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EMANCIPATED WOMEN
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Translated by Stephanie Kraft

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

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Boleslaw Prus

EMANCIPATED WOMEN

(Emancypantki, 1894)

Book II

Volume 1



Chapter I. Return

Miss Magdalena, time to wake up!”

Magda heard these words together with the rattle of the train, the clanging of chains and the rapid panting of the locomotive. But, lulled by the swaying motion of the car in which she rode, she could not open her eyes just yet.

Then there was a clatter at the window and a refreshing current of air blew in. She rubbed her eyes, sighing.

As her torpor cleared away, Magda became aware of where she was. She was sitting in the corner of a first-class compartment, and opposite her her companion, the county administrator’s wife, was inspecting herself in a small mirror, washing her face with cologne and smoothing her hair. Outside the train it was a fine, sunny morning.

“Good morning, ma’am...”

“Good morning, good morning, dear Miss Magdalena. How well you slept! After a bath and after a cry one always sleeps well.”

“Is it still a long way to Warsaw?” Magda inquired.

“It is the next stop.”

Magda stepped unsteadily to the window and looked out.

Mown fields; on the stubble, dewdrops sparkled with light that quickly died. The trees that flew back behind the train were an unhealthy green, as if autumn had set in earlier in this place than in Iksinow. Now and then a cottage surrounded by a picket fence gleamed white between the fields. A few tall chimneys could be seen in the distance.

And at the very edge of the horizon sprawled a gigantic gray cloud divided into three smoky layers. The lowest lay across the banks of the Vistula; the middle one seemed to rest on the slopes above the river; and the highest one hovered over the rooftops and spires of Warsaw, which looked like a mysterious range of toothed hills with rocks leaping out here and there.

“It is beautiful air you have in this Warsaw,” remarked Magda’s companion. “I am sure that within two days I will have black lungs. Heavens! How can you live here?”

“But, you see, ma’am, that the closer we come, the more the smoke disperses. Oh! The tower of the Evangelical Church... on the left, Holy Cross... on the right the Church of the Virgin Mary... clearer every second!”

“Thank you, Lord, for such clarity! I would die here in a year. You must return to Iksinow at the beginning of the next vacation. There! They are already sounding the whistle. In a moment we will get off. I will take you wherever you need to go.”

Having spoken, the lady began hurriedly removing her bags, boxes and parasols from the baggage rack. The train slowed. The chatter of passengers could be heard. The conductors opened the doors.

“Warsaw...”

“You, there! A comfortable cab!” called Magda’s companion, handing a porter a stack of odds and ends.

Over the porter’s shoulder Magda spied a small, slender woman in a dark gown. Her worried face seemed familiar.

“Magda!” the worried-looking person exclaimed, stretching out her hands.

“Zaneta!” Magda answered. “What are you doing here?”

“I have come for you.”

“How did you know I was coming back?”

“You telegraphed Miss Malinowska and she sent me here as her proxy.”

The ladies fell so violently into each other’s embraces that they became one solid object, blocking the foot traffic on the platform. A small cart bumped into them, a conductor nudged them, and finally the porter came over and reluctantly separated them with the county administrator’s wife’s parasol.

“So I am no longer needed?” said that lady, and then she, too, seized Magda in an embrace.

“Goodbye, then, Miss Magdalena, but only until the end of next June at the latest. I say goodbye not only for myself but for the whole town, and for my husband, whose head you also turned. Oh! We will have a row in Iksinow.”

The porter took Magda’s things and she and Zaneta went into the passengers’ hall.

“Heavens! How lovely you look, Magda,” said Zaneta. “And someone spread a rumor here that you died in April! From April to August you had a holiday. I congratulate you! You must have made the most of it, did you not?”

“I did not even see my little sister,” Magda said. “What news of you?”

“None. The school is so crowded that Miss Malinowska does not want to accept new pupils. But what changes! In the apartments that were Ada Solska’s and Mrs. Latter’s there are bedrooms now. Miss Malinowska’s mother is the housekeeper, and Miss Malinowska herself has only one room besides the salon for receiving visitors. Do you hear? The headmistress—in one room!”

“She must have less income than Mrs. Latter.”

“I doubt it,” replied Miss Zaneta. “Though, imagine! She charges fifty rubles a year less for the day students and a hundred less for the boarding students, she has raised our wages, and the food is better. Much better!”

“That is excellent.”

Miss Zaneta sighed.

“But the restrictions are terrible. The boarding students are not allowed to go out for visits. We may only receive guests in the general drawing room. At nine in the evening everyone must be in. This would be no place for Joanna. It is a convent!”

Magda’s baggage was brought and the women got into a cab.

“How these city cabs lurch! I shall go flying out,” Magda exclaimed. “The dust! The dirty air!”

“And it seems to me that the air is wonderful today,” smiled Zaneta. “I have not been in the country for so long that I probably would not be able to breathe there,” she added pensively.

“Is Miss Howard at the school?” Magda inquired.

“What are you saying? Miss Malinowska has no room for radicals.”

“The voices! The noise! Unbearable Warsaw! And have you heard nothing of the Solskis, or of—Helena Norska?” asked Magda, blushing.

“They are all still abroad, but they will return before long,” said Zaneta. “Ada wants to earn a doctorate in natural science, and Helena is reportedly engaged to her brother. But they are constantly breaking it off by mutual consent. Helena is going to be as demanding as Mrs. Latter, and Solski is jealous. I understand none of it... Please turn in at the gate and drive into the courtyard!” she called to the cabman.

A few minutes later Magda, her heart pounding, was walking up the front stairs she knew so well. Inside the school she was struck by the silence in the corridors and the absence of boarding students, who in the past had always been milling through the halls.

“Is the headmistress in her apartment?” Zaneta asked a grizzled man who stood near the stairs, wearing a black coat fastened at the neck and holding himself erect as a soldier.

“The headmistress...” he responded, then suddenly went silent. The door opened and a man, bowing profusely, moved backward out of a room from the depths of which Miss Malinowska’s mild voice could be heard.

“For from the moment a pupil enters the school, she may not go out to town...”

“There are no exceptions?” asked the gentleman, still bowing.

“None.”

The man walked quickly down the stairs, leaving Magda in full view of Miss Malinowska. She wore the same dark gown, she had the same serene face, as half a year ago. But her beautiful eyes had taken on the color of steel.

“Ah! It is Miss Brzeska!” she said, and kissed Magdalena on the forehead. “Can you go with me at five o’clock to your young ladies?”

“Yes, indeed, ma’am.”

“Miss Zaneta, see to Miss Brzeska.”

“May I greet my old students?” Magda asked diffidently.

“Yes, indeed. Piotr, some breakfast for Miss Brzeska. Then you may send the letter I gave you this morning.”

“To Mrs. Korkowicz,” interposed the upright gentleman.

“In this letter I am informing Mrs. Korkowicz that you have arrived, and that we will be with her at five,” Miss Malinowska said to Magda, and went upstairs.

Stunned, Magda looked at Zaneta. Seeing that the headmistress had disappeared into the corridor on the floor above, Zaneta nodded and whispered:

“Yes! You see?”

Now another door opened ever so slightly, and in the narrow aperture a little slip of a girl appeared. She gave a sign with her hands and whispered, “Pst! Pst! Miss Magdalena!”

Magda and Zaneta went into a spacious room where a group of girls, large and small, had gathered.

“The headmistress says that you may greet Miss Magdalena,” Zaneta said.

The girls descended on Magda from every side, kissing her and jostling for her attention.

“We saw you through the window when you drove up.” “Have you come to stay with us?”... “No, with the Korkowicz girls.”... “Oh, if you knew how strict they are with us!” “Do you know, miss, that Zosia Piasecka died in July?”

“I have perfect grades and got the first prize,” a beautiful brunette with velvety eyes said in a voice louder than the others.

“My Malwina, do not praise yourself so.”

“And, my Kocia, do not interfere. After all, I was Miss Magdalena’s pupil, so it will please her to learn that I am the cleverest in the whole school.”

“Do you know, miss, that poor Mania Lewinska never finished the sixth form?”

“Ah, Labeledzka, how are you?” Magda exclaimed. “Why didn’t she finish?”

“She has to stay with her uncle Mielnicki. You remember, miss: the very portly gentleman. He was paralyzed after Mrs. Latter’s death, and Mania nurses him.”

“Miss has forgotten about me. And I so long for miss!”

“Oh, no, Zofia!”

“I have so much to tell you. Come over here with me.”

She led Magda to the window and began to whisper:

“If you see him... for he will return before long...”

“Who, Zofia?”

“Oh, that man... Kazimierz Norski...”

“And you still think of him? In sixth form?” said Magda, shocked.

“I was just going to say that I do not think of him at all. A hundred times over, a thousand times, I prefer Mr. Romanowicz. Ah, miss, what a beautiful beard he grew over the holidays!”

“You are a child, Zofia!”

“Oh, not at all, for I can see when someone is contemptible. Let him marry that Mongol—”

“Let who marry whom?” Magda asked, turning pale.

“Let Kazimierz marry Ada Solska,” Zofia answered.

“Who has told you such a foolish thing?”

“No one has told me because no one knows, but... I have a premonition in my heart. Oh, they are not staying in Zürich for nothing.”

There was a knock at the door. The girls scurried away like sparrows before a hawk. A maid appeared and informed Magda that her breakfast was ready.

In the headmistress’s room Magda found herself face to face with a slender, white-haired but very active old lady.

“I am the hostess here,” the elderly woman said cheerfully, “and in my daughter’s name I invite Miss...”

Moved by a resemblance between the old lady and Mrs. Brzeska, Magda kissed her hand.

“Please be seated. I apologize, but I do not remember your name.”

“Magdalena.”

“Please be seated, Miss Magdalena. I will pour you some coffee, for you must be tired. And I will butter a roll for you. I know just how—”

“Thank you very much, but... I do not eat it with butter,” whispered Magda, who wanted to put her benefactresses to as little expense as possible.

“You do not want butter?” the housekeeper marveled. “Heaven forbid that Felunia should find out about this! She says that bread without butter is worth nothing. Everyone must eat butter here.”

So Magda ate her roll with butter, and felt a wordless longing in her heart. At her parents’ home, during teatime in the summer house, everyone had also eaten buttered rolls with coffee. What was the major doing now? The vicar? Her mother and father? Oh, how hard it was to leave home!

The old lady, perhaps divining her visitor’s wistfulness, remarked:

“Perhaps you will stay in Warsaw for several years, as we are doing? Felunia has not been to the country for quite a long time.”

“Oh, no, ma’am!” Magda protested. “I will return home, perhaps in a year, because I intend to open a school,” she added quietly.

“In Warsaw?” the elderly woman asked quickly, looking at Magda apprehensively.

“Oh, no. In Iksinow.”

“Iksinow ... Iksinow? We have no pupils from Iksinow. Ha! Perhaps this is a good thing. You might send us young ladies who are ready for the upper grades.”

“Naturally, I would only send them here,” Magda replied. The old woman appeared at ease again.

The door between this room and the adjoining salon was ajar. The headmistress entered the salon, followed by another lady.

“I have decided to pay the four hundred rubles,” the woman said. “It is difficult to know what to do...”

“I have no place for your daughter. That place was filled yesterday,” the headmistress responded.

There was a moment of silence.

“How can that be? Indeed... indeed, there is room for one more bed in such ample quarters,” the lady faltered.

“No, madam. There is a direct correlation here between the number of pupils and the size of the living area. Girls must have air or they will be anemic, and I will not have anemia.”

The lady rose with a clear intention of leaving and said in an irritated tone:

“Mrs. Latter was never so uncompromising. Good day.”

“And it went very badly with her. Good day,” the headmistress retorted, escorting the woman out to the hall.

Magda was astonished at Miss Malinowska’s resoluteness and still more at her mother’s expressions. During the conversation in the salon the elderly woman’s face registered anxiety, pride, anger and delight by turns.

“She has always been like that. Felunia!” said the mother, folding her hands and shaking her head to emphasize the depth of her feelings. “What an exceptional woman! Is it not so, Miss—I beg your pardon—”

“Magdalena,” Magda prompted.

“Yes, Miss—Magdalena—I beg your pardon. But is it not the case that Felunia is an extraordinary woman? I, at least, never met such another in the world.”

The headmistress appeared on the threshold.

“What now, mama?” she said. “Does the Gniewosz girl’s linen match with the required list?”

“She has plenty of linen,” the older woman replied, “but she has not made out a list.”

“As usual! She will not go for a walk today; instead she will go over her linen with you and make a list, which she will give her father to sign when he visits her. This everlasting muddle!”

Then Miss Malinowska turned her calm eyes toward Magda.

“Now, then, Miss Magdalena. Your things are in Ada Solska’s former room, which you may occupy until five o’clock. You are free until then.”

Magda thanked the elderly lady for breakfast and went to Ada’s old room. There she found her trunk and box, a huge basin of water and a snowy white towel—but not a single soul. Obviously everyone was busy. No one thought of keeping her company.

Brr! How chilly it was here! The clatter of the train still rang in Magda’s ears, the soot from the smoking locomotive was still on her, and she still could not accustom herself to the thought that she was in Warsaw.

Standing in the center of the room, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine that she had still not left Iksinow. Outside the door she could hear a rustling; perhaps her mother was walking by? Someone cleared his throat; it was surely her father or the major. And what was that? Ah, it was the shrill sound of a barrel organ!

How she wanted to cling to someone at that moment, to kiss and be kissed! If someone would at least speak to her, would listen as she told how good they had been to her at home, and how she missed them now! Oh, for one word of comfort, and there was none, none! People hurried quietly, wordlessly, through the hall; now and then a driver standing by the stairs hemmed or coughed; sultry air streamed through the open casement, and from a distance away down the next street came the strains of the barrel organ.

“Oh, my room, my garden, my fields! Even our cemetery is not as dreary as this building. Even the grave of that poor man who killed himself is not as empty as this room,” thought Magda, barely restraining herself from bursting into tears.

If only some memento of Ada remained in the room! But there was nothing. Even the wallpaper had been torn away and the walls painted a steely color that reminded her of Miss Malinowska’s tranquil eyes.

But as Magda was changing her clothes, Zaneta came in.

“Ah, at last!” cried Magda, stretching out her hands to this woman with her perpetually worried air in whom she had never taken a special interest in the past, but who seemed very dear at this moment.

“I have come to say goodbye, for very soon I am going out with a class to the Botanical Garden, and we may not see each other later.”

“You cannot come to me again?” Magda exclaimed sorrowfully.

“I cannot. I am on duty.”

“And may I not go on the walk with you?” Magda asked in the tone of one who begs a favor.

“I do not know,” replied Zaneta, looking more worried than usual. “Ask Miss Malinowska. Perhaps she will allow it.”

“Goodbye, then,” Magda said sadly.

Dreadful as it was to be alone in this pale blue room, she feared still more approaching the headmistress with such a request. She was so busy... and what if she refused, or consented unwillingly?

“Are you ill?” Zaneta asked suddenly. “I will tell someone, and a doctor will come directly.”

“For God’s sake, Zaneta, say nothing! Nothing is the matter with me.”

“But your face looks so strange,” said Zaneta. Slightly shrugging her shoulders, she took her leave.

After her friend left, Magda was alone again with her thoughts, which so unnerved her that she resolved to take a bold step. She left the room and hurried down the corridor on tiptoe, looking around her like a person about to commit a criminal act. In the linen closet she found the headmistress’s mother and said, blushing:

“Please, ma’am, I have some free time; perhaps I could help you with something?”

The old lady was counting linen in the company of a boarding student with reddened eyelids. She raised astonished eyes to Magda.

“Dear Miss—I beg your pardon—Miss Magdalena, what could you help me with? Surely Felunia could sooner find something for you to do. She is in the office.”

And she resumed her tally of the linen, saying to the student:

“Fifteen handkerchiefs. Have you written it, my child?”

“I have written it,” the girl whispered, rubbing her eyes with ink-stained fingers.

“You must write clearly, dear... very clearly...”

Magda left the linen closet and went with great trepidation to the office, where she found Miss Malinowska bent over her desk, writing letters. At the sound of footsteps the headmistress looked around.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Is there something I could help you with?” Magda asked quietly.

Miss Malinowska looked at her keenly, as if she were trying to guess what lay behind Magda’s willingness to be of assistance.

“Well, well!” she said. “My dear, take advantage of the few hours of freedom that remain to you. You will have plenty of work.”

After this dismissal Magda quickly returned to her room, aggrieved and embarrassed. To avoid giving way to desperation, she took all her things out of her trunk—books and copybooks—and began to rearrange them.

This activity, though it required little mental effort, restored her peace of mind. Only today had she learned the difference between her family’s home, where everyone had time to pay her loving attentions, and a strange house, where no one even had a moment to speak to her.

Around three o’clock there was a commotion in the hall. The students had returned from the walk and were going to the afternoon dinner. From the sound of their movements Magda concluded that they were marching in pairs and chatting quietly. At such a moment in Mrs. Latter’s time the hall would have been filled with the sounds of laughter, stamping, running. Today there was none of that!

All at once it occurred to her that no one had invited her to lunch. “They have forgotten about me,” she thought.

The blood rushed to her face, her eyes filled with tears, and she was seized with a frantic desire to go back to Iksinow.

“Home! Home! I don’t want Miss Malinowska or her patronage or above all her hospitality. My mother would not treat a beggar who found himself in her house this way at dinner time. I have ninety rubles in notes and some coins from the major, so I can go back. And in Iksinow, though I would only earn fifteen rubles a month, no one would treat me discourteously.”

So Magda told herself, walking around the room feverishly, but on tiptoe. She was afraid that someone would hear her footsteps and remember that she was there. She wanted them all to forget her, wanted the walls to move apart and release her from this alien place without anyone’s noticing.

“Good heavens! Good heavens! Why did I come here?” she whispered, wringing her hands.

The awfulness of her situation made one sad fact more painful: she wanted to eat.

“I have no proper pride,” she thought despairingly. “How is it possible to be so hungry?”

Then astonishment overcame her: from the floor above she heard movement, laughter, quick footsteps, the tinkle of a piano. It even seemed that a few pairs of girls were dancing.

“What does this mean?” she thought. “So one is allowed to enjoy oneself here?”

At that very instant there was a knock at the door and Miss Malinowska came in, smiling.

“Now it is our turn,” she said. “Would you be so kind...”

She took Magda by the hand and conducted her to her mother’s room, where there was a table set for three and a steaming tureen.

“For goodness’ sake, I never will have any sense!” thought Magda, laughing inwardly at herself.

Despair had left her and appetite now gained the upper hand.

“I can begin to catch my breath,” Miss Malinowska remarked after the boiled beef. “To tell you the truth, sometimes I am tempted to envy you because your school in that place—Iksinow—did not succeed.”

“Oh, I will go back and establish a school, even with only two classes, beginners’ class and first form,” Magda replied, wishing to reassure the housekeeper.

“And two classes will wear you to a frazzle, especially in the beginning. We know something about that, do we not, mama?”

“Oh!” sighed the old lady, clapping both hands to her head. “Why, when you got this school—Christ have mercy! I tell you, miss” she said, turning to Magda, “how many tears I shed, how many sleepless nights I spent in that first quarter! But, oh! Felunia is a woman of iron.”

“Will you let me come to you sometimes and observe your methods of operation?” Magda asked the headmistress timidly.

“Yes, indeed, but—what will you see here, my dear? One must rise very early, go to sleep very late, attend to everything. Most important, one must assign responsibility to each person at the outset, and—no concessions! Mrs. Latter, when she did not dismiss the first boarder who came back late from her parents’ home, was a lost woman. The students’ visits with Miss Howard, Joanna’s walks, began from that moment. Well, enough about that. Do you know Mrs. Korkowicz, for whom you will be working presently?”

“I know her girls. I saw her, I believe, one time.”

“And I do not know her. I hear that they are wealthy people, nouveau riche, and that the lady wants her daughters to be well educated. Let it be understood that if it is not a good situation for you, we will find you other employment, and perhaps a position will even become available here.”

“Oh, that would be best of all!” Magda exclaimed, clasping her hands.

Miss Malinowska nodded.

“Well, now! Ask your colleagues: are they so delighted?” she said. “But it is difficult. I do not want to follow in Mrs. Latter’s footsteps.”

After lunch the headmistress hurried upstairs, where in spite of her presence the students’ noisy chatter did not quiet down. Nevertheless at a quarter to five she came to Magda’s room.

“Dress now,” she said. “We are going. I will send your trunk in an hour.”

When Magda was alone again, anxiety seized her. How would Mrs. Korkowicz receive her? Perhaps her demands would be as rigorous as those of Miss Malinowska's school. Her face was pale and her hands trembled as she put on her wraps. And because she was alone in the room, she crossed herself, knelt, and asked God to bless her at this crucial moment of her life.

Chapter II. A House With a Governess

The headmistress opened the door slightly and called to Magda. They went out to the street, got into a cab and in a few minutes found themselves at the front door of an elegant house. Miss Malinowska pulled the crystal handle of a bell beside the door, which a footman in a navy blue frock coat and red vest opened.

“Who may I say has arrived?” he asked.

“Two ladies who are expected at five o’clock,” answered Miss Malinowska, entering the anteroom.

They had not yet managed to remove their wraps when a short, stout, bustling lady emerged from the drawing room. She wore a silver gown with a long train and a lace collar. She carried a lace handkerchief in one hand and an ivory fan in the other. Two large diamonds glittered in her ears.

“How grateful I am that the headmistress herself takes the trouble!” the lady exclaimed, embracing Miss Malinowska. “I am so happy to meet you at last!” she added, turning to Magda. “Please come to the drawing room, ladies. Jan, tell the young ladies to come here directly. Please, please, sit down, ladies—oh, on these chairs.”

And she pulled up two gilt chairs covered with wine-red silk.

“When will the Solskis arrive?” the lady said next, looking at Magda. “Mr. Solski has an estate next to my husband’s property. Quite an estate! Forests, meadows and extensive grounds. Nine thousand acres, if you can believe it. My husband says that it would be possible to put a sugar factory there very cheaply and get a huge income from it... You correspond regularly with Miss Solska?” she asked Magda again.

“Yes, I have written her a few times,” Magda replied, a little perplexed about how she ought to answer.

“What, a few times!” the lady exclaimed. “Anyone so fortunate as to have a friend in that sphere should be writing to her constantly. I am enchanted with Miss Solska. Such intelligence, modesty, distinction...”

“You know Miss Solska, madam?” Magda inquired, now looking at the portly woman with proper composure.

“I have not personally had the honor, but Mr. Zgierski has told me so much about her that I was even bold enough to ask her for a contribution so a hospital could be established in our district. And do you know what? She replied most courteously and sent a thousand rubles!”

Mrs. Korkowicz’s plump cheeks began to tremble.

“Pardon me,” she said, blinking, “but I cannot recall that incident without emotion. She is the one person, hers is the one house, on which I would first leave my visiting card, I so admire the Solskis! And such close neighbors...”

During a long, rapid monologue by the mistress of the house, Magda beamed with delight. What good fortune to have found a place with a family that so loved her friend! And how noble Mrs. Korkowicz herself must be to appreciate Ada's qualities without knowing her. Miss Malinowska's face, on the other hand, expressed nothing, though it might with equal likelihood have been registering either weariness or derision. She sat erect, gazing with her large eyes in such a way that it was impossible to tell on what exactly she was fixing her attention: on Mrs. Korkowicz, on the various sets of furniture in her drawing room, or on the two enormous carpets on the floor, one dark cherry, the other pale yellow.

When their hostess raised a lace handkerchief to her lips as if to signify that she had finished giving voice to her transport of feeling, Miss Malinowska spoke up:

"What will be Miss Brzeska's duties here?"

The stout lady was caught off guard.

"Duties? None!... To be a companion to my daughters so that under her tutelage they acquire beautiful habits; to help them with their studies; and to supervise them properly. My girls take lessons from professors, from teachers of reputation."

"And what will you pay Miss Brzeska? As I recall..."

"Three hundred rubles a year," said the lady.

"Yes, three hundred rubles," Miss Malinowska repeated. Turning to Magda, who was frightened and embarrassed, she added:

"During the year you will have one free week at Christmas, another at Easter, and a month's holiday in the summer, during which you may visit your parents."

"Of course!" Mrs. Korkowicz affirmed.

"And it is understood that in Mrs. Korkowicz's home you will be treated as an elder daughter."

"Even better! I know, indeed, whom I am taking—"

"And now, madam, you will allow me to see Miss Brzeska's room," the headmistress continued, rising from her gilt chair as coolly as if it were the most commonplace stool.

"Room?" Mrs. Korkowicz echoed. "Ah, yes... a room for Miss Brzeska... This way, please."

Mechanically Magda followed Miss Malinowska while their hostess bustled along in front, guiding them through a long series of small drawing rooms and studies until they found themselves in a room not large, but spotless, with a view of the garden.

"I will order a bed to be brought directly," said the mistress of the house. "My daughters' room is next door, and my son's... on the next floor."

“Oh, see—here you have an ashtray in case at some time you should learn to smoke,” Miss Malinowska said to Magda.

“Oh, that is my son’s ashtray. He likes to take a nap here sometimes... to read after dinner...” rejoined their hostess, a little discomfited. “But he will never come in from now on.”

