksinow, or in Magda’s heart.

The game ended. The vicar lost, so he carried the set back to the doctor’s office. The major filled a new pipe, packing nearly a quarter of a pound of tobacco into its bowl. Then Magda went into the summer house with an aching heart, raised grief-filled eyes to the old man, and asked:

“Major, something awful has happened to me, and I do not understand it. Everyone is angry at me.”

A light kindled in the major’s eyes. He glanced out of the summer house to be sure no one was near by. Then he seized Magda by the waist and kissed her hotly on the neck, murmuring:

“Oy! You—you—playful little piece! Why could you not flirt at least a little with an old man like me?”

It was impossible to describe the astonishment that overtook Magda in the wake of these fatherly caresses that had nothing fatherly about them.

“I—flirt with you?”

“Naturally... Certainly. Why do you have such wicked eyes—eyes that exude charm? Why do you have those roguish curls over your forehead, or that appetizing little neck? It’s all temptation for the lads.”

“And you, sir—a lad?”

The major, who was after all a good old man, looked at her. He was startled; he was at a loss. His hands shook as he began to adjust something about his pipe.

“Lad or no lad,” he said, “you should have seen me when I was a second lieutenant. It wasn’t little chits like you who were mad for me. But enough of this foolishness. What do you want from me?”

“Since the day before yesterday everyone has set themselves against me, and I do not know why,” Magda answered, blinking.

“You do not know why? Did you have to arrange a performance for those vagabonds who are complaining today that you hurt their business?”

“They were so poor...”

“Poor! Think of yourself, not of someone whose poverty is none of your business. And could you not have invited the magistrate’s wife to take part in arranging this concert? The magistrate’s wife, the apothecary’s wife, the notary’s wife—they are the ones who organize such things around here. Did you have to barge in without a thought for them?”

“I did not dare invite those ladies. I did not think they would care to fatigue themselves, all the more because, you know”—here Magda lowered her voice—“the artists had been to the magistrate’s wife and she would not even let them use her piano.”

“Rotting cannon carriage!” growled the major. “I never could abide that woman and her Femcia, who is absolutely infatuated with herself. But what were you stealing away to that hostel for?”

“Because, you see, sir,” Magda whispered, “I want to start a little school here, and I am looking for a location.”

The major’s eyes widened and he raised his pipe into the air. But he saw that the vicar was coming with the doctor’s wife, so he shrugged his shoulders and said:

“Spit on all of it! It will be all right...”

“Young women today,” said Mrs. Brzeska with a stern face, “ride out alone, go to town by themselves, arrange things without their mothers’ knowledge, and even strike up acquaintances with heaven knows whom.”

“Emancipation, gracious madam, emancipation!” rejoined the vicar. “Often acquaintances are formed behind parents’ backs that lead to unsuitable marriages.”

“Eh!” remarked the major. “Not so unsuitable: a magistrate’s daughter and a postal clerk.”

“But without the parents’ blessing...” said the vicar.

“Magda,” the doctor’s wife announced, “Mr. Mientlewicz is waiting for you in the drawing room again with the accounts from that concert, which I would rather not hear about.”

“Why?” the major spoke up. “The concert was quite nice.”

Magda made her way toward the house, thinking:

“What does this mean? Has Cynadrowski proposed to Femcia? Indeed, she poked fun at him so much...”

Mientlewicz stood in the drawing room, pale and clutching a file of papers. His usually bristling mustache looked listless, while his hair was nearly standing on end.

“You have surely made a mistake with the accounts, sir!” Magda exclaimed.

“No, madam. I only told your mother that I had come with the accounts, but—”

His voice broke and a flush appeared on his face.

“Miss Magdalena,” he said quietly but resolutely, “is it true that you are going to marry Krukowski?”

“I!” cried Magda, with a deeper blush than his. “Who told you that?”

“Cynadrowski,” the young man replied in a tone of desperation. “Anyway, everyone noticed that at the concert Krukowski neglected Miss Eufemia and constantly devoted his attention to you.”

“Ah, so that is why she is angry with me,” Magda said as if to herself. Then she added aloud, “And what basis did Mr. Cynadrowski have for such a statement?”

“He must have heard something from Miss Eufemia.”

“She never holds conversations with him!” Magda exclaimed.

“Oh!” Mientlewicz sighed. “But never mind about them. Miss Magdalena, tell me truly, are you going to marry Krukowski?”

“What are you saying?” Magda marveled, a little indignant. But Mientlewicz’s eyes were so full of sadness that she relented and said:

“I do not think of marrying Mr Krukowski or... or anyone.”

Mientlewicz seized her hand.

“Is it so?” he asked, transported. “You are not joking with me? Please tell me—”

“I give you my word,” Magda replied, still amazed.

Mientlewicz knelt before her and kissed her hand passionately. Then he rose to his feet quickly and said:

“God reward you. If you had confirmed those rumors, I would not have lived another quarter of an hour. It would have been one or the other for me: the prosecutor or the priest.”

Panic overwhelmed Magda. She took a few steps back as if she wanted to run away, but her legs gave way and she dropped into an armchair, believing that Mientlewicz was obsessed with the thought of killing either her or himself.

The impassioned man noticed this. He pondered a moment, then said:

“Do not be afraid. Indeed, I have no wish to frighten you or to control your actions. If you were marrying a man worthy of you... God’s will be done. I would not open my mouth. But this Krukowski is offensive to me. He is no husband for you. He is old; he has the look of a consumptive. He lives on charity from his sister, and he has been refused by more women than he has false teeth. So I thought: if such a woman as you could sell herself to a cadaver like that, it would be worthless to live in this world.”

Magda quivered. Mientlewicz said pleadingly:

“Miss Magdalena, I swear that I do not want to bind you to anything. Marry, even tomorrow, and I will not do myself any harm. I will only leave here and go to Warsaw. Marry a nobleman or marry a man from the town, as long as you marry for love, not money. Let the fellow be rich or poor, educated or unschooled, as long as he is young, courageous, self-supporting and not eating at someone else’s table, for that—fie! Fie!

“My deep apologies... apologies... for my boldness,” he concluded, kissing Magda’s hand again. “But I am not forcing myself on you. I know that I am not worthy... To me you are like a saint, and I could not bear, I could not endure your selling yourself to that wizened creature for his sister’s money!”

“You thought this of me?” Magda asked quietly.

“I beg your pardon. I will never forgive myself as long as I live. Young ladies’ tastes vary. Krukowski today, Cynadrowski tomorrow... Young ladies have all sorts of whims.”

They heard the voice of the doctor’s wife just outside the window. Quickly Mientlewicz unfolded some papers and began to speak in his normal tone, though once in a while his voice trembled:

“So everything is in order except that we have additional contributions amounting to five—no, ten rubles. Perhaps you will be so kind as to add these ten—no, fifteen rubles to the church’s share.”

The guests who had been in the garden came into the parlor. The vicar was cheered by the extra few rubles, and the doctor's wife by the fact that the business related to the concert had been concluded. Only the cantankerous major was not content to conceal his surprise. Where had the extra revenue come from?

"Because no one in town has a penny to sweeten his tea," he said, "much less a ruble to sweeten the pot."

"Perhaps one of the gentry, or perhaps Krukowski's sister. She does have her little caprices," the vicar put in.

Mientlewicz hurriedly explained that the donation had not come from Krukowski or his sister, but from the overall revenue. Then he folded his papers ostentatiously and said goodbye to everyone, explaining that he must go immediately to attend to business involving Mr. Bielinski's threshing machine.

"Do I notice that Magda is a little altered?" remarked the vicar.

"My head aches a little."

"No doubt Mientlewicz has been repeating some piece of gossip to her," the major observed angrily. "Old women's talk!"

"Indeed," declared the doctor's wife, "let them repeat everything to her! The next time she will have the good sense not to engage in projects without first informing her mother."

Chapter XII. In Which the Former Paralytic Is Goaded to Action

When she found herself alone in the garden, Magda took her head in her hands.

“Dear God,” she thought, “these men can be brutes! Krukowski, so well bred, so full of delicacy, such a good friend—and in spite of that he assumes that I could marry him. Oh!... The major with his caresses is loathsome. Mientlewicz is terrible. And to think that if I said jokingly, ‘See, I am going to marry Krukowski,’ the fellow would kill himself! What is one to do with such people? Where can I hide? To whom can I even speak?”

She thought of her father, a man of the utmost integrity, who loved her so that he would give his life for her. But her father had patients; he had his own troubles. When all was said and done, it would be embarrassing to speak of such things to him. How he would look at her! Worse still, he might break off relations with the major, Krukowski and Mientlewicz, or perhaps even be carried away and—a dangerous feud might brew up about nothing! About nothing, of course, because how important was she, Magda? Not important at all. To herself she was a silly girl whose acquaintances often showed little regard for her, and she did not have the strength to bear it with humility. If she were as wise and rich as Ada Solska, or as distinguished as the deceased Mrs. Latter, or as beautiful as Helena Norska, certainly she would be treated differently.

The thought of Helena reminded her of Kazimierz. How different he was from the men here! How differently he had spoken to her of his attachment; how he had appealed to her to watch over his mother. True, he scoffed at everything, but even in his most distressing banter there was something uncommon. And when he had kissed her hands then—only an angel or a devil could do that as he had, never a man.

Magda shook, hoping to put the thought of Kazimierz from her. She was ashamed of herself and her terrible moral lapse.

“I am very bad!” she whispered involuntarily and covered her face, feeling that she was blushing to her temples.

“I am very bad!” she repeated.

This realization brought Magda a certain relief. Now that she understood how fundamentally corrupt she was, at least she knew why her mother did not like her.

For she could not hide from herself the fact that her mother, who was rather strict with all her children, had always been most strict with her. She loved Zdzislaw most, and rightly; after all, he was her son. She was very fond of Zosia, since Zosia was the youngest. But her mother had never liked her, Magda, very much. She had called her stubborn and self-willed and had always

quarreled about her with Magda's grandmother, for Magda had been the apple of her grandmother's eye.

Her grandmother had sent Magda to Mrs. Latter's school against her mother's wishes, and paid her expenses. Her grandmother had overlooked her other two grandchildren and left Magda her entire fortune, three thousand rubles. It was no wonder that when Magda finished school, her mother had not forbidden her to become a teacher.

"Let her work among strangers if she likes," she had said. "They will train her out of her willfulness and undo the harm done by her grandmother's indulgence."

Only when Magda, returning from Warsaw, fell ill with typhus, did her mother's sternness dissolve in tears and alarm. Even after the sickness passed, all was well between them; a greater tenderness toward Magda had awakened in her mother's heart. Then all at once the ill-fated concert took place, and the maternal affection cooled again.

She might have reprimanded Magda more than once if it had not been for the opposition of her husband, who ordered her not to raise the issue of the concert with Magda, and in general not to be oppressively strict with her.

"She is still in her formative years," said the father. "She is a good-hearted, understanding child who has even shown signs that she will be able to work for her own support. So it is out of the question to weary her with moralisms. Let her find a friend in her mother, not a harsh overseer."

Magda knew much of this, and what she did not know she guessed. She felt that there was more friction between herself and her mother than ever before, and she did not know how to stay clear of it.

Fretting about these things gave Magda migraines. This minor development was not without its good side: it somewhat mollified Mrs. Brzeska, who, as she was wrapping Magda's head in a kerchief, kissed her on the forehead and said:

"Well, well, enough of this. Do not worry. Only next time do not make acquaintances of such people, or arrange concerts. A young lady of your age cannot thrust herself forward or she is sure to be talked about."

In this way the uneasiness that had oppressed Magda for the past two days was dispelled, but not for long.

Mrs. Brzeska, notwithstanding that she had herself provided Magda's gown for the concert and rejoiced in her daughter's triumph, still had, as she thought, a responsibility to be stern with Magda. For very early on the day after the concert she had received information from several quarters that the entire town was offended.

Offended at what? At whom? Why? The doctor's wife did not know exactly, and at all events it did not matter. For her it was enough that Magda was involved in the situation that had aroused the town's indignation, and that such a general outbreak of disapproval could damage a young woman's prospects.

Who would marry a woman who was badly thought of by the whole town, Mrs. Brzeska wondered, though she consoled herself by hoping that God would reverse this misfortune, and that Krukowski was thinking very seriously about Magda, since he sent her bouquets day after day.

The truth was that of the ten thousand inhabitants of Iksinow, nine thousand nine hundred and seventy-five not only were not offended, but were not thinking about the concert at all. The remaining twenty-five—several young men who were in despair after Stella's departure; a few fathers of families who were harassed by debts contracted for the concert, which had brought no favorable changes in the situations of their daughters; and a very few of the older ladies—stirred up the animosity of the principal intellects of Iksinow.

One of the agitators was the magistrate's wife. The worthy woman considered it beyond doubt that since her Femcia had accompanied Krukowski at the concert, Krukowski, if he had any honor at all, would ask for Femcia's hand. That Krukowski had not only not asked for Femcia's hand, but during the concert had devoted himself to Magda in a way that was almost scandalous, meant one of two things:

Either Krukowski was a miserable man whom no decent woman, including Magda, ought to look at; or Krukowski was a noble gentleman who had fallen into the net set for him by Magda, Stella, Sataniello and all the local and visiting conspirators. The magistrate's wife was supported in this logic by another respectable matron, the wife of the notary, whose chance of organizing the concert Magda had wrested away. As surely as Iksinow was Iksinow, no one arranged concerts without the participation of the notary's wife. Only Miss Brzeska had done that—the daughter of the doctor, who (as the apothecary so aptly stated) had instilled in his offspring his knack for intrigue.

So it was no wonder that the magistrate's wife and the notary's wife had exited the concert hall in an attitude of mutual understanding. Then both ladies, with their respective husbands and children, had made their way to the apothecary's house for a late supper, and there discussed the matter without mincing words.

As a result, it was resolved that the magistrate's family must break off relations with the Brzeskis, in opposition to the great-hearted Eufemia, who so loved Magda and so trusted her!

Moreover, someone of good will should extricate the no less great-hearted Krukowski from the web of intrigue spun by Magda—with the help of a warning from his sister.

Accordingly, around eight in the morning on the day after the concert, while Krukowski was still sleeping soundly, the notary's wife paid a visit to his honorable sister, who was drinking her coffee in the garden. Without beating around the bush, the notary's wife informed her hostess that Sataniello had insulted the most respectable Iksinovians in his declamation; that Stella and Sataniello were not married, but nevertheless lived together in one room; that,

finally, Krukowski, if it had not been for his sister and his respectable name, would have been compromised forever by his participation in a concert with itinerant musicians.

“And who brought this about?” asked the notary’s wife in conclusion. “Miss Brzeska, who, no one knows how, has struck up a friendship with these two immoral persons, Stella and Sataniello.”

The day before this, and even today at six and at seven in the morning, Krukowski’s sister had been pleased with her brother’s performance on the violin. But at eight, having learned from so important a person as the notary’s wife that all the town was mourning the besmirching of the Krukowski name, the former paralytic collapsed with nervous prostration.

There was a terrible day, there were two terrible days, during which the sick lady kept to her bed, ordered the whole house to nurse her, called in Dr. Brzozowski and took only his medicines, first demanding that all Magda’s father’s prescriptions be thrown out. The patient even felt the end approaching and wanted to send for the priest. Between spasms she declared to her brother that she was disinheriting him because he had disgraced the family name.

But Krukowski, who knew his sister well, first sent a bouquet to Magda, then conducted the vicar to the ailing woman. The paralytic took fright when she saw the priest, because she thought that she must really be sick. But when the cheerful old man dispelled her anxiety, as a reward she listened to his account of the previous evening’s concert.

“How pleasing to the Lord, gracious lady,” said the priest, “to put up so much money for the church, and even to support such poor people as those singers—”

“But, sir, did you know,” the patient interrupted, “that that couple is not married?”

“That is possible.”

“But in spite of that, they sleep in one room!” persisted the invalid in a tone of the warmest indignation.

The clergyman waved a hand.

“But remember, dear lady, that you and I slept in one room in an inn when a storm overtook us at the festival of the church’s patron saint. And what of it?”

The former paralytic opened her lips and fell back on her pillows. His argument so impressed her that she left off conversing about the performers.

In this way the second day after the concert passed. Toward evening Krukowski’s sister was not speaking of her death, but she had a great deal to say about the ingratitude of her brother and the disgrace he had brought on the family name.

Her health worsened during the night, and she was stricken by the thought that the fact that a Krukowski had appeared in concert with two traveling singers

would be printed in the newspapers. Under the influence of this appalling supposition, she woke her brother and told him that if the newspapers wrote about his disgrace she would die once and for all, and all her estate would go to charity.

But the morning of the third day brought a new perspective. After all, the newspapers might write that the talented Ludwik Krukowski had been so gracious as to take part in a concert from which a portion of the revenue was designated for the church. Moreover, Mr. Krukowski had appeared as an amateur; he had not walked onto the stage from the kitchen, only from the audience, and if he had played the violin, it was only to the accompaniment of Miss Eufemia, the daughter of one of the town's most prominent families.

Yes! After all, the notary's wife herself had said that the magistrate's daughter's accompaniment had saved Krukowski's honor.

"Admirable girl!" thought the ex-paralytic. She called her brother in and said:

"Femcia is a pretty young woman. Czerniawski himself was quite delighted with her. You yourself noticed her shoulders, her bosom, her feet... She has aristocratic feet... You must send her a bouquet, and when I am well again, you must pay them a visit."

"I do not know if it would be proper to resume relations. Indeed, dear sister, you yourself requested that I terminate them because of that... that person from the post office."

The sick woman's face clouded, so to appease her, Krukowski sent Eufemia a bouquet of pale flowers, but a while later sent Magda a larger, more colorful bouquet. He had no aversion to Eufemia. Indeed, he was possessed of a proper appreciation of her shoulders and bosom, and he remembered her Hungarian shoes. Well, but Magda was more pleasing to him. Yet if Magda had not been in Iksinow ...

Then around noon something unexpected occurred. The magistrate's wife, that proud lady, came in her own person to the bed of Krukowski's ailing sister and brought her a porcelain pot of wonderful chamomile tea to ward off paralysis. The tea had been prepared by Eufemia's own beautiful hands.

"Reh-ally, madam first brr-oke off relations with us," said the magistrate's wife to the sick lady, pursing her lips and executing elaborate gestures. "I ought to feel offended, and I d-did. But at the news of your suffering I was unable to restrain myself, and I said to my husband, 'I must go to that worthy woman, although it is against the c-conventions.'"

During that short visit Krukowski's sister was so moved by the goodness of the magistrate's wife that she drank the whole pot of warm herb tea, cried half a potful of tears, and swore that she already felt that Eufemia's chamomile would restore her health.

After the departure of the magistrate's wife, the patient began to praise Eufemia and her herb to her brother in such unqualified terms that the disconcerted Krukowski thought it proper to remind her about the postal clerk. But his sister berated him.

"My dear, Femcia is so excessively beautiful that persons from all walks of life love her to distraction. I myself had so many admirers that my late husband continually made scenes with his jealousy. Was he right?"

Ludwik was desperate. He felt that his sister was ready to arrange a match between himself and Eufemia once again, and he began to comfort himself by visualizing her bosom, her shoulders and her Hungarian shoes. But in spite of his best efforts he could not forget Magda. One word, one look of hers held more charm for him than all Eufemia's obvious or hidden graces.

He had already decided either to defy this new whim of his sister's, or at least not to give Magda up without an arduous struggle, when fate unexpectedly came to his rescue. The former paralytic felt a dull pain in her side, which terrified her so that she rose from her bed with the agility of a girl of sixteen and ordered Dr. Brzeski to be called.

"Come now, dear sister!" Ludwik chided her. "Why, yesterday you tore up Brzeski's prescriptions and decided that only Brzozowski should treat you!"

"What is your Brzozowski to me?" she retorted. "I want Brzeski. I am very ill. Perhaps I have even been harmed by the herb prepared by that—that Eufemia!"

Chapter XIII. A Proposal of Marriage

Dr. Brzeski was called, and in a few minutes, by means of a little massage, he relieved the dull ache in the patient's side. The former paralytic was effusive in her expressions of gratitude, and her affection for the Brzeski family revived with such warmth that she began to reprimand the doctor.

"Why has Magda not been to see me for two days? I have not seen her since the concert."

"She had nothing to come for, since, as far as I knew, you were offended with her because of the concert," replied the doctor.

"I? It is false! Who could have told you such a thing? The notary's wife or the magistrate's wife, no doubt. I ask as the greatest of favors that Magda come to me tomorrow."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and promised to send Magda. At that Krukowski hurried to his room and asked his man to pour a pitcher of cold water on his head.

"I will go mad," he murmured. "I will go absolutely mad! Every day, every hour this woman's sympathy shifts in some new direction, her plans change. God, why do You punish me so terribly? I would rather be a woodcutter!"

The next day the former paralytic received by special delivery an anonymous letter smelling strongly of medicine sold at the apothecary's shop. In this letter "a well-wisher" informed her that all the gentlefolk were furious at Krukowski for performing in the concert at the instigation of Miss Brzeska.

The sick lady understood that this was a trick, and she began to guess its source. But since she could not lay hands on the author of the letter, she decided to seek satisfaction in another way.

"Magda is a good girl," she said to her brother. "I cannot forget that she saved my life and showed more compassion for me than all my friends did. But I must read her a lecture about that concert, which has caused me unpleasantness and serious illness."

"For God's sake, sister, do not do that!" exclaimed Ludwik in a fright. "What good will it do? After all, what right do you have?"

"Have I no right to admonish someone whom I am going to accept into my home and my family? You must be mad, Ludwik!"

"Ha! If that is the state of the case, sister, you will allow me to propose to Miss Magdalena. You may reprove your brother's wife, but not a person who is unrelated to us."

"Propose or do not propose, it is all the same to me. But I must have my say or I will die."

"I am going, then," Ludwik said resolutely.

“Do. If you had gone sooner, there would have been no foolish concert and no scandal.”

No painter, no poet, no musician could have expressed the welter of emotion that overwhelmed Krukowski at that moment. His joy that his sister was permitting him to propose to Magda knew no bounds, but he shuddered at the thought of the scene the sick lady would make with his beloved.

“I will make it up to her!” he told himself, feverishly pulling on a fresh shirt, gray trousers and a black frock coat. For some minutes his legs trembled under him, for he knew that in such situations a promise of recompense was easier to make than to keep.

He said goodbye to his sister tenderly and, glittering with good breeding, perfumed, and garnished with a boutonniere, he flew on what at age forty-five might pass for wings of love to the Brzeskis’ house to make, as he said, his most beautiful dream come true.

He found the doctor’s wife, but Magda was not there. She had gone to his sister’s.

The invalid greeted Magda coolly enough. Then, taking up her expensive fan, a flask of toilet water and the unsigned letter, she said:

“Perhaps we will go to the summer house, darling.”

Magda gave her her hand and so carefully supported the precious burden that was to be her sister-in-law, so painstakingly conducted her down the steps, so studiously chose the smoothest parts of the very smooth garden path, that the invalid’s anger abated considerably.

“If she tended me after marrying Ludwik as she is doing today, it would be hard for him to find a better wife,” she thought.

They sat on a bench under the shade of a wild grapevine. One of its leaves, moving in the wind, grazed Magda’s neck. She quivered, thinking of the major.

“Well, my child, read what awful effects ensued from the concert,” the sick lady began, handing Magda the anonymous letter.

Magda flushed angrily, and her eyes darkened; but she glanced through the letter and handed it back in silence.

“There you see how a woman ought to be circumspect if she does not want to bring trouble on herself and her loved ones. Independence! Do you think that you are the only woman who is independent? What of your mother, who manages an entire household? What of me?”

The sick woman fastened her eyes on Magda’s worried face and went on:

“I do not allow myself to be drawn into association with people of questionable conduct, even though I am independent! You should have seen how I used to conciliate my husband of blessed memory, who was, may God not lay it up to him, a jealous egotist who suspected me of an affair with an estate manager. And Ludwik—oh, what I have had to put up with! God only knows

how much his gambling and his spa treatments cost me. He was wild as a prairie horse and I had to straighten him out, for a woman must steer a man or they will both come to grief.

“But all my victories I attribute not only to independence but to the discretion that protected me from improper relationships. Emancipation! The expression is new, but the thing itself is as old as the world. A woman ought to be mistress of the home. That is emancipation. But someone who associates with actors and exposes herself to people’s censure will never be mistress. All our power consists in our innocence, in our right to say every day and every hour to our husband or brother, ‘You are a rascal, a derelict, a tramp, and I—I tend the home for your sake, and I am pure as tears.’”

“But—please, ma’am—is it so bad to organize a concert?” Magda whispered.

“First of all, you are too young for concerts, and then, what sort of people are those actors? Associating with them might compromise even—me! After all, they are not married, but they sleep in one room.”

“That is not true!” Magda exclaimed, looking fiercely at the former paralytic with eyes that were full of defiance but glittering with restrained tears.

“And how do you know that it is not true?” the astounded lady burst out.

“I saw. There was only one bed in their room—”

The sick woman’s anger suddenly abandoned her. She clapped her hands together and answered back in a tone of perfect calm:

“Jesus, Mary! My Magda, how stupid you are!”

Magda burst into tears and rose from the bench.

“Oh! Thank you, madam,” she said. “Oh! I never expected to hear such an expression from you!”

The invalid rose quickly and, taking Magda’s head in both hands, began to kiss her.

“My child, I beg your pardon, but... I never heard anything so naive. If you had been married, you would have understood that it is precisely that circumstance that condemns them. But you are so naive as yet that I am ashamed to explain—”

“You are entirely mistaken about me. I am not that naive at all. Oh, no!” Magda said indignantly.

“You are, dear one, you are,” the sick lady repeated, covering her with kisses. “That is just your crowning grace. I know all about this, for after all, I was your age once. I truly do not know what that carousing Ludwik has done to deserve such a reward from God!”

“If you please, ma’am, I prevailed on Ludwik to do this. I wish to hide nothing. Ludwik would not have played at the concert if it had not been for me.”

“Dear, precious child! Well, let us say no more about the concert and those actors, because I see already that we will not understand each other, for all your experience,” the sick lady said, laughing.

After that prelude the former paralytic wanted to move on to the most important subject and drop a hint to Magda that her beloved brother, Ludwik Krukowski, was going to propose to her any day, any hour. But Magda looked grave, and the former paralytic found that vexing.

“Why is the little minx frowning?” she thought. “Look at her! I tell her a few words of truth and right away she takes offense. Oh, missy, if you want to hear about the good fortune that is waiting for you, you must come to me in a different humor.”

So she also took on a gloomy air, which Magda saw and took her leave. When she had reached the hall, the older lady called:

“Magda, please—”

“What does madam want?” Magda asked in a tone so cold that the other lady’s irritation heightened.

“Nothing, my child,” she replied still more distantly.

Magda was halfway home when such great tenderness toward her awoke in the heart of the ailing woman that she thought of sending a servant to bring the girl back. But after a moment she decided on a different course of action.

“Ludwik,” she thought, “though he spoke with determination and dressed himself to the nines, will not have the courage to propose. He has been refused so many times! It would be best if I myself go to the Brzeskis. That will be the surest way, and the most suitable. I am in the position of mother to Ludwik, so it is my place to take this step.”

Furthermore, she felt some pangs of conscience about the conversation she had just had with Magda. The concert had been a piece of folly, but she felt now that there was no need to cause pain to a girl as good as an angel.

For Krukowski’s sister’s range of feeling was extremely wide. There was room in it for all tones, half-tones and quarter-tones, from love to hate, from contempt to adoration, from despair to delight. Moreover, the pianoforte of her soul changed its melody so often and so suddenly that those who were not well disposed toward her suspected her, if not of utter insanity, at least of quite advanced hysteria.

Fortunately the lady almost never met her detractors, because everyone avoided her. Those who did business with her considered her a person of shrewdness and energy in whom those forces were stifled now and then by the pains of neuralgia. Only the major was so blunt as to call her an old lunatic; but because he judged everyone in Iksinow harshly, by common consent no one paid much attention to that.

In the meantime Magda burst into her house in a fever of agitation. Her mother intercepted her in the hallway with a deep blush on her face and an

inexpressible tenderness in her eyes. They looked at each other for a moment, the mother seeing a daughter she would shortly lose, Magda at a loss as to why her mother was so moved.

“Take off your hat quickly,” said the doctor’s wife with trembling lips. “Krukowski has asked to marry you.”

This information took Magda’s breath away. Her eyes widened.

“What?” she asked.

“Never mind. Come in.”

She pushed Magda gently into the parlor, where Krukowski stood by an armchair in gray trousers with a flower in his lapel. His eyes were a vivid blue, his hair blacker than usual. His narrow hand in its gray glove plucked mechanically at the cord from which his monocle twisted restlessly.

“Let her answer you herself,” the doctor’s wife said to Krukowski.

“Madam, my life’s happiness rests in your hands,” Krukowski declared with a bow. But even before he had finished uttering this affecting formula, mischievous memory whispered to him that he was repeating it for the ninth time in his life.

Magda look at him with all the color gone from her face, understanding nothing. She was dumbfounded, since in a fleeting moment of initial shock she had imagined that Krukowski was proposing to her mother.

“My highest dream, and, I confess, my boldest, is to have madam’s hand,” Krukowski said indistinctly, and bowed again.

Magda was silent. She was not entirely unprepared for this honor, but in spite of that, on hearing Krukowski’s declarations, she felt that she was going mad. Aversion, fear and desperation—those were the feelings she experienced in what is called the most beautiful moment of a woman’s life.

“What do you think of this, Magda?” the doctor’s wife asked in a troubled tone. “Mr. Krukowski is asking you to be his wife.”

After a moment of utter dismay, a new vigor awoke in Magda. Her face took on a stern expression, her eyes flashed and she answered in the tone of a mature, indifferent woman:

“I will not marry anyone, mama.”

It was her mother’s turn to go pale. What struck her was not so much the answer as its tone, and the expression on her daughter’s face.

“You do not need to hurry,” she said. Krukowski added:

“Really, I would be most happy—”

“That is my final answer, mama,” Magda said again in a tone which on the lips of a warm, unaffected girl had the ring of an affront.

And Krukowski felt it, thanks to the fact that he was a seasoned expert on failed bids for matrimony, and that Magda's meaning was impossible to mistake. So he bowed lower than usual, then raised his head higher than he ordinarily did.

"I beg your pardon for my mistake," he replied. "I had dared to suppose, however, that in the conversation we had before the concert (he emphasized the last phrase), madam had given me a shadow of hope."

"What does that mean, Magda?" asked her mother.

"Ah, nothing, madam!" Krukowski quickly interjected. "Of course it was only my imagination. A hundred apologies."

And he bowed his way out.

The doctor's wife dropped into a chair. She clasped her trembling hands and looked with pale eyes at the door through which Krukowski had just exited. Her face was so full of pain that her terrified daughter fell down with her face on her mother's knees, sobbing:

"Do not look like that, mama! Do not be angry. But I swear to you, I could not do it! I could not, mama! I could not!"

The doctor's wife gently pushed her away. She sighed, shrugged and answered mildly:

"What, another scene? You do not want to marry, and no one is going to make you. After all, it is too late. You are independent—not a word!—your grandmother made you so, and so your father wants it, and my opinion has always counted for nothing. But do you understand our situation?"

Magda raised her eyes apprehensively.

"Your father earns little, so little that it is hardly enough to run the house. True, Zdzislaw needs nothing from us, but Zosia is still in school. Never mind about her. Emancipated women cannot be bothered about younger brothers and sisters, for what is family to them? But we owe Krukowski's sister several hundred rubles which must be paid back immediately."

"Indeed, mama, I have three thousand rubles from grandmother. Take as much of it as you need for the debt and for Zosia. Take it all!"

"I do not know if they would give us three hundred rubles right away, but... not much of the original sum is left. We knew that you were fond of your brother and sister, and I drew on it for Zdzislaw's education. We spent more than two thousand rubles, and today I regret it."

"Do not say that! You did well, helping Zdzislaw, very well. Pay the debt with what is left, and I will take Zosia to Warsaw. I will look after her."

"You?" said the doctor's wife. "God forbid! One emancipated daughter is enough. If I lose the other one the same way, what will be left for us in our old age?"

"Do not talk like that, mama!" Magda moaned.

She fell at her mother's feet and burst into tears so full of grief that the doctor's wife was pacified. She helped Magda up, began to reassure her, and even gave her a cool kiss on the forehead.

"You are not to blame, poor child!" she said. "That accursed emancipation makes monsters of you women..."

"...who are not willing to sell themselves to debauchees who are over the hill? Is that it?" suddenly remarked the father, who for several minutes had been watching the scene through the garden window.

He came into the parlor through the glass doors, took Magda in his arms and said with a reproving look at his wife:

"Are you not ashamed, mother, of a girl who has more sense of what is appropriate than we, her elders? Think what our life would be like if we had to watch her misery, caught between an indolent husband and his sister, a woman who is half insane! You would not hand a dog who had served you for years over to those people."

"Such a fortune, Felix..."

"But a human soul should be worth more than your fortunes," the doctor retorted. "You forget that, though you pray for its salvation twice a day."

Chapter XIV. Echoes From the Proposal

After his unprofitable meeting with Magda, Krukowski walked out onto the street like a martyr to the stake. He felt superior to the whole world, which he profoundly despised; but his heart burdened him as if he were carrying a hundred pounds of explosives in his chest.

He had been, as he believed, insulted, trodden into the dust—in a word, made very unhappy. But in spite of that, something else was stirring inside him, something like light-minded joy. A few hours before, if he had been given a choice between death and being rejected by Magda, he would have chosen death. But when she had rejected him, some dormant energy had awakened inside him, and he jeered at himself: “Three Marias, two Stanislawas, one Katarzyna, one Leokadia, and now Magdalena. Obviously I am not successful with women.”

Then he recollected that for more than a dozen years he had been living on charity from his sister; that he was nothing; that people spoke to him in polite formulas that barely concealed their low esteem for him. So he clenched his fist and murmured:

“That has gone on long enough!”

When he walked onto the porch of his house and into the hall, he listened with pleasure to the sound of his own footsteps; he was so brave! Without hesitation he seized the latch, gave the door a push, and—found himself face to face with his sister.

The sick lady raised her lorgnette to her eyes and looked at him. At that instant it was apparent to her that there had been a change in her brother. His gray trousers, the Panama hat in his right hand and the glove in his left, his black frock coat with a flower in the buttonhole, and above all his face, which seem to glow with energy, all made their impression on the former paralytic. She looked at him from head to toe with satisfaction and thought: “He has been accepted!” She asked only as a matter of form:

“Well?”

The word struck Krukowski at that moment as profoundly sarcastic. The memory of all his sister’s daily and nightly caprices flashed like lightning through his mind, together with the thought of all the humiliations he had suffered at her hands and his complete, laughable ineffectiveness, which had not even aroused her compassion. His hands fluttered and he fell onto a couch, bursting into a fit of such loud crying that his manservant ran into the room with the cook behind him.

The sick woman rose to her feet. The thought that her brother had lost money at cards leaped to her mind.

“Get out!” she shouted to the servants. Drawing near her brother, she said severely:

“Ludwik, what does this mean?”

“I was not accepted!” this very grown man sobbed.

“So you proposed?”

“Yes.”

“But what did you do that for? Could you not have waited until I attended to this matter? Did you absolutely have to make it clear that you care nothing about me?”

She broke off because Krukowski had stopped crying and begun to behave like a person in a fainting fit. His hands hung limp and his head fell onto the arm of the couch.

“Well! Well! Well!” exclaimed his sister. But seeing that that did no good, she called the servants.

A carafe of water and half a bottle of cologne restored Krukowski to consciousness. His sister, recovering amazing elasticity in every member, with tightly set lips helped carry her brother to bed and sent for Dr. Brzozowski.

In the physician’s presence Krukowski went into such a deep faint that the doctor was alarmed. He surrounded the patient with bottles and mustard plasters and forbade him to get out of bed for a whole week. The former paralytic kept vigil over her brother day and night; the boy who was helping her had two swollen cheeks.

On the eighth day Krukowski put on a dressing gown and walked around the garden. Then he took his violin from its embroidered coverlet, and quietly as the rustle of a butterfly’s wings there flowed from under his fingers the same barcarole that he had played to Eufemia’s accompaniment in days gone by—the same barcarole that had brought him a storm of applause at the concert.

That day the former paralytic conducted the doctor to the most remote room in the house and asked exactly what was the matter with her brother.

Brzozowski raised his eyebrows and began to lecture her. Because they were sitting side by side, he tapped her on the knee after each point.

“Pardon me, madam, but your brother—first of all—is exhausted, and must rest and return to his normal state of health,” he said.

“Indeed, he is doing that.”

“Excellent! Pardon me, but—secondly—his nerves are quite frayed, perhaps not so much because of his troubles as because of madam’s own frayed nerves. To be continually with a person so prone to be upset as madam must be upsetting for him.”

“Come now, doctor...”

“Come now, madam,” Brzozowski interrupted, again tapping her on the knee, “you will do as you see fit, but I will speak from medical knowledge. Your brother, if he is to come to himself, must change his surroundings and his style of life. He absolutely must. The best thing would be to send him on a journey—”

“Never!” the sick woman broke in.

“As you please,” replied the doctor, and hit her on the knee again.

“But what about marriage?”

The doctor’s eyes flashed.

“That is possible. But his wife must be a woman of understanding, tactful, not temperamental. And not extremely young, for the very young are not for us.”

“We will find such a person,” the lady rejoined.

“Look as soon as possible. But above all, give him a little breathing room.”

“What do you suppose...”

“I suppose nothing. I know for a certainty that you rule him like a despot. How the tyranny of men brings tears from women! But the tyranny of women makes men sick, numbs them, weakens them, demoralizes them...”

“You are impertinent! Thank you for this advice.”

“I did not ask you to call me, madam. I do not like to take Brzeski’s few patients away from him. But when I am called to the sick, I say what I see, for that is my duty. If Mr. Krukowski could browbeat you as you do him, you would both be well.”

After that sermon the sick lady cried and gave Brzozowski a dressing down, but handed him three rubles. The doctor took the three rubles, gave her even a better dressing down, and they parted, feeling quite pleased with themselves.

Brzozowski went out, bumping into furniture and putting on his cap in the room instead of waiting until he was out of the house. When he had gone, the sick woman thought with a sigh:

“Yes—if Ludwik were like him!”

For eight days rumors raged about Krukowski’s illness in the most elevated spheres of Iksinow society. No electric current ever shot through its circuit as fast as the news of Krukowski’s latest rejection ran through the town.

Of course, two factions formed right away. The vicar said that Magda had acted with no regard for financial considerations. The major called her a noble girl. Mientlewicz was confirmed in his opinion that she was a goddess at whose feet all the world ought to fall.

But the notary’s wife, the magistrate’s wife and their circle shared whatever fluctuating opinion the apothecary formulated as he weighed powders and corked bottles.

“What now, did I not say that this friendship with roving actors would do Miss Brzeska no good? As long as it was a matter of turning the men’s heads, dressing herself up, arranging concerts, Miss Magdalena shone like a star in Iksinow. But when it came to the sacrament... Oh! ‘I cannot...’ That, sir, is the way with our emancipated women. It begins with theory, but then... Oh!”

During one of these speeches the notary's wife modestly lowered her eyes and spoke up:

"There now, you are malicious! Who ever heard such things said of... young ladies?"

The apothecary was taken aback. However much he enjoyed playing the role of the rancorous pessimist, his opinions of Magda's conduct were nevertheless founded on those of the notary's wife.

This trifling incident brought on a chill in the relations between the highly respectable households of the apothecary and the notary. The apothecary suddenly ceased to interest himself in Magda's affairs and began keeping his distance from small-town intrigues.

"Oho!" he said to his wife. "Those women want to make me a bellows to fan the fires of gossip. But a person has to get up early in the morning to put something over on me. I don't play such people's games!"

Through these difficult days Magda was hardly seen on the street. From morning until late at night she pored over elementary school books and her workbooks from the beginners' classes, preparing to become the headmistress of the school in Iksinow. Dr. Brzeski, unruffled, visited the sick or received them in his office. His wife's complexion took on a yellowish tint, and it may be that she cried at night, but she did not reproach Magda. The two barely exchanged a dozen words in the course of a day. There was no anger between them, only kind wishes. But both the one and the other felt that they were estranged.

If danger had threatened either of them, the other would have given her life to save her. But living together was becoming more and more difficult. Between them stood the shadow of the grandmother; the long years Magda had spent in the distant capital; Mrs. Latter's school; the difference between their ages; and above all the difference between their conceptions of what was happening. No one could explain to the mother that Magda's eye was not her eye, that Magda's heart was not her heart, that Magda's brain was not her brain—in a word, that Magda was not a vital, inseparable part of her being, that the mother and daughter did not share one soul. At the same time, Magda felt more clearly every day that she was distinct from her mother—that she had a soul of her own that she would not on any account renounce.

From the moment she refused Krukowski it seemed to Magda that she was a stranger in her parents' house. She felt that she was exploiting honest people of modest means. At dinner time she was almost afraid to eat because, as she saw it, every mouthful was stolen. Sometimes she involuntarily murmured "Thank you" when a dish was passed to her, and once, when her spoon fell on the table with a clink, her heart raced. As she worked in her room, though no one was watching her, she tried to take up as little space at her table as she could. She sat in a corner of her chair and almost held her breath in order not to take air away from the beloved parents she was so injuring.

With one word she could have rid them of work and trouble and ensured them a secure old age—and she had not done it! She, who cared so much about the plight of people who were hardly known to her and was so eager to devote her life to others! Yes, and still today, at any moment, she would gladly sacrifice her life for them. So why was it that they had not demanded that, but had wished to give her to a man who would have been repugnant to her as a husband?

On the whole it seemed to Magda that marriage was compromising to women. In the presence of men she felt only a deep shyness, a shyness so strong that she could not get the better of it except in the case of one man, Kazimierz Norski. But when that thought occurred to her for the first time she wept, then knelt and prayed, trembling. She felt that she was an immoral woman whom people should despise and God should condemn; such are the outlandish ideas that find their way into girlish hearts.

And in the meantime, around the town the most respectable ladies were saying that Magda must be quite advanced in her ideas about emancipation to have turned down such a fine match as Ludwik Krukowski. It was true that Krukowski had been unsuccessful in his proposals to other young women, but they had been wealthy, aristocratic. No daughter of a doctor, or even a magistrate, notary or apothecary would have shown such poor judgment without compelling reasons.

Krukowski's illness awoke lively sympathy, chiefly among elderly ladies. Krukowski, they told each other, had returned from the Brzeski house at that fatal hour like a man who had turned to stone, so that he fell against a cart loaded with oats and did not return a bow from the notary. A complete automaton! They traded accounts of his crying fit, which must have lasted about five hours and could be heard all the way to the old inn. They said that the unhappy Ludwik was fainting every day, and would have died had it not been for Brzozowski's superhuman intervention.

"And so," the notary's wife explained to the wife of her husband's assistant, "it can only mean that he will either lose his mind or get softening of the brain or a disease of the bone marrow. In any case his sister will sell the house and garden, withdraw the capital she has invested in mortgages and take the sufferer to some foreign country—some place so out of the way, so cut off from the world, that no one there would even have heard of Iksinow!"