“Goodbye, madam,” Miss Malinowska said abruptly, pressing the lady’s hand. “Thank you for clarifying the terms of Miss Brzeska’s employment. Magda, be well, work to the best of your ability, and remember that my home is at your disposal at any time—that is, until the arrival of the Solskis, in whose place I serve temporarily as your friend and protector,” she concluded with an emphasis that was not to be missed.

“Ah!” sighed Mrs. Korkowicz, looking at Magda with a face full of motherly affection. “I assure you that the Solskis will be satisfied.”

When, after this tour of inspection, the ladies returned to the drawing room, they found two girls, full-figured, prettily dressed, and perhaps laced too tightly into corsets. Both were blond, with graceful features, but one was frowning as if she were angry, while the other’s eyebrows were raised and her lips parted as if she were frightened.

“May I present my daughters?” said the hostess. “Paulina. Stanislawa.”

As both girls curtsied before Miss Malinowska in the best style, Stanislawa raised her eyebrows still higher and even gloomier creases appeared on Paulina’s forehead.

“Miss Brzeska,” their mother announced.

“Oh, we know each other!” cried Magda, kissing the blushing girls. They responded with friendly smiles, though one was slightly shadowed with bitterness, the other with melancholy.

“Goodbye, madam,” Miss Malinowska said again. “Magda, let us see each other soon. Goodbye, my children.”

Magda accompanied her to the stairs and whispered as she kissed her wrist:

“Heavens, how frightened I am!”

“Put your mind at ease,” replied Miss Malinowska. “I know employers of this sort, and I know what is important to them.”

When Magda returned to the drawing room Mrs. Korkowicz moved away from a cluster of gilt furniture and seated herself in a velvet armchair, motioning Magda to a smaller chair.

“You have had the pleasure of knowing Miss Solska for a long time?” she asked.

At that instant the girls seized Magda’s hands and sang out at once:

“Is Wentzlowna still at the school?”

“Have you heard about Mrs. Latter?”

“Linka! Stasia!” their mother said sternly, striking the arm of her chair. “How many times have I told you that well brought up young ladies should not interrupt their elders? A moment! Oh, I have forgotten what I wanted to ask Miss Brzeska!”

“About the Solskis, of course. Those people whose estate is next to papa’s brewery,” Paulina replied with a pout.

“Linka!” her mother said threateningly. “Linka, your behavior will drive your mother to her grave. Remember, I have only recently returned from Carlsbad.”

“But you are already eating cucumbers with sour cream,” Stasia put in.

“I may eat anything, for I know what I am doing,” the lady retorted. “But well-bred young ladies should not—Linka, you will soon be sitting on Miss Brzeska’s lap!”

“But once I sat there at school.”

“That is not the same.”

A powerful bass voice rang from the anteroom:

“I told you, you fool, not to dress yourself up like a monkey!”

“Madam ordered...” answered another voice.

The door opened and a heavily bearded man walked into the drawing room, still wearing a hat.

“What is this, a masquerade today?” he said loudly. “Why the devil...”

He stopped speaking and removed his hat when he noticed Magda.

“My husband,” the lady said quickly. “Miss Brzeska.”

Korkowicz looked at Magda for moment, and his face—the face of a warm-hearted man—registered surprise.

“Ah—” he said, drawing out the syllable.

“A very dear friend of the Solskis.”

“Eh!” he replied indifferently, then took Magda’s hand in his large palms and added:

“So you are going to teach our girls? Take pity on them! They are silly, but good at heart.”

“My dear Piotr!” his wife said reprovingly, ceremoniously adjusting her lace collar.

“My Tonia, do you want to pull the wool over the teacher’s eyes? She will see through your daughters at once, as tavern keepers spot a beer too newly brewed. What, now, has that loafer come home?”

“I do not understand you, Piotr,” his wife replied, obviously displeased.

“Papa is asking if Bronek has come home,” Paulina offered.

“A fine impression Miss Brzeska will have of our house!” the lady burst out. “You have just walked in and already you have presented yourself as a common person—”

“For a fact, that’s what I have always been,” he replied, opening his arms wide in astonishment. “Miss Brzezinska, or whatever her name is, won’t pay my bills even if I put on airs with her. And that rascal! I didn’t wallop him when he was a nipper, and now he’s walloping me.”

“Whatever are you saying? What is happening to you?” exclaimed Mrs. Korkowicz, seeing that Magda was terrified and both her daughters were laughing.

“What am I saying? That good-for-nothing didn’t pay my note at the bank yesterday, and if it hadn’t been for honest old Switek, the liquidators would have moved against me. That robber!”

“Indeed, Bronek did not lose that money, he was only late!” the indignant mother broke in.

“How eloquently you defend him when he hasn’t a leg to stand on! If he had diverted even a penny of that money, he would be a thief, and that’s what an idler is!” the father shouted.

A purple flush appeared on the lady’s face. She rose from her chair and said breathlessly to Magda:

“Please go with the girls to their room. Oh, my dear! Such a scene in front of someone who does not know us...”

Pale from strain, Magda left the drawing room. But the girls’ humor was undisturbed; when they found themselves in their room, Paulina turned and faced Magda, looked her in the eye, and said:

“Are you afraid of papa, miss? Do you think he is really so terrifying?” she inclined her head archly. “No one here is afraid of him, not even Stasia.”

“You see, miss, this is what papa does,” Stasia chimed in. “If he is cross with mama, he will say nothing to her. He will only flare up at her in front of us. And when Bronek gets into mischief, again papa says nothing to him, but blusters out threats at him to us or to mama.”

“Now he will fuss about all of us to you,” Paulina put in. “Oh, I can tell that he likes you very much.”

“So does mama,” added Stasia. “Mama said yesterday that if you had used your wits and bargained a little, you could have gotten five hundred rubles a year from us.”

“My Stasia... miss will get it,” Paulina cut in.

“Children, why are you letting the cat out of the bag?” Magda exclaimed, smiling. “Whoever heard of such betrayal of family secrets?”

“But do you not belong to our family?” said Stasia, flinging herself on Magda’s neck. “You have been with us for an hour, but it seems like a hundred years to me.”

“I see that you will love that little fawning creature more than me. But I am more attached to you, even though I am not pulling off your gown,” Paulina declared peevishly, nestling into Magda’s arm.

“I will love you both alike, only tell me: what are you studying?” replied Magda, kissing each one in turn, first Stasia and then Linka, next Linka and then Stasia.

“I will tell you!” cried Stasia. “From the time we left the school until the holidays we have studied everything: literature, history, algebra, French—”

“Since the holidays we have studied nothing!” Linka interjected.

“I beg your pardon! I study the piano,” Stasia cut in.

“You are in love with Mr. Stukalski, who berates you for having fingers that were made for peeling potatoes.”

“My Linka! You yourself are infatuated with Mr. Zacieralski, and no sooner are you in love than you think everyone else must be!” Stasia retorted, blushing.

“Quiet, children!” Magda soothed them. “Who is Mr. Zacieralski?”

“A painter. He teaches Linka to paint, and papa asks when the two of them will varnish our floors, for floor polishers cost a great deal.”

“And Mr. Stukalski teaches Stasia to play the piano, and through half of each lesson spreads her fingers out on the keys. Never fear! Mama noticed that not enough music was to be heard during those lessons. I vow that if he were taking one ruble instead of two, this solicitude would end.”

“And I suppose your dear Zacieralski would be teaching you for free!”

“He would do just that,” Linka retorted indignantly, “because I have a feeling for nature.”

“Oh, yes! When he set you to painting a basket of cherries, you ate the cherries, scattered the leaves outside the window, and then fell ill with a headache.”

“Heavens, children!” said Magda the peacemaker. “You would do better to tell me: where do these lessons take place?”

“Piano lessons upstairs, I paint in the orangery, and other lessons are held, or are going to be held, in the lecture room,” Linka explained.

“I will take you there,” Stasia said.

“I will, too.”

They seized Magda's arms and conducted her through a series of studies, corridors and anterooms to a much larger room. It was dark, so Linka, who had found some matches, lighted four gas lamps and said:

"Here is our lecture hall, where the linen was pressed during the holidays."

"I beg your pardon, trunks full of furs sat here," Stasia corrected her.

Magda marveled at the spacious room. In it were several upholstered benches standing before elegant little tables, a big blackboard like the one at the school, and, most impressive of all, a cabinet with taxidermist's specimens and another full of apparatus for the study of physics.

"Why so many benches?" Magda inquired.

"Because mama wants to gather a group of girls here to be lectured by the best professors," said Linka.

"And what are these instruments for? Are you studying physics?"

"Not yet," Stasia said hastily. "But, you see, miss, this is how it was: mama found out that Miss Solska owned such things, so she very soon bought them for us."

"And they sit here unused?"

"Indeed," said Linka, "Bronek was smothering mice in the compressed air machine, so papa smashed its glass cover. He shouted at Bronek and locked the cabinet. But he will give you the key."

Magda spent half an hour looking around the schoolroom before a footman in a frock coat finally informed the ladies that it was tea time.

"I would like to wash my hands," Magda said.

"We will go to your room," Stasia exclaimed. "Linka, turn off the gas, and I will take the matches."

Again they walked through a hall, a dressing room and a lighted corridor. They stopped in front of one door. Stasia lighted a match, Linka pushed at the door, and suddenly Magda smelled a strong aroma of tobacco. At the same instant she heard a man's voice:

"Out of here! What are you doing here?"

A scrape, a stomp, and up from a chaise-longue sprang a heavyset young fellow in an undershirt. Fortunately the match went out.

"What are you doing here, titmice?" the young man asked drowsily.

"What are you doing here? This is Miss Brzeska's room," cried both the girls.

"Go to blazes! he muttered, trying to shut the door, with Linka resisting.

Then another door opened farther down the hall and out of it hurried Mr. and Mrs. Korkowicz, followed by the footman with a candelabrum.

“What are you doing, Bronek?” Mrs. Korkowicz anxiously asked the young man, who was taking refuge behind a cabinet and putting on a coat. “And where is the bed?” she added when the candlelight had illuminated the interior of the room. “Jan, where is the bed for Miss Brzeska?”

“Up there in the young master’s room.”

“Are you out of your mind?” the lady moaned.

“Indeed, madam ordered that the bed be put in the room where the young master sleeps.”

“But where he sleeps after luncheon! What a fool—” said the irritated woman.

“So Mr. Bronislaw sleeps there after luncheon and here just at evening time,” the footman explained.

“Open the window... bring the bed from up there... good-for-nothing!”

“Eh! I see that long ago I neglected to oil the machines in this factory!” declared Mr. Korkowicz. He seized the candelabrum from the servant’s hands, took him by the back of his neck and pushed him out to the dressing room. In a moment there was a shout and the sound of two dull blows.

“Come, everyone, to the dining room,” Mrs. Korkowicz sighed. “How awful the servants have been today!”

When they were all seated at the table, she turned to Magda.

“My son, Bronislaw... Ask Miss Brzeska’s pardon for your awkward behavior.”

The fat young man bowed very low to Magda and growled:

“I—I apologize, madam... though I swear to God I don’t know what for.”

“What for? Because you had the temerity to sleep in her room.”

“Everyone throws it up to me for sleeping! After all, a fellow must sleep...”

The older man came in.

“Well!” he exclaimed to his son. “Well, tell me: how was it yesterday with the bank?”

“Papa is already trying to make a scene!” his son retorted. “On my word of honor, I will move out of this house.”

“Please, Piotr, leave him alone!” the mother interposed. “Ring, Stasia.”

Jan came in, covering his nose with a handkerchief.

“Why aren’t you serving the tea?” the master demanded.

“Because I am leaving this family’s service.”

“What does that mean?” said the master of the house threateningly.

“Just so!” replied the servant. “The master continually abuses a man, and then is surprised when—”

“Well, well, well... don’t run on. Nothing so very bad has happened to you.”

“It’s easier for the master to give a beating than for me to take it,” Jan muttered.

Terrified and astonished, Magda thought to herself that the Korkowicz household was very odd.

Chapter III. What It Is to Teach Other People's Children

Mrs. Korkowicz possessed dictatorial power over the house. The servants feared her and her alone; her husband gave way to her. No directives but hers inspired obedience in her daughters or even in her beloved son, who listened to his father very little.

She wielded authority over everyone, with more resistance from some, less from others. She was more than a little surprised, then, when after some time she noticed the force of a new personality becoming more evident in the house: Magda's.

This Magda, cheerful, courteous even to the servants, never resisted the mother's authority, but, more resolutely obedient than Linka and Stasia, became more important every day. Everyone felt her presence, above all the lady of the house herself, though she did not understand how it had come to be so.

Within a very few days after Magda's arrival, Mrs. Korkowicz had ceremoniously summoned her to the drawing room to express her wishes concerning the direction of her daughters' education.

"Miss—Miss Brzeska," Mrs. Korkowicz began, settling herself on a sofa, "you must visit Miss Malinowska and ask her which professors she recommends for my girls. In any case... yes... I think my husband must invite Mr. Romanowicz, for in April he gave a lecture in the city hall and in the autumn will give another. Well, and in addition to Mr. Romanowicz we will take several more..."

"Excuse me, madam," Magda said. "Why do our girls need professors?"

Mrs. Korkowicz flinched. "Why? What do you mean?"

"It is not certain whether lectures are useful just now," Magda explained, "and they are very expensive. If we had only two such lessons a day at two rubles an hour, that amounts to around a hundred rubles a month. My salary together with music and art lessons costs ninety rubles, so everything together would cost nearly two hundred."

"Two hundred!" the lady repeated, taken aback. "I had not thought of that... But we will have a group of ten young ladies. So for each one the cost will come to perhaps twenty rubles, perhaps less."

"And do you already have a group?"

"I am just now attending to that. But at the moment—no," Mrs. Korkowicz said with a touch of pathos in her voice.

"And so, madam, let us proceed in this way. As soon as you form a group, we will approach the professors, and in the meantime I will review with the girls what they learned at Mrs. Latter's school, some of which they have forgotten."

"Two hundred rubles a month!" the lady whispered, rubbing her face with her handkerchief. "Of course we must wait." After calming herself for a moment, she added:

“I have an idea! I will set about forming a group, and you will ask Miss Malinowska to help select the most suitable professors. In the meantime, you and the girls will review what they learned at school.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

Mrs. Korkowicz was satisfied that the final order had come from her lips, and that Magda had undertaken to carry it out with no opposition. She was satisfied—but somewhere in her mind a vague uneasiness remained.

“Two hundred rubles!” she thought. “Why was I not aware of that at once? Well, it is her responsibility as a governess to think of such things.”

That was only the beginning. From time immemorial, Mr. Korkowicz had had the habit of sitting down to the midday dinner on hot days without a jacket. One day late in August there was such a sweltering heat that he sat down at the table without even a vest. And he unfastened the front of his shirt, leaving all too visible his florid chest with its generous covering of hair.

Bronislaw seated himself by his mother, the footman hurried out to call the young ladies, and the next moment Linka and Stasia entered the room with Magda behind them.

“Our respects to Miss Magdalena!” exclaimed the master, leaning forward so that the opening in his shirt yawned wider.

“Oh!” Magda cried, and withdrew toward the door.

Bronislaw rose from his seat. Mr. Korkowicz demanded in astonishment:

“What happened?”

“What do you mean, what happened?” said Linka. “Why, papa is undressed.”

“Oh, damn!” grumbled the master, clapping his hands to his head. “Ask Miss Magdalena to come back.... devil take it!”

He ran to his room and a few minutes later returned, attired as if he had emerged from a fashionable store. At that moment Magda was entering the room again, so he apologized with many bows and assured her that the unhappy incident would not be repeated.

“At your age, Piotr, many allowances may be made,” his wife observed acridly.

“Many—or not many,” Bronislaw remarked. “The English wear frock coats at luncheon.”

“Miss Magdalena has no cause to be offended,” said his mother. “But remember, Piotr, how many times I have asked you not to come to dinner carelessly dressed? It is important to observe social forms, even if only for the girls’ sake.”

When the meal ended, Magda told Mrs. Korkowicz that she wanted to visit Mr. Dembicki.

“Dembicki? Dembicki?” the lady repeated, frowning slightly.

“That librarian and friend of Solski’s,” her husband explained.

Mrs. Korkowicz beamed.

“Ah,” she smiled, “you want to find out when the Solskis are arriving? Yes, you are welcome to go.”

“And I will accompany you!” Bronislaw exclaimed, springing up from his chair.

“Thank you, no,” Magda answered him in a tone so cool that Mrs. Korkowicz winced.

“What? Are you embarrassed?” Bronislaw said, smiling. “If we meet anyone, I will say that I am your third pupil.”

“You are too big.”

“Then you may say that I am your tutor.”

“You are too young,” Magda said, cutting off the banter. “Goodbye, ladies and gentlemen.”

Stasia ran out of the room after Magda, while Linka brandished her fist at her brother and said angrily:

“Listen! If you treat Miss Magdalena so, I will scratch your eyes out.”

“She is right to say so!” their father added. “You must be a blockhead to try to force yourself on a decent girl.”

“Decent, eh?” the beefy young man retorted belittlingly. “Decent girls don’t have watches set with diamonds.”

“What is the beast saying?” his father asked.

“I know what I am saying!” Bronislaw insisted. “The watch is worth four hundred rubles. Where would a governess get that?”

“I know!” cried Linka. “Oh, about a week ago Stasia and I looked at that watch. Lovely! Even mama does not have such a watch. Stasia opened the cover and we read the inscription: ‘For dearest Magda in memory of the years 187—. Your eternally loving Ada.’ Ada: that is Miss Solska,” she concluded.

“Such an inscription? Really?” asked Mrs. Korkowicz.

“Upon my word! We both know it by heart.”

“Why, you have a watch with diamonds, you silly thing!” sighed Mr. Korkowicz, striking the table with his hand.

“Please, Bronek, be on your best behavior with Miss Brzeska,” said his mother solemnly. “I know whom I have brought into our home.”

Bronislaw grew sullen.

“Stupid Bronek! Stupid Bronek!” sang Linka, laughing and jumping about.

“But, Linka, not a word of what was said here to Miss Brzeska,” her mother admonished. “You would drive mama to her grave.”

When her family had gone out—Mr. Korkowicz to attend to business in town, Bronislaw to take a nap and Linka to assist Stasia at her piano lesson—Mrs. Korkowicz retired to her sitting room, seated herself in a rocking chair and began to reflect.

“Does it appear that our governess is exceeding the limits of her position? Piotr dressed up for her at dinner. Well, he ought to break his appalling habits! Linka defended her like a lioness... There is nothing wrong in that. Anyway, Bronek spoke disparagingly to her. But the boy must be courteous to her, and so must even I, and all of us. Such connections for thirty rubles a month! A gold watch with diamonds! If we do not make friends with the Solskis now, we never will.

“By the way: at the first opportunity I will give that young woman to understand what I am, and what she is.”

The chair rocked more and more slowly. Mrs. Korkowicz’s head fell onto the cushion that hung from its back, and now and then loud snoring emanated from her half-open mouth. Sleep, the brother of death, sealed the eyelids of the distinguished lady.

Stukalski had finished initiating his pupil into the mysteries of the difficult art of fingering, and had not neglected to remind her that she ought to peel potatoes; the girls had hurried to the garden, where an angry Linka sat on the swing and a tearful Stasia pushed her; when Magda came into Mrs. Korkowicz’s study and found her in the rocking chair with her head thrown back and her fingers entwined on her bosom.

“Oh, excuse me!” Magda whispered involuntarily.

“What? What’s that?” the lady exclaimed, rousing. “Ah, is it you? I was just thinking... What did you learn about the Solskis, dear?”

“They will return at the end of October. But in the beginning, one of the party will arrive in Warsaw...”

For a moment Magda seemed out of breath.

“Mr. Solski?”

“No... Mr. Norski,” Magda replied quietly. “The son of the deceased Mrs. Latter.”

“Of Mrs. Latter?” Mrs. Korkowicz echoed. “The one whose sister Mr. Solski is going to marry?”

“So it is said.”

“I must meet Mr. Norski, even if only to make partial restitution for involuntarily injuring him. I am afraid,” said the lady, sighing and wagging her head, “that my removing my daughters from the school was one of the causes of the unhappy Mrs. Latter’s suicide. But God knows I could not have done

otherwise, Miss Brzeska! In its last days the school had a very bad reputation, and I am a mother. I am a mother, Miss Brzeska.”

Magda remembered the day when Linka and Stasia had left the school. It seemed to her, however, that Mrs. Latter had not even been aware of their departure.

“I have a great favor to ask,” Magda said timidly after a moment’s silence. “Will you allow Professor Dembicki’s niece to come and study with our girls?”

“She wishes to join the group?”

“She has no money for lessons with professors, so she would be taught only by me.”

“Aha!” the lady thought. “Now, young woman, you will understand what I am, and what you are!”

But she said aloud:

“Why does a poor girl want to be educated on the same level as my children?”

Magda looked at her in astonishment.

“But... but...” Mrs. Korkowicz continued, feeling that she was not speaking to the point, “this Mr. Dembicki whom you visited—he is a bachelor?”

“A bachelor, but very old. Oh, what a learned man, how noble! Mr. Solski is very fond of him, and forced him in spite of himself to accept the post as his librarian.”

“Excuse me,” the mistress of the house said suddenly. “That is a lovely watch you have. Is it a souvenir?”

“It was given me by Ada Solska,” Magda replied, coloring a little and handing her the watch. “But sometimes I am embarrassed to wear it.”

“Why?” asked Mrs. Korkowicz, opening the cover with some difficulty. “For dearest Magda... Why doesn’t that girl of Mr. Dembicki’s go to Miss Malinowska’s school? We could set about finding a way to pay for her.”

“Her uncle was involved in a painful incident with some pupils and had to leave Mrs. Latter’s school. The ugly scene was so frightening to Zosia that now she is afraid to go to any school, so she studies by herself, the poor little thing, with a little help from her uncle.”

“Ah, if you think that Mr. Dembicki is such a good man...”

“Very good... very—”

“And that girl is poor... Well, let her come, as long as my girls are none the worse for it.”

“On the contrary, they will profit from it. A little competition will spur them to greater diligence.”

“I must add, however, that I do this only to maintain good relations with the Solskis. After all, I do not know Mr. Dembicki,” the lady went on, feeling herself more and more in a false position in relation to Magda.

Mrs. Korkowicz was a bit sharp with Magda for a few days. But when Dembicki paid her a visit and mentioned that he had known the Solskis since they were children, and that he corresponded with Stefan every few weeks, Mrs. Korkowicz was mollified. In fact, she thanked Magda for her part in establishing the new relationship.

“Dembicki would be an ingrate if he did not speak well of us to the Solskis,” she thought. “The Brzeska girl, too, ought to speak favorably of us; at any rate, we will try to ingratiate ourselves with her.”

From that time on, being with the Korkowicz family was like being in heaven for Magda. Bronislaw was obliged to offer his greetings and farewells with the greatest respect. His father was allowed to make it evident that he liked Magda. In the end, Mrs. Korkowicz had Magda seated beside her at the table, and the butler served her immediately after serving the mistress.

In spite of Mrs. Korkowicz’s better inclinations, however, Magda more or less constantly aroused her antagonism. Be as lenient as she might, she had to acknowledge that some of Magda’s actions bespoke a good heart but an extraordinary lack of prudence.

Once, for example, Linka noticed a little girl in the yard—the daughter of a laundress in their very own house. The child was barefoot and wore a shirt so ragged, a dress so covered with patches, that the temptation to make a model of her was irresistible. Linka called her over, made a place for her in the orangery, and began to paint her amid the palms, cactus and other exotic plants.

Watching this study were Stasia, Mrs. Korkowicz, Mr. Korkowicz, and even Bronislaw, who was in some doubt at any given moment whether his sister was painting a cactus or the leg of the ragged little girl. But it was Magda who noticed just then that the child was coughing hard.

“Good God,” she exclaimed, “she is practically naked!” Then she added in French, “If the poor thing does not get some clothes and some nursing, she will die.”

Linka stopped painting. Tears welled up in Stasia’s frightened eyes. Both sisters began to observe the coughing child carefully and discovered that she did not have even the flimsiest of shoes on her feet; that her half-worn-out shirt did not make up for the lack of an underskirt; and that her old pinafore looked more like a spider web than a piece of clothing.

From that moment the young women stopped painting the child and began to care for her. Without their mother’s knowledge they put together the money to take her to a doctor. They bought little shoes and stockings and then linen and fustian, from which they began sewing clothes for her with help from Magda and the maid.

“You see what a good thing it was that you learned to sew at Mrs. Latter’s school,” Magda reminded them.

When Mrs. Korkowicz saw Linka struggling to stitch up fustian on the sewing machine, she thought, as she would have expressed it, that she would fall down dead. Magda was not in the room, so the worthy woman limited herself to conducting an investigation, and, taking the incriminating fabric, rushed with tight lips to her husband’s study. In her wake came Linka, who firmly requested that her mother not interfere in her business.

“Do you see, Piotr?” his wife exclaimed, throwing the fustian onto his desk. “Did you ever hear of such a thing?”

Then she and Linka each spoke faster than the other of the little ragamuffin, her cough, and the help the young women had given her. Linka dwelt on the child’s unhappy state, Mrs. Korkowicz on how dirty she was, how contagious her cough might be, and how full of emancipationist notions Magda’s head was.