Listening to this with the gravity appropriate to his position, the notary assumed an expression signifying that it would be no easy matter to find a place to which information about Iksinow would not make its way.

"And what a misfortune for Femcia!" said the notary's wife. "For if that—that Miss Magdalena had not come along, Krukowski would certainly have married her. They were such a fine couple—and now!"

"Well, but Cynadrowski was there—unnecessarily," remarked the notary.

“My dear, what do you mean, ‘there?’” his wife demanded, raising her voice. “That he was smitten with her? All you men are smitten with any beautiful woman.”

“Cynadrowski hung about the magistrate’s house in the evenings,” said the notary.

“What of it? He is free even to hang about the church. Please do not repeat gossip or you will make me angry.”

The notary was silent, but he made a face that might have suggested that he was surprised at his wife’s sudden aversion to gossip. She, at least, construed it that way, and fell into a bad humor.

Chapter XV. Strolls in the Cemetery...

On the fifth day of Krukowski's sickness, shortly before sunset, Magda went for a turn in the garden. All at once a cap with a star flashed above the fence from the street side, and after a moment a letter fell into the garden next to the raspberry bush.

"From Miss Eufemia!" said a stifled voice from outside the fence.

Magda was a little afraid and a little annoyed with this strange messenger, but she picked up the note and read it. Again she saw two lovebirds embracing. This time they were not crossed out.

"My dearest, my blessed, my only friend! After sunset today, come to the cemetery, where I will be waiting with indescribable longing. I beg you, do not refuse, for I have something serious to say."

The next clause, "perhaps about the lives of two beings," had a line through it. Then came the signature: "Yours eternally, Eufemia."

In half an hour Magda, whom no one had asked where she was going, was at the appointed place.

The cemetery was small, surrounded by a wall. The gate could be opened by hand and would close by itself, swinging in and out and then clattering shut. The luminous rose of early evening could still be seen on the white monuments. As she hurried along the main street it seemed to Magda that the tombs were taller, that the gray and white crosses stared at her, and that in the great silent spaces between the trees shadows were deepening and whispers could be heard.

When she passed her grandmother's gravestone, Magda knelt and murmured a prayer. Just then there was a rustling in the cemetery and then a noise, as if someone had climbed the wall and jumped down on the inner side.

"Mercy on us! Why did I come here?" Magda thought apprehensively. At that instant she heard quick footsteps, then the voice of Eufemia:

"Is that you, Magda?"

Magda stood up. Eufemia threw herself on her neck and tearfully began to kiss her.

"Will you ever forgive me?"

Magda answered her with a hug. Then, arm in arm, they hurried through a dense cluster of trees and sat on a bench opposite a small cross that leaned sideways as if it wanted to hear their whispers.

"You turned Krukowski down?" said Eufemia, nestling against Magda's shoulder. "Oh, how magnanimous you are, how brave! You do not know how I bless you, for you alone opened my eyes to the truth. Fortune is everything to my mother, and if Krukowski had proposed to me half a year ago, oh, or even after the concert, I would have accepted him, and trodden down the noblest heart..."

She stopped to catch her breath.

“You see, Magda, we women in particular are very wicked: we sell ourselves, or allow ourselves to be sold; we renounce our own wills and even our feelings for money. And in the meantime, what fortune can take the place of true love?”

“Look at these graves, Magda, where everything ends, these graves to which it is not possible to take a fortune, and say: is it right, for the sake of miserable mammon, to bruise a heart—a heart that loves, that worships one? Only today do I feel womanly dignity, only today do I feel pride, now that I know how he loves me. To give someone as much happiness as I can give that person! Ah! Is there anything more important in the world?”

“Of whom are you speaking?” asked Magda.

“Of Cynadrowski. I will hide nothing from you: we are engaged, and I feel that I am beginning to love him. A woman needs to be loved, adored. That rewards her for the sacrifices she makes in life.”

“And your parents?”

Eufemia shuddered.

“Parents? Did you ask your parents before you rejected Krukowski? I am also a woman, a human being, and my body, at least, is mine to dispose of. That, after all—my body—is my only property, which I may bestow on the one I love, but sell—never!”

Magda felt a painful pressure at her heart. She gave Eufemia a long, long kiss.

“In the winter,” the magistrate’s daughter continued, “my fiance’s father will put up money to make him the postal transfer agent in Kielecki. That will be the foundation of our livelihood, and I will supplement it by working. For who will prohibit me from teaching children, even when I am the wife of the transfer agent?”

She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

“For that reason I ask you, Magda: accept me as a partner in your school. I will work from dawn till dark. I do not want a room of my own with curtains and wallpaper. Whitewashed walls will be enough. Under your influence I will grow accustomed to teaching, and in the evenings I will embroider; for the rest, perhaps I will give music lessons to save money for a very modest trousseau. For I am sure mama will give me nothing before the wedding.”

They rose from the bench and left the cemetery.

Magda was moved beyond expression. In the self-forgetful wife-to-be, so eager to devote herself to another, she could not recognize the old proud, egotistical Eufemia.

From then on Magda went to the cemetery every evening and chatted with Eufemia about her plans for the future or about the school they were going to

establish. The postal clerk always accompanied Eufemia, but he hid behind the wall at the sight of Magda.

When Krukowski had recovered his strength, thrown off his dressing gown and begun more and more often to restore his equilibrium by playing the violin, his sister summoned the notary's wife and a long conference took place behind closed doors. After it concluded, the notary's wife, beaming with satisfaction, paid a visit to the magistrate's wife and another conference ensued. After it concluded, the notary's wife went out and it was the magistrate's wife turn to beam with satisfaction.

Then the magistrate's wife called for the magistrate and began to confer with him. After hearing her opening statements, he exclaimed:

"I had a hunch about that a long time ago!"

But as the conversation continued he sprang from his chair, stamped his feet and shouted:

"I will not meddle in this! Give me a son and I will do as I please with him, but a daughter is yours to deal with."

"Have you g-gone soft in the head or what?" his wife answered pompously. "Where am I going to g-get you a son?"

She accompanied this remark with movements full of an affected dignity—movements perhaps too grand for such a trivial reply. And because it was nearly sunset, she asked him most pressing not to go out of the house.

It was all very distressing to the magistrate. Fortunately, he did not have long to wait. Just then he heard his good wife say to Eufemia:

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

That must have been a cue, for the magistrate went through to the parlor and sat on a chair by the heating stove like a man with a stomach ailment. His wife also entered the drawing room, moving majestically. After her came Eufemia with her hat on. She was even in the act of buttoning her second glove. The magistrate's wife, exuding authority, settled into an armchair and said to her daughter:

"So you are g-going for a walk, young lady?"

"Yes."

"Not to the c-cemetery?"

"To the cemetery."

"And you are not afraid to walk among the g-graves by yourself at this time of day?"

"Oh?" Eufemia rejoined quietly, sitting by a table opposite her mother. "I see that someone has been spying on me, so I will hide nothing. Yes, mama, I go to the cemetery either with Magda or with—Mr. Cynadrowski."

The magistrate looked with great attention at a chink in the floor. His wife shifted in her chair, but did not change her tone.

“Mr. Cynaderr-owski,” she remarked, “is a most unsuitable companion for a young woman of your p-position!”

Eufemia hung her head and began to blink.

“I love him, mama,” she whispered.

The magistrate threw up his hands.

“You are not using good j-judgment, my Femcia,” replied her mother, “with your love affair or with your school. All of this is the effect of your association with Magdalena.”

“Oh, no! I am establishing the school with her, but I love him on my own. I struggled for a long time against his pleas and the feeling that was being born in me. But since once I swore that I would be his—”

The magistrate put his hands on his belly and inclined his head. His wife interrupted her daughter:

“I neveh would have thought, Eufemia, that you could f-forget your p-position!”

“Well, it is not such a fine position, being an old maid, which I would have become in a year or two. Until this time I have listened to you blindly, and what has come of it? I am twenty-five years old...”

“Oh, fine!” muttered the magistrate.

“...and you will admit that it is better to die than to be an old maid. Do we not know enough of them here, of various ages? The older they are the unhappier they are, and the more they are ridiculed. Thank you for this position; I prefer to be the transfer agent’s wife,” the young woman said, fingering an album.

“Well, well! How the girl chatters. How she chatters!” remarked the magistrate.

“And I think,” his wife said slowly, “that it would be better to be Madam Krrr-ukowska with your parents’ b-blessing than a disinherited, disowned Madam Cynadrowska...”

The album slipped from Eufemia’s hand and fell to the floor with a little crash.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Her voice shook.

“That Krukowski and his sister will ask for your hand very soon if they are certain that you will not r-refuse.”

Eufemia burst into tears.

“Good heavens, what a turn of events! But Cynadrowski...”

“A passing fancy,” her mother replied.

“I swore to him... I promised...”

“In a moment of n-noble exaltation, no doubt, when you were overwhelmed by his d-desperate pleading.”

“We exchanged rings... What is more... he has my letters.”

“Oh, damn!” growled the magistrate.

“Eufemia, my dear,” said his wife, “Mr. Krukowski is well born, b-beautifully brought up, and, in spite of that, lonely and unhappy. To give your hand to such a man, to imbue him with c-courage, to restore his faith in himself—that, in my opinion, is a goal worthy of a superior woman. Cynadrowski—your m-maid would do for him!”

The magistrate’s wife shrugged her shoulders haughtily. Eufemia wept.

The opening conference on this question went on until late at night, punctuated with the tears and embraces of the mother and daughter and the vociferations of the magistrate, which contributed very little to anyone’s understanding of the matter at hand.

Eufemia was not at the cemetery that evening.

Chapter XVI. ...And Where They Ended

The next day the magistrate, worn out and full of misgivings, called on the major and had a conference with him. About what? That will be a secret for eternity. Only it is certain that the major railed at the magistrate's wife so viciously that the window panes trembled with indignation.

Furthermore, when the perspiring magistrate had left the major's house and returned at a light trot to the bosom of his family, the major made his way to Dr. Brzeski's. He entered the room where Magda was writing out lesson plans and said in a low voice without preamble:

"Tell me: is it true that you were the go-between for Miss Eufemia and Cynadrowski?"

"I?" Magda cried in amazement.

"Tell me truly, child," the major said. "For they claim that you induced Eufemia to walk in the cemetery with Cynadrowski and to exchange rings with him."

Magda resented the suggestion. And because even when she was at school she had made a habit of preserving her correspondence, she handed the major two letters: the one with the picture of the lovebirds crossed out, in which Eufemia had broken off relations with her, and the other with the lovebirds not crossed out, in which Eufemia had invited her to the cemetery.

"Of course!" said the old man as he read the letters. "I was sure of it!"

Then he peered out the window, glanced at the door, and seized Magda by the waist. He nuzzled her neck with his gray, tobacco-sodden mustache, muttering:

"Oh, you—you playful little thing! Could you not tempt me, an old man... Keep well, then," he added after a second, and kissed her on the forehead.

From the doctor's house the major tottered toward the post office, filling his monstrous pipe. He walked into the parcel post office where the young man with his mane of blond hair was bent over his desk, adding up a column of figures.

"Cynadrowski," said the major, "do you have a little time?"

The young man put his finger on one of the numbers and, looking forbiddingly at the major, answered:

"I will in a moment. But no one is allowed behind the grating—"

"Oh, and there is another place where no one was allowed to go in, but you wanted to," retorted the major. And not only did he sit on the couch by the desk that was reserved for postal officials, but he lit his atrocious pipe with the postal officials' matches.

"You are most informal, sir!" Cynadrowski said.

“I learned that from you, and I will explain that to you shortly. Just finish writing.”

Under his crest of blond hair the young man bit his lip, added up the column of figures and checked his calculation.

“Do you have a room here?” asked the major.

Cynadrowski rose and without speaking conducted the major to an adjoining room. It contained an iron bed, a pair of black cabinets with papers in them, and, in one corner, a pile of saddlebags that gave off the smell of reconditioned leather.

The major sat on the bed and blew out puffs of smoke for a minute. He gazed at the ceiling and recalled how, half an hour earlier, the magistrate had knelt, literally knelt before him, begging him to prepare the clerk very tactfully and very gradually for the forthcoming grievous news.

“For you see, dear major,” the magistrate had said, “Cynadrowski is inclined to be carried away, and if we do not approach him diplomatically, he will very likely make a scene.”

The major recollected all this, and it was evident that he was forming a plan worthy of Metternich, for he smiled and said:

“Do you know what my object is in coming to you?”

“I cannot guess to what I owe this honor,” answered the impetuous young man, who was losing patience with the old soldier’s behavior.

“You see... I came in the name of Miss Eufemia, to give you back your letters to her, and—your ring.”

After this speech he slowly placed on a table first a little packet bound with black ribbon, then a little pillbox in which a ring with the image of the Divine Mother sparkled from its cotton wool wrapping.

“Furthermore, I ask you on behalf of Miss Eufemia for her letters and her ring,” the major concluded, looking at Cynadrowski.

The young man stood by one of the cabinets with his hands in his pockets. His face seemed frozen. His lips were white. His thick hair was tousled, though he had not touched it. The major felt sorry for the unfortunate clerk, and just because of that his face, with its bristling eyebrows, took on a stern look.

“This cannot be,” Cynadrowski said hoarsely.

“You are right,” rejoined the major. “It cannot be that an honorable man would keep letters and a ring from a young lady who has sent his back to him.”

“That cannot be,” the young man repeated with a cry, beating his chest with his fist. “Just the day before yesterday she swore to me—”

“The day before yesterday she swore for the day before yesterday, but not for today. A woman never swears for the long term except in church. There is no

point in prompting her through a long vow, for before she reaches the end, she will forget what came at the beginning.”

“But why did she do this? Why?”

“They say that Krukowski is going to propose to her.”

“And she will marry him?” the young man almost howled.

“Well, certainly. And it’s a pity she didn’t manage to do it sooner. Such a splendidly built woman could have six children...”

Cynadrowski suddenly turned around and fell to his knees among the aromatic saddles. He pressed his forehead between the two walls and moaned, not shedding even one tear:

“Christ... Christ... Is it possible? Merciful Jesus, is it possible that people can be murdered in broad daylight? Christ!”

This was painful for the major.

“The devil brought me here,” he muttered.

He rose from the bed, went over to the kneeling man, clapped him on the shoulder and said:

“Come now! Get up!”

“What?” replied the young man, springing to his feet. He looked as if he had lost his wits.

“Above all—do not be stupid.”

“What, then?”

“Return the young lady’s letters and ring, and take yours.”

Cynadrowski lunged toward a small trunk, opened it and took a packet of letters from a box inside. He counted them over, put them into a thick envelope and secured it with three official seals.

Next he took a ring set with an opal off his finger and carefully placed it in the little box with cotton wool. The ring with the Divine Mother he put on his finger.

“It came to me from my mother,” he said, quivering.

“A beautiful keepsake,” the major replied. “Too bad you didn’t respect it.”

“Eh?” Cynadrowski inquired.

“Nothing. Now you ought to take a purge, and even ... Do you know what? I will send you six laxative pills. Take them all, and by tomorrow your peace of mind will return. In our regiment we had Dr. Gerard; every time an officer met with a disaster in love, he gave him a purge. And if a fellow played around very much, he gave him an emetic right off. It never failed; it was like quicklime for rats.”

“Are you mocking me?” the young man whispered.

The major put his right hand on his shoulder (for his left hand was holding his pipe), kissed him on both cheeks, and said:

“Upon my word, I am not mocking. How I respect you, my Cynadrowski! Only, you see, a petticoat—a good enough thing—but you don’t have to wrap your head in it. And don’t think that I don’t understand. I know what love is. I was in love a dozen times a year, perhaps more. And since I was as handsome as a picture, the girls flocked after me like cats after suet. And what do you think? Each one of them was dying for love, each one swore that she would love me forever, and there was not one of the little beasts that didn’t betray me. What made me angriest of all was that they always betrayed me as much as an hour before I betrayed them. Because of that I have a grudge against women, and I am so stubborn about it that—as you see me living—I would defame any female with no qualms of conscience.”

Cynadrowski smiled vacuously.

“Very good,” said the major. “You are coming to your senses. Take my pills next and you will see the world with complete clarity. My dear fellow, you are not unhappy in love when the women play around with you, but when they cannot play around with you even though they want to very much. I feel a chill go through me, I tell you, when I think that in a year or two... three at most... these little flings will no longer occupy a man...”

“Believe me, it happened this way through the grace of God. You would have had a father-in-law—well! —and a mother-in-law! And besides, you would have had one wife, who would have watched over your virtue more closely than Jews over tolls at the turnpike. What do you want with one wife? You have a mirror here somewhere. Look at yourself: muzzle like a Tartar, forehead like an ox, back of your neck like a ram, legs like a cock... Are you crazy, man, to throw all that away on one woman?”

“So she is going to be married?” Cynadrowski interjected.

“Who?”

“Eufemia.”

“Yes, of course, until she licks her lips! A twenty-eight-year-old single woman is like a widow of a year: her heart is hotter than a samovar. If you touched her, you would burn your hands to the bone.”

“Jesus! Jesus!” whispered the young man, clapping his hands to his head.

“Well, well ... don’t mix the Lord Jesus up in it,” the major rebuked him. Putting the envelope with Eufemia’s letters and the box with her ring in his side pocket, he added:

“Very well, then. Chin up! And when my cook brings you the pills, take them all. Only don’t start anything with the cook herself, because I don’t like that. Sadness is sadness, but don’t tamper with what isn’t yours. Be well.”

He pressed Cynadrowski’s hand and turned his cheek for the young man to kiss.

A few days later, as Magda slipped through the side streets to Eisenman's shop, Mientlewicz intercepted her. He was troubled, but he was trying to master his feelings.

"Have you heard," he said, "that Krukowski was at the magistrate's house today with his sister, and that he proposed to Miss Eufemia?"

"I know about it," Magda answered, blushing.

"I beg your pardon, but was he accepted?"

"So the magistrate told my father, at least."

"Excuse me. I do not ask out of curiosity," Mientlewicz explained. "I am obliged to find out about this because that poor Cynadrowski made me promise that I would—"

"Why does he want to know?" Magda rejoined, shrugging her shoulders. "Surely he is too well-bred to think of doing anyone an injury."

Mientlewicz blushed like a boy caught red-handed at some piece of mischief. He understood the impropriety of the threats he had wanted to use to prevent a marriage between Magda and Krukowski.

"Sometimes," he stammered, "a man goes so mad with grief that he is ready to do an injury—at least to himself. But Cynadrowski will not do that, oh, no. He is a rock. All day yesterday he wrote reports. He only wanted to be certain that Miss Eufemia's parents were not forcing her, and that she had accepted Krukowski of her own free will."

"It is said that their banns will be published this Sunday," Magda observed.

"Is that so? Miss Eufemia is in a hurry! Cynadrowski has done well in going to his father in the country for a few weeks. For perhaps he could not bear to hear them play *Veni Creator* for another man."

Chapter XVII. Strolling in the Cemetery: The Sequel

Magda took her leave of the talkative Mientlewicz and, when she had finished her shopping in town, returned home. Toward evening the major arrived with the vicar and, as was their habit, the old men sat down to their chess game in the summer house, where Magda brought them coffee. Dr. Brzeski smoked a cheap cigar and watched the players.

But the match dragged on hit or miss, since the players continually interrupted it to chat about things that had nothing to do with the elegant game.

“I would not like to be in Eufemia’s skin,” said the major. “She will be living in a hospital, for God’s sake!”

“Well, she will have a fortune... a name,” remarked the vicar.

“What’s in a name when your husband is an indolent slacker? What a surprise she is in for!”

“Yes, with madam, his sister... really, an extraordinary woman!”

“A worse joke is waiting for her from the brother’s side.”

“Stop this talk, major! What a foul mouth, that lets out such claptrap every time you take out your pipe.”

“You talked the same way when you were younger.”

“Never!” the vicar burst out, striking the table with his fist. “Never, not when I was the curate, and not when I became the vicar.”

“Because the curate didn’t know how, and the vicar could not,” retorted the major.

The priest was silent. He began to stare at the chessboard.

“Now, my worthy friend, let us get on—so!” said the vicar, taking a bishop in his fingers and raising it above the board.

At that instant a shout rang out in the street, as if someone were crying “Fire!” Then a short, pudgy man opened the gate with a violent shove and ran into the garden, calling:

“Doctor!”

“The postmaster—” said the major.

It was indeed the postmaster. He burst into the summer house with an apoplectic face covered with a network of violet veins. He wanted to say something, but he only choked and waved his hands wildly.

“Have you lost your mind?” the major shouted.

“He is strangling,” the vicar put in.

“He—he shot ...” the postmaster moaned.

“Who shot whom?”

“He shot himself...”

“Oh, oh! It must have been that ass, Cynadowski,” said the major. Holding his pipe between his teeth, he ran from the summer house without his cap, followed by the vicar.

Dr. Brzeski stepped into his office for dressings, and he and the postmaster set off after the other men.

A swelling crowd of townspeople, Jews among them, stood in front of the post office. The major pushed them aside, rushed past the parcel post office and entered Cynadowski’s small room, where the aroma of leather mingled with the smell of gunpowder.

Cynadowski was sitting on the bed with his back braced against the wall. His full face seemed flaccid; it had a yellow, waxy cast. A postilion stood in the corner among the saddles, stupefied. Another, crying hard, was pulling away Cynadowski’s coat and vest from the left side, tearing the front of his shirt.

The major stumbled over the huge post office pistol that lay on the floor, then drew near the bed and had a look. Cynadowski had a wound the size of a ten-penny piece on the left side of his chest. The underside of the skin was slightly visible around the edge of it; the center was filled with clotted blood, which ran down in a pinkish streak.

“Oh! Such a wound!” exclaimed the vicar.

The major turned around and pushed the vicar closer to the bed.

“He is dying,” he said without taking his pipe from his mouth.

“He cannot be...”

“Well, well... do what you must.”

The vicar began to tremble. He rested one hand on the wall, bent over the wounded man and, putting his face near the other’s, asked in a low voice:

“Do you repent of your sins with all your heart and with all your strength?”

“I repent...” the wounded man answered hoarsely.

“Do you repent out of love for God, your creator and savior, whom you have offended?”

“Yes...”

The postilion standing by the bed was crying at the top of his voice; the major muttered a prayer.

“Absolvo te in nomine Patris et Filii,” whispered the vicar. Then he made the sign of the cross over the dying man and kissed him on the forehead, where drops of sweat could be seen.

The wounded man raised a hand, writhed, and began to move his lips as if he were eating the air. His eyes showed fright. Then his muscles tightened,

he exhaled, and his head fell onto his chest. A look of something like dejection appeared on his yellowed face. Brzeski took his hand and released it abruptly.

“Well, yes!” he said. “Lay the body on the bed.”

A few minutes later the three men returned to the doctor’s house.

“And did you have to scandalize people even at such a moment?” the vicar said to the major.

“What are you carping about now?” the major grumbled. “I said a prayer, did I not?”

“Yes, and you blew smoke from your pipe in our faces.”

“And you absolved the dying man with the bishop you were holding in your fist!”

“God’s wounds!” cried the vicar, throwing up his hands. “I surely do have the bishop in my fist! I will never again play chess, the accursed game from which only the image of the Divine—”

“Do not reproach yourself, reverend sir,” the major broke in, “or you will fall into worse sin.”

“Here is the effect of consorting with the ungodly. Oh, God’s wounds!” wailed the vicar.

“Do not despair, sir! Our chaplain often blessed the dying with a whip, and it was no hindrance to their salvation. It all happens for the best; as the saying goes, ‘Whoever hangs does not drown.’”

After this event the combined intellectual powers of Iksinow were spurred to incomparably greater activity than after the concert. The postmaster telegraphed the news of the clerk’s death to the regional headquarters of the post office, from which a group of auditors arrived three days later. It was said in the town that Cynadrowski had scandalously abused his office, that he had detached stamps, that he had removed money from letters, and that he had shot himself out of fear.

But when the postal records were reviewed, it was clear that not a penny was missing, or even an ounce of sealing-wax. The account books had been maintained to his last hour and were found in flawless order. It was only noted that during the last several days before the unfortunate man’s death, his handwriting had altered: the letters had become larger and less well formed.

The autopsy that Dr. Brzeski performed on Cynadrowski showed congestion of the brain. That led to the conclusion that the cause of death was suicide by reason of insanity. But what could have caused the insanity?

“What was the cause of the insanity, doctor?” the apothecary, standing on the threshold of his shop, asked Dr. Brzozowski on the day after Cynadrowski’s death. “Is it not a case of *cherchez la femme*, or—Fem?” he added, very satisfied with his own wit.

“Enough of that!” Brzozowski broke in acidly. “Insanity does not always have a definite cause. Moreover,” the doctor added, lowering his voice, “Krukowski has given his word that if any man bandies Miss Eufemia’s name about in connection with this disaster, he will challenge him to a duel.”

The apothecary’s face took on a look of pained astonishment.

“Really?” he said. “But I did not make that statement; my wife did. Tell them, my dear,” he added, turning to the lady of his heart, who was leaning on the counter. “Did you not say that Cynadrowski shot himself because of Miss—”

“But it is you Krukowski will call out, not your wife,” replied the doctor.

The apothecary’s wife ran to the door, crying:

“How can that be? Krukowski will challenge my husband to a duel for saying what everyone says? What if my husband does not accept the challenge?”

“Enough! Enough!” the apothecary interrupted, closing the door. “A man who challenges someone to a duel is beyond having his mind changed. He would shoot me... shatter my mirrors... my cabinets... God forbid!”

“What, then, is there no government? What, are there no police to restrain assailants?” protested his wife. “We will get the watch—we will hire people to guard the shop. Is it for this that I pay taxes, that I am not free to open my mouth? Whoever heard of such a thing?”

The doctor and the apothecary managed, with difficulty, to calm the outraged woman and explain to her that in the face of threats of that sort, the most appropriate response was disdainful silence.

“I give my word,” said the apothecary, “that from now on no one in our house will mention the name of Krukowski, nor of Miss Eufemia, nor of any of their family. If they want unpleasantness, they will have unpleasantness!”

“Well, well, my love, do not work yourself into a fever,” said his wife placatingly. “I even think that Krukowski behaved quite nobly, for there is too much gossip in the town. How wicked to ruin the reputation of an irreproachable young woman!”

“Do you know, you are right!” the apothecary answered after a moment’s reflection.

It hardly needs to be added that during this exchange Fajkowski, the dispenser of medicines, could not contain himself for joy. He was ostensibly engaged in some task behind the counter, but he smiled maliciously and murmured:

“Good for the old lady! They sealed her mouth! If only the poor thing does not fall ill!”

At that moment the notary’s wife hurried into the shop.

“Quiet! Quiet!” she said, holding up a finger. “I will tell you something extraordinary.”

The apothecary took her arm and conducted her to his apartment. His wife and the doctor followed them.

“Do you know what has happened?” the notary’s wife began. “This morning at nine, almost at the very time that (here she sighed) they ushered that poor man out of this world...”

“Cynadrowski,” put in the apothecary, who liked to make a show of being perspicacious.

“Who else?” said the offended lady, cutting him off. “This morning, then, at nine, Magdalena Brzeska made an appointment with Eufemia to take a stroll in the church.”

“Well?” Brzozowski inquired with a rather skeptical expression.

“What do you mean, ‘Well?’” the notary’s wife demanded indignantly. “Furthermore, yesterday one of the postilions said that not long ago—a few days ago—Cynadrowski threw a letter to Miss Brzeska through her garden fence.”

“Well?” the doctor repeated.

The notary’s wife flushed and burst out angrily:

“Do you know, doctor, if that is how shrewd you are about the sick...”

“Really, I do not see the point very clearly myself,” intervened the apothecary, who had a high regard for Brzozowski because he prescribed a great deal of medicine.

The notary’s wife bit her lips. Descending from the summit of her rage to a plateau of icy contempt, she answered calmly:

“I will put no interpretation on the matter, my friends. I will only recount the facts. Note, please: Magdalena induced Femcia to join her in establishing a school. Magdalena flirted with Krukowski. Magdalena compromised Krukowski and Femcia with that concert. And even that is not all, because Magdalena took Femcia out for a walk with Cynadrowski, with whom she was carrying on a correspondence. But that was not enough for her. When it became clear that she could not draw Krukowski away from Femcia, she refused to marry him (how I could laugh at that refusal!), and finally today, after this catastrophe has occurred, she lures Femcia to the church. What do you think of that?”

The apothecary made a wry face. Even his wife seemed at a loss. All at once the doctor stepped forward and said:

“I have an answer for you, madam. Here it is. In the first place—” here he tapped her lightly on the arm—“I personally do not like Brzeski. In the second place —” here ensued another tap on the arm.

“Now, now, doctor!” exclaimed the notary’s wife, pushing away the hand that was hovering near her arm for the third time.

“In the second place,” Brzozowski declaimed, beating time in the air, “Miss Magdalena Brzeska associates for no good reason with actors, and organizes concerts. In the third place, if she established a school in our town, I would

not entrust my children to her, since she is too young to be the director of an institution. You see, madam, that I have no great admiration for Miss Brzeska.”

“And rightly,” remarked the notary’s wife.

“Yes,” said the doctor. “But that this same Miss Brzeska engaged in improper flirtations or arranged trysts for anyone, I beg your pardon, I never will believe.”

“Neither will I,” declared the apothecary, bowing and rubbing his hands.

The notary’s wife was filled with consternation, but, like a clever diplomat, she immediately shifted her ground.

“I did not say that this is certain, after all, only... I find that sequence of events remarkable. Miss Brzeska may be an unimpeachable young woman, but she is not getting on well in town.”

“That is gospel truth!” the apothecary’s wife put in.

“Ah, this ‘getting along!’ What a relative thing it is, is it not, doctor?” remarked the apothecary. “It is fate that shows us to be wise or foolish, honorable or the reverse. Why, is it not true, doctor?”

Nevertheless the notary’s wife was partly right: Magda was strolling in the church with Eufemia, but it was Eufemia who had invited her.

They met in the dark, empty side chapel. Magda had hardly walked in when Eufemia drew her to a bench. She was pale and tearful. She nestled close to Magda and began to whisper:

“What do you think of this awful thing? Yesterday, when word reached me, I thought I would go mad. I could not sleep all night. Oh! What a vengeful man, at such a moment to...”

Magda had come to the church only to calm Eufemia, so she pressed her hand and answered:

“Do not despair, my dear. On the day Ludwik proposed to you, Mientlewicz told me about that poor man, and as it happened, he most expressly assured me that his unhappy friend was not thinking of taking his own life. Perhaps it was an accident.”

“Do you think so?” Eufemia asked, with no sign of delight. “More than one man has killed himself for love, but... is a woman to blame for that? Is a woman not a free, thinking being? Must she acquiesce when any man loves her, or can she not choose? What an awful world it would be if she could not!”

Magda looked with astonishment at Eufemia, whose beautiful face at that moment had an almost angelic expression.

“You see, my dear,” said Eufemia, lowering her wonderful eyes, “you see... I want to make a clean breast of it with you... I, my dear—I always loved Ludwik. When Ludwik, I do not know why, began to seem indifferent to me, I was in despair. I was broken, and I admit that I made a mistake, listening to that unhappy man’s passionate effusions. What woman can resist confessions?”

Who is not moved by true love and suffering? For a time I was moved, and I... thinking that Ludwik had abandoned me, I decided to devote myself to that man. But he took me to be—I do not know—a slave, or what?”

She covered her eyes with her handkerchief and went on after a moment:

“Ah! If you knew how noble he is, how he loves me...”

“Ludwik?” Magda asked.

“Who else? Yesterday, when he heard the news of this misfortune, he hurried to our house, fell on his knees before me and begged me not to attach any importance to it. ‘I know,’ he said, ‘that that unfortunate man adored you, but how many people adore the sun, the flowers?’ And when mama pointed out that I might be the subject of gossip, Ludwik swore that he would allow no such thing. He asked me to walk out to town with him today at noon. ‘Let people know,’ he said, ‘that nothing changes my love. Nothing!’”

Magda, recalling incidents not long past, was astounded at how rapidly great and immutable feelings succeed each other in the human heart. Only she was not yet certain in whose heart such feelings were replaced more easily: in that of her friend Eufemia, or in that of their mutual admirer, Krukowski.

Chapter XVIII. Fighting With a Shadow

In spite of such an inauspicious event as the suicide of the postal clerk, plans for the marriage between Eufemia and Krukowski were moving happily toward completion.

The union of their hearts must have been very strong, to be sure, since it was not shaken by such a blow. It even seemed that the bonds of feeling between them were reinforced by Krukowski's vigorous response to the disaster and Eufemia's grateful devotion.

On the fatal evening when Krukowski's man had come to him with the news that Cynadrowski had shot himself, Ludwik had comprehended the situation at once and begun to act. Before doing anything else he informed his sister, with due regard for a person afflicted with a serious illness. But the former paralytic had, among the many surprising attributes in her repertoire, an extraordinary store of courage.

"Really?" she said. "He shot himself? Peculiar chap..."

"I am afraid this occurrence may create a painful situation for Eufemia," Ludwik remarked diffidently.

"Painful situation?" exclaimed the sick lady. "Are you averse to being the fiance of a woman for whom people kill themselves? How many men thought of killing themselves for me? How many of them really died—and what of it? A beautiful woman is like a fire: she is not to be trifled with."

"So you do not think it improper for me to go and offer Eufemia my support?"

"Certainly not; it is your obligation! Go to her immediately, only send the servants to me, and do not stay long. When night comes on I am particularly nervous."

Having settled the issue with his sister, Ludwik hurried to his fiancée and so effectively reassured her that the magistrate's wife herself said to him:

"You have worked a m-miracle! I was afraid for Femcia, because she is so d-delicate, and we are not accustomed to such incidents in this town. But you have changed ev-rrything."

After leaving the magistrate's home, Ludwik paid a short visit to Dr. Brzozowski, whom he liked very much. Taking the doctor into his confidence, he asserted that he would challenge to a duel anyone who mentioned Eufemia's name in connection with the suicide. The doctor declared that he was in the right, adding that public speculation ought not to be allowed to run wild in such cases.

To make a long story short, within a few hours of Cynadrowski's death, which might have plunged Krukowski into the abyss of celibacy again for a long time if not for good, Ludwik was farther along the road to marriage than ever.

His intended loved him without measure and he was skillfully defending her; everything was going swimmingly.

Yet he had a rather uneasy night. The former paralytic's nerves were so bad that she surrounded herself with devotional objects and ordered the cook and a maid to sleep in her room. Ludwik himself woke often, and when he slept, strange dreams tormented him. It seemed to him that the dead man opened the door of his room and stood on the threshold, looking at him with anger and hatred.

But Krukowski, who was terribly afraid of his sister, feared actual dangers less than he feared her, and apparitions less than either. So in order to assure himself of sleep once and for all, the next morning he went to the shed where Cynadrowski's remains lay.

"It is best to look the enemy in the eye," he told himself.

He passed the town square, he walked along Warszawska Street, then along Piotrkowska Street, so everyone would see him. He turned at the post office, before which again a group of people were standing.

"Where is the body?" he asked the watchman loudly, in order to draw the attention of the crowd to himself.

"In the shed by the stable," answered the watchman.

People began to whisper. Krukowski listened hard; he thought someone was calling him the killer, or the fiance of the killer. But instead he heard:

"The doctor!" "No, it is the surgeon's assistant." "Nothing of the kind! It is only a gentleman."

The crowd did not accuse him of anything, did not call him out to fight, did not put him on the defensive. At that moment his feelings were divided between relief and disappointment.

"Now to the corpse!" he thought.

It seemed to him that the face of the dead man should have a terrible expression of anger or hate. And he would not have been surprised (in his imaginings) if the departed had looked at him and exclaimed, in a voice inaudible to others:

"Why did you come here, murderer? To jeer at the unhappy man who had to renounce his beloved because of you?"

Those were Krukowski's thoughts as he passed the yard where a cluster of hens were pecking at some rubbish, one postilion was chopping down a tree, and another was watering a horse at a well.

A watchman was standing listlessly in front of the shed, but at the sight of the elegant visitor he pulled himself erect and pushed the door open.

Krukowski found himself alone in the shed. In the center of it, on a litter, lay the body, its upper half covered with a saddle blanket. He drew nearer, pulled the blanket away, and looked at his rival. The dead man's eyes were closed. His

lips were blue, his face was yellow, and on it was an extraordinary expression. But in that expression there was neither anger nor contempt nor hate—in a word, no feeling that could alarm or offend an onlooker.

If a new suit of clothes tossed out on the highway by its owner could find speech or facial expression, surely it would say, “I am a new suit, good in every way, and I do not know why my owner has thrown me away.” Such an epigraph seemed to be written on the dead man’s remains. It was as if they asked, “Why did he kill me?”

Yet the question was not directed to Ludwik, but rather to the owner of this young, healthy body, who had so violently abandoned it.

Krukowski stood before the corpse, amazed.

“If someone drove him to suicide,” he thought, “I was surely the one. If anyone wronged him, it was I as well. And this man has no quarrel with me, shows no aversion to me?”

He took off his hat and made the sign of the cross, and though it was not in harmony with the liberal spirit of the times, the phrase “eternal rest” sprang to his lips. Then he left the shed and the yard by the side gate, because he was embarrassed to pass once more by the people who waited in front of the post office.

“What a good man he must have been,” Krukowski thought, walking with his head down. “How he loved her, and what he may have suffered because of me!”

After that sorrowful visit, Ludwik was unable to calm himself for a few hours. For he wanted to fight to defend Eufemia’s honor, he felt a compelling desire to fight, and here—his chief opponent not only could not accept his challenge, but could not be aware of him at all.

Fortunately, living enemies remained.

At noon, in accord with the previous day’s plan, Krukowski went to the magistrate’s house to meet Eufemia for a stroll around town. Eufemia looked wan and dejected. When Ludwik mentioned the walk, she began to beg him to put it off until another day.

“Why should we make ourselves targets for the town gossips?” she asked. “Someone will whisper, will not bow to us, will not even look at us, and... then what?”

“That is just the point,” answered Krukowski with a graceful bow and unaccustomed firmness.

The magistrate’s wife encouraged her daughter to listen to her fiance’s counsel, so within a few minutes Ludwik and Eufemia found themselves in town.

They walked through the square and across Warszawska Street. Everywhere they met acquaintances and strangers. But though Krukowski watched and listened as closely as he could, they did not hear one unfavorable

word; they saw no impolite looks. Those they knew greeted them cordially, and some congratulated them on their upcoming marriage.

Krukowski still wanted to go toward the post office, but Eufemia grew so pale and had such a look of terror in her eyes that her gallant fiance, not wishing to upset her, turned toward home.

“You see,” he said with elation, “how good it is to go out and face the talebearers. No one mentioned the unfortunate man.”

“But I am sure that since yesterday everyone has been talking about him,” replied Eufemia.

Krukowski grew morose. His elegance, his delicacy, his good breeding were at their best in his future bride’s presence, but his good humor abandoned him. Worse yet, that good humor more and more rarely showed itself in her company, though they spent whole days together. Even the former paralytic noticed this, and once said to her brother:

“My Ludwik, why are you so distracted? You do nothing but brood, continually brood. It is not healthy.”

The next Sunday—at the prompting of the magistrate’s wife, it was said—the vicar omitted to publish the banns for Ludwik and Eufemia. Not, God forbid, that anyone wanted the wedding to be delayed, but—such things are never quite clearly explained. No one knew how the thought came to the magistrate’s wife, and it angered Krukowski’s sister a little, but it electrified Krukowski, and for the better.

“There will be rumors,” he said to himself. And once again his desire to wage war for Eufemia’s honor and peace of mind came to the fore. He would convince the world and its five continents that Eufemia was not to blame for Cynadrowski’s death.

But again no rumors came to light.

Two weeks after the fatal incident, Krukowski said, pacing around his sister’s room:

“Why is it that there is no gossip about me or Eufemia? After all, gossip always starts up even for the most trifling reasons in this town, but now there is nothing!”

“They are afraid because of your threats,” his sister answered, “and so no one speaks openly. The notary’s wife mentioned to me, however, that the major visited Cynadrowski a few days before that poor fellow’s... She also said that if anyone knew the real cause of his death, it was probably that man—what is his name?—Mientlewicz.”

At last Ludwik had heard a name. At last he had found people with whom he could, perhaps, not create a scene in defense of Eufemia’s respectability and peace of mind, but at least talk about Cynadrowski’s death. Let someone level accusations at him, let them start a quarrel; anything to break the silence!

Very satisfied, Krukowski put on his handsome gray trousers, his no less gray gloves and his black frock coat, and went for a visit with Mientlewicz, whom he had previously regarded with a degree of disdain. After binding him to absolute secrecy, he asked: was it true that the deceased Cynadrowski had confided to him that he would die because of his love for Eufemia?

“God forbid!” exclaimed Mientlewicz. “It is true that once when we met at night quite some time ago, he mentioned something about suicide, but did not allude to Miss Eufemia. He adored her, it cannot be denied, but he received the news of her engagement to you calmly enough.”

And as the conversation went on, Mientlewicz, who was afraid Krukowski would transfer his affections to Magda again, began so to compliment Eufemia’s grace, bearing, manners, and performance on the piano that the praise took her fiance’s breath away.

Krukowski said a sad goodbye to Mientlewicz and went to see the major. He was counting on the petulant old man, who had little liking for Eufemia, to give him cause for a quarrel.

He found the major at home, requested a moment’s confidential conversation, insisted on discretion, and... the major cut him short.

“My dear friend,” he said, “if you are not certain that I will keep a secret, a silly one, no doubt, what do you entrust it to me for? Anyway, I warn you that I only hold secret what I myself consider worthy of secrecy.”

After offering a myriad of the most delicate apologies, Ludwik remarked:

“The death of the unfortunate Cynadrowski was an awful thing, was it not, major?”

“Well, what then? He is dead, and that is all there is to it.”

“But such a violent death...”

“Sometimes several thousand violent deaths occur within a couple of hours. What of it? The world doesn’t end.”

“Do you... do you not think that unrequited love for Miss Eufemia may have driven Cynadrowski to suicide?”

“Spare me! If a man died every time a woman rejected him, you, my dear chap, would have to build a cemetery full of graves just for yourself. After all, the women gave you the gate times out of mind, but you are still alive. Why would that young fellow have been stupider than you?”

The old man’s argument was so strong that Krukowski, who had broken out in a sweat, quickly put an end to the discussion and said farewell to the major, profoundly relieved.

“Oh, what a boor he is!” thought Ludwik, walking twice as fast as usual. He was afraid the major would call him back, and he had no relish for a new series of elaborations on the theme of love and suicide.

And then something occurred that was hard to believe, but true. Cynadrowski, who was dead, dissected and buried—the dead man, whom some had forgotten and others were trying to forget, the deceased Cynadrowski—was alive! He was living an invisible, intangible, incomprehensible life and poisoning the peaceful atmospheres of two of the most respectable households in Iksinow.

This strange life of the dead man did not manifest itself as a uniform whole. It existed like a broken mirror whose slivers lay hidden in various corners, but now and then gave evidence of their presence with a sudden flash.