When he understood what was afoot, Mr. Korkowicz stroked his abundant beard and remarked in a quiet tone that made his spouse very uneasy:

“Was the child dirty when you painted her?”

“Like a little tarpot, papa!” Linka replied.

“And did she cough?”

“Oh, she coughed far worse than now.”

“Go, Linka,” said her father in a tone of ominous mildness. “Go and kiss Miss Magdalena’s hand for encouraging you to behave so admirably.”

“But, Piotr—it cannot be!” cried his wife. “I will not allow it!”

“Tonia,” her husband answered when Linka had gone out of the room, “Tonia, do not lose your senses! After all, I see only today that my daughters have hearts. God has sent this Miss Brzeska to us.”

“I know, I know,” she said. “You approve of everything Miss Brzeska does. And if I went to my grave today—”

“I appeal to your good sense, Tonia. If you must praise Miss Solska for giving you a thousand rubles for the hospital, do not reprove your own children when they provide an orphan with clothing.”

“But they are sewing it themselves...”

“English duchesses also sew clothing for poor children,” her husband replied.

“Are you sure?” she asked in spite of herself, feeling her anger quickly dissipate.

An hour later she complimented her daughters on their efforts on the girl’s behalf, and thanked Magda. In her heart, however, she resolved at the first opportunity to point out the flaws in Magda’s newfangled emancipationist ideas, which were sowing discord among the most respectable families.

The most serious development in these domestic relationships occurred six weeks after Magda's arrival. It happened at the afternoon dinner, during a short pause between the beefsteak and the chicken with cucumber salad, when Linka said angrily to the butler:

"Take this plate."

"It is clean, if you please, miss," replied Jan, glancing at the plate and putting it back.

"You dolt! Take it when I tell you to!" Linka burst out, on edge from a quarrel with Stasia about whether Zacieralski was greater than Lesser or only equal to him.

"When miss speaks, that is how it must be," said Mrs. Korkowicz sternly.

The butler took the plate and placed another one on the table. Then he served the chicken and salad and finally went out to the kitchen.

Then Magda leaned toward Linka, put her arm around her neck, and whispered:

"You will not answer Jan in that way the next time, will you?"

These harmless words had the effect of a thunderbolt at the table. Stasia raised her eyebrows higher than usual. Bronislaw took his fork, which he had been using to pick his teeth, out of his mouth. Mr. Korkowicz turned purple and lowered his face so that his beard was smeared with the rest of his salad. Linka gasped several times, burst out crying and ran from the dining room.

"Come back for the pudding, though! There will be cream!" Bronislaw called in a tone of genuine sympathy.

"Very good," muttered his father.

Mrs. Korkowicz was stunned. Because she was an exceptionally shrewd person, however, she adjusted to the situation quickly and said ceremoniously to Stasia:

"In aristocratic homes, young ladies speak with studied politeness to the servants."

Mr. Korkowicz clapped a hand to his fleshy neck as though it did not seem to him that this wise dictum from his wife had been spoken in season.

The lady as well was concealing her confusion under the pretense of being sure of herself. She was conscious that from that moment her children's relations with the servants had changed, not because of morals inculcated by herself, but because of Magda's remark. She also reminded herself with some bitterness that Jan served Magda with alacrity, conversed with her more cheerfully than with the girls, and at the table manipulated the dishes in such a way that the best pieces of everything came Magda's way, though she did not take them.

"I see that this is Bismarck in the form of a young woman!" she thought, setting aside a double portion of cream for the absent Linka. "On this subject, God knows how many years I have asked Piotr not to abuse the servants. And

long ago I set about telling the girls to be polite in their dealings with people of lower position. Well, and that girl—she got in ahead of me! We will settle our accounts sometime, miss. We will settle our accounts.”

After dinner Mrs. Korkowicz thanked the governess coolly for her company at the table and ordered Stasia to take Linka her cream. After that Mr. Korkowicz said “Thank you” to Magda, held her hand a little too long, and looked her in the eye rather strangely. So when Magda had left the room, the irritated lady said to her husband:

“I thought you were going to kiss Miss Brzeska.”

He nodded.

“You know,” he replied, “I really wanted to kiss her hand.”

“In that case, father, I disown you,” Bronislaw remarked, turning toward the window.

“Disown me, my dear boy, at the bank,” his father retorted.

His wife took the floor.

“But you must admit, my dear, that for several weeks Bronek has been improving,” she said. “He hardly goes out of the house, and he sits with us regularly at table.”

“No doubt he wants to cadge a few hundred rubles from me. I know him! I fly into a rage when I see the tricks he plays, but my skin creeps when he begins to amend himself.”

“You are wrong,” said the mother. “Bronek has done nothing wrong—only he has yielded to my persuasions. I have been explaining to him that he behaves improperly, idling about in inappropriate company, that he was driving us to our graves, and—he understood me.”

“Eh!” growled the father. “So you always think! You don’t know how to manage the girls, and you think such a rip listens to moral suasion?”

“Who manages them, then? Who directs their education?” the lady cried, turning as red as hot iron.

But Mr. Korkowicz, instead of answering his spouse, turned to his son.

“Well, listen!” he said. “For you will make a beggar of me, you loafer. Either get yourself to work so Switek can go to the brewery in Korkow, or go to Korkow yourself. I cannot be in two breweries at the same time when they are thirty miles apart. When I am in Warsaw, something goes wrong in Korkow; when I am in Korkow, there is no supervision here. And you go roaming around the restaurants!”

“I told you, he stays home,” the mother put in.

“I don’t mean that he should sleep the clock around at home,” roared the father, “but that, even just a couple of times a day, he should look in at the brewery and check on what they are doing.”

“He took your place for several days.”

“Yes! And they didn’t fill half the orders on time. Damn your—”

Suddenly he clapped his hand to his mouth. He did not finish the imprecation, but added calmly:

“Be gentle here... do not call them names... when everyone, beginning with your own son, drives the knives into your liver...”

“I see that Miss Brzeska’s lecture has had its effect on you,” his wife sniffed.

“No—it is your moralizing!” the father retorted, and walked out of the room.

During this time Bronislaw had been standing by the window, drumming on the pane with his fingers and shrugging his shoulders now and then.

Mrs. Korkowicz wrung her hands, looked tragically at her son, and said:

“What do you think?”

“But... well... that when someone is pretty she is pretty, and there is nothing to say,” answered the precocious young man.

“Who? What fancy is this?”

“Magda is pretty and trains the girls well, only—she has too many whims. And you, mama, still beat your little drum to her about those Solskis. Solskis! Solskis! When all is said and done, what of the Solskis? Am I afraid of them, or what?” he said, gesticulating with a phlegmatic air.

Then he kissed his stupefied mother on both hands and went out, grumbling:

“What does the old man think, that I’m going to cart beer around?”

“Merciful heavens!” moaned the lady, holding her hands to her head. “Merciful heavens! What is happening here? What has become of me?”

She was so exasperated that when she found herself in the rocking chair in her sitting room, she was unable to fall instantly into a postprandial doze.

“She does what she pleases with the girls, and they only cry,” she thought. “She spoils the servants. She brings children of various undesirables into the house. Bronek himself is delighted at how pretty she is (what do they see about her that is so pretty?), and as if it weren’t enough that the old bear undermines my influence in the house, he even wants to kiss her hand. No! I must put an end to this.”

After cooler deliberation, Mrs. Korkowicz’s reproaches against Magda began to dissipate. After all, she herself had agreed that Zosia could study in her home, and she had done it to establish close relations with the Solskis. After her initial resistance, she had allowed her daughters to provide clothing for the laundress’s ragged little girl, and nothing bad had come of it; in fact, everyone in the whole house was talking about their good deed.

Finally, well-bred young ladies (and even a husband!) ought not to speak abusively to the servants. For what a blow it would be to her maternal feelings if some day Linka, in front of the Solskis or other distinguished guests, called the butler a dolt!

But the more Mrs. Korkowicz vindicated Magda in her mind, the more resentment toward the teacher awakened in her heart. What an awful state of affairs: to feel an aversion toward someone and have nothing to reproach her with!

“What will I say to her,” the lady thought bitterly, “when the girls, my husband, and even Bronek answer that Miss Magdalena does as I wish?”

Nor was it proper to let her aversion show. For what if the governess should take offense and leave the house? What would the girls, Bronek, her husband, say then? And above all, what prospect would there be of the longed-for acquaintance with the Solskis?

“A strange woman, that Miss Solska,” Mrs. Korkowicz said to herself, “having a governess for a friend!”

Chapter IV. Mrs. Korkowicz's Anxieties

In early October Mrs. Korkowicz's household was turned on its ear. She herself felt as if she were a shipwrecked sailor sitting on a narrow rock, looking at a raging ocean and only waiting for the waves to engulf her.

Her daughters, on whose education she had expended so much money, had not only stopped being peevish to the servants, but, what is more, had become intimate with the maid, the cook, even the butler's family. Often Mrs. Korkowicz found both the young ladies in the dressing room, and at the table she saw with her own eyes that Jan smiled not only at Miss Brzeska but even at Linka and Stasia.

"Let him make such a face at them in front of some distinguished visitor and I should have to die of shame!" she thought.

But she did not have the courage to scold Jan about these familiarities. Nor was there any point in complaining to her husband, who since that memorable dinner not only had not "greased Jan's machine," but had even ceased to speak harshly to him before Magda and his daughters. Once Mr. Korkowicz was so annoyed that he turned purple and waved his big fists, but the blows fell on the table or the door rather than on Jan's back.

"You will die of apoplexy some time, Piotr, if you hold your feelings in!" said his wife one day, when Jan had spilled sauce on him at supper and, instead of shaking the butler by the ear, he struck his own thigh with his fist.

"Leave me be!" he burst out. "Ever since you went to Carlsbad you have been calling me common; and today, after I have improved my style, you want me to abandon my restraints. Plans fall all over each other in your head as if it were a vat full of malt."

"Whereas you do not inconvenience yourself on your wife's account," the lady sighed.

Her husband rose from his chair, but, glancing at Magda, sat down so hard that the floor squeaked, and leaned his head on his hands.

"What is the meaning of this?" thought the exasperated lady. "That governess really has a hold on my husband."

Mrs. Korkowicz grew so angry that she got up from the table and went to her sitting room. When her daughters and their teacher hurried after her, she said to Magda in an icy tone:

"You, at least, need not take up your time with me. There is nothing the matter with me."

Magda withdrew, and Mrs. Korkowicz exclaimed angrily to her daughters:

"Go away. Go to your teacher!"

"What is it, mama? What have we done?" both daughters demanded tearfully, baffled by their mother's irritability.

Like all impetuous people, Mrs. Korkowicz soon quieted down. Sitting in her chair, she said in a more tranquil tone:

“Linka, Stasia... look me straight in the eye! You do not love your mama. You would like to drive your mama to her grave...”

The girls were sobbing.

“What are you saying, mama? Whom do we love?”

“Miss Brzeska! She is everything in the house now. I am nothing.”

“We love Miss Brzeska as a friend, and mama as mama,” Linka rejoined.

“You would like for me to go to my grave and for father to marry your governess!”

In spite of the tears that were flowing copiously down their faces, both girls began to laugh like madwomen.

“And what a pair that would be! Ha! Ha! Ha! Whatever would Bronek say about that?” cried Linka, holding her sides.

“What clowns they are! Do not laugh at mama’s words, for the words of a mother are holy. Bronek? What about Bronek?”

“Indeed, Bronek is in love with Miss Magdalena, and woos her so that yesterday she was crying, poor thing... Ha! Ha! Ha! Papa and Miss Magdalena!” Linka laughed.

This information about Bronek’s pursuit of Magda completely calmed Mrs. Korkowicz. Drawing both daughters to herself, she said:

“What is this chatter about Bronek’s wooing? Well brought up young ladies ought not to know anything about that. Stasia, Linka—look me straight in the eye. Swear that you love mama better than Miss Brzeska.”

“Here, now, upon my word, a hundred times better!” exclaimed Linka.

“Miss Magdalena herself tells us over and over that we should love mama and papa more than anything in the world,” added Stasia.

Among the lady’s fluid emotions a little friendliness toward Magda surfaced momentarily.

“Go and finish your supper,” she said to her daughters, adding to herself:

“Miss Magdalena may not be a bad child, but what a domineering character! She wants to gain the upper hand over everyone. Ah, well, she has such connections! If one time those Solskis would come to us... What gossip are the girls passing to each other about Bronek again? He makes overtures to Brzeska? It is the first I have heard of any such thing!”

After a moment, however, Mrs. Korkowicz recalled that perhaps it was not the first time she had heard something of that kind. Bronislaw’s habit of staying at home was undoubtedly the result of her motherly admonitions, but

the presence of the beautiful governess might also be wielding its influence over her son.

“He is young; there is nothing astonishing in that!” she sighed, and remembered how one evening, finding herself by chance in an alcove off the corridor, she had heard this interchange between her son and the governess:

“Please do not block my way, sir,” Magda had said crossly.

“I would like to convince you that I have a great regard for you,” Bronislaw had replied in a pleading tone.

“Please show your regard by not conversing with me when I am alone.”

“Excuse me, madam, but before other people—” he began, but could not finish, for Magda had gone.

“She is teasing him,” Mrs. Korkowicz whispered, and then thought:

“A young man, wealthy, and, well, handsome—Broniek is quite passable as men go, and his advances must be flattering to a young woman. Naturally she will speak of him to Miss Solska, and Miss Solska will notice him and will set about luring Broniek away for herself out of feminine envy. Good heavens, how perfectly it is all arranging itself! I cannot deny that many things are working in my favor because of Magda.”

Mrs. Korkowicz then found herself in a period of warm feeling for the governess, and from that time Magda would have felt as if she were in heaven for certain if her emancipationist notions had not filled her employer’s mind with fresh bitterness.

For some time Linka and Stasia had been neglecting their accomplishments. Linka painted less and less often; the usually docile Stasia began to quarrel with her music teacher and even to tell others how Mr. Stukalski was growing bald; and each devoted less time to her lessons, the one’s in music, the other’s in painting.

Understandably their alarmed mother investigated the situation and discovered a terrible thing. The girls were using the time allotted for their aesthetic education to tutor Michal, the butler’s eight-year-old son. Stasia was teaching him to read and Linka was showing him how to write!

This was too much for Mrs. Korkowicz. She decided to have a conversation with the governess.

“Miss Brzeska,” she would say, “my home is not an elementary school and my daughters are not teachers.”

With that object she rang once, then a second time, since Jan was not quick to answer. At last he stood in the doorway.

“Why do you not come at once when I ring?” she said, adopting a stern tone. “Ask Miss Brzeska to come here.”

“A gentleman has just come for Miss Magdalena, and is waiting in the hall,” replied the butler, handing her a card.

“Kazimierz Norski,” she read. “Aha! Inform Miss Magdalena.”

She rose and walked quickly from her sitting room to the hall. Her anger was dispelled; excitement now seized her.

“Norski!” she thought. “Yes, he was due to arrive in the beginning of October. Perhaps the Solskis are here as well.”

Her legs trembled under her when she opened the door to the salon, but she was stunned at the sight of the young man who glanced at her and bowed most elegantly.

“What features—eyes—eyebrows!” she thought, but said aloud:

“Do I have the honor of addressing Mr. Norski? I am... Miss Brzeska is staying with us just now. And I hold the sacred memory of your mother in the greatest respect, sir. Heavens, what an appalling development! I ought not to allude to it, but my daughters were beloved students of your dear departed mother, who was mourned by everyone here.”

So Mrs. Korkowicz said, bowing herself and motioning him to a gilt chair, on which he sat down unceremoniously.

“He is lovely!” she thought, and because the young man remained silent and looked at the door, she made another remark.

“Your mother of blessed memory, how is... that is to say—”

“I have just been to her grave, where we want to place a monument.”

“You and your sister must return to society,” the lady quickly interrupted him. “And in that case my husband and I and all our household—”

At that instant Norski rose from the little gilt chair, looking over the head of his kind hostess. Mrs. Korkowicz turned around and saw Magda, pale and resting one hand on a table as if to support herself.

“Here is Miss Brzeska—” Mrs. Korkowicz began again.

But Norski, ignoring the formalities, approached Magda and took her hand.

“We know that our mama spent her last hours with you... I wish to thank you and sometime, if it is possible, to hear the details from your own lips,” he said in a fine, velvety voice.

Magda looked at the slender white cords stitched to the lapel of his coat and her eyes clouded with tears.

“I will tell both of you everything... sometime...” she said, not looking at Kazimierz. “Has Helena returned as well?”

“She arrives with the Solskis in a week... ten days,” he replied, unable to get the better of his astonishment. “But if you greet them like this—”

“Have I offended you?” Magda asked apprehensively.

“You could not possibly offend me,” he answered warmly, taking her hand again. “But let madam be my witness,” he added, turning to Mrs. Korkowicz. “In my deceased mother’s home, Miss Magdalena, Ada Solska, my sister and I were one family. Our mother, as she traveled to her death, sent us her blessing through Miss Magdalena. And today, when I return after saying farewell to my mother, this, her second daughter, receives me as if I were a stranger. Let madam say if it is not so.”

Magda hung her head, unable to hold back her tears.

“Happy Miss Magdalena!” he said. “I have no more tears to shed.”

He broke off and knit his beautiful eyebrows as he noticed Bronislaw a few steps away. Bronislaw had come quietly into the drawing room, and for several minutes had been looking now at Norski, now at Magda.

“Perhaps mama will introduce me to this gentleman,” he said. “I am Korkowicz, or Corkscrew, as your old friends call me, sir.”

“You know each other?” asked the perplexed hostess. “My son ... Mr. Norski.”

“We know each other well, or at least I know you by reputation. There are many stories about your pranks at Stepek’s,” Bronislaw broke in, extending his big hand to Norski.

The young men shook hands, Kazimierz lackadaisically, Bronislaw energetically. One who looked closely, however, could see that there was no sympathy between them.

Norski sat for a few minutes, looking rather gloomy and giving brief answers to Mrs. Korkowicz’s inquiries about the Solskis. After a time he stood up, made his farewells and promised to visit Magda more often, if Mr. and Mrs. Korkowicz would permit him.

“We have so much to say to each other about my mother, Miss Magdalena, that sometime you must devote an hour to me alone, as you used to do,” Kazimierz said upon leaving.

When the door of the room had closed behind him, Magda, pensive and confused, said to Mrs. Korkowicz:

“Jan told me that you wanted to see me, madam?”

“Yes. I wanted to tell you how grateful I am to you, dear Miss Magdalena, that my girls are devoting time to teach little Michal. What a beautiful quality compassion is!” Mrs. Korkowicz answered spiritedly, kissing Magda several times.

In the face of the imminent arrival of the Solskis— and given the intimacy that linked the governess to Ada Solska and to Helena, the future Madam Solska— Mrs. Korkowicz’s anger was dispelled. Let Magda do as she liked in the house, let her daughters clothe and teach every child on the street, if only relations were established with the Solskis!

“Bronek hasn’t even an inkling of his good fortune,” she thought, beaming with joy.

“But—but—” she called to Magda, who was on her way out of the room, “at the earliest opportunity, please tell Mr. Norski to be so kind as to visit us as often as possible. Our home is always open to him. Goodness! I forgot to invite him to dinner. Please suggest to him very tactfully, Miss Magdalena, that he have dinner with us regularly. And if he does not yet have proper lodgings, let him not stand on ceremony, but come to us... until the Solskis arrive, or even longer. Will you do that, dear Miss Magdalena? I will be grateful all my life, because... the memory of the deceased Mrs. Latter...”

“Please, madam, I do not even know if it is fitting for me to speak of this with Mr. Norski,” Magda answered uncomfortably.

“Not fitting?” marveled the distinguished lady. “After all, in the home of the departed Mrs. Latter, he, you and the Solskis were as one family.”

“So Kazimierz said,” Magda said sadly. “But in his mother’s house I was a classroom teacher, nothing more.”

“And the watch set with diamonds from Miss Solska?” Mrs. Korkowicz prodded uneasily.

“Ada Solska liked me a little, but that is the end of it. What other connection could there be between a poor girl like me and a wealthy young lady? Ada is very good to everyone.”

After Magda went out of the room, Mrs. Korkowicz turned to her son, who was biting his nails.

“Oho! Did you notice how she avoided serving as intermediary between us and Norski? She was hiding something, did you notice, Bronek?” she said, tapping her forehead with her finger.

“Good for her! growled her son. “Why drag such a rotter into the house?”

“Bronek!” the lady squealed, striking her fist on the table. “You will drive your mother to her grave if you express yourself like a boor... like your father... I need Norski to establish a relationship with the Solskis. Do you understand?”

Bronislaw waved a hand and retorted, yawning:

“You have already chosen your go-betweens: Zgierski, Norski! The Solskis must be rotters as well if they consort with such fellows.”

His mother’s face flushed.

“Listen to me!” she said angrily. “If you say anything more against Mr. Zgierski, you are no son of mine. A wise man, a well connected man, a friend of ours.”

“A friend because he unloaded three thousand rubles on dad, the devil knows why, at twelve percent? It’s a laugh, that Korkowicz borrowed at twelve percent!”

“It was very considerate of him. We must find a way to repay him for his goodheartedness to us... even to you,” his mother answered.

For several days Norski did not put in an appearance at the Korkowicz home. Magda, on the other hand, paid a visit to Dembicki, and returned in a state of agitation. Mrs. Korkowicz, who noticed that Magda’s eyes were a little wet, asked her with apparent indifference:

“And was Mr. Norski at Mr. Dembicki’s?”

“He was just there,” Magda answered, blushing deeply. “We spoke of his mother... He told me that his stepfather is coming here from America with his family.”

“What stepfather?”

“Mrs. Latter’s second husband. He served in the army of the United States, and at present is an industrialist, or sells machinery.”

Magda’s alacrity in supplying these details did not please Mrs. Korkowicz.

“That little cat is hiding something!” she thought. “Would she be scheming against us? Scheming against us, and in the home of Dembicki, whose niece I took in so she could have lessons here! Oh, people are ungrateful creatures!”

Mrs. Korkowicz really was too sensible to suspect Magda of intrigue. But to protect her own interests, she decided to give a large evening party, and sent her husband to call on Norski. When Mr. Korkowicz had returned, breathing heavily, and was hurriedly removing his best clothes, she asked him uneasily:

“What about Norski? Is he coming?”

“Why wouldn’t he be coming? Everyone goes where they’re given something good to eat.”

“Eh, Piotr! You have some prejudice against Norski—such a fine-looking fellow, who any day will be Solski’s brother-in-law!”

“But he must be a bounder,” her husband groaned, with difficulty removing a tight boot with a bootjack in the form of a fawn.

“What are you blithering?” said his wife. “You are a fine, respectable man, but you will never be a diplomat.”

“Pshaw! God sent me such a Metternich in a skirt that that her cunning could run two breweries.”

Chapter V. The Soiree and Its Hero

On the next Saturday, which fell in the latter half of October, the drawing rooms in the Korkowicz house were brilliantly lit. The stairs were resplendent with carpets and flowers and the vestibule was full of servants. At their head stood Jan, clean-shaven, wearing a navy blue swallow tail coat, a red vest and yellow trousers.

“A true monkey from the happy isle!” muttered Mr. Korkowicz, looking at Jan.

“Just do not say that out loud, my dear, because people will see that you have bad taste and use boorish expressions,” his wife scolded.

By around eleven in the evening perhaps sixty persons had gathered. The majority were from wealthy families in the city, families of brewers, merchants, jewelers, carriagemakers. Ladies decked out in silk and diamonds were seated along the walls, carrying on conversations that began with the theater and concluded with talk of how servants were growing worse every year. Young women moved eagerly around the corners of every room, seeking out artists and men of letters so as to obtain the latest information about positivism, Darwinism, political economy, and the question—which in these days was being more and more warmly debated—of the role and rights of women.

The young manufacturers and merchants went out very soon to smoke cigarettes and make fun of the well-read young women and the poets, who did not have an unpatched pair of pants among them. Eventually their fathers, powerfully built, solemn men wearing ill-fitting frock coats and jostling against the gilt furniture, cast gloomy looks at their wives and daughters and went to the card rooms.

“A princely affair!” said a carriagemaker to a distiller. “They laid out hundreds of rubles.”

“But can’t they afford it?” retorted his hearer. “Anyone can be a prince if he has money. Let us sit down, I there, you here...”

They took seats. Other groups sat at tables near by, and soon everyone became invisible as the smoke of excellent cigars filled the room. From time to time someone was heard to say: “Pass!” “Three, no trumps!” “Oh, you rascal!” or “When are you going to listen to the bidding?”

At half past eleven there was a murmur in the salons and card rooms. Some asked: “What happened?” Others whispered: “He is here!” Mothers and aunts nonchalantly turned their eyes toward the door, not, God forbid, because anyone had piqued their interest, but—why, one might as well look. Daughters and nieces one after the other broke off their conversations about Darwin and positivism and cast down their eyes, which did not hinder them from seeing everything. Poets, literary people, artists, all the intelligentsia felt suddenly isolated. The young industrialists in the more distant rooms were uneasy and began to put out their cigarettes.

Mrs. Korkowicz tore her husband away from his card game and hurried with him to the vestibule, where Kazimierz Norski was removing his overcoat. Zgierski said to one of the maids:

“Listen, my dear, keep our coats handy. We must go out...”