All these individual flashes slowly aggregated in Krukowski's mind, creating an overwhelming image and forcing him toward the certainty that, in one way or another, the dead man still existed and was coming between him, Ludwik, and his future wife, Eufemia.

One day, for example, the former paralytic, with no nervous outbursts (for she must truly have been terrified), said to Krukowski:

"My dear, I do not want to alarm you, but every night something walks in our garden."

"The watchman, perhaps."

"Oh, no. I inquired."

"A thief, then?"

"A thief would have stolen something one night, not roamed around every night," replied the sick lady.

Krukowski sighed quietly and lowered his eyes.

"You see, my dear," his sister said with a mysterious air, "you do not believe in ghosts. Yet simple people, who must often keep watch at night, say that they meet ghosts. They say that a ghost is most often a suicide. He visits those who wronged him, disturbs the sleep of some, and sucks the blood of others."

She sighed, shook her head and concluded:

"Persons whose blood has been sucked by ghosts are sad, pale, weak. Often they have small spots on their bodies from the bites."

"Oh, what drivel!" Ludwik broke in so impatiently that his sister was pleased.

"It is not drivel!" she whispered in a sweet, almost diffident voice. "It is not drivel! The night before last I myself saw a frightful figure in white in the window. It was a man with a wild face, eyes like coals and bristling black hair."

"Well, well. Be calm: that man was blond!" Ludwik replied almost rudely.

"I saw a blond as well, several times."

But Ludwik walked out of the room and slammed the door, which so delighted his sister that she invited him back for some exquisite chocolate and even exerted herself to please him, waiting on him and divining his thoughts.

Chapter XIX. The Shadow Conquers

That conversation with his sister was a turning point in Krukowski's life and relationships. He began to observe the magistrate's family more closely, and to remember little things.

Once, for example, he heard the magistrate's wife make an angry scene in the kitchen because the maids did not want to tell her something that they had been talking about quietly among themselves.

"What is it to her?" thought Ludwik. And without his knowing why, Cynadrowski stood before him as if he were still alive, with a yellowed face, but calm, with no expression of antipathy.

Another time the magistrate's wife, in Ludwik's presence, remarked irritably to her husband:

"My deah, why are you always s-sitting at home? You used to go out for whole d-days, but now..."

"To whom would I go?" the magistrate replied quietly.

This short, mild answer so upset the worthy lady that she ran into the next room and burst into tears.

On yet another day the magistrate's wife began, for no reason, to complain to her future son-in-law about Iksinow.

"What an insufferable town! What insipid people!"

"Has someone offended you?" exclaimed Ludwik, leaping up, ready as always to fight for his beloved's honor and peace of mind.

"Oh, no!" replied the magistrate's wife haughtily. "Who would da-eh to offend me? But society is so inferior here. The notary's wife cannot live without g-gossip, and even when she is silent, she is fostering it. And the wife of the apothecary: what a hypocrite! When she k-kisses me, I feel as if I am t-touching a snake."

Krukowski had to admit to himself that he could not do anything about the hypocrisy of the apothecary's wife or the silent dissemination of rumor by the wife of the notary.

"When you have m-married, you two," said the magistrate's wife on another occasion, "you should and you must g-go somewhere for a honeymoon—to Paris, to Naples, or to Ojcow. You must absolutely have some fresh air; you must look to a w-wider world. Femcia is so haggard. Well, intense feelings are the cause of that. But it is always best to go somewheah, even for a short time—for a m-month or two."

Ludwik went cold when he heard this advice. In the first place, he knew that his sister would not permit him to go away. But he also understood that when the magistrate's wife spoke of a honeymoon, it was a subtle reminder about the wedding, which had been delayed.

Actually, the third bann could go out the next Sunday. Indeed, it was the third Sunday since Cynadrowski's death.

"That Cynadrowski again!" thought Ludwik. After the most elaborate goodbyes to his beautiful fiancée and her respected parents, he went to the vicar to ask that the bann be published the following Sunday.

But the old man began to wag his hand near his ear—cruelly, as it seemed to Ludwik.

"Why is it so urgent?" he said. "You waited a few weeks, you can wait a week or two more. Oh, well, if you are so set on it..."

"I am amenable to your wish," Ludwik answered quickly, "but my fiancée ...her parents ..."

"I will explain this to them," the vicar replied. "Who gets married in the summer? In the autumn, that I understand. After the harvest."

Ludwik went away dejected. Why had the priest advised him not to hurry about the wedding? Really, it was almost an insult, or at least an insinuation. He wanted to go back immediately and ask: "What does this mean?" But—though he did not understand why—he lacked the courage.

From that moment it seemed to him that he was confronted by something opaque—a veil with a secret hidden behind it. If he moved a finger, the veil would collapse. But Krukowski, for all his absurdities, had such delicacy that he would not have dared to remove the veil.

Once Eufemia came for a long visit with his sister. They sat in the summer house. The time passed pleasantly enough, for the young lady read a book, and read it charmingly. Then the wind sprang up, and Eufemia, showing a proper solicitude for the health of the invalid, went to her room for a shawl.

"Ludwik," the sick lady said quickly, "have you noticed that Femcia is paler every day?"

"She must be unwell."

"And do you see a mark on her neck—a red mark?" said the former paralytic, looking at her brother with an expression of alarm.

Ludwik felt a tremor. But when Eufemia returned to the summer house with the shawl, he made a great show of kissing her hand.

The sick lady lowered her head. She felt a deep joy at the thought that her brother was beginning to give evidence of a will of his own, but that he was doing it in this case pained her.

Finally, in the middle of the following week, Krukowski decided to cut the Gordian knot. He went to the vicar and asked him to publish the banns. And when the elderly man waved his hand again, Ludwik asked gravely:

"What does this mean, vicar? Why are you ordering me to put off the wedding?"

“Order? I do not order you,” replied the priest. “I only think that perhaps there is no point in rushing, even if only for the sake of your fiancée. It must always be painful to a girl when someone takes his life on her account.”

“But when all is said and done, what is there in it to concern Eufemia?” asked Ludwik, perplexed. “It is certainly a source of unpleasantness for the time being, but today she herself...”

The vicar began to scowl. His hands fluttered.

“Well,” he broke in, “she must always have cared for him at least a little. Not so much as she did for you, but she always... After all, she saw him, she wrote letters; there was even some talk about rings.”

Ludwik’s face went gray. He ran his hand through his luxuriant sideburns.

“How do you know about this, vicar?”

“The whole town knows,” answered the priest. “In any case, I would not have alluded to such things if it had not been that the magistrate, who felt certain scruples, asked me to mention it to you. Of course I know,” the vicar added emphatically, “that you are a noble gentleman and will not let discredit fall on a young lady who is attached to you.”

“That is understood!” Krukowski replied in parting.

But he walked toward the town with the quick step of one who is disturbed.

“I am learning things that are new to me,” he thought, “but which, it must be noted, the whole town is talking about. Still, the magistrate is an upstanding man; yes... he has scruples. His wife did not have them, nor his daughter. Well, after all, she went for walks with him, I with Magda. She wrote letters, I sent bouquets. She—there was something about rings—I proposed to Magda. I neglected her, that man was mad for her, so it was no wonder that the heart made its case. At any rate, he was punished. The wedding must be put off; let the poor girl regain her peace of mind completely...”

Ludwik felt his superiority to Cynadrowski so utterly that he was not even jealous. Moreover, as decency would have it, the young lady had preferred Krukowski to Cynadrowski, and Cynadrowski had voluntarily conceded to Krukowski, with the understanding that one who had had the honor to be an admirer of the future Madame Krukowska had no right to live.

“A very, very well-judging fellow. He even had what is called delicacy of feeling,” thought Ludwik.

Yet in spite of these complacent views of his relationship to Eufemia and Eufemia’s to Cynadrowski, he felt that something remained to be discovered. But what? He wanted to know.

So he set aside his reluctance and went once again to see the major. Putting various fragments of information that had reached him together in his mind, he guessed that the major must know more of the affair than other people.

The old man was on his way out to play chess, so they fell into a conversation on the porch.

“Major, sir,” Ludwik began at once, “I do not like to ask about something you yourself did not speak of to me before, but... can you tell me candidly what sort of impression Cynadrowski made on you?”

“I hardly knew him.”

“But ... to the extent that you did know him ...”

The major thrust out his lips.

“He was an honorable young fellow. Stupid, but very decent—very. Perhaps even too decent.”

They said goodbye, and Krukowski sighed with satisfaction. The major’s opinion of the dead man flattered his complacency.

“An obscure figure,” he thought. “A petty official. So much for Cynadrowski... such a name! But a person of integrity, at least. Even in taking out her anger at me, Eufemia did not show poor taste.”

At the market square Ludwik, not without a certain aversion, met Mientlewicz. He greeted him most politely, and after an exchange of several rather commonplace remarks asked:

“If you please, exactly who was this Cynadrowski?”

“But you know: he was the post office clerk. He earned twenty rubles a month.”

“But his character, sir—his character.”

“Oh, he had a rash nature, which may have resulted from a laxity in his upbringing,” Mientlewicz answered, adjusting his collar in a way that signified that there had been no laxity in his own upbringing.

“But... was he a good sort of person?” Krukowski persisted.

Mientlewicz looked at him in amazement.

“You ask, sir, if Cynadrowski was a good sort of person? He was the very soul of honor, of magnanimity. Once he was someone’s friend, he would go through fire and water for him.”

The fervor with which Mientlewicz eulogized the dead man was so sincere that Krukowski was strangely moved.

“So,” he thought, “he must have been a good man. I did not err. He must even have been a very good man. And—who knows—has a good man’s life been wasted here? Love and ambition! Noble blood... wasted manhood.”

He was content. For however well he understood that Eufemia had violated the conventions of fashionable society by becoming enamored of a minor official, even in doing so she had exhibited good taste and sublimity of feeling.

“One must have a very noble soul to sense the presence of another noble soul in spite of all the barriers erected by convention,” he thought.

So he was content, oh! perfectly content. For he had the right to say, and he certainly would say, to his intended bride:

“Madam, I do not insist on hurrying the wedding (in spite of Dr. Brzozowski’s admonition ... no, I cannot tell her that!). I do not insist, madam, because I respect your sorrow. You will name a day when you like, then, and I myself will smooth matters over with your parents, my sister and even the doctor (no, I cannot possibly tell her that!).”

He was content, and proud—proud not only of his fiancée, but even of his rival.

“So,” he said, rubbing his hands together, “this was not some petty functionary, but a prince bewitched. Well—and he surrendered the field to me. Such a man surrendered!”

In his eyes, Cynadowski had grown from a postal clerk to—for all he knew—the postmaster general of Great Britain, who might indeed be an English lord.

That evening Krukowski escorted Eufemia from his sister’s house to her parents’. It was beautiful night; a full moon was shining. The houses of Iksinow, none too well kept in daylight, were transformed by its glow into exotic villas. The towers of the church seemed majestic.

Ludwik, in a pleasant reverie, pressed Eufemia’s beautiful hand affectionately, but in spite of that her spirits seemed to have no buoyancy. She even gnawed at her battiste handkerchief with her pearly teeth several times; though hardly compatible with etiquette, the gesture was full of grace.

“My lady seems a little upset,” Krukowski remarked in his melodious voice.

“I am just annoyed...”

“With me, I think.”

“You are right.”

“May I guess the reason?”

“I should like to hear you try.”

“You think,” he whispered, “that I do not do justice to your grief.”

“Grief?” she exclaimed, stopping where she stood. “Who has grieved me? Grief for what?”

“To be precise: grief for whom?”

At that moment, in spite of her *savoir vivre*, in spite of her better judgment and even her will, Eufemia lost control of herself. She blanched, her eyes widened, and she pulled her hand from Ludwik’s tender grasp.

“Grief for whom?” she asked in a choked voice. “Perhaps you are thinking: for that man?”

“I thought...”

Eufemia laughed, jerking at the handkerchief in her hands.

“I?” she said. “Could I grieve for a man who exposed me to gossip, to suspicion? And why? Because I pitied him... I lowered myself to an acquaintance with him...? Because—anyway—I don’t know—I found him amusing...”

Eufemia said that to vindicate herself to her fiance in the face of whatever rumor might have reached him.

“Found him amusing?” Krukowski repeated vaguely.

“You abandoned me for Magda,” Eufemia said jocularly, “so I had the right of reprisal. But I assure you, Ludwik, whatever people say, it was entirely innocent. I swear it, Ludwik!”

They walked onto the porch, into the thick shadow of a grape vine. Eufemia leaned on her future husband’s arms and gently touched his forehead with her lips.

“I swear to you,” she said, “that you are the first man—to feel this—”

“Found—him—amusing?” Ludwik repeated.

“Of course. Did you suspect anything more? You know, I ought to be offended!”

Ludwik moved ever so gently away from her. When the moonlight fell on his face, it seemed to Eufemia that the man who stood before her was a stranger.

“Found him amusing—” he whispered—“and so innocently, that—”

“That what? I see that some dreadful slander has reached you,” she broke in, frightened.

“I despise gossip!” he returned. “Indeed, slander is not the issue. A man’s death is.”

“Oh!” Eufemia cried, throwing herself on a bench on the porch.

A moment after her cry, the magistrate’s wife came running out in a white negligee with a train, followed by her husband.

“Femcia! What is this all about?” she demanded. “I have been expecting, d-dear Ludwik—”

But dear Ludwik was nowhere near the porch. He had escaped quickly, choosing a route obscured by the shadows of houses.

When he had hurried home and walked into his sister’s room, the sick lady, not even raising her lorgnette to her eyes, called uneasily:

“What is it?”

For his expression was wild and his clothing disheveled. He drank some water and said in a low voice:

“Dear sister, you must give me money. Tomorrow morning I leave this place.”

“Where will you go? What for? And what of me?”

“Where? Where you direct me, and you will follow me. We will go away from here.”

“But Femcia?”

“I don’t want Femcia! I don’t want to know her. I don’t even want to hear of her. Not only did that woman have the nerve to say that she had found that unfortunate clerk amusing—amusing, do you hear?—she did not even understand what she was saying!”

The former paralytic snapped her fingers like a grenadier.

“And, you know,” she said, “you do very well not to marry her. For a week now I have had misgivings about this marriage. That is not the woman for you. That is—”

“Thank God!” Ludwik interrupted harshly. “Why did you not tell me this sooner?”

“I was afraid, darling—afraid of you. For some time now you have been awful! Calling everyone out for duels, not letting them speak, slamming doors...”

They talked until dawn, embracing each other, weeping. At four in the morning Ludwik sent his man for the post chaise, and at five he rode out after a loving farewell from his sister, who moved as lithely as if she had never heard the word “paralysis.”

In the annals of Iksinow, Krukowski’s departure was the crowning event in a procession of noteworthy occurrences.

It must be acknowledged that the better informed residents of the town understood the situation. Small-town gossip died down; people grew sober. The notary’s wife, his assistant’s wife, and above all the magistrate’s wife did not go out of their houses at all that day. With the incomparable tact of women, they understood that at such a serious juncture women should withdraw to the background and leave a free field for the actions of their husbands.

And the husbands acted. First, each of them individually went to the post office to ascertain if Krukowski had really left by the post chaise, and at five in the morning. But after verifying that fact, and looking at the carriage that had conveyed Ludwik away and the postilion who had driven him, all the gentlemen returned to the apothecary shop. It seemed to them the most appropriate place for a thorough exploration of the following questions:

Had Krukowski gone away on unexpected business, perhaps related to money, or did business have nothing to do with it? And in the latter case, had

he broken off with his fiancée or not? And why would he have called off his engagement?

About half a dozen gentlemen gathered in the apothecary shop, but they were all as silent as Roman senators. At last the silence grew so oppressive that the host himself felt compelled to say a few words.

“If you please, gentlemen,” he said, “in my view, one thing is certain.”

“That Krukowski is gone,” the notary interposed.

“Incidentally, yes. But I meant that Iksinow is becoming a city. Notice, gentlemen: there is a scandal at a concert, Miss Brzeska rejects Mr. Krukowski, Mr. Krukowski proposes to our extremely agreeable Miss Eufemia, Cynadrowski commits suicide, and today—Mr. Krukowski goes away.”

The apothecary sighed.

“If you please, gentlemen, this is not Iksinow,” he continued. “It is—one might almost say—Warsaw. For only in Warsaw is there a concert every day, and every day someone kills himself.”

“And every day someone goes away,” the notary remarked unctuously.

The apothecary was disconcerted. By good luck his wife appeared and invited the guests to partake of refreshments.

What conclusions the visitors reached as they ate and drank even Fajkowski, the apothecary’s dispenser, never learned. He only guessed that everyone must be commiserating with the situation of the respected family of the magistrate. All the people gathered there were friends of theirs, and as they left the apothecary’s flat, they wore the inarticulate expressions of people who cannot find any reason for cheerfulness, but do not want to appear sad.

Chapter XX. Better Days

Ironically, just as a distressing time began for the magistrate's family, pleasant surprises were occurring at Dr. Brzeski's house—in particular, for Magda.

Mr. Efowski, who was in charge of Magda's money, conveyed three hundred rubles to the doctor's wife on her first request. It was the sum Mrs. Brzeska owed Krukowski's sister; and because Magda's indifference to Krukowski had brought about a breach in the relations between the two families, the doctor's wife carried the money to the sick lady immediately.

The invalid received Mrs. Brzeska in a friendly though rather formal way, and took the money. But the next day she paid a visit to Dr. Brzeski in person, thanked him warmly for the care she had received up to that time, and said in conclusion:

“I have been remiss about settling our accounts.”

“What accounts?” asked the doctor.

“Well, after all, for a year you have received no payment from me for your visits. But I shall certainly leave Iksinow together with Ludwik, so if you would be so kind as to accept... Please. Please.”

There was no help for it. Brzeski took the money and saw clearly that it was the same three hundred rubles that his wife had given the sick lady the day before.

Pleased and a bit mystified, the doctor called his wife and daughter into his office and spoke as follows:

“Mother! I know that Magda paid our debt with this money. Well, do not pretend to be surprised: I am talking about three hundred rubles. And because Krukowski's sister has presented me with that same money as payment for my visits, Magda, you have your three hundred rubles back.”

It is impossible to be sure precisely how much time elapsed—a quarter of an hour or half an hour—before Magda took the bank notes that had so often changed hands from her father and gave them to her mother for safekeeping. For the time being there was no room in her mind for the realization that she was mistress of a large sum of money; she was simply giddy at the thought of what she could do with such a fortune. Three hundred rubles! What a lot of capital it was for a person who often did not spend as much as a zloty a week on herself!

During the next few days, under the influence of memory and reflection, Magda decided to approach her mother very respectfully and beg her to take as much as she needed from the three hundred rubles for Zosia's education—and from the remainder to deduct the cost of Magda's breakfast, lunch and dinner, taking the greatest care to keep it a secret from the doctor.

“Calculate it as you would for a stranger. Bill me for as much as you would have to take from any young woman for her board. Do not be offended with me,

because ...” Magda inwardly rehearsed her speech, waiting for the moment when her mother would have the most time and be in the best humor.

But that very evening, when she saw her mother in the garden, she was on the verge of walking out and saying:

“Please, mama, I want to ask a great favor! Really, a very great...”

But almost at that very instant the postman came and handed Magda an official document.

Taken by surprise, she unsealed it and found—permission to open a private school for girls with two grades and a beginners’ class!

Joy struck her like a thunderbolt. She danced around the room, kissed the document, then ran into the kitchen to hug her mother. But because her mother was chatting with the young tenant farmer who tilled the Brzeskis’ fields, Magda ran out to the garden and began to hug and stroke her beloved chestnut tree. It seemed to her that she was in possession of happiness so secure that nothing could shake it. She had permission to establish the school and she had money, so what hindrance could there be? None, unless she died, or Iksinow fell through the ground.

But she would not die, for most certainly God had sent her to Iksinow to found the school. Had the Divine Mother herself not given her a sign in the church that day that she understood her concerns and heard her prayers? Had those boys whom she had seen romping in the street not been a signal from heaven that she should set about educating the children of Iksinow?

“After all, there are several hundred children here,” she thought, “and so at least fifty of them can come to the school. And if I only take a ruble a month from thirty of them, I can pay the expenses and still help my family, since I will be paying mama for my board.”

Finally she managed to overtake both parents at once in her father’s office.

“Mama! Papa!” she called. “I have permission for the school!”

She held the precious paper in both hands and, with an excited jump, raised it above her head.

But her mother shrugged indifferently and her father, hardly looking at the document, smiled as he answered:

“Well, in that case, madam headmistress, busy yourself first of all with the education of our Magda, and teach her how to maintain an air of authority.”

Magda felt chilled as if by a cold wind.

“You are laughing, papa?”

“No, child. Only—what will you do with that paper?”

“I will organize a beginners’ class as soon as possible. After all, I have the money. I will arrange for a room in the old inn. The carpenter will make benches and a blackboard for me.”

“And you will stand at this blackboard and give lessons to the benches,” her father remarked. “Do you have pupils?”

“Ah, they will be found, papa! I have been talking with several people here. I can have any number of pupils.”

“In that case, hand over some of them to the teacher in town, for the poor devil can hardly keep the wolf away from the door,” her father retorted.

“Good heavens!” Magda cried hotly. “This is your encouragement? Papa pokes fun and mama says nothing!”

“It is because I have known since yesterday about this permission,” answered her mother, waving a hand. “Zosia wrote me that her headmistress is reproaching her on account of this school of yours. She is complaining that you will ruin her.”

Magda stood in the middle of the room, wringing her hands.

“What is the meaning of this?” she thought. “Everyone always told me that I should work to support myself, and now, when I am ready to work, what happens? My father makes fun of me, my mother shows no interest, and Zosia’s headmistress complains that I will put her out of business. I will put her out of business! What an idea, that I am going to put someone out of business! Merciful heavens, what is going on here?”

And in one moment she plunged from boundless joy to bottomless despair. She was astonished at being so misunderstood; afraid of the future; and, above all, grieved at the death of the hopes that had nourished her so long, and that had hardly begun to be fulfilled before they came to nothing.

Her father came up to her, stroked her under the chin, and asked cheerfully:

“What sort of face is that? You look as if you had fallen from the moon.”

“What am I to do, papa?” she whispered.

“Oh, my poor little one!” her father replied, taking her in his arms and pressing her to him. “What is she to do! Come now, have you no father or mother?”

“But, papa,” she burst out, “how can I live without work, without a goal? How can I go on eating your bread when every piece chokes me as if I had stolen it? Indeed, I know that things are not easy for you, and if I cannot help you now, at least I do not want to impoverish you.”

She knelt before her parents, stretched out her hands and exclaimed tearfully:

“I swear that after the summer holidays I will not eat at your table for nothing. I cannot, so there! I cannot! Papa, dear, you understand,” she said, turning toward him. “You will advise me. For I will die here before your eyes, because I cannot live on your work and your want.”

Her mother rose from her chair. Her father caught her in his embrace again, and, covering her with kisses, seated her on the sofa.

“Ah, so carried away! So carried beyond herself!” he said. “What are you doing, girl? How can you bandy such preposterous expressions with your father? She will not eat at our table for nothing! Whoever heard such a thing? She will die... And you, you silly, bad girl... Take up the hem of your dress and go back to our grade school. You yourself should still be in school, not establishing one of your own, child!”

“I cannot be an idler. I cannot eat you out of house and home. Well, I cannot!” Magda repeated, weeping.

Her father was still holding her in his arms. When she grew calmer, he made a sign to her mother, who left the office with a flushed face.

“Magda, let us speak reasonably,” said the doctor when the mother had gone out. “You are the best of children, you are a noble woman, but...” He clapped his hand on his knee and began again:

“Tell me: what do you really want?”

“I do not want to live for free at your expense. Because you yourselves do not have ...” she put her head on her father’s shoulder.

“Well said! But what work do you want to do?”

“Indeed, I have permission to open the school.”

“Excellent! And do you have pupils?”

“I will have.”

“And if you do not have them? Or if the costs of maintaining the school are greater than your earnings? What then?”

“When you continually laugh at me or discourage me?” Magda answered, but in a more cheerful voice.

“No, child, I am not discouraging you. I may be mistaken, but I will not share your joy until I see a successful result. You see, the less elated someone is about his plan, the more he foresees the obstacles, the less disappointment there is for him if the plan does not succeed. Do you understand?”

“But why should I not succeed? Why?”

“I do not say that you will not succeed. It is only because you are setting yourself a serious goal that I warn you that from the outset you must tell yourself: either the plan will succeed or it will not succeed, and—what will I do if it does not succeed?”

“Sometime, papa... I will tell you something. I have a feeling that all will go well!”

The doctor smiled.

“Two times a year your mother has the feeling that she will win the lottery. And what do you think? In ten years she has hardly won back even a small part of what she put in.”

“Papa, you continue to discourage me!” Magda exclaimed, stomping her foot.

“Not at all! I only ask one thing of you. Before you set about opening the school, think what you will do if the school is not successful and you lose money. And as you frame your plan, tell me about it. Agreed?”

“Agreed! If you like, I will think all night about the fact that nothing in life will work out for me! Agreed, if you like!”

“Oh, just like a woman! What is all this preaching about emancipation among you women when you have no power to think rationally? I tell you: make a plan in case of failure.”

“I have a plan!” Magda broke in. “I will write to Warsaw right away and try to find a teaching post for the beginning of the next term. I will not have a school of my own. I will go to Warsaw.”

“You are out of your mind!”

“I will go, papa. I cannot eat your bread for nothing. I want to support myself. I have sworn it here in this room, and I do not retract a word. Are you angry, papa, dear?” she added tenderly, looking him in the eye.

The doctor had to pause and think, not because this kind of argument was new, but because he was hearing it from the lips of his own daughter. It seemed so strange to him, so unheard of. At that moment he could not escape the feeling that his daughter was already a person in her own right, and a person who belonged to another generation, one he hardly knew at all.

“If you were older—!” he said, heartsick.

“I will grow older, papa, I, too,” she answered sadly.

Her father rose from the sofa and walked around the room. Suddenly he stopped in front of Magda.

“Ah! It is difficult,” he said. “I have no power over you anymore. Do as you like, and God bless you. Only do not forget that you have a most loving friend in me.”

His eyes brimmed with tears, but he fought them back.

The old clock struck ten. Magda told her father good night and went to her room. She felt cold as a stone, but she was sure she would crumble into powder and dissolve in tears if she lost control of herself even for a minute.

She sat down at her table, put the shade over her lamp, and began a letter to Miss Malinowska. But when she found herself writing this sentence: “I may need an occupation after the summer holiday, so if there is a position in Warsaw...” a huge tear fell on her paper.

She took another sheet and, muffling her lips with a handkerchief so no one would hear her quiet weeping, began to write again. Hot tears flowed onto the handkerchief and her hand, and her heart ached as if this letter were her last farewell to her family.

It happens every day: young, sensitive girls leave the parental nest to throw themselves into the maelstrom of the world. But only God knows how much agony there is in it!

Chapter XXI. A New Partner

During the next few days, Iksinow's kettle of rumor reached the boiling point again as the news circulated that Miss Brzeska, the famous Mrs. Latter's most distinguished pupil, was establishing a school.

And again two factions were created. At the town square the magistrate's wife declared to the major that even if Femcia were going to relive her early childhood, she would not put her under Magda's supervision. The notary's wife, moreover, whom heaven had not blessed with offspring, also asserted that even if God had sent her four girls instead of four pug dogs, she would not be brave enough to entrust any of them to that advocate of emancipation who had been so keen to arrange concerts.

The vicar and the major, on the other hand, could not praise Magda enough, or find words to describe the good fortune that would accrue to Iksinow from having a school with such a headmistress! Meanwhile, in the course of the first day Mientlewicz informed everyone in town about this propitious development, and for the next several days rode around to the nearby manor houses extolling the cleverness of Miss Brzeska, who spoke French like a born Parisian and played the piano like Moniuszko.

After a week had passed, no one doubted that Magda's project was going forward. The county administrator himself repeated several times that a school was needed in Iksinow, even if it were a school with only five grades, and he expressed his surprise that one had not been established already. The effect of that was a declaration by the notary's assistant that he would put his two daughters under Magda's care. The head of the local militia paid Magda a visit and began to negotiate the conditions of the education of his three young girls. The commissioner of police also promised to send his daughters to the newly created institution, and the distrainer was nearly burning with shame and dismay because none of his six little rascals was a girl. He was afraid of appearing to be disloyal, and he made a face that seemed calculated to insure him against such a supposition for all time to come.

Magda also received letters and visits from beyond the town. One day Mr. Bedowski traveled to see her in his Krakovian britska. The next day brought Mrs. Jotowska, whom everyone recognized because of her linen duster and green veil. Then a few days later the Abecedowskis pulled up in front of the doctor's house with three girls. Their visit became known in the town, for their carriage had a broken door that rattled most awfully. And Magda was no less terrified when she learned that the Abecedowskis were ready to turn the three young ladies over to her immediately for room, board and instruction, and to pay a lump sum of three hundred rubles plus additional fees according to contract.

Magda's extraordinary success caused discord in the opposing camp. Indeed, the magistrate's wife and the notary's wife maintained their aversion to her, but the apothecary and his wife, gifted by God with four daughters who were being schooled at home, held a consultation between themselves. The result was

that the apothecary began to treat the magistrate and the notary coolly, and his wife to appear more and more frequently on the street where Dr. Brzeski's house stood.

Magda's triumph was so decisive that even her mother remarked to the major one day:

"Ha! I see that my girl has a head on her shoulders."

"Yes, the tasty little wench!" the major answered. "In six months Krukowski would have kicked the bucket on her. But what a six months..."

The doctor's wife shrugged her shoulders and at the earliest opportunity told her husband that the major had sunk so far into his dotage, it was impossible to talk to him.

Magda would have been completely happy these days—the happiest being in the world—if her father had not spoiled her good humor. Only to him did she talk about how her projects were unfolding and, as bad luck would have it, he always managed to find some pitfall.

One evening, for example, she presented him with a list of prospective pupils who were in the midst of arranging to attend her school. There were twelve young ladies from the country and more than twenty from the town.

"So, papa," she asked, "which of us is right?"

"You are right, my dear," he answered, taking a pencil and beginning to cross out the names of the girls from outside the town.

"What are you doing?" Magda asked, startled.

"See here, child—do not take the Abecedowski girls. Those children are accustomed to comfort, even luxury, and for three hundred rubles you will hardly be able to feed them. Then where is the money for lodging and lessons?"

Magda brooded.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "For ten rubles a month it would be hard for me to maintain a girl decently. So I will give you those three!" she concluded, throwing her arms around his neck.

"And give me the nine remaining," replied her father. "On an average they are going to pay four rubles apiece per month for tuition, but you must have three teachers for them. Can you pay each teacher twelve rubles a month and pay for quarters for the school? Finally, where will you find teachers in this town?"

Magda was dumbfounded. Receiving visitors, answering letters, arranging matters with parents had taken so much of her time that she had not considered this point. Until this very moment she had not taken into account that there was no one to manage the school except herself!

All in a moment after that discovery, Magda lost faith in herself. She collapsed onto the sofa in a flood of tears, and began to babble:

“Good heavens, how stupid I am! I never will have any sense. I will never accomplish anything! What a disgrace! As if I did not know perfectly well how much Mrs. Latter had to pay teachers every month! Oh, God, why didn’t I die? Why wasn’t I born a boy?”

Her father began to hug her and stroke her dark hair.

“Well, well! Do not despair,” he said. “You overlooked something important, but that only goes to show that you are a good Pole. You see, we Poles always make plans without amassing the means to carry them out, or even asking if our means are sufficient. Well, that is how we make our way through life. But you, who belong to a new generation, wiser than ours—”

“You are making fun of me again!” Magda interrupted, moving to the opposite end of the sofa.

“No, darling. I only advise you to think of means as well as ends, and to adapt your project a little to fit them.”

“I am listening, papa.”

“So you see, you have a place for your school: we will give you the living room.”

“But it is too small.”

“If it becomes evident that you need larger quarters, we will give you half the house.”

“But I will pay rent. Oh, yes! Otherwise I do not want it,” Magda said animatedly, her gray eyes growing bright and cheerful as ever.

“You will pay, you will. Secondly, because you yourself are the only teacher, begin by taking only five or six girls from the town.”

“Twenty, papa! I will work from morning till night, and I will earn—probably about forty rubles a month.”

“With your permission, dear, I do not approve of such a number as your doctor, or as head of the house, which gives me a certain responsibility for your pupils. It would be unconscionable to overextend yourself so that you teach poorly.”

“But if I find an assistant?”

“Where?”

“I could bring someone from Warsaw. No!” she exclaimed. “I am a lunatic. I want to bring teachers from Warsaw, and I could not feed them.”

“That is not the end of everything,” her father broke in. “Indeed, you are speaking now like a person who has her wits about her. So I suggest this: take a few of the best-paying pupils by the hour, see how it goes with them, and—look for teachers.”

“But that would not be a school, papa! Those would be private tutorials, which in fact I could have been conducting already. Oh, miserable Magda! How

much time I have wasted when I could have been giving private lessons! Oh, what a worthless creature I am!”

With difficulty the doctor managed to alleviate this new outburst of despair and explain to his daughter that in any undertaking, in addition to initiative, energy, money and contacts, patience plays no small role.

During the next few days Magda received yet more visits. From the nearby countryside the Zetowski and Zetowicz families called on her. From the town came the hairdresser, the photographer and the owner of the windmill by the tollgate.

Magda discussed various arrangements with them very graciously, very sensibly, but without enthusiasm. How could she be enthusiastic now that she realized that she had no teachers to help run the school, and that private tutorials would bring her barely twelve rubles a month, and even that was uncertain? And each conversation with prospective clients revealed more clearly that people were drawn to her school because they thought it would be cheaper than educating their children at home or sending them to school in the provincial capital.

“A fine education I will give their children all by myself!” Magda said inwardly, and a feeling of dread ran through her at the thought that she had no staff. “When it comes to that, why am I talking with people about the school when I have no teachers?”

One day, toward evening, her mother hurried into her room and said:

“Miss Cecylia wants to see you. You remember her: the elderly spinster. The apothecary’s sister.”

“Oh, that lady? Why, certainly,” Magda answered, a little surprised, for she quickly recollected that Miss Cecylia was almost a mythological figure in Iksinow. No one ever saw her or heard of her, though she had lived in the town for about ten years.

A moment later she came in, carefully shutting the door—a tall, slender woman in a dark gown. She must have been beautiful once. She had large eyes, though now they were sunken and without luster; rather sharp but classic features; a yellowed but delicate complexion; and a great crown of dark hair frosted with gray. Her bow and all her movements were those of a born lady, but a lady troubled, almost fearful. It seemed to Magda that her visitor was embarrassed about something: her old dress, her dainty movements, or perhaps the beauty she had outlived.

The lady wanted to say something, but her voice failed her. So she only bowed to Magda a second time and gave her a large sheet of paper tightly rolled.

“What is this, please, ma’am?” Magda asked, no less at a loss than the new arrival.

“That is my diploma from the Pulaski Institute,” she answered quietly.

“Madam graduated from the Institute in Pulawy?”

“With honors,” replied the lady still more quietly. “You do not know me,” she added, “but I remember you when you were a little girl.”

“But I do remember you, Miss Cecylia!” Magda exclaimed as a deeper awareness of her visitor’s identity broke over her. “I believe that just this year we passed each other on the highway. I was out for a walk; you were returning from a walk. But you turned into a field... Please be so kind as to sit down.”

And shaking off her first impression, Magda embraced Miss Cecylia and helped her to a seat in an armchair, then sat by her on a low children’s divan.

Miss Cecylia gazed at Magda a long time, then said, grasping her hand:

“You must be very good...”

“Why, yes! I am truly a good girl!” Magda answered with a smile and, feeling a sudden tenderness for the older woman, kissed her warmly.

A new friendship had formed.

“Why are you never seen in town?” Magda inquired. “A lady so beautiful and undoubtedly the finest person in Iksinow...”

Miss Cecylia blushed.

“If everyone were like you!” she rejoined. “I have quite lost the social graces,” she added quickly. “I live only with my brother’s children or those who come to visit them.”

Magda sprang up from the sofa and clapped her hands.

“Madam!” she cried. “Be my partner and join me in establishing my school. We are so well matched! We will love each other so!”

“Your partner?” Miss Cecylia replied with a gentle smile. “I came to ask you for a position as a teacher.”

“But you will be my partner. I will be the teacher in your school,” said Magda feverishly. “Oh, this has happened for the best. What a happy development!”

Miss Cecylia was confused again. Seizing Magda by the hand, she said quickly:

“I assure you that there are rumors. My sister-in-law did not turn me out of the house. She is too sensitive.”

Magda listened in astonishment. Miss Cecylia spoke on:

“My sister-in-law only said—which shows very good judgment on her part—that she would send her two older girls to your school. And that other families whose children have been taught together with ours also prefer to send them to school (and they are quite right!). So I (not my sister-in-law, God forbid!) said to myself that my role in my brother’s home has come to an end. That I cannot be a burden to them any longer. That I would go to Miss Brzeska and ask for the most modest conditions. And here I am; I found the courage,” she finished with a smile.

“How glad I am that you had this thought,” Magda answered. “You will see what a thriving school we will have.”

“You are right. For when I wanted to open a school here ten years ago...”

“You?” Magda interrupted. “And why did you not open it?”

Miss Cecylia shook her head sadly.

“There were many reasons,” she said. “There were no pupils. I had no teachers.”

Magda quivered.

“I did not have the money...”

Magda’s face went fiery red.

“For the rest,” Miss Cecylia said, “I lacked the courage. My brother’s wife still laughs at me today (very justly!) and says, ‘Cecylia, with your disposition, how could you even have dreamed of such a project?’ And she is right. I can work, but to create something, to manage something, to accumulate the money for something... I would have a nervous collapse the first time anything went wrong, which can happen very easily when one takes the responsibility for dozens of people.”

After listening to this outpouring from Miss Cycelia, Magda felt that her head was spinning and her heart had ceased to beat. Fortunately her father came in—and Miss Cecylia changed. Shyness overwhelmed her; she was disconcerted; she answered questions in monosyllables. Finally she said goodbye to Magda and the doctor.

After her exit, or rather her escape, the doctor said to his daughter:

“It seems that you have your assistant, and a good one. You could not dream of a better.”

“How do you know why she came to me?”

“The whole town knows,” the doctor said. “The apothecary’s wife wants her daughters to be educated at a school—at your school—so for several days she put this teacher, her husband’s own sister, through such scenes that the poor woman must now run away from home, as you want to do from us.”

Magda felt a chill.

“Now what will happen?” she thought with alarm. “I am not sure yet that I am going to open a school, and now an obligation has fallen on me. After all, I cannot abandon Miss Cecylia, who has lost her place because of me!”

“What are you brooding about?” asked her father, laying his hand on her forehead.

She did not confide her new worry to him. It seemed so burdensome that she did not have the courage. She lowered her eyes, avoiding his glance, and asked rather distantly:

“Tell me more about Miss Cecylia. There is something strange about her.”

“She is a very good, intelligent woman who worked as a teacher when she was young in order to help her brother. Now she is a teacher, educating his children, and later she will be a teacher again in order to avoid eating his bread for free.”

Magda’s breath was taken away.

“Why did she not marry, papa? Is it possible that no one wanted a woman so beautiful?”

The doctor waved a hand.

“Any woman can marry; any woman at least has admirers. Miss Cecylia had them, as recently as two years ago.”

“So?”

“She is a singular person,” the doctor answered reflectively. “She lost her fiancé, and she decided to remain unmarried.”

“He left her?” Magda asked in a stifled voice.

“He died. There are such women.”

It was not a peaceful evening for Magda. Miss Cecylia seemed to be standing before her eyes. So one could be beautiful and good, and unhappy in spite of that? One could love, and lose what one loved? One could serve faithfully, even devotedly, and be driven away from those one had served? One could possess a diploma, be a person of learning, form bold plans, and in the end be abandoned, an object of quiet ridicule? What kind of world have You created, merciful God?

“And what am I going to do?” Magda thought after all this. “If Miss Cecylia did not dare open a school here, with her qualifications, where on earth could I succeed? They are promising me pupils, but how many will they really give me, and how many of their families will pay regularly? And where are the teachers? It is true that I have three hundred rubles, but Mrs. Latter had thousands of rubles, and in spite of that... I must have been insane to come out with such a project and arrange with people to take students!”

But the next day letters arrived from Warsaw, letters Magda received with trepidation but read with joy. Dembicki responded that she could tutor by the hour and earn around forty rubles a month, only she must be prepared to rush around the city. Miss Malinowska informed her that she had a permanent position for her as a teacher in a private home to two girls who had been at Mrs. Latter’s school.

Chapter XXII. What Price Success?

The next week was Magda's happiest in Iksinow. She was convinced, after interviews with prospective clients, that she could have fifteen or even twenty girls who would enroll in the beginners' class and study various subjects according to their own needs and levels of advancement. Their parents agreed to that method of grouping because they understood that in the beginning it could not be otherwise. Furthermore, they would have to pay enough that the total income of the school would amount to sixty or eighty rubles a month.

Some wanted to pay in advance for a quarter, even for a year, or give a promissory note for the money. Doctor Brzeski turned down these offers, pointing out that nothing was certain yet and that a final decision in the matter would come in the beginning of August.

Every day brought favorable news. A new pupil was enrolled; Mientlewicz dropped in to say that the nut-brown paint for the benches had arrived; and Zosia, who was spending the summer vacation with one of her friends, informed her parents that she would come home for the last week to show them that she had gained weight and had a rosier complexion.

Even Zdzislaw, who was not fond of writing, sent a letter addressed to Magda personally. He told her that he had a very good position in a percale factory, then he concluded:

"Concerning your plan to establish a school, I will certainly say that I am sorry for you, since however pleasant unmarried young ladies may be, taken individually, a crowd of such young flibbertigibbets must be tiresome. You ask me for some pointers: what pointers can I give you? At the institute I hear it said from morning till evening that a man should devote everything he has to society; at the factory from morning till evening I hear that a man should devote all his efforts to making a fortune. So at this moment I have two views of life. And as I am utterly fed up with platitudes like 'the love of humankind,' 'work for the social organism,' and so forth, who knows if I will not take a turn at making money? In any case I am like an ass—or like Hercules—between two bundles of hay, so you understand that in such a state of ambivalence I cannot advise you."

When he heard the letter read, Dr. Brzeski raised his eyebrows high and drummed on the table with his fingers, but Magda laughed like a third-form student. She would have laughed at anything just then because she was in a very cheerful mood. To be on the verge of opening the little school she had dreamed of, with all her troubles behind her: could there be greater happiness?

One day the farmer who did the planting on her parents' land came to announce to the doctor's wife that there would surely be fifteen bushels of rye per hectare, and took the occasion to bring Magda an unusual bird. It was a young bird, dark gray, with a little beak but an exceptionally wide gullet, which it constantly opened. Above all, Magda was delighted that the bird did not try to escape but sat still, puffed up like an owl, opening its throat every little while.

But after a few hours, when it became clear that the extraordinary little bird did not want to eat, drink or sleep, even on a bed, Magda tucked it into a basket and carried it back to the bushes where the farmer had found it.