“What an honor this is! How thankful we are!” exclaimed Mrs. Korkowicz, holding out both hands to Norski. Zgierski immediately seized them, diverting the hostess’s joyful outburst to himself.

“What an honor! Piotr... What, have the Solskis not yet arrived?” she asked.

“They are coming in a matter of days,” replied Norski.

Jan, in his poppy-red vest and yellow trousers, threw open the door to the drawing room and called:

“The honorable Mr. Norski!”

“Mr. Norski!” Mrs. Korkowicz repeated, clinging delightedly to the young man’s arm.

“The brother-in—! She is next to—” said Mr. Korkowicz, thunderstruck.

The lady turned her head and shot her husband such a despairing look that he swore himself to silence.

“Did I have to spout such tommyrot?” he nevertheless whispered to Zgierski.

“Ah!” Zgierski said with an indignant air, sweetly closing his eyes.

The hall grew quiet; then, here and there, a whisper started up:

“What is this?”

“No one else was presented in that style.”

“One would have thought they were bringing in a prince.”

But the murmur died down. Norski was so handsome that mothers and aunts looked at him and restrained their bursts of indignation, and daughters and nieces were ready to forgive him anything.

“So handsome it’s a mortal sin!” the emancipated lady of mature years said to the eighteen-year-old turtledove with sapphire-blue eyes.

The turtledove made no answer, but her heart beat violently.

After being presented in this singular way, and exchanging courtesies with the most distinguished ladies, Norski moved suddenly toward the piano. It seemed to those present that at that moment there was an aura around the instrument and the group seated beside it.

“Who is sitting there?”

“Linka and Stasia Korkowicz.”

“And with whom is he speaking so intimately?”

“With the Korkowicz family’s governess.”

“Who is she? What is her name?”

That few minutes’ conversation with Norski was enough to draw everyone’s attention to Magda, whom no one had noticed until then. The older ladies demanded that their hostess introduce Magda to them. The younger ones vied with each other to exchange greetings with Linka and Stasia and take the occasion to become acquainted with Magda. Even the young factory owners began drawing near Magda with measured steps, or observing her from a distance.

“Well, well!” one of them whispered. “A pretty bit.”

“And graceful... like quicksilver.”

“That filly would run away...”

“With someone,” muttered the young distiller, who had a reputation as an athlete. “What do you say, Bronek?”

“Eh! Leave me out of it,” young Korkowicz retorted angrily.

“Bloody hell!” sighed a fourth young man.

“Well, well, well ... young gentlemen, button your lips, for that’s a decent girl,” the older Korkowicz said in an undertone.

“Why must you take up for her, papa?” asked Bronislaw truculently, standing by the window and looking sidewise at the author of his being.

Taking advantage of the moment, the potbellied Zgierski rolled toward his hostess. Looking at her ingratiatingly, he said in a sweet voice:

“Splendid party, upon my word! I could hardly drag Kazik, whom I couldn’t keep from carrying me off to Count Sowizdrzalski’s—”

“What is that? He was not going to come to us?” she asked in consternation.

“Well, I don’t say that... Indeed not. Only it’s no wonder if a pampered fellow used to running with others of that feather is keen to get back to those frivolities. Prince Gwizdalski is supposed to be there... Count Rozdzieralski... a brilliant young crowd,” Zgierski explained.

“But you and he will stay to supper with us,” she said a little crossly.

Zgierski twirled up one end of his dyed mustache and piously raised his eyes to heaven. When Mrs. Korkowicz had left him, however, he went over to Magda, tenderly pressed her hand and said in a voice that trembled with emotion:

“You may remember me, madam: Zgierski. Friend (here he sighed) of the departed Mrs. Latter, and—I make bold to claim the honor—also your friend.”

Having found it taxing to be the object of so much attention from strangers, Magda wished for even a moment’s relaxation, so she motioned Zgierski to a chair beside hers. At her invitation he sat down and, inclining his beautifully groomed bald head, which reflected his moods through its varied coloration, began to speak in an affable undertone:

"I am very happy to meet you in this house. For half a year I have wished that the Korkowicz family might have the pleasure of your society, and I am glad to see that my project has succeeded. Sometime ago you heard from Miss Helena?"

"Oh, long ago."

"Yes!" he sighed. "She has not yet recovered from the shock, poor girl. Those children (for so I will always call them to you)—Kazik and Helena—are a great concern of mine. In order to secure their future I must approach the Solskis, and in this you will help me, will you not?"

"What can I do?" Magda whispered.

"Much... everything! One word spoken in season, in the right place... One hint to me on the right subjects... Miss Magdalena," he said passionately, "the welfare of those children, the children of your dear friend, matters deeply to me. We both must occupy ourselves with their future. You will help me, I will help you. We are allies. And now—action, and discretion!"

He rose from his chair and looked at Magda as if he were entrusting the future of the world to her. Then he squeezed her hand suggestively and disappeared in the crowd.

With ponderous, clumsy steps Bronislaw approached Magda from the direction of the tiled heating stove.

"Has that one been talking your ear off?" he said. "Do not believe anything he says."

From the other side of her chair Bronislaw's father appeared.

"What confidential information does Mr. Zgierski have to share?" he asked. "I advise you not to have any secrets with him, for he is an old flirt—"

"A flirt, father! What is that to you?" Bronislaw spoke up, looking pointedly at the older man.

Their bickering was lost on Magda, who was thinking of Zgierski. She had seen him at Mrs. Latter's school after that lady's sudden departure, and her impression of him had not been particularly favorable. She had heard something rather unflattering about him—from Marta, the housekeeper, she thought. And today both Bronislaw and Mr. Korkowicz had spoken denigratingly of him.

"He is evidently a good man," she thought, "but he has detractors. Of course I would do anything for Helena and Kazimierz. But what can I do?"

She was touched by Zgierski's solicitude about Mrs. Latter's children and proud that he had taken her into his confidence.

Mrs. Korkowicz was showering her attention on her guests. Everyone present had an interested question or a kind word from her; she did her best to be amusing or helpful to each one. She was, therefore, extremely busy, but in spite of that, Magda's success did not escape her attention. Unknown an hour earlier, presented to no one, the governess forgotten in a corner had suddenly

become the center of attention. The hero of the evening, Norski, had conversed longest with her, and returned several times to talk to her again. A man as well connected as Zgierski had asked something of her, or confided something to her. Young women hovered around her; ladies of consequence by virtue of their age and position made her acquaintance. Young men bombarded her with glances from a polite distance.

It even seemed—and Mrs. Korkowicz rarely erred in such cases—that some dispute had arisen between her husband and son, no doubt because of Magda. It was no wonder, then, that on the smooth brow of the mistress of the house a frown appeared that was out of keeping with the benevolent smile on her lips and the glow on her cheeks.

“You take an interest in our teacher. She is pretty, is she not?” Mrs. Korkowicz asked Zgierski, who was continually maneuvering so as to be near her.

“Oh, I have known her for quite some time,” he rejoined. “She is a close friend of Miss Solska’s.”

“You seemed rather—excited—when you were near her.”

“Because Miss... Miss... your teacher can do much in spheres in which I am not exactly well known. She can do much!” he added insinuatingly.

Two stiletos passed through Mrs. Korkowicz’s heart at that moment. One was resentment toward Magda, who emerged victorious in every situation. The other was tenderness, genuine tenderness for Magda, because she could do so much in certain spheres.

“If she can do so much,” the lady thought, “she must help us become acquainted with the Solskis. For, to tell the truth, though Miss Solska is homely, Bronek has too much sense...”

Supper was served. Bowls of caviar appeared and disappeared, as did piles of oysters, heaps of wild game and farm meat, and buckets, one might almost say, of the finest liquors. Corks shot from champagne bottles so often that Zgierski, as if deaf, ceased listening to his neighbors and gave himself over exclusively to an examination of the contents of dishes and bottles.

At around three o’clock all the gentlemen found themselves in a very mellow frame of mind, and at that time an extraordinary psychological phenomenon manifested itself. One set of revelers asserted that Norski had stayed to supper and that they had seen him; another group said that that same Norski had slipped away before supper. Then the first set began insisting that Norski had not been there at all, while the others declared that he was there, but in another room.

When the host was asked to resolve the dispute, he agreed heartily with both opinions, so in the end no one knew the truth: whether Norski had never existed in the world, or whether at supper there had been several Norskis, who by design had guided the conversation in such a way as to perplex the assembled company.

And the more energetic gentlemen began to protest in an undertone against certain improper jokes when a new development turned the guests' attention in another direction.

Bronislaw, in a state of infatuation, had kissed the sleek shoulder of an emancipationist who had been diverting him with a treatise on Schopenhauer; and when that preliminary maneuver had been taken in good part, he had followed it up by declaring that he passionately loved her.

The maiden, with great presence of mind, immediately shed a tear of joy. Her uncle (a brawny factory owner), who found himself next to Bronislaw, began to embrace him and tell all who would hear that he could not wish for a better match for his niece.

At that point something most unusual occurred. Young Korkowicz rose from his chair, rubbed his eyes like a man who has just awakened from sleep, and without beating around the bush acknowledged to the woman and her uncle that he had made a mistake because his affections had another object, whom he had searched for in vain at the table.

Fortunately supper was just ending, so the guests could rise from the table and scatter quickly to their homes.

At that painful instant, Providence called Zgierski to save the honor of the Korkowicz family. That prudent gentlemen not only did not rise from the table with the others, but in the name of propriety loudly protested their departure. Worse yet, he did not leave the house with the majority of the guests; he did not even want to budge from his chair. Finally one of the servants retrieved his overcoat, put him into a cab, and saw him to his home.

As fresh air blew over him, Zgierski forgot about the young Korkowicz's misadventure, but recalled his conversation with Magda.

"A sweet, sweet girl," he thought. "I must devote some attention to her. And above all I must gain entree to the Solskis through her, for Mrs. Korkowicz will have my head if I do not become acquainted with them."

Immediately after the guests had gone, Mrs. Korkowicz busied herself with collecting the silver from the servants, while Mr. Korkowicz shut himself into his study for a while in a tete-a-tete with soda water and lemon. What he was thinking about is unknown, but at five in the morning he summoned his wife and son.

Bronislaw presented such a mournful picture that it would have moved the most stoic of mothers. His face was pale and puffy, his look was bleary, his hair was tousled. At the sight of him Mrs. Korkowicz could hardly keep back her tears, but his father did not appear to be touched.

Noticing the soda water on his father's desk, Bronislaw picked up a glass with an uncertain hand and held it to the siphon. But his father pulled the glass out of his hand and shouted:

“Keep your hands to yourself! I didn’t call you in to have you drink up my soda—”

“Piotr, dear,” the mother said pleadingly, “see how he looks!”

“The devil take him!” the older man snapped back. “How did he make me look? What did you—listen to me! —do to Miss Katarzyna? How dare you kiss her on the shoulder, or anywhere at all?”

“Papa has something to shout about,” Bronislaw answered apathetically. “I was confused, that is all. I thought it was Magda.”

“Eh?” his father demanded, rising from his chair.

“Well, then, he thought it was the governess,” Mrs. Korkowicz interposed quickly.

“The governess?” her husband repeated, his attention fully aroused.

“Broniek has too much delicacy to treat a young lady of good family that way as long as he is in his right mind,” said the young man’s mother, winking at him. “Tomorrow he will apologize to the girl and to her uncle, and it will all be over. Why, Katarzyna herself told me, as she said goodbye, that she was taking it as a joke.”

“There is nothing to talk about!” said Bronislaw. “After all, I told her uncle on the spot that I had blundered. Indeed, it was not Katarzyna that I—”

“That you wanted to kiss on the bare flesh—but whom?” his father probed.

“Magda, I told you. There is nothing to be said!” Bronislaw replied, holding a hand over his mouth to cover a yawn.

His father turned blue in the face and struck the desk with his fist so hard that the siphon jumped and the glass fell onto the carpet.

“Cad!” Korkowicz shouted. “Libertine! Do you think I will allow a respectable girl to be compromised in my house?”

“But what is irritating you so, Piotr, dear? When all is said and done, nothing untoward has happened to the governess,” his wife said appeasingly.

“It is because papa is jealous,” muttered Bronislaw.

“Of whom? What are you saying?” his father asked in astonishment.

“Of Magda. You stand as jaunty as a black grouse around her. I’ve seen that time after time.”

“You see, Piotr!” his wife chimed in. “You yourself are a bad example to the boy, and then you make him the object of your anger.”

“I a bad example?” Korkowicz repeated, clutching his head.

“You smile at her. You dance attendance on her. You converse intimately with her,” she said heatedly.

“And, indeed, I am younger than papa, and I can get by with it better—”

His father seized him by the lapel of his frock coat and nearly pushed him into a lamp.

“What kind of man are you?” he said coolly, looking his son in the eye. “I behave like a decent man to a decent girl, and you, you buffoon, dare to say that I stand like a black grouse?”

“Piotr! Piotr, dear!” cried the frightened lady, trying with trembling hands to free her son from his father’s grasp. “Piotr, it was only a joke!”

“Eh!” said the older man, still speaking calmly. “I hear too many jokes in my house. You can get away with flirting because you are younger? All right. Flirt with the girl, but ask immediately for my permission to marry her.”

“Piotr!” his wife burst out. “That is too much!”

“You don’t wish your son to marry a doctor’s daughter?”

“You will drive me to my grave!” she retorted, shaking.

“Aha! Madam is not pleased with this marriage. Well, wait, then. Bronek,” his father said resolutely, “leave home tomorrow and come to the brewery. There is a room there. I will put you to work, my boy. I will set you a good example. You will stand like a black grouse, but by a vat.”

“But, my dear...”

“Don’t open your mouth!” he exploded. “It will be as I say, and that’s enough! You brought the boy up to be a rascal; if the girls were like him, they would go—do you know where? I must look in at the brewery, for things are probably going wrong there... When you hitch an apron to your belt and put those sandals on your bare feet, you will lose your taste for wooing,” he added, turning to his son.

At that moment Bronislaw was paler than when the conversation began, but his look was perfectly lucid. He took his father’s hand and kissed his forearm, blurting out hoarsely:

“Indeed—please, papa, indeed I can propose to Magda.”

“Don’t you dare!” cried his mother. “Over my dead body—”

“First of all, dear boy, go to work, and more of marriage later.”

“Over my dead body! You both want to drive me to my grave!” said the mother hysterically.

“Enough of this comedy,” the father broke in. “I must go to the brewery, and all of you to sleep. Bronek,” he added by way of farewell, “if you harass that teacher, I will beat you as I did two years ago! Remember?”

“I really want to marry her.”

“Take yourself off!”

When Bronislaw and his mother found themselves in the corridor, Bronislaw said in an undertone:

“You see, mama, that the old man is jealous of me! Well, good night.”

He went out to the main hall. Mrs. Korkowicz stood by Magda’s door and said, brandishing her fist:

“Just wait, emancipated one! When I have met the Solskis, I will pay you back for everything.”

Chapter VI. The Solskis Arrive

The day after the magnificent party, neither the elder nor the younger Korkowicz sat down to the table. The next day the son ordered the midday meal to be brought to his room. His father was indeed at the table, but had no appetite, and berated Jan. Only on the third day did Bronislaw appear in the dining room with an aggrieved air, while the older man did not dare to look him in the eye.

Through those heavy days Mrs. Korkowicz complained of migraine, quarreled with her daughters and the servants, slammed doors and conversed with Magda only briefly, making an effort to be civil.

“A fine household!” said Linka to Stasia. “I see from all this that mama and papa must have spent a fortune...”

“And for all that, Bronek was up to some mischief,” rejoined Stasia. “Rumor has it that he made a pass at Katarzyna at dinner.”

“That is ugly!” Magda sternly reprimanded them. “How can you repeat expressions that would embarrass the servants in the kitchen?”

“Oh, please, miss! They told us that in the dressing room.”

“Well, my dears, do not repeat it,” Magda said, kissing both girls.

But inwardly she added:

“Poor Mr. and Mrs. Korkowicz! To be at so much expense for a party, and buy themselves migraine and trouble! Poor people.”

And she waited patiently for the bad humor to disperse, as country people go their ways and wait for foul weather to pass.

Her patience was rewarded even sooner than anyone would have supposed. One day Mrs. Korkowicz came into the schoolroom out of breath but beaming with joy, and exclaimed:

“What do you think, miss? A moment ago Mr. Zgierski was here, and said that the Solskis arrived in Warsaw last night. Today, though, Mr. Solski is going out for a few days to his estate, which borders on our brewery.”

“So they are here?” Magda repeated, feverish with excitement. “Oh, good! Good!”

Mrs. Korkowicz could not refrain from a display of affectionate feeling, which swelled in her like a mountain stream after a rain.

“Dear Miss Magdalena,” she said, embracing Magda, “forgive me if I have caused you pain over the last few days, but I have been so upset... I have been through so much with my husband...”

Astonished at this outpouring of tenderness, Magda replied that she had had no painful experience in the Korkowicz household; indeed, that she considered her stay in it one of the pleasantest periods of her life.

Mrs. Korkowicz hugged her again and added:

“Surely Miss Solska will invite you to come to her, and will visit you herself. I ask you therefore: do not let lessons hinder you. Go out when you like and return when you like. And our drawing room is at your disposal for your guests.”

That evening an old servant of the Solskis brought Magda a letter and told her that a carriage was waiting for her. Mrs. Korkowicz lost all presence of mind. She gave the Solskis’ man a ruble, which he accepted indifferently, wanted him to take a glass of wine, for which he thanked her, and was even ready to drive Magda to Miss Solska’s herself! When Magda, having quickly put on her wraps, hurried from her quarters, Mrs. Korkowicz called both her daughters, Jan, and the maid to the drawing room and ordered them to watch through the windows.

“Look!” she said feverishly. “Miss Solska’s carriage... Pity it’s dark, though it seems rather an old carriage, is that not so, Jan? Oh, she is sitting down. Oh, they are moving. The horses... not impressive...”

Inside the Solski palace, Magda walked up the wide staircase to the second floor, accompanied by the valet. She passed several large apartments filled with furniture shrouded in slipcovers and found herself in front of a closed door, at which the valet knocked.

“Come in! Come in!”

The room was lit by a shaded lamp. Opposite the fireplace, in which several logs were burning, Ada Solska sat on a sofa, wrapped in a shawl.

“You are here at last, you vagabond!” cried Magda, running to her.

“Do not kiss me, you will catch cold! And now, kiss me, but do not look at me,” said Ada. “My dear! My precious! I look awful. Stefan opened the window of the train car yesterday and I caught a cold that will last for ages. Do you hear this voice of mine? Like a sixty-year-old granny! Well, sit here—kiss me again. No one has kissed me for so long! Stefan does it only dutifully, and Helena dislikes caresses. Her lips are cold as marble. Well, say something. How lovely you are! What are you doing, and what do you intend to do? Indeed, it will soon be a year since we have seen each other.”

She held Magda around the waist and covered her with her shawl.

“What can I do, my darling?” Magda answered. “I am a teacher in the Korkowicz home. Next year I will establish a school in Iksinow.”

“That Korkowicz family must be unbearable.”

“You know them?” Magda asked, surprised.

“Oh! Do I know them! For six months they have bombarded us with letters, and only today Kazimierz told me that they are insipid, boastful people.”

“Has Helena arrived?”

“She has been in Berlin for several days, and is arriving with her stepfather.”

“My dear, they are saying here that Helena and Stefan are engaged.”

Ada shrugged her shoulders and raised her eyes to the ceiling.

“How can I answer you?” she said. “They had an understanding, then they broke it off, then they made up, and now the state of the case is unknown. Reportedly they are on good terms. Perhaps they will marry when Helena is out of mourning. If she were to marry someone else today, however, it would not surprise me.”

“Does Stefan love her?”

“I would put it this way: he insists that she marry him.”

“And she?”

“I do not know,” Ada said. “When Stefan flirts with other women, Helena does not hide her jealousy; but when he returns to her, she is cold to him. Perhaps she loves him. It is possible to love Stefan, really it is!”

“And you?”

“I am not as enchanted with Helena as I used to be... do you remember? I do not want to compete with Stefan. But I would be overjoyed for them to marry. Do you know why? There would be children in the house,” Ada said quietly, “beautiful children. And I so love children, even ugly ones.”

She kissed Magda and spoke on.

“All our family, all our acquaintance are offended at this match of Stefan’s. A young woman without dowry, without name... the daughter of a suicide,” she added softly. “But the angrier they are, the more resolved Stefan becomes.”

“Has Stefan gone away now?” Magda asked.

“He went out to our estate. Imagine: he wants to set up a sugar factory! I am very pleased with the project, because Stefan was always in despair about having no goal in life. Now he has a goal, and he says, ‘Either I will improve the lives of a large group of people or I will earn money, which is also worthwhile.’”

“Like our Zdzislaw,” Magda remarked.

“Your brother?” asked Ada. “How is he getting on?”

Magda waved a hand. “Apparently it is our fate not to understand our brothers! Zdzislaw is director of a factory, or of a few factories, near Moscow in which calico is printed. He wrote me, asking me not to tell our parents, and said that he is doing very well but that he will tell me no more at present. Apparently he is thinking of surprising our parents in some way, but I do not understand it. But tell me something about yourself, my dear.”

“Oh, about me!” Miss Solska answered with a sigh. “I wrote a treatise on mushroom reproduction, and now I am working on mosses. I have met several distinguished botanists, who have praised my work—and nothing more. I must have some nervous illness, since in spite of strenuous work I always feel sad, even anxious. Before you came, I was constantly thinking that our house is too

large for me. Can you imagine what a torment it is to have eleven rooms for one little person like myself? I am afraid to walk around them; their vastness and the echo of my own steps unnerves me.

“Today, as evening came on, I ordered the lights to be turned on because I was seized with fear that our ancestors would come out of their portraits and wander about in the empty halls. But I was frightened at the sight of the apartments all brightly lit and empty, and ordered the lights turned out. The same feelings plagued me in palaces in Venice and Rome. That is my life... In Zurich it was a little better, for I had only two rooms, as I had at Mrs. Latter’s. But those days will not return. You see what an unbearable cold I have?” she said, rubbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Move into smaller rooms here, then,” Magda said.

Ada smiled wistfully.

“Do you not know,” she replied, “that the smallest dwellings are huge when we are lonely? Wherever I go I will always be myself, and always alone.”

“Have company.”

“What company? The people who flatter me, or the ones who envy me?”

“Indeed, you have family and acquaintance.”

“Don’t mention them,” retorted Ada with a scornful shrug of her shoulders. “I prefer my mosses to those people! I am not on speaking terms with them. A burden of excommunication weighs on me and especially on Stefan. We have aristocratic minds, but our education made us sympathetic to the interests of other classes. Well, and we have a little knowledge. The fruit of the tree of knowledge drives us out, not only from paradise, but above all from elegant society.”

Supper and tea were served and the two friends sat till midnight, talking of school days.

When Magda reached home, she found a feverish Mrs. Korkowicz in her room.

“And what of Miss Solska?” exclaimed the plump lady, helping Magda out of her wraps.

“She is a little ill. She has a cold.”

“Did she mention us? Please speak frankly.”

“Indeed,” said Magda a little uncomfortably, “she said something about your letters.”

“Good; a magnanimous woman!... Are you too hot in your room? I ordered that it be kept warm... Tomorrow my husband goes to his brewery outside the city, where he will certainly have occasion to speak to Mr. Solski.”

Magda could not sleep until three in the morning. She was excited about Ada’s arrival, but most of all she was moved by the sight of her friend’s low spirits. The image of the wealthy young woman swathed in a shawl and huddled

on the sofa would not leave her imagination—the mistress of eleven rooms that were terrifying when they were dark and still more so when they were lit.

“Is it possible,” she thought, “that Ada is unhappy? She has a huge fortune, and she is sitting there by herself. She is good, she is the best of women, and she cannot find companionship. Surely there is no justice in the world, only chance, which gives goodness to one person and happiness to another.”

She shuddered slightly. She had always heard it said that virtue received its reward, and she had believed it. But an unjust universe had dealt Mrs. Latter and poor Cynadrowski the punishment of death while many evil people enjoyed life and success!

For the next few days the carriage arrived every evening and took Magda to Miss Solska’s. Mrs. Korkowicz was delighted, but suddenly her view changed.

One day Mr. Korkowicz returned from the brewery bristling with anger and immediately came to the dinner table. He greeted the family carelessly and Magda indifferently, sat down, and said to his wife:

“Of all the fool’s errands!”

“How is that? So you did not accomplish your goal?” she asked.

“No more about my goal,” he thundered. “It was not my goal, it was your whim. My goal is to make good beer and to sell as much of it as I can. It is not to drum up acquaintance with the aristocracy.”

“Enough, Piotr, dear!” his wife broke in, turning pale. “You always do things awkwardly. If Zgierski had gone with you...”

“Zgierski is lying. He doesn’t know them, either. Solski is either a hothead or busy—”

“Please, Piotr! Enough!” she interrupted. “Mr. Solski must have been very busy.”

In spite of his anger Mr. Korkowicz ate enough for four, but his wife lost her appetite. After the meal she went with her husband to his study, where a long conference took place.

When at the usual hour of the evening the carriage arrived for Magda, Mrs. Korkowicz, blocking the governess’s way in the corridor, remarked sarcastically:

“You go to the Solskis’ every day. Do they never return your visits?”

“Ada is unwell,” Magda replied in some confusion. “Anyway—”

“It is not my place to call your attention to such things,” said the worthy lady, “but I warn you that with these aristocrats it is necessary to keep a careful accounting. If Miss Solska does not return your visits, I do not know if everything is proceeding properly.”

“Am I still under my parents’ roof?” Magda answered, then quivered for fear Mrs. Korkowicz might take her quick rejoinder as a reproach or affront.

But the effect of this slight impertinence was quite the opposite: her employer was touched.

“Oh, Miss Magdalena,” she said, taking Magda’s hand, “is that the way to answer such a friend as I am? Our home is your home. You are like a daughter to us. You may receive whomever you like in the drawing room. You may even invite the Solskis to dinner—a dinner which, I may say, we will not be ashamed of. If I brought up the matter of returning calls, dear Miss Magdalena, it was entirely for your own good. After all, I cannot allow anyone to show lack of regard for a person who deserves love and respect.”

Magda was experiencing two feelings: a lack of faith in Mrs. Korkowicz’s solicitude, and a fear that she would be bothersome to Ada.

“Mrs. Korkowicz is angry at the Solskis for some reason,” she thought, “but, on the other hand, there is something in what she says. Why do I impose on Ada when I will not be able to maintain an enduring relationship with her—I a governess and she a great lady?”

An hour later, when she found herself with Ada, she was not so at ease as usual. Ada glanced at her and said:

“Is something wrong? You look as if something painful has happened—at home, perhaps?”

“There is nothing wrong with me, dear,” Magda answered with downcast eyes.

At that moment Stefan Solski walked into his sister’s room. Seeing Magda, he stopped, and a light of satisfaction gleamed in his slanted eyes.

“It must be,” he said, “that I am greeting Miss Brzeska. But I confess I would not have recognized you.”

He took both her hands and gazed at her. His nostrils flared as if he were a thoroughbred horse.

“In Rome,” he said, “painters would crowd around you so that you would let them... Well, say, Ada: is this not the personification of goodness? Say, then: among a thousand women, is one such face to be found? Where were my eyes when I saw you for the first time? Ada, you must speak.”

He pressed Magda’s hands, devoured her with his eyes, and advanced toward her with such determination that she had to step back in embarrassment. She did not dare look into those flashing dark eyes.

“Stefan!” his sister admonished, gently pushing him away from Magda. “She will be offended. She hardly knows you.”

Solski grew grave.

“Surely you understand that I would rather lose a hand than offend a friend of yours—and such a friend!”

He walked toward Magda again and again Ada held him back.

“Do not be angry, darling,” she said to Magda, “but Stefan is such an unconstrained being that... whenever anything pleases him, he reaches out immediately, like a child. He is so lively and original that every now and then he makes things awkward for me. Imagine: at an audience with the Holy Father, he was so taken with a statuette of the Virgin that he did not answer the questions.”

Her brother pulled himself away from her and seized Magda’s hand again.

“I swear to you, madam,” he exclaimed, “that I am a good sort of fellow, and Ada quite unnecessarily rings me around with a net of propriety. I admit that I have only today taken my first good look at you. You have a strange expression, which I love.”

Magda hid her reddening face on Ada’s shoulder.

“If you speak in that way, I will never come again,” she answered.

“No? Then I will be mute, but please visit Ada as often as you can. You will be doing a good deed, because my poor sister is quite abandoned. I am very taken up with business, and it is quite likely that she and I will hardly meet once a week.”

Magda was silent. Solski had made a deep impression on her; she felt a wild strength in him which she could not have resisted, but which he had controlled voluntarily out of respect for her.

He stayed for another half hour and they talked cheerfully of Italy and Paris. Ada announced to Magda that she would take her abroad by force sometime.

“You come to know another world,” she said, “cities built differently, fields cultivated differently, other customs, even other values.”

“Other values than where?” her brother asked.

“Than our values here.”

“We have no values,” he smiled.

“You do yourself an injustice.”

“By no means. Only I know myself and my surroundings. I myself have no principles; you have none.”

“And Kazimierz?” his sister asked.

“He least of all.”

“And Dembicki?” she added with a blush.

“Yes, no doubt; he alone. But he is like a course in geometry, where everything is certain, ordered by and dependent on a few axioms. Meanwhile the whole apparatus is dead weight, which, to be sure, gives instructions of inestimable value even on how to move the earth, but cannot itself move a pin.”

Solski was in a good humor, though it was evident that he was curbing himself in deference to Magda. Often he drew near her, but then moved away; sometimes he took her hand and immediately let it go. It seemed that the very

touch of her gown gave him pleasure; his face lit up for an instant, and sparks kindled and died in his slanted eyes.

“Awful man!” Magda thought, feeling that he wielded an influence over her that it was impossible to withstand.

Solski left, still darting looks at his sister’s friend from the door, and soon afterward Magda was saying goodbye to Ada.

“Ada, dear,” she said timidly, “I want to ask you a favor. Do not send for me every day.”

“Are you intimidated by Stefan? Has he annoyed you?” asked Ada, looking at her apprehensively. “But, really, you do not know him. He is the noblest of men!”

“I am sure he is. It has nothing to do with him, but with my employer, who, it sometimes seems to me, envies me my acquaintance with you. But not a word of this, Ada. I may be mistaken—no doubt I am mistaken—about all of it.”

“Oh, what unpleasant people!” Ada replied, frowning. “Kazimierz told me so much about their manners that I almost dislike them. Worse yet, Mr. Korkowicz is absolutely laying siege to Stefan. Stefan returned from the country quite irritated with him.”

“Well, then, you see yourself that I cannot be with you so often,” Magda concluded.

They agreed that Magda should visit Ada every Sunday in the late afternoon, but that the carriage should not be sent.

“Do you know what? You should leave them and come to me,” said Ada.

“How can I? After all, I have an agreement with them.”

Halfway down the staircase they kissed each other again.

Chapter VII. A Clairvoyant Speaks

The autumn came on. In a sky veiled with clouds like thin smoke, the sun did not appear for several days. The cobblestones barely emerged from a flood of mud; the walls of houses took on sullen colors; the air was choked with damp fog turning to fine rain. Drenched sparrows, fleeing from the bare trees, huddled together on cornices and stared at the dark, gloomy buildings.

The Solskis had not visited the Korkowicz family even once, and even Norski, who had been so hospitably received at their home, had not put in an appearance. Mr. Korkowicz stayed at the brewery from morning till evening. Sometimes he even roused himself at night and hurried to the brewery, now and then bumping into his son at the gate as the younger man was returning from supper. Mrs. Korkowicz was preoccupied, and gloomy as the season itself. Once she asked Zgierski, who was often a guest of theirs:

“What is happening at the Solskis’? How well you have kept your word!”

“I do not understand it,” he replied, throwing up his hands. “I did what I could to bring you together. Clearly, however, there are more potent influences than mine.”

“So I surmise!”

“Oh, but—please do not surmise anything!” Zgierski protested, giving her a look that invited her to surmise whatever she liked.

“Just wait, young lady!” Mrs. Korkowicz said to herself. “You will understand the meaning of this saying: ‘With what measure ye mete, it shall be meted unto you again.’”

One day she ordered Jan to summon Magda to her study.

“Miss Brzeska,” she began, “I want to speak to you about a delicate matter.”

Magda blushed.

“I reproach no one,” the lady continued, “because I myself agreed to your plan for my girls’ education. I see, however, that the present system is flawed. Instead of playing the piano and painting, as befits young women in society, they spend the greater part of the day in the dressing room stitching rags or teaching the butler’s son. What is worse, I heard with my own ears as they said that one was not in love with Mr. Stukalski, and that the other loathed Mr. Zacieralski. How awful!”

“Does madam suppose it is my fault?” Magda interrupted spiritedly.

“Excuse me: I do not suppose anything, but I notice a lack of supervision. The girls must have too much free time or they would not occupy themselves with such matters. To keep their attention somewhat more engaged, I have asked Miss Howard to lecture to them three times a week. She is coming this very day.”

Having said this, Mrs. Korkowicz nodded her head as a sign that the conference was ended.

“But... but,” she added, “my girls will soon be so busy that you will surely excuse them from sewing and from their efforts with little Michal.”

In the hall poor Magda felt her eyes fill with tears, and when she reached her room, she cried her heart out.

“God help me!” she thought, weeping, “I cannot succeed as a teacher. How will I live? What will my parents say?”

Miss Howard came that day, and after talking with Mrs. Korkowicz, paid a visit to Magda.

“Dear Miss Magdalena,” she said in her characteristic tone, which left no room for discussion, “do not think for a moment that I am undermining your position. With you the girls can review the school’s course of study, and I will lecture to them upon another subject. It will be the history of women’s influence upon the development of the race, beginning with the mythical Eve, to whom we owe the impulse for scientific investigation, and concluding with Alice Walter, who directed the armies of the United States in the late war.

“I mean no criticism of your system,” she continued. “It is a beautiful thing to foster compassionate feelings in children! I call your attention to the fact, however, that we have too many compassionate women and too few independent ones. So I will teach them independence.”

With that Miss Howard asked to have Linka and Stasia introduced to her, and began her lectures.

At first both girls accepted the new instructor reluctantly. They said that she was homely, and that she could not be a good woman because she had reddish hair. They also complained that they understood nothing of the history of the influence of women on human development. But when after a few days Miss Howard recommended a course of horseback riding to them, they were delighted.

They became as ardently absorbed in riding as they had been in teaching little Michal a month before. They wore riding habits and tall hats; they traded hunting crops back and forth; they chatted for whole days about their new friends and how this one or that one held herself in the saddle, or how beautiful it would be in the spring, when they could arrange a trail ride in the country.

Stukalski, the piano teacher, and Zacieralski, the painter, were put on the shelf. Their places in Linka’s and Stasia’s hearts were occupied by other gentlemen: by Galopowicz and Wybuchowski, the young, good-looking assistants to the owners of a horse market.

Magda could not assign them lessons to be done in their spare time; both girls studied only with her, and only for love of her. As soon as a lecture ended, books and copybooks were left on the table, and Linka and Stasia ran to the dressing room to change into their riding habits.

Magda's position in the Korkowicz household was becoming more and more difficult. Often she grew despondent and wished she could leave her employer, then beg Miss Malinowska for work at the school or opportunities to give private lessons. But then she reasoned with herself:

"What, then—will I change places every quarter? Every situation has its painful aspects, and one is obliged to see it through. Furthermore, my girls will tire of riding, and then I will not have so much trouble with them. I have had too many advantages in my life, so I lose my courage easily."

When once she complained to Miss Howard that the girls showed less and less desire for learning and were daring to the point of rashness, Miss Howard was amazed.

"How is this?" she said. "So you are not happy to see girls developing independence? Or is it only boys who should show a zest for physical exercise? Do only boys have the privilege of speaking loudly and moving boldly? Oh, Miss Magdalena, the days are past when artful blushes and lowered eyes were womanly graces! Fearlessness, resourcefulness in the most difficult situations—these are the qualities of the new women."

One day Magda received another summons from Mrs. Korkowicz.

"I noticed that you are keeping the girls at their lessons longer and longer," the lady said. "So much work cannot be good for you or for them, so I have written to inform Mr. Dembicki that his niece cannot study in our home."

"You have sent the letter?" Magda exclaimed anxiously.

"Yes. And Mr. Dembicki agrees with me."

"But... surely I did not deserve this!" Magda replied. "That child was no trouble to our girls. What will I say to Mr. Dembicki?"

Magda was weeping; Mrs. Korkowicz was uneasy. She quickly abandoned her stern tone and spoke affectionately.

"But I was thinking of your welfare, Miss Magdalena... I was concerned about you," she said, reminding herself inwardly that if Magda left her, her last hope of meeting the Solskis would disappear. Yes—perhaps they would visit Magda sometime, after all.

One evening—it was a weeknight, not Sunday—Ada's carriage appeared in front of the Korkowicz house again, and the Solskis' valet gave Magda a letter.

"The day before yesterday," Miss Solski had written, "Helena returned from abroad with her stepfather and his family. Today they are all taking tea with me, so come, for they want to meet you."

Mrs. Korkowicz willingly agreed that Magda should go; so, dressed in a new gown and full of apprehension, she rode away.

In the Solskis' entrance hall, one of the servants stopped the valet and whispered something to him. After a moment Ada's maid hurried in; upon

seeing Magda she withdrew, but immediately returned and invited Magda to the drawing room.

“But be so gracious, madam, as to go in very quietly and stop near the doorway, for there is a lady in the room who is calling forth the spirits,” said the maid, who was clearly in a state of excitement.

“What lady?”

“The wife of Miss Norska’s and Mr. Norski’s stepfather. It will be about fifteen minutes now since she got the spasms that come when the inspiration falls on her.”

Magda walked carefully through the half-open door of Ada’s drawing room. Pausing on the threshold, she witnessed a bizarre spectacle. In the center of the room, behind a table, sat a woman perhaps thirty years old, with eyes transfixed and hair loose, like a lion’s mane. Her face was remarkable for its strange expression, in which astonishment seemed mixed with a sense of impending danger. Beside her stood a handsome dark-haired man who appeared to be asking something. The other people who were sitting here and there in the room looked on, spellbound.

The man repeated his question, but the woman did not answer. She turned her eyes to Magda and suddenly reached out with one hand, calling out in English in a resonant voice:

“Here is the bride!”

She closed her eyes, frowned like a person who is brooding over something very difficult, and added in a tone of amazement:

“How extraordinary... I do not see the bridegroom! But he is great and powerful... oh, powerful!”

Her head fell onto the arm of her chair, and an expression of deep weariness appeared on her face.

“I do not want... I do not want to!” she repeated several times, rubbing her eyes with her hands.

The dark-haired man bent over her and blew on her face for several minutes.

“Was I sleeping?” the clairvoyant asked at length, laughing, but speaking in an altered voice.

When Magda looked at her again, it seemed that a different woman was sitting behind the table. Her eyes had lost their ominous glare. Her rapt expression had given way to a normal, then a playful look. She rose from her chair and went to a sofa, laughing and wiping away tears.

“Ah! I must have a moment’s peace and quiet,” she said in English. “It never used to tire me so.”

Then came introductions and greetings. Ada introduced the handsome dark-haired man to Magda. He was the Norskis’ stepfather, Arnold Latter. Then

she introduced his wife, who was still shaking off her drowsiness. Then Solski hurried over to Magda and greeted her warmly. After him came Kazimierz, who appeared a little troubled, and then Dembicki, who was characteristically abstracted and impassive.

Only Helena Norska did not get up from her chair, and when Magda, detaching herself from those who surrounded her, went over to her, Helena, extending her hand from afar, said in Polish in a tone of delicate irony:

“My dear, you must certainly marry Bismarck if your bridegroom is going to be great and powerful, as the oracle says.”

This greeting Magda found disconcerting. But at that moment Arnold said to Helena in broken Polish:

“Do not speak facetiously. That same oracle foretold your mother’s death.”

“But she promised Kazik and me that everything would be as we intended it should,” Helena rejoined with a careless smile that was not in keeping with her black gown or her stepfather’s words.

Ada drew near Magda, took her arm and whispered with a smile:

Well, well! Confess: who is the potentate you have been setting your cap for? What a pity,” she sighed, “that your future husband must be great and powerful! If he were noble and clever, I would have thought that Stefan was destined for you.”

“You are all making fun of me!” Magda answered, a little taken aback on realizing that Mrs. Arnold’s prediction had made her the center of attention, at least for the moment.

“Let us go and see the professor,” said Ada, who had noticed her brother conversing in a corner with Dembicki.

“What do you think of this omen, professor?” she inquired as she approached them.

Dembicki turned his blue eyes on her and planted his hand on his lapel, intending to answer, when he was beaten to the mark by an impatient Solski.

“Imagine! He does not believe in spiritualism! He says it is either quackery or a special type of madness.”

“Indeed, he believes in a transcendental world,” Ada exclaimed. “He has even delineated it with the aid of a mathematical formula. So how can he be skeptical about spiritualism?”

“I warn you,” Solski said, addressing Magda, “that my sister is a thoroughgoing atheist. She has listened to Haeckel, as if that were not enough! But her atheism did not hinder her from going to Czestochowa when we returned from abroad—or from believing in the rapping spirits.”

“I doubt,” said Dembicki after a moment’s reflection, “that creatures of the transcendental world could communicate with us.”

“Why?” asked Ada.

“Could you communicate, madam, with oysters, for example?” Dembicki said didactically. “Would you think it of any use to spend time explaining to them what the world is, as we see and hear it? In the end, would there be the slightest possibility of interpreting our world to beings who have neither sight nor hearing? Only think: we lack the faculties to apprehend the transcendental world just as oysters lack the hearing to be delighted by our operas, and the visual sense to appreciate the beauty of our landscapes.”

Kazimierz approached the chatting group with a smile.

“Oho!” he said. “I see that the professor has taken up his favorite subject: what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.”

“You do not believe in it?” Ada asked hesitantly, glancing first at Kazimierz and then at Dembicki, who looked like a caricature of a man next to the handsome young Norski.

“I believe what I see.”

“Do you see America?” asked Dembicki.

“Others have seen and see it.”

“And do you see the revolution of the earth around the sun, and its axis?”

“I know nothing about that,” replied Kazimierz cheerfully.

Dembicki and Solski looked at one another.

“I cannot help but suspect,” Norski said to the ladies, “that otherworldly theories come into being to comfort the unfortunate who are shut out of this world. Transcendentalism compensates them for the hunger of their senses. People to whom the attractions of the temporal world are accessible, however, are robbing themselves if they waste time on these speculations. It is as if a thirsty person longed for a painted peach instead of eating one fresh and newly ripened.”

“Poet!” laughed Solski, with a look at Magda.

“A poet of the present time,” added Dembicki.

“Do you think other times are coming?” asked Ada.

“They are always here. Only they are always standing outside the door for those who like the peaches as they ripen.”

Helena made her way to Magda, took her aside, and sat down with her on a sofa.

“What is this?” she said, looking at her fan. “Are you beginning to flirt with Solski?”

“I?”

“He is charmed with you. He confided in me. We are friends, after all.”

“And you ought to be his wife,” Magda replied in a tone so unconstrained that Helena looked at her alertly.

Magda quickly moved closer to her and began speaking quietly:

“What are you doing, Helena? Why do you procrastinate and vex a man your mother wanted—wanted so much for you?”

“She did?”

“Believe me, she did. Believe me. And it grieved her very much when she heard that you had broken off—”

Helena shifted on the couch.

“Oh, I know something about this! My mother, my brother and even my stepfather always told me what a fine match it would be. I don’t wonder at the rest of them, but mother! I have hardly any legacy from her but this, that I am not capable of selling myself. Whoever wants to possess me must give all of himself to me. I do not care for beauty of person, but for mutual proprietorship. Do you think that I do not know what marriage is, and what role it confers upon a woman? For all those dreadful impositions, let me have something in return. So if I bestow on someone the happiness of having me as the mother of his child, let that someone appreciate what I am giving him.”

“You do not love Solski, then?” Magda said, surprised. “Surely a woman never yet spoke of marriage in that way.”

“Not here, in this country full of geese. But talk with American women, Swedish women... It is only in such places that a woman appreciates her own worth! Those women understand that a man is above all else a hungry animal. So if I am going to be eaten, let him pay me what my body is worth... though they are the ones who appraise its value among themselves,” she added with a laugh.

“And so, madam, your husband must be Bismarck,” Kazimierz broke in, giving Magda his hand.

Mrs. Arnold reached for Dembicki’s arm, her husband took Ada’s, Solski took Helena’s, and they all went through to the dining room.

“I would wager that you were speaking with Miss Magdalena about women,” Solski said.

“That is a good guess,” Helena answered.

“And may one ask—what did you conclude?”

“As always—that you do not deserve us.”

“It sometimes seems to me that you are right.”

“That is excellent: ‘sometimes!’” Helena laughed. “Oh, you must change. You must change very much. Finally, let women band together—”

“What for?”

“For the defense, if not of their rights, at least of feminine dignity, against you,” she answered, leaning against him.

Solski pressed her hand and said, looking passionately into her eyes:

“I swear, madam, that you have something of the lioness in you: beautiful and dangerous. Ready to wound in the midst of caresses.”

“Caresses! What do you mean?” she replied, darting a glance at him. “There is nothing strange in this, that those who were your kittens grow into lionesses. At this age all creatures grow more powerful.”

During dinner Mrs. Arnold several times touched on the subject of the new religion, spiritualism, which had many thousands of adherents in America.

“And of what use will this new faith be?” asked Norski, trying to keep a straight face.

“How many times must I tell you?” Mrs. Arnold exclaimed in French. “It is a religion that continually furnishes evidence of a world beyond the grave, in which the happiness of every soul depends on how it behaved on earth. In this way it restrains people from evil and encourages virtue. Furthermore, spiritualism teaches us that all people and all living creatures constitute one family over which love should rule.”

“Love! Right you are!” Kazimierz chimed in.

“Do you agree?” Solski asked Helena.

“Indeed, provided that love gives rise to actions.”

“Moreover,” Mrs. Arnold said with rising zeal, “spiritualism allows us to maintain relationships with the dead.”

“It does?” asked Magda.

“Oh, not that!” Helena said, shuddering. “I am so lacking in a sense of the supernatural that I would be frightened.”

“And are there not spirits who would show people hidden treasures?” Kazimierz inquired.

“Certainly. They have said that a person carries the greatest treasures within himself,” answered Mrs. Arnold.

Dembicki looked at her attentively and nodded his head.

It was a lively dinner. Only Dembicki, though he sat opposite Helena, appeared downcast and kept his eyes on his plate, while Magda, who sat next to Norski, sometimes blushed and then grew pale again, and seemed at moments to want to leave the table.

Afterward Solski took Dembicki aside and said with a laugh:

“I see that you have no taste for Miss Norska, professor.”

“That is by no means the case,” replied Dembicki, shrugging his shoulders. “Only I do not understand how you could be—infatuated with her.”

"I like the sport of it," Solski answered. "When there is a storm, something draws me out for a walk. When I see a steep mountain, I want to climb it."

"I should think that a steep mountain ought not to be an incentive for excursions."

"But... there is something that causes just those things that are inaccessible and dangerous to wield a magnetic influence over a man."

"Over some men," Dembicki observed. "At any rate, I do not see how Miss Helena could be dangerous."

"How?" Solski returned. "With her egotism, her deification of herself, before whom all the world should grovel. In her eyes every man is dust. There is satisfaction in possessing such a woman!"

"Is it worth the trouble?"

"What is worth it, then?" Solski asked heatedly. "I have fought duels and come away with scars, or with damage to my conscience. Near Capri I was shipwrecked during a storm, but I only suffered a dislocated foot. A lion tore my trousers when I went up to his cage. The belching fire of Vesuvius nearly blinded me with ashes and gave me sneezing fits. And they call that the drama of life? The devil take them! Meanwhile, the possession of a beautiful, self-assertive woman will give me a moment's thrill, and I will not be drenched or break my bones or suffer other injuries. Let me have something of consequence in my life, or of what use is all my money?"

"Are you gentlemen still speaking of spiritualism?" inquired Magda, approaching them warily.

"Of something much more difficult," Solski quickly rejoined. "We are speaking of happiness. At sometime or other you must have thought: what is happiness?"

"Happiness?" Magda repeated. "When all is well with those around one, a person feels happy."

"That is other people's happiness!" Solski said. "But what happiness do you imagine for yourself?"

"Surely the greatest happiness comes when one can do good, does it not?" she asked, looking at Dembicki and then at Solski with eyes full of wonder.

"And that sort of happiness would be enough for you?" Solski persisted.

"Heavens—yes!" she exclaimed. "After all, there is nothing better in the world, and a person cannot even need anything more."

"Indeed," Dembicki observed phlegmatically, "a person may still need to jump in the sea, tumble down precipitous mountains, fight duels—"

"What are you saying?" Magda expostulated. "Those things are quite opposed to happiness."

“We do not understand each other, dear lady,” said Dembicki, pressing her hand. “You are a normal, healthy person, and we—sick and degenerate. Our nerves are so jaded that we are not only unable to feel other people’s joy, we cannot even feel our own. Only physical pain reminds us that we exist.”

“Well, well!” remarked Solski. “Neither egotism or a need for the drama of life is a sign of jaded nerves.”

“They are! They are!” Dembicki contradicted him. “Fine violins even emit their sounds when some other tone resounds near them. But in order to get a sound from a stone, you must shatter it with a hammer. Altruism is the fine violin that all healthy beings carry in their hearts, whereas these strong impressions from what you call the drama of life are a hammer—the hammer it takes to break the stone.”

“I do not know what you two are talking about,” Magda said, blushing and turning away to join the other women.

“What do you think of that?” asked Dembicki, inclining his head in Magda’s direction. “Isn’t it better than a sheer rocky ledge?”

“A dream... a vision!” Solski replied meditatively. “If not a comedy well played out,” he added after a moment. “Women who choose can deck themselves with wings and rainbows, whereas all wisdom advises us, while pretending that we believe them, to take the beloved angels for what they are in reality.”

“And what are they?”

“Females, weaker than males, whom consequently they must always be exploiting with the aid of various strategies. Some pose as angels, others as demons, as necessary.”