She returned home, musing about how the bird would manage, whether its parents could be found, whether both of them were dead—and if he, poor creature, had lost his appetite with grieving for them. And she told herself that someone would have to be a bad person to take a fledgling from its parents and grieve both the orphan and those who were bereft of him.

“Is it possible... is it possible to do such a thing?” she repeated, feeling compassion for the defenseless young bird that was not capable of complaining or even understanding the extent of the injury that had been done to it.

Then on the street not far from her house she saw a pack of children. Laughing and shouting, they had surrounded a small elderly lady wearing a faded satin hood and a large shawl that was nearly threadbare. The old woman had a listless, deeply furrowed face, an open mouth, and vacant eyes.

“Rude children, to laugh at the old lady!” cried Magda, running up to the group. As she drew near she asked:

“Where would you like to go, madam? What do you need?”

The woman turned and fixed her with round eyes. Slowly, with an effort, she answered:

“I am asking them where the lady is—the lady who—how is it? The lady who is establishing the school.”

“Magdalena Brzeska?” Magda supplied, taken aback.

“That one, my dear ... the one who is setting up the school in town...”

“I am the one. I am setting up the school here,” Magda answered, taking her by her shriveled hand.

“You, eh? Do not joke.”

“I am certainly the person.”

The elderly woman’s pale eyes flashed. Suddenly she drew a wooden ruler from under her scarf and began to beat Magda’s hands, muttering:

“Horrid woman! Horrid woman! And what has Kazik done to you? Horrid woman...”

The blows were weak and awkward, but they caused Magda as much pain as if she had been beaten with a hot iron.

“What are you doing? Why?” she asked, barely able to hold back tears.

“Horrid woman! What has Kazik done to you?” the old lady repeated, waving her hands. The ruler fell to the ground.

Magda picked up the ruler and gave it to her. The aged woman looked at her: something loomed in her dull eyes, as if she were surprised or trying to

collect her thoughts. Finally she tucked the ruler under her scarf again and stood motionless on the street, not knowing where to go, or perhaps thinking there was no point in going anywhere.

“Who is that lady?” Magda asked one of the boys, who burst out laughing.

“That is our professor’s grandmother,” he stammered between giggles. “She’s so funny!”

And he ran off toward the school.

Magda took the old lady’s arm and carefully began to conduct her in the same direction as the boy. As they reached the school, a woman without a hat or jacket and with her sleeves rolled up ran toward them from the yard.

“Grandma, what are you up to?” the woman cried. “Oh, I do apologize, madam!” she added, turning to Magda. “But this is how it is: a person is taken up with the children or the kitchen, and grandma goes out to town and always causes worry or embarrassment.”

“Nothing happened, I assure you,” said Magda, ushering the old lady into the yard and settling her on a bench next to the house.

The professor’s wife, poor, ashamed of her poverty and disconcerted by the older woman’s actions, flew into another spasm of apologies. Magda did her best to make a joke of the incident. When she had succeeded, she asked what quarrel the grandmother could have with her.

“Ah, I will tell you everything, since you seem to be so good,” said the teacher’s wife. “You see, my husband lost several pupils: Miss Witkowska, Miss Siarczynska, Miss Narolska...”

“They are going to come to my school after the summer holidays,” thought Magda.

“They did not pay much here: just six or seven rubles, but I do not have to tell you that that is a reduction of twenty rubles every month. It amounts to more than the teacher’s salary. So then my husband said to me: ‘Until our debts are paid (for we have a debt of eighty rubles plus interest), go with three of the children to your brother in the country, and I will stay here with the two oldest.’ My brother is a distiller, madam, and does not live in the lap of luxury, but he is fond of me and will not begrudge me bread and lodging for a year.”

She wiped her eyes with her apron and continued:

“I will not hide the fact that, as we are only human, we complained a little between ourselves about your school. And grandma—she napped and she listened, she listened and she napped, and—you see what she did! A person would sooner expect death than such disgrace!”

Magda, as she listened, gazed at the teacher’s house and its occupants. Through a window partly covered by commonplace flowers in pots and a percale curtain she saw a room, clean, but fitted out with old, shabby furnishings. On the hearth in the kitchen sat a large pot of potatoes and a little stewing pan of

bacon. Four fair-haired children dressed in plain, heavy cotton clothing were running around the house. They were clean and quiet, and their clothes and socks were patched and darned. One of them, a girl of perhaps twelve in a short dress, looked at Magda with alarm and resentment, or so it seemed to Magda.

“She is surely one of the two who will be without their mother, while those three will be without their father,” thought Magda.

She embraced the professor’s wife, bowed to the elderly lady and kissed the children. The younger ones looked at her in amazement; the older girl withdrew.

When she reached home, Magda met her mother on the porch, bargaining with two Jewish women for ducks and butter. The doctor’s wife saw Magda and said:

“Why do you look so drawn?”

“I had to walk too fast.”

“You are pale... perspiring. Are you ill, my child?” her mother asked. Turning back to the Jews, she continued:

“Four zlotys for the butter and forty pence each for the ducks.”

“May calamity overtake me, but I cannot,” said one of the Jews, kissing the doctor’s wife’s sleeve. “Let gentle madam herself say if they are not worth a zloty and a half apiece! The ducks, excuse me for saying so, are like lambs. It takes a man to carry them.”

In her own room Magda began to undress slowly, looking fixedly in front of her. She saw the face of the old woman, like a boxwood carving framed in a ring of satin. The smoother points on the yellowed face seemed to glisten in the sun like polished wood. And those radiating furrows from the corners of her mouth, the corners of her eyes, the base of her nose—it was exactly as if some self-taught sculptor had carved her out of wood with a blunt knife.

“How old can she be?” Magda wondered. “Well, it never entered my mind that here in Iksinow was an old lady with a hatred for me that has been growing for weeks. She has no doubt been sitting by that wall, perhaps on that very bench, hating me through idle days, through sleepless nights, and thinking of revenge!

“But the children... How did they feel when they were told, ‘You must be separated; you will not be playing together.’ The two oldest will not see their mother for a whole year, and the three youngest will not see their father. How strange it will seem to them when they understand that it is I who am forcing them apart! I—forcing children to separate... well, I myself! That woman I see here in the mirror!”

In the afternoon the teacher came to Magda. He was a bald, graying man who found it difficult to hold his head erect above his stooped body. He wore a long coat, and because he was so hunched, his hands seemed too long. He apologized profusely to Magda for his grandmother’s behavior, begged that she would not injure his reputation with the overseers of schools, and went out

deeply convinced that if Magda interceded with them on his behalf, he would have two hundred and fifty rubles a year instead of one hundred and fifty.

“Well, but I understand that I cannot ask madam to do that,” he said in parting.

After he had gone, the doctor’s wife appeared.

“What did he want from you?” she inquired.

“Nothing, mama. He thanked me for bringing his old grandmother home.”

“The old lady has grown feeble-minded; she is more than ninety years old. But why are you so shaken?”

“Because, you see, mother,” Magda answered, making an effort to smile, “he thinks that I can injure him or do him favors with the overseers. Poor man!”

“Let him think what he likes. He will not interfere with you.”

Mientlewicz appeared at that moment. He was irritated, and as he spoke of the very dry, extremely dry wood the school benches would be made of, he looked keenly at Magda.

After Mientlewicz the major arrived, so indignant that he did not notice that his pipe had gone out.

“What is this?” he said to Magda. “That old lunatic assaulted you on the street?”

Magda burst out laughing.

“Are you talking about the teacher’s grandmother?” she asked. “Could she assault anyone, the poor thing?”

“I made that very observation to the magistrate, who nevertheless insisted that he had heard in the town that the old woman threw herself on you ...”

The major had not finished his sentence when the vicar came in.

“Kyrie eleison!” he exclaimed from the threshold. “And what do they want from you?”

“Who?” asked Magda.

“The schoolteacher and his wife. The notary’s wife told me about his grandmother, but the grandmother can barely stir...”

It was impossible to keep the matter a secret any longer, so Magda told her friends everything.

“Well, in that case, sir, let us go and play chess,” said the major. And seizing Magda by the waist, he kissed her forehead and added:

“You are wasted on Iksinow. You are too good... I remind you, sir, that today I play the first match with white.”

Magda's father did not speak to her at all that evening about the rumors that were circulating around the town. Both parents must have heard them, however, for the mother was on edge and ill with headache.

All night in her dreams Magda saw the bird. She took it into the underbrush; she found a little hollow in a thick clump of juniper, made a nest of dry leaves and placed the orphan there, exactly as she had done in reality. She even returned to it three times, as she had done in the daytime. She blew on it, she kissed it, and when after the final leavetaking she turned to look back once more, the bird was sitting in the little hollow with its wings spread, opening its wide throat and emitting hisses—saying goodbye to her, as it was able.

"Will it live?" thought Magda. "Perhaps older birds have found it, but something may have eaten it."

When she woke, she left the house before breakfast and ran to the field, to the bushes. She walked into the juniper thicket with a pounding heart, telling herself that if something had caught the bird it would be a bad omen for her. She looked: the hollow was empty, but there was no sign of a struggle. Magda sighed with relief. She felt certain that the orphan had found caretakers.

She returned home and said her prayers. She was ashamed to pray for the bird, because she did not even know what kind of bird it was: a nightjar. But it was continually on her mind, and she left its fate to God, whose unsleeping eye keeps vigil over great worlds and tiny hatchlings.

In town Magda met the schoolteacher's older daughter carrying a packet of sugar, perhaps half a pound. Magda did not accost the girl, but she curtsied politely, then kissed Magda's hand. When they had passed each other, Magda turned her head in spite of herself and noticed that the girl was also looking back.

"She thinks that I am driving her mother out of the house!" Magda said to herself.

Dr. Brzeski had finished his breakfast and was walking around the garden, smoking his pipe. Magda strolled with him to the summer house, sat down next to him on the bench, put her arms around him and whispered in his ear:

"Papa—I am not going to open the school here. Miss Cecylia can take half the pupils and the schoolteacher's can stay with him. Are you angry, papa?"

"No, my dear."

"Do you understand why I must do this?"

"I know that you must."

"Perhaps you think it is the wrong thing to do?"

"No."

"Ah, papa, papa, how good you are... what a saint!" whispered Magda, putting her head on his shoulder.

"It is you who are a saint," he rejoined. "That is why you see everything as you do."

But when Magda's mother learned of her decision, she was at her wits' end.

"All you can do is confuse your father and me and yourself," she said. "First you are going to start a school, then you hesitate, then you have the desire again, then you have no desire again; every hour a different plan. It cannot be this way. You have placed yourself under obligation to people—"

"I beg your pardon, mother," her husband interjected. "She explicitly reserved the right to make the final decision in August."

"Do you want to send her to Warsaw, then, Felix?" cried the mother, choking back tears.

The doctor was silent. Magda said:

"Would you let our schoolteacher be ruined because of me, mama?"

"What sickly scruples!" the doctor's wife retorted. "Brzozowski knew when he came here that he would hurt your father's practice. But he came, and we have no quarrel with him."

"Well, that was not the same," the doctor observed.

"True," said the mother, "but we showed no antagonism toward him, and for his part he did not ask if he was creating difficulties for us."

"Do not do to another what you would not wish him to do to you," said the father.

"My love," his wife interrupted heatedly, "you were born to be an anchorite. You elevate your considerations to a level even above your attachment to your children. But I am only a mother, and I will not stand by and see my child's plans come to nothing—even a capricious child who cares nothing for me."

"Oh, mama!" Magda whispered.

"I will call people together," said the doctor's wife passionately. "Let the whole town come together. Let our greatest enemies judge who is in the right."

"Enemies judge badly," the doctor remarked.

"Friends, then. Let the vicar come, and Mientlewicz, and even that old codger who in spite of his eighty years..."

"The major is not eighty yet," the doctor countered.

His wife turned and ran to the kitchen.

Chapter XXIII. The Family Council

At four in the afternoon the people who had been invited to the deliberations began to assemble. First came Mientlewicz in a striped suit and a turned-down collar so wide that its ends almost reached to his collarbone. Then came the major with two pouches of tobacco, as if he were ready for a long journey on the highway; then the gray-haired vicar, at whom the doctor's wife blinked in the friendliest way, upon which he blinked back at her, rubbing his hands. At last Miss Cecylia arrived, out of breath, and collapsed on a chair in Magda's room, begging not to be ordered to go into the garden, where there were so many men. But the doctor's wife took her by the hand, conducted her to the summer house and seated her, white as a sheet of paper, opposite the major.

"Please be circumspect today, major," Mrs. Brzeska whispered to the old man.

"Do not teach me common sense, madam," he muttered wrathfully, taking out of his bag a pipe cleaner, flint, tinder and a packet of sulphur matches with varicolored heads.

Teatime at the Brzeskis' house was always pleasant, but that day it surpassed expectations. No one had ever seen such strong coffee, such thick cream, and so many kinds of rolls, biscuits, cookies, shortbread, and tarts sprinkled with flour and sugar, all straight from the oven. A samovar bursting with steam was even set up in case the major demanded tea, and the doctor's wife with her own hand brought a bottle of white arak from the cabinet because the major liked to drink tea with arak. In the kitchen and the pantry, in the garden and the summer house, the doctor's wife could be heard repeating what seemed to be a grammar school exercise: the major. To the major. For the major.

Poor Miss Cecylia, at whom the major now and then threw shameless glances (in Mrs. Brzeska's opinion), blushed and grew pale by turns, peeking from under her long lashes at the old rascal, who against her brother's interest advocated purging pills, and was thought to be a cannibal—or a chimney sweep—by the children in town.

While the doctor's wife was pouring coffee, the major looked at Mientlewicz, who was sitting beside him, and said:

"Why have you gotten yourself up like a wet nurse today? Your collar is drooping so that your navel almost shows."

In spite of herself Miss Cecylia whispered: "Oh!" The doctor's wife said quickly:

"Perhaps the major will have some of these biscuits? They are still warm. Miss Cecylia," she added, "will you butter a roll for the major?"

This tactful reminder of Miss Cecylia's presence was embarrassing to the major, and he turned away from Mientlewicz with aversion. For was it not Mientlewicz's fault that he had spoken coarsely in front of unmarried ladies?

Meanwhile Miss Cecylia obediently began spreading butter on the roll. She was so confused, however, that she dropped the knife, crushed the roll and nearly turned over a glass of coffee. In an effort to put her at ease, the major said:

“What is this—your family is turning out the dispenser of medicines?”

At first Miss Cecylia did not trust her own ears, did not believe that the major was speaking to her. When a look from the doctor’s wife had confirmed that that was actually the case, however, she collected herself and answered:

“Yes, the ties between my brother and Mr. Fajkowski have been broken.”

“For once I must admit that they are right,” said the major, determined to win Miss Cecylia over completely. “What a shocking thing to be up to in a house with a family!”

“My brother said that Mr. Fajkowski cannot be in the apothecary shop any longer because he is not of sound mind.”

“Really?” exclaimed Magda. “He walks on the rooftops?”

“Imagine: the night before last he walked along the roof and went through the window into the kitchen on the second floor.”

“How lucky that he did not walk into your room!” Magda exclaimed, sighing with relief.

“Magda, dear!” the doctor’s wife began.

“I would have died from fear,” said Miss Cecylia. “After all, I could not have cried out, because he would have awakened and fallen.”

“Bring us the chess set, Magda,” said the major. He glanced triumphantly at Mrs. Brzeska, who was ready to hug him for his tact and presence of mind.

“But surely you gentlemen will not play today,” she said when Magda had returned with the chess board and box. “We must carry on our deliberations.”

“We are not going to deliberate all night,” the major growled. “We are not demented.”

Through all this Mientlewicz was blushing like a girl. He was troubled alike by Fajkowski’s adventure and by his own collar, which only now seemed decidedly too long and too deeply cut. At that moment he would have preferred to have a garland of nettles and thistles around his neck rather than this miserable collar, because every time one of the ladies looked at him, he was painfully conscious of the feature of his dress that the major had so brutally censured.

When the table had been cleared and the major had begun to fill his pipe from his embroidered tobacco pouch, the doctor’s wife said with a sigh:

“What do you think of Magda’s latest whim, major? She has lost interest in her school and wants to go to Warsaw!”

“We cannot take her by the scruff of the neck,” replied the major.

“But parental authority in such a case...” the vicar put in.

“Miss Magdalena cannot even think of doing that!” Mientlewicz added hastily. “The whole town is dumbfounded. The commander of the county guard told me that it is impossible, and the county administrator himself stopped receiving people on business when he found out. He walked around his office with his hands folded, repeating, ‘ So! So!’ to himself.”

“You hear, Magda!” her mother remarked, raising a finger.

“Pity the family did not invite the commander of the guard here to begin with if he is going to decide Magda’s future,” snapped the major.

“But public opinion, major, sir!” Mientlewicz pleaded.

“Agreements concerning the young women are in the final stages,” added the doctor’s wife.

“Obedience to parents: a sacred obligation!” the vicar intoned.

“Why don’t you want to open your school?” the major asked Magda.

“Here is the reason, sir,” Magda began. “The teacher at the school has a wife, five children and a grandmother. He has a salary of a hundred and fifty rubles a year—”

“Answer briefly,” the major admonished.

“I will speak briefly. So, sir, the teacher earns another twenty rubles a month from private tutoring. And because his pupils are going to come to me instead, the teacher will lose those twenty rubles a month, and must send his wife and three of his children to the country.”

“Well, but why do you want to go away?” the major probed. “Indeed, you have pupils.”

“So I have.”

“Then open the school.”

“But I cannot destroy the livelihood of the teacher’s family. I cannot tear children away from their mother and father. What sort of justice would it be if a man was ruined after more than a dozen years’ work?”

“Brzowski had no such scruples where your father was concerned,” said the doctor’s wife.

“Perhaps Dr. Brzowski had no other place. But I could have an excellent situation in Warsaw.”

“Miss Cecylia—say something, please!” exclaimed the doctor’s wife. “You have the right to hold Magda to her word.”

“God knows what this will cost me,” Miss Cecylia responded quietly, “but Miss Magdalena acts from such noble motives—”

“And what does her father think? We should like to hear her father’s opinion,” said the vicar.

“Miss Magdalena will do the whole town an injury,” Mientlewicz interjected.

“Are you her father?” the major asked him sharply.

“I have nothing to say here,” said the doctor. “Her leaving will pain me, but I find it gratifying that she shows good instincts. One cannot care only for one’s own interests!”

“My dear doctor,” retorted the major, “if every soldier thought of his neighbor’s skin, and perhaps even of his enemy’s, what a fine army we would have! Each one should care for himself.”

“Do you hear, Magda?” said her mother, glancing at the major with eyes full of gratitude.

“At any rate,” Mientlewicz ventured, “if Miss Magdalena would like to indemnify the schoolteacher, let her pay him a percentage for each pupil he loses.”

“As you pay Eisenman so he will not disrupt your business,” added the major.

“Listen to me, gentlemen,” the doctor’s wife said in a voice filled with emotion. “Because of my husband’s views, I would not dare to limit our children’s freedom, if it were only a question of freedom. But what does Magda have to look forward to in Warsaw? She will be a governess for a year, two years, ten years, and what then? If we should die, apart from an old house and a few hectares of land, we will leave nothing to the children. So what would she be able to do for herself?”

“But she would face that same difficulty if she were here,” the doctor pointed out.

“But here she would have a school ... her own school. And after a dozen years or so of work, she could put something by, a person as thrifty as she is,” said the mother. “As a matter of fact, Felix, you yourself decided that the fifteen rubles she wants to pay us for board and lodging would be put aside for her dowry.”

“Magda has a dowry. Four thousand rubles,” the major remarked.

“What are you saying?” demanded the doctor’s wife. “Magda got three thousand rubles from her grandmother, not four thousand, and today not even half of it remains.”

“And I tell you, madam, that Magda will have four thousand rubles. Not now, but within a few years,” the major answered.

There was silence in the summer house. Then Mientlewicz, with the quickest comprehension of any of them, leaned over and kissed the major on his wrist.

“Are you completely out of your mind, Mientlewicz?” said the major.

“Thank him, Magda!” the vicar prompted.

Magda was stunned, unable to understand what was being said. But the doctor's wife wept.

"She will never belong to me!" she cried. "In her childhood her grandmother took her from me, and later that unfortunate Latter, God forgive her. And now the major!"

"I am not taking her away," said the old man, "and I will not give her a penny during my lifetime. She is young, so let her work. But let no one blather about how her future is not provided for!"

"Suppose she were to hire our teacher?" exclaimed Mientlewicz, beaming. "He could teach arithmetic, geography..."

"I thought of that," Magda replied, "but he is not free until after four, when lessons would be over at our school."

The major pondered.

"How much income would you receive each month?" he asked Magda.

"Around sixty rubles for Miss Cecylia and me."

"So if it were shared among three persons, it would amount to twenty rubles each. The game is not worth the candle!" the major concluded. "Well, vicar, let us get down to work."

And he took the chess pieces from the box and scattered them around the board.

"How, now? What do you gentlemen advise?" the doctor's wife asked feverishly, seizing the major's arm. "I must know for good and all what the girl will do."

"She knows better than we do," answered the major, setting up the chessmen.

"But I know nothing, I, her mother—"

The major rested one hand on the chess board and the other on the arm of the bench. Turning his whole body toward the doctor's wife, he said, striking the board with his castle:

"I never approved of the plan to open a school because Magda is too young to be a headmistress. In the second place, they will not pay her as she deserves, they will leave her in the end, and she will have squandered her energies within a very few years. And what then? Nothing then! So let her go to Warsaw when she wants to work, which is to her credit. Let her meet the world, not just this hencoop, Iksinow. She may find a decent man there. And in a year or two, when I go to my eternal furlough, she will have four thousand rubles, and maybe a bit more. With that money and that experience, she can establish a school if she likes, but with sound underpinnings."

"You see, mama, the major orders me to go to Warsaw," Magda said.

“Embrace the major! Show your gratitude!” the vicar ordered, giving Magda a push.

“That will do!” said the major. “When I hug her I do it without your permission, sir. And there is nothing to thank me for, for I certainly will not take the money with me to my grave.”

“I do not know that it is proper for me to accept such a gift,” said Magda, looking troubled.

The old man rose from the bench with his pipe in his teeth. His bloodshot eyes flashed. Holding his side, he began to curve his body like a ballerina and mimic Magda in a squeaky voice:

“Tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk! She cannot accept gifts! And you, you chit, do you take it on yourself to rebuke me? If you want to repay me, then when you hear that they have laid me out, offer a prayer for my soul, at all events,” he said gently, adding in a whisper, “Perhaps there really is a soul.”

“So!” the vicar burst out, angrily pushing the chess board away. “I do not play with people who say there is no soul!”

“I said perhaps there is!” the major shouted, beating the table with his fist.

“Well, that is something else again,” replied the vicar, mollified. “Make your move, sir ... No, today I make the first move.”

When the game had begun, Miss Cecylia made a sign to Magda and both women slipped quietly away toward the far end of the garden.

“Good heavens!” whispered Miss Cecylia, looking in every direction and clapping her hands to her head. “Good heavens! What is happening to me? But I have never seen such a man!”

“Are you speaking of the major?” Magda asked.

“Of course! Whom else could I be speaking of at this moment? You know,” she added suddenly, “let us speak confidentially—”

“Oh, good!” Magda answered.

They kissed each other, and Cecylia, blushing, chattered away with gleaming eyes:

“What a good man! No, he is an angel. No, he cannot really be an angel with a pipe like that, but what a noble man! Yet so uncouth along with it! If he had spoken to me as he did to Mr. Mientlewicz—good heavens!”

The two women saw the doctor’s wife and Mientlewicz approaching. Under the pretext of a sore throat, Mientlewicz had tied a handkerchief around his florid neck.

At that sight Cecylia lowered her long eyelashes and Magda barely restrained herself from a new outburst of merriment. Fortunately she was able to turn her attention to what Mientlewicz was saying.

“The major was right when he called Iksinow a hencoop!” he exclaimed. “Soon everyone will be leaving. Krukowski has gone away. The magistrate’s family are going to move to Warsaw. And I will not dillydally here, where I have no field for my talents. I am beginning to lose confidence in Eisenman.”

In the summer house a cry went up: the vicar had checkmated the major, and the major was showing that he had no imagination about chess. The match broke off on the next-to-last move, for the major was not at all willing to admit that he was checkmated, which he would not have been if his queen had positioned herself here, if his knight had stood there, and his castle somewhere else.

“Yes,” answered the vicar, “and if your king could walk out to the garden when he had no place on the board.”

The two old men, still quarreling, began to make their way toward their homes. Mientlewicz and the women approached the summer house.

“Well, thank you, madam, for the tea. It was first-rate,” the major said to Mrs. Brzeska. “And you, little one,” he added, kissing Magda on the head, “get away from here. In this hole young ladies grow old—and men grow stupid,” he finished, glancing at Mientlewicz.

“I am going to leave, too,” Mientlewicz retorted. “I will open a business in Warsaw.”

“Only first buy yourself another shirt, because that one is going to fall off you sometime,” remarked the major.

Chapter XXIV. Going Away

Several days later there was another tea in the Brzeskis' garden, with the vicar, the major and Mientlewicz in attendance. The vicar had just reached for the sugar when the cook came out, calling:

"Telegram! Telegram for the young lady!"

And throwing the message onto the table, she looked at Magda in alarm.

The doctor raised his head. His wife appeared disconcerted. Magda turned pale and the vicar, his hand still outstretched for the sugar bowl, repeated:

"Telegram? What could it be?"

"Well, what is so extraordinary about it?" remarked Mientlewicz, who was more familiar with telegrams than other Iksinovians. But his face showed his suspense.

"Telegram? For Magda?" the vicar muttered in a worried tone.

"Perhaps Zdzislaw is sick?" whispered Mrs. Brzeska.

Only the major, who had become acquainted with danger on the battlefield, did not lose his *sang froid* at such a singular occurrence as the arrival of a telegram in Iksinow. So all eyes were on him, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief when the unruffled old man took the message from the table, tore it open with his characteristic roughness and, holding the paper at arm's length, began to spell out:

"If you accept the position come to me Sunday cost of travel reimbursed answer paid mal-i-now-ska."

"What is there in that that does not make sense?" the major said.

"Indeed," Magda said, looking at the paper over his shoulder, "I must telegraph Miss Malinowska immediately and go to Warsaw on Saturday."

"You will not see Zosia," whispered her mother.

"What? Didn't I say it was something bad?" moaned the cook, raising her apron to her eyes.

"Read it again," said the doctor, confused. "Perhaps it does not mean that..."

"Yes, it does, papa," replied Magda. "The will of God!"

"Excellently said!" was the vicar's comment. "It is always necessary to accept the will of God."

"But perhaps Miss Magda does not want to accept that position. In that case she would not need to go," Mientlewicz put in.

The major looked at him with bloodshot eyes and the young man shifted on the bench.

“Mientlewicz! Mientlewicz!” said the major, wagging a gigantic finger in his direction. “Mientlewicz ... I know what your stake is in this!”

“Sir, I give you my word of honor!” Mientlewicz said defensively.

“I know!” the major insisted. “But do you know what would come of that? The idea—oh!”

And he thumbed his nose so close to Mientlewicz’s face that Magda’s silent admirer nearly bent over backward on the bench.

“What would come of it, then?” the doctor’s wife inquired, preoccupied with her own thoughts.

“Never mind,” said the major.

“Magda is not going!” the poor mother cried joyfully, seizing the major’s hand.

“Why is she not going?” the old man asked in amazement. “She is going on Saturday.”

“Because you said that she is not,” answered the doctor’s wife.

“Eh! I was saying to Mientlewicz ...”

“But I give you my word of honor,” Mientlewicz vowed, flushing to the top of his forehead.

“On Saturday morning Magda will make her confession,” said the vicar. “Then there will be a votive mass, and she will take holy communion.”

“Good heavens! Good heavens! She is going to leave!” wailed the doctor’s wife. “The holidays are not over yet! She ought to see her sister.”

“The greatest obligation is to attend to what gives you your living!” roared the major, striking the table. “And do not go into a whining fit for no reason, madam, or you will make a crybaby out of the girl. When something has to be, it has to be!”

“Of course,” whispered the doctor.

Magda sat by her mother and put her arms around her neck.

“Mama, dear, you know—I am quite content. Being here is like being in heaven to me, but you know, mama, I have been longing for work. Anyway, I will be very well off with that family. I will be quite happy there. Miss Malinowska is the best of women. It is a pity that you do not know her.”

But because her mother wept, Magda began to weep as well, resting her head on her mother’s shoulder. The vicar had tears in his eyes; the doctor bit his cheap cigar. Mientlewicz tilted his face toward the table, and in the kitchen the cook lamented at the top of her voice.

The major, who missed none of this, rose from the bench and said, “I will be right back.” He moved toward the far end of the garden, pulling a foulard handkerchief from his pocket.

Magda felt a spasm of pain that rose to her head, tightened her lips, squeezed her throat and slowly moved close to her heart. But, wishing to calm her mother, she said:

“Well, why am I bleating like a sheep? Isn’t it ridiculous? Just listen to me. Imagine, mama and papa, that you have not one but two sons. Zdzislaw has already taken a position, and I, the younger son, am just now going to work to support myself. Mercy on us! How sinful we are to be sad at such a moment! How many people have no work and are looking for it without success? They would give years of their lives for any employment, and they do not have it, while I am so fortunate as to have gotten a position with no difficulty—and here I am crying, and mama, too! Isn’t it true, vicar, that it is a sin? I am quite serious, mama.”

“You speak as a Christian,” the vicar remarked.

“Oh, it is all ceremonial female fussiness,” said the major, returning to the summer house with a purplish nose. “Instead of thanking God for His goodness and giving the girl an earful about how to manage her pupils, you will bellow, madam, as if your finger were being chopped off. Soon you’ll go into a crying jag when your husband goes to visit the sick in the country.”

“Only the priest goes with God to visit the sick out of charity. The doctor goes to his patient,” the vicar interrupted.

“Teach paupers the responses in the liturgy, sir; don’t teach me how to speak!” the major fired back testily, brandishing his pipe.

“Magda, bring the chess set,” said the doctor.

“I will help you!” Mientlewicz spoke up.

“Mientlewicz—sit here with me!” shouted the major, knocking on the bench with his pipe. “He will help her carry out the chess set! Did you ever hear of such a thing? Sometime I will cut off such a piece of you that you will lose your taste for women at once.”

“What are you going to cut off?” said the vicar. “See here, he is offended when you correct what he says!”

“Numskull in a cassock!” the major growled, scattering the chessmen. But then he was silent because he noticed that the vicar was looking as though he were going to go into a huff and refuse to play.

The rest of the evening did not pass as cheerfully as usual. The vicar made an error in the game, and the major did not make a scene. He only muttered quietly to himself, which was a bad sign. Mientlewicz, with bleary eyes, told the doctor in an undertone that he found no field for his abilities in Iksinow; the doctor listened, sucking on his cigar, which had gone out. His eyes wandered to the ceiling of the summer house with its thick covering of leaves. Finally Magda began to pace around the garden. Then, still feeling out of humor, she decided to go for a walk beyond the town.

"I will go to the cemetery," she said to herself, "and say goodbye to grandmother."

She picked some flowers in the garden, made two bouquets, slipped out and walked along the side streets, then took a path through a field.

Evening was coming on. The shouts of the herdsmen driving the cattle to town echoed on the fallow fields. Carts full of sheaves rolled along the highway between the black trunks of lime trees. From time to time a grasshopper jumped out of Magda's way, or an old woman carrying a large bundle of herbs greeted her with the words, "May Jesus Christ be praised!"

As she reached the cemetery, Magda remembered that it had usually been just at this spot that Cynadrowski had jumped over the wall when he was about to see Eufemia, and when he parted from her.

"Poor man!" she said to herself, turning in at the cemetery gate. "I must say a prayer for him. We have both forgotten about him, and perhaps he needs prayer more than anyone," she added, thinking a little bitterly of Eufemia.

The plot reserved for suicides was in the corner of the cemetery, set off by juniper bushes, blackthorn and wild roses. Only a very few were buried there: a cooper who had taken to drink, a maid who had conceived a child out of wedlock, and Cynadrowski. The first grave had sunk a little, tall grass was growing on the second, and the third, by a wall, was freshly dug.

All at once Magda stood still, amazed. Someone had remembered Cynadrowski; that was clear from the way the grave was tended. An unknown hand had surrounded it with a little partition of twigs, set out several potted plants, and strewn the ground with fresh flowers every day without fail. It was even possible to distinguish yesterday's flowers from the previous day's, and those from the ones that had lost all their color.

Magda's eyes brimmed with tears.

"How wicked I am," she thought, "and how admirable Femcia is! For of course it is only Femcia who has a place in her memory for this grave."

She threw a few flowers from her bouquet onto it, knelt, and prayed. Then she returned to her grandmother's grave, prayed for the soul of her beloved benefactress, and with redoubled zeal began to beautify her resting place.

"Good, noble Femcia!" she thought. "And everyone judged her so harshly!"

A moment before sunset the gate made a scraping sound and someone entered the cemetery. Her heart racing, Magda hid between the trees. She had a premonition that Eufemia was coming in, and she did not want it to be apparent that she knew her secret.

As it happened, there was a quiet rustling sound and a woman in dark clothing came down the side path by the cemetery wall. Magda could not see her clearly for the branches, but she was certain that it was Eufemia, because she went straight to the corner where the suicides lay.

“How she must have changed, poor thing,” Magda thought, “since even her movements are different ... so diffident and refined. Oh, I am shameful! I ought to approach her first.”

The change must indeed have been great, for it seemed to Magda that Eufemia had even grown taller and thinner. Seized with curiosity, she moved warily forward.

The lady in the dark costume drew near Cynadrowski’s grave. She placed a little garland on it, then bent over and began to tidy it up.

“Femcia? This is not Femcia,” Magda said to herself, watching closely. Suddenly she called:

“Miss—is that you, Cecylia?”

She ran up to the frightened, embarrassed woman and took her in her arms.

“So it was you who have been thinking of this poor man? I did not guess at once that it was you, dear, precious one!”

“Oh, good heavens! Dear Magda,” Cecylia said, as if she needed to explain her actions, “such a small service for the dead. Indeed, we must make room in our thoughts for the dead who are not our own kin so that others will do the same for our dead. But I ask you, I adjure you,” she added, folding her hands, “not a word to anyone. It would give me great pain if anyone found out.”

Magda helped Cecylia enclose the plot with twigs and said a prayer with her. Then the two women left the cemetery.

“Will you go tomorrow, then?” Cecylia asked.

“I must.”

“It will be sad for me,” Cecylia said, “and even sadder because I only just met you. But it is hard—in any case, it is better for you to leave here. Here women grow old, as the major said—that worthy man,” she added with a smile. “And people... certainly people turn to stone. How awful life is in small towns!”

“Move to Warsaw, then.”

“What for? Who would receive me there? I have no ties, and above all I have so retired from life that the very sight of strangers makes me apprehensive. Finally, there are children here who need to learn. I will stay with them, and for recreation I will come here,” added Cecylia, pointing to the cemetery.

“Did you know Cynadrowski?”

“No. But now I am fond of him, very fond. It is clear that he was abandoned—that is, that he was fated to live on the margin of society, as I do. Anyway,” she added in a voice full of regret, “I also have a grave that no one remembers. Even I myself do not know where it is. For years I have been tormented by not knowing. Now I imagine that that is it.”

They were approaching the town. Cecylia was silent, but slowly recovered her self-possession. Then she said in her soft voice:

“Magda... pardon me, but I will say goodbye to you today. I would not dare to in front of people.”

They embraced.

“Remember me, if you wish,” Cecylia said. “And write a line now and then... though I know you will find other friends there.”

“None of them will be like you, so good, so noble,” Magda whispered.

“You will see how ridiculous I will appear to you when you are in Warsaw. But I will never forget you.”

She pressed Magda’s hand and walked away toward the apothecary’s home. Magda was alone, haunted by that strange parting.

At home her mother was busy seeing to the pressing of linen and the packing of Magda’s trunk. Magda withdrew to her room, where her father soon appeared. He sat on the sofa, lit his pipe and said:

“What now? At this time tomorrow, will you be on the train?”

The question took Magda’s breath away. She sat beside her father, took his hand, looked him in the eye and asked:

“Papa, am I doing badly, going away and leaving you and mother?”

“Well, well, this is no time for sentimentalizing,” her father answered, smiling and stroking her hair. “Your leaving—certainly that will be painful for us and for you, but there is no need to exaggerate these feelings. Look at me... I do not intend to let it sadden me, first, because I know that it is necessary for your happiness, and secondly because I am sure that within a year, or a year and a half, you will return and we will be together.”

“Oh, how I should like to return here!”

“You will return, dear. Your school is not a bad idea. Iksinow could support a school, even a school with four or five grades, provided someone was serious about the project. The major just told me that he is ready to give you a thousand rubles, or two thousand, for a school if you will find yourself teachers in Warsaw and, above all, get some practical experience with the administrative side of the business.”

“The major said that?” Magda cried joyfully.

“Yes, indeed, and he will tell you himself. So you see, your departure is not an emigration, but a temporary relocation for an apprenticeship. That is why I am not at all grieved, and your mother, though she is crying floods, is calmer. In a year, a year and a half, we will be together again, and then you will not leave us, darling,” added her father, holding her close.

Magda dabbed furtively at her eyes as the doctor continued:

“Now, my child, I will give you one, only one, piece of advice. Try to remember it. You know that cherry tree of ours that leans through the fence and over the street. Some cheeky rascal strips away not only the ripe and unripe

fruit, but even the flowers, leaves and branches. Hear me, dear: the same thing threatens you.”

“Me, papa?”

“Yes. People treat every person this way: they take one’s money, time, and labor, they take one’s understanding, heart, beauty, even one’s good name. They take everything if one’s own sense of self-interest does not defend one. That is why a reasonable sense of self-interest is a benevolent force: a fence for the cherry tree.”

“Self-interest?”

“Exactly that. You do not have the sense of self-interest; you are handicapped in that respect, so I do not appeal to your self-interest. But, my child,” he said, pressing her head to his shoulder, “do not allow yourself to be robbed and exploited. Do not allow it, not only for your own sake, but for other people’s. Sacrifice yourself, for that is in your nature, but sacrifice yourself for good people; so that you will have more to offer good people, protect yourself from those who are not good. Bear this in mind so the world will not flay you and break you like the street urchins do our cherry tree.”

“And how can I distinguish bad people from good?” Magda asked meditatively.

“That, you see, is a good question which I will answer briefly. Find your friends among those who have more work than profits and reputation. Those are useful people to whom it is worth while to devote yourself, and only they will understand you. But avoid people who have income from unknown sources and notoriety for unknown reasons.”

“And if someone inherits a fortune?” Magda broke in anxiously, thinking of the Solskis.

“The character of a person is not determined by what he inherits, only by what he does and has done. A person who does nothing is a parasite, and the more he spends, the more harmful he is.”

Still resting her head on his shoulder, she mused.

“Papa,” she said after a while, “you speak entirely differently than everyone else. Everyone seeks relationships with people who are wealthy and famous.”

“And you must seek people who work, who give more to the world than they take from it. Humankind moves through various phases: struggle, discovery, persecution, madness, plagues. In the period we are now witnessing, everything is stunted, everything is on a petty scale, but however that may be, there is too care for appearances, too much pursuit of superficial happiness! Hear what I tell you: be wary of that trend. Anyone who trusts it may find disgrace, and lose his soul.”

Lighting his pipe, which had gone out, the doctor went on speaking:

“Consider the earthworm. There is no more downtrodden creature, yet earthworms do more for civilization than all the conquerors of the world. In lowliness and silence they create fertile land. For them there is no fame or profit, but their usefulness is beyond measure.”

“And should I be like that?” Magda demanded, looking at her father with flashing eyes.

“You are already like that, and that is why I advise you: look for companions of your own sort. Twice you have made new things happen in Iksinow: when you organized the concert, and again when you aroused people’s interest in the establishment of a school. And what did you get from it? Nothing—a little hostility and gossip. But a pair of itinerant actors got some income, Miss Cecylia will have several pupils, and the teacher will get a better salary because you called the town’s attention to his poverty. Well, give your father a hug, and... no tears! In a year, a year and a half, we will see each other.”

The next morning, as Magda was returning home after the mass the vicar had conducted in her honor, Krukowski’s sister stopped her.

“Pardon me, Magda,” she said, “for coming a little late to the service for you. But I have come to show you and everyone that I love you and consider you the most deserving of young women.”

Then she leaned on Magda’s arm, steered her to the middle of the town square, and there—in the presence of two cart drivers, a policeman and four Jews—kissed her on her forehead, and with an insistence that would allow no refusal handed her a small box.

“Jewels, I could have sworn!” said the notary’s assistant, walking away from the square.

“If not diamonds,” added the apothecary.

And everyone from the church began nodding their heads and waving their hats in applause at the former paralytic’s beautiful action, while she took her leave of the Brzeskis and the major and returned to her house puffed up like a turkey with satisfaction, supporting herself with her cane.

“Excellent woman!” remarked the delighted apothecary. “Not a day goes by that I do not get at least a ruble out of her.”

Magda could never remember exactly how her last few hours under her parents’ roof passed. She knew that she drank coffee, then ate beefsteak and washed it down with wine the major had brought, and that afterward her head swam a little. Then her mother said something about linen and the wardrobe and, crying, handed her a long list of belongings to be claimed at the railroad stations.

Next the cart came for her things. Taking advantage of its arrival, a grieved Mientlewicz said something to Magda—about his great capabilities, it seemed—and took his oath about something: that he would soon move to Warsaw, no doubt.

Perhaps he would have spoken longer and vowed to do other things if it had not been for the red-eyed major, who grabbed Magda by the hand, pulled her into the next room and said roughly:

“Your father told you that you can open a school, of course, when you have had time to take a look at the world.”

“He told me. Thank you—thank you very much, major...”

“Nonsense, not worth a pipe of tobacco!” the major burst out abruptly. “So pay attention: after my death you will have four thousand rubles. Quiet! And in a year I can lend you a thousand rubles or two at interest. Understand?”

“But, sir...”

“Stuff it! And now, tuck this away,” he said, handing her a heavy purse of elk hide. “Quiet! If you could accept a bracelet from that lunatic, you can take a couple of gold pieces from me. But only for a rainy day. Remember!”

“But can I...”

“Psst! Not a word. You may accept them from me as from—an older brother.”

In spite of her heavy heart Magda laughed at that and kissed the major’s hand.

Her mother hurried into the room.

“The administrator’s wife is arriving,” she called.

The county administrator’s carriage rolled up in front of the porch. Someone put Magda’s wraps on, and then Magda clung to her mother and father, feeling a stream of tears—her own and theirs—on her face.

A crowd was standing on the street. Someone kissed her hand again and again. Some men helped her into the carriage and threw bouquets in after her. Then the doors clicked shut and the carriage began to move.

“Be well! Write! Do not forget!” came the voices from the porch.

“God bless you!” called an unknown voice from under the fence.

The carriage lurched and rolled... lurched and rolled... rolled without end. Magda took her wet handkerchief from her eyes, apologized to the county administrator’s wife for causing her inconvenience, and turned her head. She could see only the tower of the church in Iksinow gleaming in the sun.

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