“And as what does your sister pose?” asked Dembicki, looking sternly at Solski.

“Oh!” he burst out. “Ada is a saint. She is an exceptional woman.”

“Be more careful with your theories, then, for there may be other exceptions.”

It had grown late. The conversation in the room broke off, and the guests began saying their goodbyes.

“May I take you home?” Kazimierz asked Magda.

“Thank you. Perhaps Mr. Dembicki will look after me,” Magda answered.

“You see, professor, how your faith is rewarded,” Solski said.

“Not a very heartening repayment!” Kazimierz remarked.

“Magda, thank Mrs. Arnold for that favorable prediction,” Ada teased, “though I would have preferred that a less impressive bridegroom be predestined for you.”

On the way home, Magda began to explain to Dembicki why Mrs. Korkowicz had dismissed his niece, Zosia, from her house. But he interrupted her:

“It was only because you were there that I sent Zosia into that household. Today I am content that things went as they did because—they are peculiar people. I expect that you will leave them before long.”

Guessing that Dembicki must have heard details of her relationship with the Korkowicz family, Magda changed the subject and asked him what he thought of the party they had just left.

“What?” he replied, squinting in the glare of a streetlight as they rolled by it. “We passed the time in a way less banal than at the ordinary evening affair. But as for the people...”

He rubbed the end of his nose and said:

“Both the Solskis are beautiful characters—I have known them for a long time—but they have little purpose in life. A little poverty would do them good! Mr. Arnold is, it seems, a very decent person; his wife is a bit too apt to embrace dogma, a bit hysterical. Women who are pampered and allowed a great deal of freedom easily fall into a habit of caring too much for their whims, and then slide into hysteria.”

“Do you have nothing to say about the Norskis?” Magda asked quietly.

“What is to be said about them?” he countered. “This, no doubt, that they are fond of the pleasures of life and lack any sense of its obligations. The lack of obligation torments Solski and prods him to devise artificial goals, but Norski knows nothing of such suffering.”

“You do not like the Norskis?” Magda ventured, recalling the bitter interchange between Dembicki and Helena at Mrs. Latter’s school.

He shook his head and said after a moment’s reflection:

“Excuse me, but even if I wished to, I would not be able to dislike anyone.”

“I do not understand.”

“You see, every person comprises two parts, as we learn from the catechism. One is a very complex automaton, which may inspire pity, contempt, sometimes admiration. The other is the divine spark, which may burn brighter or more feebly, but in each person is worth more than all the world.

“Add to that that both parts are so closely connected that a person, taken as a whole, may evoke in us at the same time both contempt and the most profound respect, and you understand what the consequence of those feelings must be.”

“Nothing?” Magda inquired.

“No. Sympathy insofar as the spirit is uppermost, and objectivity when the automaton predominates. It is not possible to hate a person in any case, knowing that sooner or later he will lose his gangrenous shell and become a being of infinite nobleness.”

“You also believe in spirits?”

“The rapping kind? No!”

The carriage stopped. Dembicki helped Magda alight and rang at the gate.

Magda had hardly reached her room when Mrs. Korkowicz appeared with her hair in papers, wearing a petticoat and a bed jacket that set off the robust amplitude of her bosom.

“It is two o’clock!” she said fretfully. “Have you been with the Solskis all this time?”

“Yes.”

“How cheerfully they pass their time—not like working people. Did Mr. Solski bring you home?”

“Mr. Dembicki.”

“The two of you must—” here she faltered and then added:

“Mr. Dembicki must be displeased with me!”

Magda was silent. But since a shadow appeared on her usually pleasant face, Mrs. Korkowicz said goodnight.

When Magda had turned out the light, vague images of Ada’s drawing room began to pass before her eyes. She saw Mrs. Arnold’s transfixed eyes and the lion’s mane of her hair, and around her the beautiful figures of Arnold and the Norskis as well as the homely faces of the Solskis and Dembicki. And—it was strange—at the very moment when the details of these portraits grew indistinct, each face displayed its characteristic expression. Arnold was absorbed in his wife, Dembicki was profoundly abstracted, in Solski something flamed and seethed. Resignation was written on Ada’s face, Helena exuded pride and anger, while Kazimierz had no particular expression, rather an insouciance that she found painful to see.

“The divine spark is not at full flame!” she thought.

Suddenly something new appeared among the shadows: Mrs. Korkowicz in her bed jacket, with her hair in papers and antagonism in her eyes. She seemed so comical that Magda was overcome with embarrassment for her, and pity.

“The divine spark is not at full flame!” she told herself again, trying not to look at Kazimierz, who with his mocking smile, his beauty of face and figure and elegant movements, nevertheless seemed to her even more trivial than Mrs. Korkowicz and her petty quarrels.

She remembered nothing of the clairvoyant’s prediction concerning herself, which she had already dismissed as a misreading of the omens.

Chapter VIII. A Governess's Lot

Through the ensuing days Mrs. Korkowicz choked back her anger, alluding ambiguously to the idleness of the rich and the late return home. Magda pretended not to notice.

The lady's exasperation intensified. At dinner one day, after serving herself from the bowl Jan was handing around, she said to him:

"Now serve Mr. Korkowicz."

And when Jan hesitated, confused by this departure from habit, she pushed him toward her husband.

"And Miss Brzeska?" asked the astonished master of the house.

"Take your portion, please."

Korkowicz shrugged his shoulders but served himself, leaving his spouse to a moment of unmitigated triumph.

"Now serve Miss Brzeska," she commanded.

Linka looked at her mother. Stasia, furious, glanced at Magda. Bronislaw, enormously gratified, put out his tongue at Stasia. Without losing her composure, Magda took her helping from the dish, only turning a little pale. It was clear that she was forcing herself to eat.

The scene was repeated when the other dishes were served.

Immediately after the meal both girls ran after Magda and began speaking at the same time:

"Think nothing of it. In a week mama will apologize, but now she is in such a bad humor that papa himself is afraid of her. Even we ... Now mama and Bronek are running over everyone in the house, but in a week..."

"And perhaps your mama does not wish me to be your teacher?" Magda said calmly.

Stasia began to cry. Linka knelt in front of Magda.

"Oh, miss!" they said, interrupting each other again. "How can you suspect such a thing? I would die. I would run away from home. Oh, the whole world is no use without you! Swear that you will never leave us."

They cried so pathetically, they hugged Magda so tightly, that she cried along with them and promised never to leave.

Miss Howard continued to lecture the girls several times a week, but the sentimental Stasia as well as the sterner Linka found her presentations increasingly difficult to understand. Miss Howard could not succeed in explaining to the one pupil or the other, for example, why the disobedient Eve, the curious wife of Lot or the bloodthirsty Judith were women of the higher sort, whereas Penelope was a distasteful embodiment of woman as captive. Often Stasia said to Linka:

"I wonder why Miss Howard finds Penelope so irritating. If her husband did not die but only went away, she was obliged to wait for him. Anyway, she would not have been allowed to marry anyone else."

"Mama waits for papa so many times, and no one finds it strange!" Linka observed.

"Do you know," Stasia said quietly, "I do not even like those heroines. Did Eve do well, snatching knowledge at any cost, while all of us are doing penance for her action today?"

"What? You believe in the wisdom of Eve?" Linka retorted. "Why, did she go to a university like Miss Solska, or what? I think, and anyway Bronek told me, that there was something else about that apple."

"And Judith!" Stasia said in a preachy tone. "Frankly, I would never have cut off Holofernes' head."

"Indeed, he might have awakened," Linka added.

For the reasons given above, both girls were heartily bored with Miss Howard's lectures about the role of women in history, beginning with the mythical Eve, who gave humankind its impulse for rigorous investigation, and concluding with Alice Walter, who led the Army of the United States. Stasia and Linka were unmoved even by the important fact that male historians habitually omitted to mention that a woman had commanded the Union army, and that, according to the very latest information, that commander had not been Alice Walter but Elvira Cook, or perhaps someone else.

Stasia and Linka yawned unceremoniously during the lectures or nudged each other's feet under the bench, though they were happy to chat with Miss Howard about current events and household matters.

Consequently when, after the scene at the midday meal, Miss Howard arrived with a new chapter demonstrating that the heterae were the most independent women in Greece, Linka and Stasia began vying to tell her about their mother's bad humor, about how the order of service at the table had changed, and most of all about the goodness of Miss Magdalena, who was a saint and an angel.

Miss Howard listened with horror to this narrative. Then, abridging her lecture, she made her way to Magda's room.

"Is it true," she demanded, "that Mrs. Korkowicz, contrary to decency and habit, ordered that you be served after her husband?"

"Where is the harm?" Magda replied. "Mr. Korkowicz is old enough to be my father."

"Ah! So you forget your sex and position."

"I do not understand..."

"Through the long continuum of the ages," Miss Howard intoned with the look of one who is inspired, "woman—ragged, exploited, cheated—

struggled against man and won this at least, that in external forms of behavior he acknowledged her as superior to himself: on the street, in the drawing room, at the table, he gave her precedence. So in my opinion a woman who relinquishes that privilege betrays the collective womanhood of which she is part.”

“What should I do?” asked Magda, overwhelmed by this flood of eloquence.

“Fight! Force Mr. Korkowicz to admit his mistake and see that you receive the deference that is due you.”

“But I am only a hired teacher here.”

Miss Howard’s forehead, her face and even her neck went crimson.

“All the more reason!” she cried. “Evidently you do not understand how lofty a teacher’s position is, how the importance of the teacher towers high as the sky, even above the importance of parents. For we create the mind of the child, its independence, its sense of itself, while parents only give it a body. No doubt you will immediately appreciate which is more difficult.”

“Please, ma’am, I do not know,” Magda answered diffidently.

Because it occurred to Miss Howard that she really did not know which of those activities was the more difficult either, she shrugged her shoulders and, nodding to Magda, left the room.

Another few weeks went by. The first snow fell and changed into a layer of mud. Then a light frost set in; then a second snow fell, whitening the streets and roofs. In Mrs. Korkowicz’s heart, however, aversion to Magda did not cool, but heated as the lady struggled with her fear that she would have to renounce her hope of making the acquaintance of the Solskis and bringing about a match between Bronislaw and Ada.

“Wicked girl!” thought the respectable lady. “These are the thanks I get for the affection and the privileges I gave her. After all, it is in her own interest to whisper a word to the Solskis. Surely she understands that when I meet them I can raise her wages, whereas in the opposite case she will be treated like a governess. Is she stupid or evil? I do not know.”

One Sunday, when Magda had returned from a visit to the Solskis in such a good humor that her gray eyes were full of laughter, Mrs. Korkowicz said in an icy tone:

“Tomorrow I will order you to be moved to another room... for a while,” she added, afraid of alienating Magda.

“Why, madam?” Magda asked. A wrinkle appeared on her forehead even before the playful expression faded from her eyes.

“There must be insects in your room.”

“How could there be? You are mistaken, madam.”

“Perhaps. In any case I want to give the room new wallpaper and even rebuild the heating stove,” she added gently, noticing Magda’s flashing eyes and the flaring of her little nostrils.

“At any rate,” Mrs. Korkowicz concluded, “it will only be for a while. When all is said and done, I cannot allow you to freeze.”

The last words were said in such a motherly tone that the anger which had begun to smoulder in Magda died down, and she felt only concern that her tone or expression might have caused Mrs. Korkowicz pain. Magda never wanted to cause anyone pain; so much did she prefer to suffer herself and spare others that she was not fit for anything all evening. She was ready to apologize to Mrs. Korkowicz and even to admit that her room had a faulty stove and ugly wallpaper.

The next day Magda’s things were taken to a new room. It was small and dark, not only because of its old wallpaper, but also because the window looked out on the gable end of the neighboring building, which was only a few steps away. An iron bed, a little lacquered table, two bentwood chairs and, instead of a washstand, a basin on an iron tripod: those were its furnishings. The maid in charge of the dressing room had better quarters in Mrs. Korkowicz’s house.

Tears welled in Magda’s eyes.

“They want to be rid of me,” she thought, “but why do it this way? Do I not deserve to have them simply tell me that I am not needed?”

She decided to go to Mrs. Korkowicz and ask to be released from her obligations without delay.

“Indeed,” she told herself, “I have well over a hundred rubles from home and from the major, and that will be enough to live on for at least six months. I could even move in with Miss Howard and find work giving lessons. Miss Malinowska and Mr. Dembicki, who is so goodhearted, have not abandoned me.”

Just then Linka and Stasia came running into the dark little room, both in tears. They flung themselves on Magda’s neck, declaring that they were beginning to despair of their mother, and they both beseeched her by her love for them, for her parents and for God not to be offended.

“Papa was awfully angry at mama about this move,” Linka whispered. “But mama explained that that room needed renovation and that you would only be staying in this one for a few days. So papa was a little calmer, but he said he would leave home if mama did not give you back that room, refurbished.”

Then once more both girls began pleading with Magda not to be angry, because their mother must be sick with a liver ailment just then and therefore in a bad humor.

What could Magda do? Again she swore to the girls that she would never leave them, and began to reproach herself inwardly.

“Why have I become so quarrelsome? The room is not that bad; indeed, there is even something pleasant about it. And what if I had to stay in a garret or a basement? How much better and more beautiful this room is than the residence of the teacher in Iksinow or the carpenter from whom I intended to order the

benches, or poor Stella's dirty lodgings in that inn. On the whole, this is quite a pretty room!"

The next day, during the lecture on the role of women in history, from the mythical Eve to the mysterious leader of the United States Army, Linka and Stasia told Miss Howard about Miss Brzeska's move to the dark room and the latest evidence that she was a saint and an angel. Because Magda was not in the room, Miss Howard demanded to see it, and having done so, she walked out, muttering through her teeth:

"Humanity needs no angels, only independent women who value their dignity."

That same evening a messenger came with letters to Magda and Mrs. Korkowicz from Miss Howard. Both were uncharacteristically concise. The apostle of emancipation informed Magda that she could no longer maintain friendly relations with a person so deficient in respect for her womanly dignity. To Mrs. Korkowicz she wrote that she could not think of giving lectures any longer in a household in which there was no understanding of the exalted position of a teacher, and in which a working woman was disrespectfully treated.

Mrs. Korkowicz read through the missive once, then twice. Suddenly striking her forehead, she cried:

"She wants to drive me to my grave, this lunatic!"

Until late that night the lady's spasms and vituperations against Miss Howard dragged on as the question burned through her brain: who could have told Miss Howard about Magda's new room?

The next day, however, Mrs. Korkowicz told Magda tearfully that she had had no intention of treating her disrespectfully and that she would have her moved back into her former room as soon as possible if she would use her influence to conciliate Miss Howard, the most distinguished teacher in Warsaw.

In answer, Magda showed Mrs. Korkowicz the letter she herself had received from Miss Howard. Mrs. Korkowicz read it through and was thunderstruck.

"She has risen against you!" she exclaimed. "She is a worse—I mean—she is a more zealous emancipationist than you."

An hour later she said to her husband:

"Soon the wardrobe women and cooks, instead of tidying up and preparing food, will be prating about their womanly dignity. Heavens, what an awful epidemic this emancipation is! If I do not give my governess whole drawing rooms, another governess repays me with impertinence."

"Well, you can have no quarrel with Miss Magdalena. That quiet little thing..." said the master of the house.

"Your Miss Magdalena is worse than the Howard woman!" she exploded. "That underhanded girl... It was that proselytizer who made our girls give lessons to the butler's boy and sew clothes for brats off the street."

“Let her go, then.”

“Aha, what then?” she countered. “After all, perhaps she will finally come to realize that if she provides us with an entree to the Solskis, she can have anything her heart desires.”

“And if she does not arrive at this realization, or they do not want to meet us?”

“Then she will leave this house!” the lady said in a tone of exasperation. “At any rate,” she added meditatively, “we are not wasting our money on her. When I have taken her down a peg, she will not be a bad governess.”

Her husband hung his head in despair and flung up his hands. His business taxed him so that he had no strength for a struggle with his wife.

“Do as you please!” he whispered.

In the meantime Miss Howard was telling both acquaintances and strangers about Mrs. Korkowicz’s arrogance and Miss Brzeska’s lack of womanly dignity. This news, circulating more and more widely, reached Miss Malinowska’s school from one direction and from another, the ear of Ada Solska.

Chapter IX. At Last: A Visit

At around noon one day some time after Christmas, Jan called Miss Brzeska and the girls to the drawing room. Magda, stopping for a moment in the doorway, looked in a mirror and saw two nuns in navy blue gowns and white hats like large butterflies. It was such an unusual sight in the drawing room that she was alarmed.

“These are my daughters. This is Miss Brzeska, a friend of Miss Solska,” Mrs. Korkowicz said to the nuns.

Bows followed. The young ladies each kissed the hands of both nuns. Magda sat near the younger of them, saw their mirrored reflections again in the mirror opposite the sofa, and shuddered without knowing why.

“These beneficent ladies,” Mrs. Korkowicz said ceremoniously, “have been so gracious as to visit us on their way to our hospital in Korkow—”

“In order to thank you for your generous gifts to the hospital,” the older nun interposed. “They will be very useful, for typhus is rampant in the vicinity.”

“That is—I am embarrassed to say—the case,” said Mrs. Korkowicz. “But, sisters, since you are so appreciative of the donors—much greater credit is due Miss Solska, who responded very courteously to my letter of request and offered a thousand rubles for the hospital. A noble woman! I would be most happy if you ladies visited her in particular, and made a point of mentioning that you will never forget the beautiful gesture which, through my mediation...”

Magda glanced aside and saw the nuns’ headdresses again in the third mirror: nuns on the sofa, nuns from the front, nuns from the right side and from the left. They appeared, not as four pairs, but as two unending rows reflected in the side mirrors. After a few moments the white wimples, the hands folded on the chests, began to unnerve her.

“Have you been in the convent long, madam?” she asked the younger nun.

“This is my seventh year.”

“But you can leave the order when you please?”

“I do not think of doing so.”

“You will remain as you are all your life?”

The nun smiled gently.

“To ladies in the world, the convent seems a prison,” she said. “But we are happy that we have reached our harbor in life.”

The older nun joined in the conversation, saying with a look at Magda:

“I also knew, among the Nuns of the Visitation, Mother Felicissima, who in her other life bore the name Brzeska, though I do not remember her given name. Were you not related to her family?”

The question almost terrified Magda.

“She was my father’s aunt, Wiktoria Brzeska,” she said in a muffled voice.

“Of course you could not have known her, because she has been dead for twenty years,” said the nun. “She was a person of exceptional piety, so steeped in prayer and ascetic practice that it was often necessary to impose prohibitions on her.”

Mrs. Korkowicz turned the conversation to the hospital again, and the magnanimity of Ada Solska. As the nuns said their farewells, the older one kissed Magda and said:

“I am always in residence in Warsaw. If you would ever care to visit me, dear child, I would be grateful. Your great aunt was very good to me, and I loved her very much.”

After their departure, fear and sadness overtook Magda. As a child she had heard stories about how her great aunt Wiktoria had taken the veil, which was said to be like going to her grave. Later she had had several encounters with nuns, always under painful circumstances: at a sickbed, by a coffin.

Today all these mournful memories had revived, and beyond that it seemed to her that from the right side and the left she saw endless rows of nuns.

“What an appalling life!” she thought. “To remain shut away in eternal prison, to break off with one’s family, to renounce one’s friends, to see the world only through a grating—and never any goal, any hope. Oh, better to die at once!”

But Mrs. Korkowicz was very gratified—so gratified that she said to Magda, rubbing her hands:

“If the Solskis do not think of us this time, they are surely such thoughtless people that it is not worth our while to approach them!”

Several days later, Linka appeared at Magda’s door a few minutes before luncheon, greatly excited.

“Miss!” she exclaimed. “The Solskis have come. Mama asks for you. Heavens, and here papa has just left...”

Magda gave her a joyful hug.

“At last,” she said, “your mother’s and my dearest wish is fulfilled. Ah, how good they are!”

The drawing room door was closed; Stasia was peeking through the keyhole. Embarrassed at the sight of Magda, she escaped to the dining room, but when Magda had entered the drawing room, she returned to her previous post. Pulling Linka after her, she whispered:

“What luck! Bronek is here as well. Now he will certainly marry Miss Solska. But how plain she is!”

Magda walked in at the moment when a feverish Mrs. Korkowicz was introducing Bronislaw to the Solskis.

“My son!” she said with emphasis. “It is truly unfortunate that my husband had to go to Korkow, the very place where your grace (here she bowed to both visitors) wants to establish a sugar factory. But after he returns, my husband will not fail to—”

“Surely you have never been to Stepek’s, count?” Bronislaw asked.

“Your supposition is very accurate,” Solski said politely.

“I cannot tell you,” said Mrs. Korkowicz with a declamatory flourish, “how Miss Magdalena longs for you.”

As Magda looked at her in amazement, Solski said:

“Your words, respected madam, remind me that we have come to ask a favor.”

“Let the count command me!” she said grandly, inclining her head.

“I hardly dare to ask, for I am uncertain of the effect.”

“It is the sacred obligation of all our house to fulfill your every wish.”

Magda felt as if she were sitting on pins. Ada blushed, and when Bronislaw saw that, he blushed as well.

“She is not as homely as they said!” he thought.

“My sister,” Solski said, “loves Miss Magdalena so that she cannot do without her company.”

“But every day—all day—” Mrs. Korkowicz put in.

“So we have come to request, with respect, that madam will be so kind as to release Miss Magdalena from the obligations she has been under until this time,” Solski said in conclusion.

“But...” Magda protested.

“My dear, I ask you. Please!” Ada whispered, taking her hand.

Mrs. Korkowicz was stupefied.

“What? If I understand you—” she said.

“Yes,” Solski returned. “That is exactly what we are asking.”

“I do not know whether Miss Magdalena, whom we all so love—”

“It is precisely because we know your feelings, and understand the magnitude of the sacrifice we ask you to make, that my sister and I have come here.”

Then Magdalena spoke up:

“But I cannot come.”

Ada pressed her hand.

“Will madam be so good as to comply with our request, then?” Solski said so insistently that Ada threw him a warning glance.

Mrs. Korkowicz was overwhelmed with chagrin.

“Ha!” she said in a voice that was barely recognizable. “If you wish it so pressingly...”

“We are most obliged to you, madam,” Solski said, bowing and pressing Mrs. Korkowicz’s hand. “Now it is your turn,” he added, addressing his sister.

“You will come with us, dear. You will not refuse me this favor. After all, we are related...” Miss Solska begged.

“Yes,” her brother affirmed, “through the Strusis.”

“So dress, my darling, and when madam is so gracious as to release you, come with us directly.”

“Yes, indeed!” said Solski.

Five minutes later only Mrs. Korkowicz, nearly apoplectic, remained in the elegantly appointed drawing room with her astonished son.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” laughed Bronislaw. “The Solskis’ cousin! So that is where putting her in that dungeon got you!”

“We will visit her at the Solskis’,” his mother declared suddenly. “We have the right, even the sacred obligation.”

“If they will receive us there! You see! I told you a long time ago that they were not fit to associate with,” Bronislaw finished.

Linka and Stasia, who had heard enough through the keyhole to understand what had passed, did not even say goodbye to Magda, but locked themselves in their room and cried their hearts out. Their worried mother, beating on the door to no avail, heard these words from Linka:

“Did I not say, mama, that you would bring this on yourself?”

“We will certainly visit Miss Brzeska at the Solskis’,” Mrs. Korkowicz said appeasingly, though ominous premonitions assailed her.

Chapter X. The House of Friends

From the moment she said goodbye to Mrs. Korkowicz, Magda hardly knew what was happening to her.

Stefan Solski conducted her downstairs and handed her into an elegant two-wheeled chaise (not the carriage that had usually been sent for her). He helped his sister to a seat beside her and sat down opposite the ladies. The carriage began to move, scraping over the thick layer of snow that lay white on the streets and roofs.

Magda looked at Ada and Stefan in silence. She felt that she ought to say something to them, but she was at a loss for words; indeed, she could hardly think coherently. She could never have imagined such an extraordinary situation; she had been kidnapped, for a fact, and however gently it had been done, it had happened apart from her will or prior knowledge.

The chaise stopped before the Solskis' house. Stefan helped his companions out and, taking Magda by the hand again, turned with her toward the right wing of the house. She noticed that they were not entering through the main hall, and hesitated. Solski did not give her time for brooding, however, but pulled her gently but firmly upstairs.

"Awful man," she thought, not daring to put up any resistance.

On the second floor a maid, young and plain but no less well dressed than Magda herself, was waiting for them.

"Anna, this is your mistress," Solski said, motioning toward Magda.

"I will do my best to satisfy madam," answered the maid. Her lack of attractiveness and her serious expression impressed Magda, who noted involuntarily that in the Solski house all the menservants were handsome and all the women plain.

Now Stefan stopped at an open door and Ada gave Magda her hand.

"Come in with us, Stefan," said his sister. "Today Magda will make an exception, and allow you..." Then she said warmly, "Here is your apartment, Magda, dear. You see... a sitting room... this is a workroom, and this is a bedroom which can open onto mine, if you like."

The rooms were large, cheerful and full of light. The workroom had a balcony that looked out on the garden, now sprinkled with snow.

Magda let the maid remove her wraps, then stood motionless in the center of the sitting room. Still in a state of astonishment, she looked at the great mirrors in gilt frames, the small damask-covered chairs, the armchairs covered in blue with bands of embroidery, and the huge vases of fresh flowers.

"So I am no longer with Mr. and Mrs. Korkowicz?" she asked Ada quietly.

"No, dear, happily for you and for us," Ada answered, covering her with kisses. "Someone will bring your things this evening."

“And what am I now?”

“You are our friend and our beloved guest,” Ada said. “Let me make amends to you for a little of the pain you suffered on our account.”

“I?”

“Well, do not conceal anything! By now the whole city knows that Mrs. Korkowicz ordered that you not be served at dinner until after her husband, that she put you into a cell, and even curbed your efforts to treat the servants compassionately. And all because you did not succeed in luring us to her drawing rooms!”

“To palaces proudly standing!” Stefan declaimed.

“Do not deny it,” Ada added quickly, embracing Magda and sitting down with her on a sofa. “I confess I am of no use, because, apart from being so angry I cried, I could think of nothing to do, and went along with Miss Malinowska’s plan to take you back to her school. But let me tell you, Stefan was boiling... Well, and you see what happened! He carried me off on a visit to Mrs. Korkowicz and wrested you from her clutches by invoking this thoroughly sound principle, that we cannot allow an injury to be done to a granddaughter of the Strusis, to whom we are related by blood.”

Magda wept. Solski, taken aback, rushed to her side.

“Miss Magdalena,” he said, taking her hand, “I swear that I did not mean to grieve you. But tell me yourself: could I be unconcerned when I heard about the goings-on at Mrs. Korkowicz’s and saw my sister’s fountains of tears? She actually went into a decline in the course of a few days, she was in such despair.”

“Magda, dear,” whispered Ada, nestling against her friend, “pardon me for my selfishness. I am so lonely... so sad... For a long time I have wanted to beg you to live with me, but knowing your sensitivity, I did not dare. Well, but your goodness to Mrs. Korkowicz emboldened me. You are not angry, Magda, are you? Remember the old time, when we were under one roof. Is it not worth while even for a few months to renew those memories?”

“But I will give lessons at Miss Malinowska’s,” Magda said suddenly, noticing that her friend was anxious and troubled.

“Do as you wish, darling.”

“And after that I will go to live at Miss Malinowska’s. Because, you see,” Magda said as if to justify herself, “I must, after all, acquire the skills necessary for the administration of a school. For I must open a school in Iksinow after the holidays, you know.”

“Must it absolutely be in Iksinow?” Ada broke in. “After all, as you yourself have said, there are no pupils there.”

“Where, then, my dear? There, even if a school pays me nothing the first year, I will find help at home, and later—somehow it will go forward.”

“My dear,” said Ada, making a sign to her brother, “if you must have a school to be happy, we will have a school at the sugar factory. You can take it; it will open with no expense and risk to you.”

“We ask this from our hearts,” Solski interposed. “And I in particular beg that you will not leave my sister, at least until I have finished my most pressing business. Ada is truly too dependent on her own company, and you do us a favor even to see her once a day and exchange a few words.”

“You are spoiling me,” Magda murmured, hiding her face against Ada’s shoulder.

“So you are not angry? You do agree, my dearest, my precious?”

“Bless you!” Solski exclaimed, laughing. He knelt and kissed Magda’s hand. “Now,” he said, “all the world will not take you from us.”

When the Solskis had gone to their rooms and left Magda alone, Stefan rubbed his hands and said fervently to his sister:

“Ah, what a singular woman! Can you fathom her, Ada? Always ready to devote herself to something, suffers without complaint, and... do you know what? She must not even know that she is beautiful. She creates such an impression. What simplicity, what naturalness!”

He walked quickly around the room, his small eyes flashing. He rubbed his hands again.

“Do you find her attractive?” asked his sister.

“I would be mad for her if... if she were what she seems.”

“That I can vouch for,” said Ada, putting her hand on his shoulder and looking into his eyes.

“Do not vouch for anyone,” he returned in the same tone and with the same gesture. Then he kissed her on the forehead and added with a sigh:

“It is our good fortune that in the face of various disenchantments, we can at least rely on each other.”

“Is it Helena again?” asked his sister.

“It does not matter,” he returned, and added: “You see, Helena, from what I know of women, is no worse than others, and she has spice! But if there were such women as you—and as Magdalena seems to be—oh, Ada, I tell you, the world would be better for it and so would we.”

“I assure you... I assure you that she is as she seems.”

“May it be true! But at all events, do not swear as to anyone’s character. At any rate, wisdom counsels us to take people for what they are: deceitful beasts without whom we cannot get along.”

“If only you would find a wife like Magda!”

“Perhaps she would weary me,” he replied with a smile. “After all, I also am a creature of time, and I like novelty.”

He exchanged a few parting words with his sister and passed by a long series of rooms to his study. Between its two windows and under its walls covered with dark damask, the interior was cluttered with tables and cabinets full of books and papers. The furniture was oak upholstered with leather. Under one window stood a desk furnished with buttons that rang electric bells. On the wall behind the desk hung a plan of the future sugar factory and its buildings.

Solski sat at the desk, which was strewn with sketches and reports, and yawned.

“It is a fact,” he thought, “that another woman in her place might have exploited her friendship with Ada for several years, and she did not... perhaps because she was too naive.”

He touched one of the buttons on the desk. A door from an anteroom opened quietly and in came a footman who looked, if not drowsy, at least tired.

“The man from the brickyard was here, sir, and the German and the lawyer,” the footman said. “I put their cards on the table.”

Solski saw that the cards were in their proper places, but he did not care to read them just then.

“Did you send the letters?”

“I sent them, sir.”

“Was there any correspondence for me?”

“There was none, sir.”

“Strange!” Solski murmured, thinking how little it all concerned him—these letters of his and other people’s, and all these visits from mechanics, brickmakers and lawyers.

“You may go,” he said aloud.

“Perhaps she will begin just now to take advantage of what Ada can do for her,” he thought, “although... what kept her from coming to us at once instead of going to the Korkowicz? So she has a will to make her own way. And if she bore with disrespectful treatment there for the girls’ sakes, then she is capable of forming attachments.”

He looked at the ceiling and saw the shadow of Magda in her gray gown, with parted lips and indescribable astonishment in her eyes as she looked at her new quarters.

“Beautiful—the way she marveled!” he thought. “Anyone who can express such wonder must be sincere.”

“For the rest,” he added after a moment, “we will see how she behaves toward the Korkowicz. Helena, in such a case, would summon up a deadly contempt. Well, not just anyone can muster contempt. Haughty lioness! And

how she displays herself to advantage in company! If only she had money and name, she would figure brilliantly in European society. A fortune enhances a woman's graces past all believing."

In the meantime Magda, after the Solskis had left her, first clapped her hands to her head, then began to survey her apartment with growing curiosity.

"A workroom," she thought. "What a desk! What books... Shakespeare, Dante, Chateaubriand. The bedroom... I do not know if I will be able to sleep in such an enormous bed."

There was also a rocking chair, like the one in Mrs. Korkowicz's study, opposite the chimneypiece. Magda sat down, rocked a few times, which did not seem pleasant to her at all, and began to meditate again.

"If I do not go mad here," she thought, "I do not know what I will do! I am like the peasant who was changed into a prince. I, however, would not dare to change places with people, to go from a governess's room to the salon of a great lady—but men manage to do it. I do not even know whether it is appropriate for me to accept their offer of the school at the factory. At any rate, that whim of theirs may still change. Ah, they have money and do not know what to do with it!"

She felt a growing uneasiness. She had not yet fully grasped that her relations with the Korkowicz family had been broken off, and she was afraid to think what they would say about her. She had been taken like a picture or a piece of furniture and moved to another residence. A fine way to be treated!

But then she reminded herself of the demonstrations of unfeigned friendship on the parts of the Solskis. They had been offended with the Korkowicz for her sake, and had removed her from their midst as if she were their sister. It was impossible not to value such actions, and Magda did value them.

"Dear, dear," she whispered, "how ungrateful I am! After all, they did me a service. And perhaps it is precisely here that my duty begins. Ada is not happy, and perhaps God has sent me.

"Just so!" she whispered. "God, too, must use someone... and if... Perhaps I could induce Helena to marry Solski. It was, after all, the dearest wish of her mother, to whom I am so indebted... indebted even for being here today. I am certainly not here for myself, or through my own doing."

Her musings were interrupted when Ada entered the room.

Dinner was served at around six, in a huge dining room and with the assistance of two servants, but at a small table set for four. Just as Magda was going to ask who the fourth diner would be, an invisible hand pushed the door wide open and the Solskis' aunt, Countess Gabriela, walked majestically through it. She was tall, slender and sickly-looking, but dressed with elegant simplicity. For Magda, who was somewhat abashed by the novelty of her situation and by the older woman's presence, she hardly had a glance to spare. When Ada had introduced Magda to her, she sat down and ordered dinner to be served.

"How did you sleep today, aunt?" Solski asked.

"As usual, I did not sleep a wink."

"And your nerves?"

"How can you ask? Since your mother's death, insomnia and agitation have never left me."

Then for the hundredth time and with much deep sighing (which, however, did not diminish her appetite), Aunt Gabriela began to admonish her niece and nephew not to withdraw from society.

"You are becoming unfit for company," she said. "You are growing unaccustomed to seeing people, and you will become the subject of strange rumors."

"I should greatly enjoy that!" Solski interjected.

"At Wladyslaw's house yesterday, for example, someone told me with absolute certitude that Stefan was going to be the director of his own sugar factory. Why, I replied, do you not promote him at once to be a building superintendent or a coachman?"

"What you were told is true," Solski said. "I am supervising the preparation of plans for a sugar factory."

"For God's sake!" cried Aunt Gabriela, looking at the ceiling. Then she asked Ada if it would be all the same to "that young lady" if they spoke French, since with the servants present it was not acceptable to carry on a full exchange of views in Polish. Upon receiving an answer in the affirmative, she went on to assert:

That the style of life that the Solskis were presently maintaining was a source of astonishment to all polite society. That Stefan's relationship with Miss Norska (whose brother was, for that matter, not unwelcome in society) was giving rise to insinuating smirks. That Stefan ought to marry, if only out of regard for his sister. That he could marry the more easily because there were several good matches to be made among the right people just then, and Stefan might count on being considered thoroughly eligible for such a match in spite of the originality of his character—even, indeed, because of it.

"Stefan has a reputation as a lady killer," Aunt Gabriela concluded, "which gives him enormous charm in the eyes of women of the world."

"And do those ladies over whom I cast my spell have money?" Solski inquired.

"I would not speak of them if they did not!" Aunt Gabriela declared. "They have name and money. They are charming. In spite of these assets, many of those unfortunate girls are threatened with spinsterhood only because it pleases men to bestow their affections elsewhere than in the proper sphere."

Dinner ended. As the family and their guest lingered over dessert, a servant informed Ada in an undertone that Miss Brzeska's personal effects had arrived,

together with some letters for her. One, containing some money, was from Mrs. Korkowicz, the other from her girls.

Over coffee Ada, then Stefan and Aunt Gabriela, urged Magda not to stand on ceremony but to look over her correspondence, since it might contain something important. Magda began to read the letters, blushing every minute and then turning pale. Solski, who was looking stealthily at her, noticed that she was breathing rapidly, that her lips were trembling, and that she was making a great effort to restrain herself from crying.

“No one who is so affected on reading a letter from her pupils can be all bad,” he thought. “They must have written her something disrespectful.”

“What, then?” Ada asked Magda.

“Nothing. Though, you know, Ada, I must go there,” Magda answered, not raising her eyes, which were rapidly filling with tears.

“But not this evening, dear?”

“When it is convenient for you, my darling,” Magda said quietly. But then she could no longer contain herself and ran out of the room.

The two footmen turned discreetly toward the window. Aunt Gabriela shrugged her shoulders and exclaimed:

“You know, Ada, dear, among the young ladies you might find a more cheerful companion! Perhaps you enjoy witnessing nervous fits, and in that case my efforts to hide my suffering have been wasted.”

“Aunt,” Solski remarked with unaccustomed gravity, “those tears are worth more than our diamonds.”

“You astonish me, Stefan,” Aunt Gabriela said in a tone that matched her words. “Every day I cry rivers.”

“It is obviously very painful to her that she is separated from her pupils,” Ada put in.

“Then let her return to them instead of crying,” her aunt said in a tone calculated to dispel all physical and metaphysical doubt.

Solski struck the edge of the table with his fingers.

“Ah, aunt!” he replied. “You do not in the least comprehend what a beautiful thing we have seen just now. Say yourself if anyone has cried for you, for Ada or for me, and with such heartfelt tears. No one has grieved for us, though we have done no one any injury. Perhaps that is why we must cry rivers over imaginary sufferings. Tell us, Ada: who ever loved us as Miss Brzeska loves her pupils?”

“You see! And you did not believe me,” his sister remarked.

“It was a holy day,” said Solski fervently, “a holy day, when such a woman walked into our house. We will have a sight more splendid,” he added in an ironic tone, “than the northern lights and the sunrise over Righi.”

“This is very troubling!” Aunt Gabriela said, clasping her hands. “Stefan, you speak like a man in love. You speak as you did when you returned from your first walk with that Miss—Miss Norska.”

“Oh, enough of Miss Norska!” he answered irritably.

“Ah, I understand! The king is dead, long live the king. It is time for us to leave the table,” said his aunt.

Because the conversation had been carried on in French, the footmen had pretended that they understood nothing. Nevertheless from then on, any servant who encountered Magda bowed to the ground.

“Our employers,” said one of the footmen in the kitchen, “always like to have something new in the stable.”

“It will pass,” replied the aged valet.

“But think what it costs,” the cook chimed in. “For what was spent on the Norskis I could have had three restaurants like the one in the Europejski Hotel. No wolf eats as much as a woman. And is it worth it? We know best, Jozef.”

The valet shook his gray head.

“You, at least, ought not to complain on that score,” he said slowly. “From one Eve so many people were born that all cooks have work to do and something to drink themselves into a stupor about.”

Chapter XI. A Most Unaccustomed Situation

In this way Magda settled into the Solskis' household. Apart from Aunt Gabriela's having no notion of how to be friends with "these young misses," everyone was kind to her. Ada truly loved her; the servants outdid each other in courtesy; and Solski, the master of this little colony, vacillated as if on a seesaw between idolatrous admiration of Magda and skepticism about the female sex in general.

Under these new circumstances, however, Magda was not free from anxiety. At night, on the ornately carved bed, she could not sleep; every time she dozed she was awakened by a sense of foreboding. She saw herself with no roof over her head, huddling on the city streets.

From four in the morning she could not close an eye, but when the maid came in around seven o'clock, she pretended to be asleep. She was embarrassed that such an elegant young woman was going to clean her rather shabby dress.

After eating breakfast in Ada's room, Magda went for a visit to the Korkowicz, who received her with astonishment and delight. The lady of the house burst out sobbing; the girls had been crying since the previous day. Mr. Korkowicz, who had returned from the country an hour earlier, embraced Magda and said in his gruff voice:

"I would rather have you as a daughter-in-law than a governess, for no one could take a daughter-in-law away from me."

Mrs. Korkowicz sighed plaintively. During the course of half a day she had lost the hope of having her son married to Ada Solska, but she had done a good deal of thinking about another matter.

"Excuse me," she said between kisses, "those Strusis of whom the Solskis spoke yesterday: that must be a family of foreign extraction?"

"No, ma'am, it is a Polish family."

"I was thinking—because my husband's family came from Germany, where they were called von Propfenberg. It was only the edict of Nantes that forced them—"

"Will you quit talking rubbish?" her husband grumbled. "Some grandfather of mine must have been a bottle corker in a taproom and that's where our name came from —"

"Oh, Piotr, dear, do not contradict me! I myself was by the Rhine, on the Propfenberg mound, which, as Count Przewracalski explained to me, must have been our ancestral home. Even the count advised me that we should buy the place and build—"

"A third brewery?" her husband interjected. "Not a bad idea!"

"Indeed not! A castle."

“For God’s sake,” Korkowicz exclaimed, striking himself on the chest, “sometimes it seems to me that I have more sense than you. And I didn’t even go to boarding school and don’t study French to use in my old age.”

Bronislaw came into the drawing room. He was somewhat taken aback at seeing Magda, but quickly recovered his equilibrium, threw himself onto a sofa, and exclaimed:

“That Kazik Norski has the devil’s own luck. He won six hundred rubles from us yesterday. But that sister of his! I tell you, father, she’s a tasty dish.”

“Where did you see her?” his mother asked uneasily.

“Oh! That’s a story,” replied Bronislaw, waving a hand and reinforcing that gesture with one foot. “I met her at Saxon Square. She was walking with her stepfather from America. I stood there like a blockhead, I tell you, mother, and looked at her, and she at me, a quick glance. I followed her, I overtook her; another glance. I was quite stupefied, and she delicately turned her head away, but—there was something—as if she smiled. I was scalding hot... and she whispered... whispered something to her stepfather... and they turned toward an exhibition of art, and I followed them.

“I saw nothing, only her,” Bronislaw went on, rubbing his perspiring face with a handkerchief, “but she made eyes at me, too, at least a little. Then we went our ways. But Kazik owed me some money, so I asked him to introduce me to his sister. He promised, and today or tomorrow I will meet her. I tell you, papa, when I think of her, I stop dead in my tracks. There are plenty of pretty chits in Warsaw, but I never saw one like that before.”

“Did you hear?” asked Mrs. Korkowicz, looking despairingly at her husband.

“A product of your upbringing,” her husband retorted.

Bronislaw sprang up from the sofa.

“But a true son of my father! Your own flesh and blood!” he cried, patting his father on the belly.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” laughed Mr. Korkowicz.

After being smothered with kisses and invited by all the Korkowicz family to visit as often as possible, Magda said her goodbyes, hiding her astonishment. So even Bronislaw had added himself to the list of Helena’s admirers, of whom there were already several in Warsaw! What would Solski, such a proud, exclusive man, say to that? Was this Helena’s way of carrying out the wishes her mother had expressed before her death?

From the Korkowicz Magda went to Miss Malinowska, who congratulated her on releasing herself from her obligations to that family, then asked if she would teach arithmetic and geography three hours a day to the lower grades.

“Employment—that is exactly what I came to ask for,” Magda said joyfully.

“Indeed? You do very well to assure yourself of some reserves from your own work,” Miss Malinowska replied, “for the regard of the great is more changeable than the tastes of women. Come tomorrow at nine, then, and begin at once. I must say goodbye now, for I have a great deal to do.”

After parting with Miss Malinowska, Magda met Miss Zaneta, who was waiting on the stairs. Without preliminaries the older woman asked:

“What is this, Magda, dear? Do you want to give lessons here?”

“Oh, yes,” Magda answered cheerfully. “Imagine! I have three hours with you.”

Miss Zaneta shrugged her shoulders and said without enthusiasm:

“Well, well... If I had such a situation as you have with the Solskis, I shouldn’t think of anything like this.”

“Why not?”

“I...meant nothing,” Miss Zaneta said.

They said goodbye coolly. “What does she want me to do, live on the charity of the Solskis?” Magda thought resentfully. “She knows very well that I have to work, and that my stay with Ada will end in a few months.”

From that time on, Magda’s life in the Solski household moved along very methodically. She rose at seven, dressed, and said her prayers. That was a difficult moment, for it often occurred to her that the Lord God might not hear the prayer of so great a sinner as herself.

Around eight, coffee was brought to her. After she had drunk it, she kissed Ada, who was still lying amid goosedown and lace, and hurried to the school, from which she returned at one or at three.

For an hour, cheerful and smiling, she talked to Ada about what happened at the school. Then in her own room she tutored Zofia, whose uncle, Dembicki, lived next to the library on the ground floor of the left wing. One day she said to Zofia:

“You see, Zosia, dear—tomorrow we will go to the school, to the fourth year class. You must finish school, after all, or it will grieve your uncle.”

The little girl turned pale and began to tremble.

“Oh, miss,” she said, “I am so afraid. They will make fun of me. Even Miss Malinowska will not be glad to have me.”

“Do not be afraid! Come to me tomorrow at eight-thirty, but say nothing to your uncle.”

Somehow she managed to get Zosia to the school the next morning. The girl was pale with apprehension, and her nose was red from the cold. But Magda chatted with her so merrily, and asked her so many questions along the way, that

she did not even notice where she was when they stood in the corridor at the school.

One of the maids took off Zosia's short cape and Magda led the trembling child by the hand to the fourth-form classroom.

"Look," she called to the pupils, "Zosia, whom you invited, has come. Be loving and kind to her."

The girls surrounded their old comrade and began to chat with her in such a friendly way that her anxiety left her. Only when Magda left the room did she turn pale again and look at her departing protector with wide eyes.

Magda came back into the room, kissed the frightened Zosia, and said to her companions again:

"Be loving to her, very loving. She is afraid that someone will treat her harshly."

Zosia remained in the room. During the free period at noon she admitted to Magda that she had found that time in the classroom quite pleasant, and as they were returning home at three, she said that she did not understand how she could have endured so many months without the companionship of other girls.

Dembicki waited uneasily in the yard, and on seeing his niece wan but smiling, took a few quick steps toward them and exclaimed:

"What is this? You returned to school?"

"And she will come to school until she has finished," Magda answered quickly.

She saw Dembicki's thanks in his eyes. He led the shivering Zosia to her room, helped her off with her flimsy cape, and asked:

"Were you afraid? Was it very distressing for you?"

"Awfully! But when Miss Magda kissed me, it touched my heart so! You know, uncle, it touched me so that I would have gone into the darkest room..."

That evening Dembicki told Solski about Zosia's adventure: about her fear, about the long interruption of her education, and about her return to school that day thanks to Magda, who had made all the preparations without his knowledge.

Solski listened with emotion, pacing rapidly around the study. After a while he ordered his sister to be called.

"Ada," he asked, "have you heard about Zosia?"

"Of course. Magda formed the entire plan in my room."

"Would we have managed to do this, Ada?"

"The idea never even occurred to us," his sister answered quietly.

"An angel in female form... or an ingenious manipulator!" muttered Solski.

"Please!" Ada burst out. "Indulge your pessimism toward all the world, but not toward Magda!"

Solski fell into a fit of irritability. Straightening his diminutive figure, he cried:

“Why not, if I may ask? Is Miss Magdalena not a woman, and a pretty one at that? Poets aptly call a woman a kind of ivy which, in order to grow and blossom, must entwine itself around a tree and suck, suck, suck. And the more strongly it sucks, and the nearer its host draws to death, the more luxuriantly it grows and the more beautifully it blooms.”

“I did not know you were so clever as to say such a thing about a friend of your sister’s—”

“And was not Helena a friend of yours?” he retorted, thrusting his hands into his pockets. “You thought she was a supernatural being! Well, and today a dozen devotees pray to that heavenly creature... and it is three months until she will put away the mourning she is wearing for her mother! Confess, Ada, that before they turn to imperishable statues, goddesses already have hearts of stone,” he finished, kissing his sister.

They reconciled quickly. Ada went out and Solski, with a bored look, set about reading documents concerning his factory.

One day in the beginning of February, when Magda had returned earlier than usual from the school, she saw servants hurrying up and down the stairs. Maids were running from one floor to another with flasks and towels, and the younger footmen, taking their places on the landings, collected toll from them in a way more or less visible, to an accompaniment of delicate shrieks.

When Magda appeared, the maids adopted the gravity of nurses, and the footmen began to pretend that it was they who were supposed to carry the flasks and towels upstairs.

“What has happened?” Magda asked fearfully.

“The countess is ill with migraine,” answered one of the servants, bowing low and struggling to restrain a sigh that was bursting his chest.

The countess was Aunt Gabriela, who lived on the third floor of the Solskis’ home. The lady, who was by no means a bad person at heart, had a hundred thousand rubles in the bank. She complained of ennui and loneliness, but spent whole days paying calls and went to the theater in the evenings. She saw her niece and nephew only during dinner, at which she informed them that she was abandoned by all the world.

On learning that Ada and Stefan were not at home, Magda hurried to the third floor and entered the sick woman’s bedroom. She found her moaning in an armchair with closed eyes, nearly invisible under pads and mustard plasters. These were constantly being changed by an elderly gentlewoman called Edyta, whose own head at that moment was heavily covered as well.

When Magda appeared, the ailing woman moaned:

“At last someone has come! For an hour I have been dying. I see black spots before my eyes, my teeth are popping out, and my temples hurt as though someone had pierced them with burning drills.”

“I, too!” put in her companion.

“God, put me out of my misery!” moaned Aunt Gabriela.

“God spare my lady!” whispered Edyta, placing one more pad on the head of her distinguished patient.

“Excuse me, madam,” Magda said in her natural voice. “Perhaps I can be of help.”

The sick lady opened her eyes.

“Oh, is it you, miss? It is very good of you to visit a lonely woman, but... how can you help me?”

“My father taught me a way of treating migraine that works now and then.”

She took off her hat and wraps and, standing behind the sick woman’s chair, began to remove all the towels and pads that encased her head.

“What is miss doing?” cried the other woman, wringing her hands. “This is murder—”

“Let her be, Edyta,” said Aunt Gabriela in a feeble voice, feeling a pleasant coolness. “She is a doctor’s daughter, after all.”

Magda began gently to rub and press the sick woman’s forehead and temples and the back of her neck. Aunt Gabriela felt these motions and a question darted to her mind:

“Where did she get such hands? Like velvet! Strange hands.”

Magda continued to rub and stroke her head. The sick lady abandoned herself to the touch of those hands.

“Aristocratic hands!” she thought, looking with one eye at Magda’s long fingers and rosy nails.

“Can you believe, Edyta, that I am better?” she said aloud.

“It is beyond everything!” her companion replied.

“I feel as if a warm breath of air had come into my head. Of course it is a flow of magnetic energy. And the pain retreats.”

A minute more and Aunt Gabriela was well.

“Your father,” she said by way of thanking Magda, “must be a homeopath or a student of Count Mattei.”

“I do not know, madam.”

“Can you believe,” exclaimed Edyta, “that my head feels a little better, even though I only watched miss’s movements? I really feel a warm current of

air in my left temple, and the pain on the other side is going away. Wonderful medicine! Miss must have learned some secret from Mrs. Arnold.”

“Who is Mrs. Arnold?” asked Aunt Gabriela.

“An American lady. Miss Norska’s stepfather’s second wife.”

“Oh, that one...”

“But she is a famous exponent of magnetism and speaks with the spirits,” her companion explained.

Before Magda had gone downstairs to her own room, everyone in the palace had been told how wonderfully she had cured the countess and Edyta. The Solskis had just returned from paying a call when Stefan’s valet informed them of the extraordinary development. Aunt Gabriela called them in and in two languages painted a vivid picture of her sufferings and the way Magda had dispelled them. She emphasized the delicacy of Magda’s touch, marveling that a doctor’s daughter could have such beautiful hands.

“I approve of Miss Magdalena’s system,” Solski remarked, his olive face darkening. “She treats migraine by stroking the patient, but she has no courage for kisses.”

“Don’t talk rubbish!” exclaimed his sister.

“Well, true enough: she put courage into Zosia by kissing her. I strongly believe that that helps!”

After they had taken leave of their aunt and were walking downstairs, Ada said:

“But, Stefan, do not start up a flirtation with Magda. I noticed that you pay her compliments too often.”

“What, then? Is that not allowed?”

“Not allowed—for if the girl falls in love with you—”

“Then I will marry her,” he rejoined.

“Ah—in that case—”

“Only make her fall in love with me!” he added with a sigh.

“Do not rely on me!” his sister answered firmly.

“You will not help me?” he asked in amazement.

“No,” she replied. “This matter is too serious.”

“As you wish.”

They kissed each other, but both were displeased. Ada said to herself:

“I see that Stefan is in love again. A fine thing! Either he will marry Magda and then both of them will care less for me, or he will break off with the poor girl, and then she will have a reason to hate me.”

“If only there were two Magdas in the world, as alike as two drops of water! No, even if one were far better and more beautiful than the other... In that case I would give the better one to Stefan, and leave the ordinary one for myself, and we would all be happy. As it is, no one knows what will happen.”

Meanwhile Solski was walking rapidly from one end of his office to the other with his hands in his pockets, adroitly glancing around so as to avoid seeing the plans for his sugar factory that were hanging on the walls.

“She came to us like a little spark,” he thought, “and she lighted a fire that has reached to the third story. Ha! Ha! If Miss Brzeska succeeded every time in driving away my poor aunt’s migraines, Gabriela would begin to suspect that her doctor was, like as not, descended from royalty. After all, the French kings eliminated scrofula by their touch! Then Miss Brzeska... Ha! Ha! Ha! I see my aunt in our camp already.

“But Ada! It is always a row with these women. How many times has she said to me: ‘I would like for you to find a wife like Magda.’ And how she praises her, how she loves her! And at this very moment, when I find the wife most like Magda, she says that she does not want to be involved.

“When all is said and done, my accounts with Helena Norska are—how can they not be?—even. I did not break off with her, but she with me, advising me, moreover, to win her again according to the newest principles, as yet untried by anyone, but which only she knows how to value! Thank God! Let her test the new principles on other game and leave me in peace.

“I will have a beautiful wife who speaks French and plays the piano and—who will be indebted to me for everything. Fortune, name, the respect of the world... everything except an angelic heart, which, for the rest, needs to be better known. Perhaps she has invented new rules of love as well; the devil knows! Some epidemic of the intellect has fallen on women, amusing in the beginning but boring in the long run.”

At that same time Magda was in her room, reading her pupils’ exercises. But the work was not coming easily. Every little while she put aside the notebooks, rested her head on her hand and closed her eyes as if she were wrenching herself away from the outer world in order to look more deeply into her own soul, which was oppressed by a feeling she found troubling but difficult to articulate.

At Mrs. Latter’s school the reading of exercises had been a pleasure to her. Often she had been carried away with amusement by the diverting expressions of the young authors. But today she was fatigued by the unformed handwriting, annoyed by the errors and unable to take an interest in the contents. It seemed to her that at any minute someone would come in and ask, “How did you come to be here? What are you doing here?”

Perhaps even her own father would come in, and if he so much as looked at her, she would take it to mean: “What is happening? How is this? So you wanted to pay your parents for a room and a simple dinner, and in the home of

the great you sit in drawing rooms at no cost and eat dishes we do not see in a whole year?"

Magda held her head in her hands.

"I must do something for the Solskis, for otherwise their bread of charity will poison me!" she whispered in desperation. "God would not cast me away here without a purpose. After all, these people in their great salons are not happy. Ada so longed for Stefan to marry Helena, and so did the deceased Mrs. Latter.

"Mrs. Latter would have showed Ada how to dispel tedium; she would have found a way to repair relations between Solski and Helena. Should I not be her deputy here? Then everyone would be happy, and I would have repaid their goodness."

Chapter XII. How the Dead Spaces Filled With Life

Near Ada Solska's apartment was a kind of orangery, lighted all day by the sun. During Ada's mother's lifetime, unusual plants had been brought there when they were ready to bloom. Later, for some years, the greenhouse had stood empty. By this time it had been converted into a botanical laboratory for Ada.

Magda was rarely there. She disliked the laboratory. The glass structure had been elegantly appointed, but objects that filled it were as queer and ugly as the orangery itself was beautiful.

Ada raised mosses and lichens, so all the tables and shelves were littered with them. Some species grew in flat crates filled with sand, peat and mud. Others were being carefully nurtured on big pieces of thatch, on stones, bricks and tree bark. There were green, yellow, red and sapphire blue bell jars for the cultivation of mosses and lichens under the influence of light of various tints. There were oil lamps equipped with concave mirrors to keep plants under light for entire nights. Finally, there were large boxes with glass walls in which the caretaker, at will, could generate a tropical or a polar temperature, increase the amount of carbonic acid in the air, add oxygen or nitrogen—in a word, play on the forces and materials of nature as on piano keyboards.

The tiny, barely visible plants, which grew here instead of orange trees, orchids and cactus, Magda found pathetic and horrifying. The mosses were like tiny bushes, at least, or at worst like velvet, or the pinfeathers of nestling chicks. But the lichens were monstrosities. One of them looked like a yellow or greenish powder sprinkled sparingly over bricks. Another was a gray stain on bark, another a scale or ooze from a diseased tree.

Now and then it seemed to Magda that these small forms of life represented unsuccessful attempts on the part of nature to create a normal plant. Here she produced some misshapen leaf, there an odd petal, elsewhere a fruit node. It was grotesque, deformed, and so it had been thrown aside; but, horrors! it survived, dried up, cadaverous.

That nature had erred was too bad. But that it had forced the victims of its mistakes to live on seemed downright cruel.

In these surroundings Ada spent several hours a day—more or less the same hours young women in her sphere devoted to paying calls and looking around the shops. Usually she examined some of her lichens through a magnifying glass; once in a while she wrote something in the records she kept of her specimens; now and then she drew. But there were also days when she sat motionless in her chair with her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the transparent ceiling and an expression of profound sadness on her face. She revived only when Magda came to her and, shrugging her shoulders, said for the tenth time:

“I do not understand what you are doing or why you are doing it.”

“So listen once more,” Ada replied with a smile, “and you will develop a taste for this work.

“I am taking, for example, seven pieces of bark with yellow stains. They are lichens of the same species. I measure the surface of each stain and I write: A has one hundred square millimeters; B one hundred and twenty; C eighty, and so on. Then I put one piece, for example, under a red bell jar, the second under a yellow one, the third under a violet one, the fourth under a clear one, and I leave them in peace.

“A week later I take my specimens from under the bell jars. I measure the surface of the yellow stains again, and again I write. The comparison of the new figures with the old shows me which color of light fosters, and which color does not favor, the development of the lichen in question.

“In the same way I examine the effects of heat, moisture, and carbonic acid on lichens, and I have a copious record of my observations.”

“Oh!” Magda shuddered, “How tedious! It seems to me that a person’s heart would wither among such dried-up plants.”

“How wrong you are!” Ada exclaimed with flashing eyes. “If only you knew how many feelings this occupation arouses! How many times I have found myself full of concern about whether this or that stain was accurately measured! How many times have I awakened in the night thinking that there might not be enough oil in the heating lamp, or that some specimen had been placed in the wrong bell jar! And you know, from time to time that has happened.

“And that is only one side of the question. For one day a new little growth appeared on the lichen I was observing: a small leaf or node. I have seen that a hundred times, but at every appearance of a new living thing I experience a strange feeling: I am overcome by fear, joy, and—can you believe it? —something like shame. I would not speak about it, for example, to Stefan. I tell you, each new growth seems like something very close to me; I am happy when it grows, I am apprehensive when I see symptoms of abnormality, and if you only knew how it grieves me when one of the poor things dies! It seems to me that it is a little child that I created but cannot keep alive.”

“Strange!” Magda whispered. “Are you always so engrossed in it?”

Miss Solska clapped her hands to her head and closed her eyes.

“No,” she answered after a moment. “Sometimes it is awfully quiet and empty here. Then I think that the whole world is empty and bare like my laboratory, and life inanimate, as it is on stones and bark. In that universal deadness and vacuousness, our house seems the place most dull and dead.

“Oh, Magda, in such moments I would give my laboratory, my home, even my fortune, for what, do you know? For one little nephew who would call Stefan papa and me aunt. How it would resonate—some movement in this monastery of ours!”

She shielded her eyes with her hand, but a few tears found their way between her fingers. Magda repeated to herself—as she had done too many times to count—that her wealthy friend was unhappy.

After that conversation a change came about in Ada's laboratory. Every day new arborvitae, oleanders, and palms appeared in its corners, and, along the walls, hyacinths, roses, and pots of violets and lily of the valley. Whether the changes were barely perceptible, or whether Miss Solska was distracted, is not clear. At any rate, she did not notice them.

One day, on entering the laboratory, Ada heard a rustling sound. She stood in the center of the room; the rustle did not repeat itself. Moving closer to the table, she began to look at one of the lichens through the magnifying glass, and to draw. The rustling sound could be heard again, quite distinctly.

“A mouse in a trap?” she thought, looking around.

She became aware that there was a large cluster of plants in one corner. She noticed, too, that flowering plants in pots had been placed here and there. But she heard the rustling again, so she hurried to look among the arborvitae and oleanders.

“What? What?” she exclaimed, stripping away a black cover. “A cage? Canaries?”

There really were canaries, one yellow as a saffron cake, a second somewhat paler but with a crest. Ada looked at them in astonishment and they stared at her, terrified.

On the wire cage was a little card with an inscription: “Good day, madam!”

“A present from Magda,” Ada thought, not knowing whether to laugh or be angry. She seated herself at the table again, but felt no inclination to draw. She was fascinated by the rosy beaks, dark gray eyes, and above all the darting movements of the birds, who peeked out, fled to the corners of the cage, jumped onto their bar and swung on their little hoop, making serious faces and turning around in all directions, so that every instant a head appeared where a tail had been, and a white breast instead of a yellow back.

The February sun, which since morning had either remained hidden or appeared tentatively from under clouds, lit up the laboratory at that moment. The palm and oleander leaves gleamed; the shy hyacinths, roses and violets seemed to advance into the foreground; the canaries began to twitter. The crested one piped up, the yellow one answered; the crested one retreated to a corner of the cage, and the yellow one, trying his voice a few times, sang out with a melody that filled the whole room and drew an answering strain from the bell jars. Miss Solska's hands went limp and she gazed around her, astonished at the inexplicable changes she saw.

The moribund greenhouse at that moment was colorful, fragrant, full of life. A scientific workshop had become a kingdom of birds, where arborvitae and oleanders formed a home, with roses and violets for decoration. The former

masters of the terrain, mosses and lichens, could hardly have served as a nest for the singing pair.

When Magda returned from the school, Ada thanked her for the surprise.

“Either I am on a lower level than other people or you are on a higher one,” she said. “How inspired you are!”

“I am not inspired,” Magda replied. “You are engrossed in science, so there is no room in your mind for trifles. And yet they do have value.”

Ada raised a finger. They were sitting in the third room from the laboratory, and in spite of that they could hear the pearly trills of the canaries.

“One little creature enlivens half the house,” Ada said. “If Stefan...” she added wistfully.

“Give him Helena,” Magda smiled.

“He will find a wife on his own,” Ada replied. “I will give him something else.”

A few days later, when a holiday kept Magda from going to the school, Ada came hurrying to her, wearing a hooded coat.

“Take a warm wrap and downstairs we go,” she said. “There is something for you to see.”

Both ladies made their way along the covered stairs, the wide halls and the narrow corridors to the laundry at the other end of the palace, which at that moment presented an unusual spectacle. Ten men and several women were there, each with a dog on a leash.

There was a clipped poodle with a beard and whiskers like an aging bachelor, and a dachshund on crooked legs like a black and yellow caterpillar. There were ash-gray pugs with arrogantly pouting mouths, a gloomy bulldog, and an English pointer with a winsome face and gentle, charming movements. When the ladies entered, the handlers of the dogs, who until then had carried on a noisy conversation, quickly quieted down; but the dogs, in spite of the tugs on their leashes, paid little attention to the newcomers. One of the pugs was ogling a black rat terrier; the poodle was peeking into an empty washtub; and the English pointer was trying to ingratiate himself with the dachshund, who was always standing next to him.

“Psst! Here, Parol! Musia, to heel!” called their handlers.

At that instant a sickly-looking young fellow, collarless, with a blue handkerchief twisted around with his neck and an English bulldog in hand, moved forward, turned to Magda and said in a piercing treble:

“Here is a genuine English bulldog, or may I break a leg, if you please, miss—with a wild crocodile for a mother.”

“Quiet!” the valet, who was standing at a respectful distance behind Ada, said menacingly.

“A murderous beast, if you’ll excuse me, your grace,” put in a burly woman, looking at Ada. “My Musia is something else again. Beg, Musia.... Well, Musia, beg...”

“Take her back to school, ma’am. She don’t belong in a palace like this,” the owner of the poodle broke in. “The bitch has no idea how to beg.”

“Because she was embarrassed—”

“Karo, do your stuff!” exclaimed the handler of the poodle.

In an instant the dog abandoned the washtub and began to walk on its front paws like a clown.

“Hee! Didn’t I see that comedian in the circus last fall?” said the young man in the blue neckerchief. “Ma’am—” he said, turning to the woman with the rat terrier—“I’ll wager you the building across the way that that dog is a runaway from the circus.”

“You show that you steal dogs yourself when you accuse others,” the poodle’s owner retorted. “I brought Karo up from the time he was a puppy. I trained him—”

“And madam herself was his wet nurse!” added the chap with the bulldog.

“Quiet, there!” the valet said again, afraid a brawl would break out.

But Ada was oblivious to the quarrel, for she was stroking a dog with the color and the splendid form of a lion. “Look, Magda,” she said in French, “Stefan had one like this in his student days. What a wise, gentle expression! Strength and serenity...”

“How old is this dog?” she asked his owner in Polish.

“Two years old.”

“And what is his name?”

“Cezar.”

“Please follow me,” she said, then nodded to the other dog owners.

“And what about us, my lady?” cried the young man with the bulldog. “A well-trained poodle like that would have earned two zlotys in people’s yards during this time. The lady with the rat terrier closed a shop with Paris fashions for half a day to come here, and I am late to the marketplace—”

Ada whispered something to the valet and quickly left the laundry with Magda, while Cezar and his owner followed close behind.

“The lad is right!” cried the woman with the ratcatcher.

“You will each receive a ruble for your trouble,” said the valet.

“That beats all!” the young man burst out. “A ruble for that ratcatcher and a ruble for my bulldog! By God, that louse is like a flea to my dog—there’s not enough of her for him to bite.”

In the end they all took the ruble except the owner of the pointer, who put on his cap and went out muttering that he was no beggar.

“Did you ever see the like?” said the burly woman contemptuously. “Such a picture of elegance!”

“You had better be quiet, ma’am,” said the young man, “for that’s the supplier from Mr. Dytwald himself. I know because we were together on New Year’s Eve at the Citizens’ Club. I helped the ladies out of their carriages and he looked to see if everyone coming to the festivities had a name card from the city hall.”

“Eh! You were born to be a lawyer,” said the owner of the poodle, spitting.

“They try to persuade me now and then, but I prefer being one of you.”

Solski was due to return from town before long, so Ada quickly concluded her business with Cezar’s owner. The dog was gentle and obedient and had never bitten anyone. He had only been with his present owner for two months; his price was set, offhandedly as a penny’s worth of cracknel, at a hundred and fifty rubles.

The valet wanted to bargain, but Ada paid without further ado, and received in exchange a receipt from the seller together with documents containing Cezar’s description, his pedigree, and testimonials from his previous owners.

Ada had just fed the dog some sugar when his master left the room, with little enough display of feeling. Cezar looked after him, refused the sugar, and ran to the door and began to scratch at it, first squealing, then whining, finally breaking into mournful howls.

“Cezar... Cezar! Come here, doggie,” said Ada. “Now you will have a better master who will not sell you to anyone.”

The dog looked at her with eyes full of sadness, scratched at the door again, and sniffed. Seeing that it was of no use, however, he went to Ada and leaned his beautiful head against her knees. But every few minutes he whined quietly, or sighed.

“You know,” Ada said to Magda, caressing Cezar, “this is what I will do: I will put a cap on him, wrap him in a quilt, and put him on the chaise-longue in Stefan’s suite. How surprised he will be!”

Suddenly Cezar raised his ears and, wagging his tail, bounded to the other door, at which Solski appeared a second later. The dog’s tail dipped and he looked alertly at the newcomer.

“What? What?” Solski exclaimed. “Miss Ada is going into the dog trade.... But that is the ghost of my Hektor! Well, come here, little one...”

He ruffled the dog’s hair, then took him by the muzzle and stroked his back and sides. The dog happily accepted his caresses.

“You have your Cezar, Stefan, dear,” Ada said. “But thank Magda, since she reminded me, with her canaries, that we haven’t a living creature in the

house... How is it that you are not glad? I see that the masculine race all embody the same ingratitude, for even this villain, Cezar, does not want to look at me.”

“Thank you, dear Ada,” he rejoined, kissing her.

He sat beside her and stroked Cezar, who put his head on his lap.

“Is something wrong? I thought I would surprise you...”

“The worst of it is that I have not greeted Miss Magdalena,” he said, pressing Magda’s hand. “Oh, what a surprise! I knew yesterday that you had ordered dogs to be brought to the house, and I only warned Joseph not to let you buy some cur. But at this minute I am thinking of something else. A moment—a moment—I know!”

He hurried to his room and dispatched the valet to town, while he himself went upstairs to his aunt and held a long conference with her.

At dinner he spoke up:

“Listen to me, ladies. I do not want to keep you in suspense any longer. This very day—guess, Ada, what will it be?”

“Thursday.”

“What do you mean, Thursday? Today will be—theater! We are going with aunt to *Revenge at the Border Wall*.”

“How wonderful!” cried Ada, clapping her hands. “I have not set foot in the theater yet this year—”

“And that is not all,” Solski said, interrupting her. “For they are playing *Revenge* at the Grand, where we have an orchestra circle box.”

“Ahhh!” Ada exulted.

“And that is still not all, for—listen! Listen! After the performance we will go to Stepkowski’s for supper.”

He rested his hands on his knees and looked triumphantly at his hearers. Ada hugged him.

“You are superb, Stefan,” she said. “What made you think of all this?”

“Listen,” he answered, “and marvel at how ingeniously the world is constituted. As a lump of snow, rolling down the mountain that reaches to the sky, grows into a gigantic avalanche, so in our house small virtues give birth to great actions. Miss Magdalena gave you a pair of canaries weighing barely eight ounces. That was a bit of snow which, coming into contact with you, grew into Cezar, who weighs fifty kilograms, while Cezar, coming into contact with me, was transformed into a theater that weighs hundreds of thousands of kilograms.”

“Now I know why I have worse migraines in your house than when I lived alone,” said his aunt.

“But you have a doctor, aunt!” replied Solski, eyeing Magda. “Under such circumstances I would willingly take on your migraines.”

“Stefan, don’t be absurd!” Ada scolded.

“Where is Cezar?” Solski said suddenly, and whistled.

The intelligent animal answered him from three rooms away with a bark, and after a moment came bounding in.

“Great God, what kind of monster is this?” moaned his aunt. “Please, Stefan, do not let him look at me.”

She gradually grew calm, however, and even petted Cezar, whom Solski began to feed from his hand.

“Terrible things happen in our house!” said his aunt. “Canaries shriek so that one has to plug up one’s ears, the dog barks until the walls shake, and Stefan whistles at dinner. It seems to me that I have gotten myself into the wilds—”

“But admit, aunt, that our wilds of today seem more cheerful than our monastery of yesterday,” answered Solski. “We lived here like monks or prisoners; it came to this, that I myself was afraid to speak without keeping my voice down. In a word, we were wasting life. But it will not happen again. Miss Magdalena has come to us like a beam of sunlight; she melts the ice that was weighing on our hearts, and drives the ghosts of sadness from the musty corners.”

“Stefan!”

“Do not hinder me, Ada, for I am inspired. Madam’s lesson—” he turned to Magda—“finds apt pupils. Away with ennui! From now on our circle will be alight with diversions.”

“What? Do you want to open the house?” Ada asked.

“Not to everyone. But I want things to be arranged differently. No more bursting our lungs with yawning! The beginning of this new era will be—tonight’s visit to the theater!”

Aunt Gabriel gave him a light bravo.

“I like you this way. And if you go on in this manner, I am ready to tolerate Cezar, and even Ada’s canaries.”

“You will tolerate many other things,” he replied, kissing her hand as she aimed a keen glance at him.

Magda sat silent and troubled. Her favorite of all diversions was the theater, but this proposal was causing her more uneasiness than pleasure.

“Why are they taking me?” she thought, feeling the distance between a poor teacher and persons in a higher sphere.

Everything grated on her: the simple style of dress Ada and Aunt Gabriela adopted, evidently so as not to make her look out of place; the fine horses and beautiful carriage; even the fact that Stefan and Ada sat forward while she and Aunt Gabriela sat behind.

But only in the theater did her real torment begin. They had hardly entered the box when everyone's eyes fell on them. Whispers could even be heard: "The Solskis... the Solskis," and a question: "Who is that young lady?"

"Who?" thought Magda. "An ordinary gentlewoman who has found herself in the wrong place."

She sat with her face flushed, her head lowered and her breathing labored. Whenever she had to raise her eyes, she was horrified by the sight of a living wall of men and women filling the stalls, the amphitheater, the balconies. Here and there light flashed on the glass of lorgnettes fixed on her face, looking her in the eye.

Someone stood in front of their box and made a low bow. Magda saw a large, pink bald spot and recognized Zgierski. She sighed with relief; at least there was one familiar, friendly face in the crowd. And there were two more gentlemen—Kazimierz Norski and Bronislaw Korkowicz, who sometime before had become fast friends.

"Perhaps there is someone else we know," Magda thought, glancing around the hall. Of course! On the second level of the amphitheater, where the gentry sat, she spied her colleague from the school, Zaneta, and Mr. Fajkowski, the dispenser of medicines from Iksinow.

A momentary shyness caused her to look down and her eyes fell randomly on a gigantic hat in the pit. It was Miss Howard, all alone; no, not quite alone, because in a loving grasp she held a lorgnette like a pair of army field glasses, suitable for a woman who wanted to be a match for men.

But matters took a turn for the worse when the ugly old Baron Pantoflewicz came up to Ada, looked with one eye at the corsage in her bodice and with the other at Magda, and asked:

"What is that wonderful flower?"

"It is common lily of the valley."

"True! And our flowers are beautiful... only one must change them now and then..."

"For in this world, my dear baron," Solski put in quickly, "everything changes except wigs."

The baron quickly took himself off, but Ada went pale and Magda's eyes darkened. She was one of the flowers that had to be changed!

In spite of the actors' excellent performances, the evening at the theater was not a success for the Solskis' party. The ladies were uncomfortable and out of humor. Stefan was morose. At the end of the play Ada said that she had a headache and that, instead of going to Stepkowski's, she would prefer to have supper at home.

When they were in her rooms again, Ada said to Magda:

“I see that the theater is not for me. I find the heat and the crowd jarring. My nerves were so bad this evening that I spoiled the party for the rest of you. Stefan felt it, and is angry at me. I will never go to the theater again!” she added in a voice full of grief.

In the face of these painful feelings Magda forgot her own. She put her arms around Ada’s neck and said, laughing:

“See here—you will go to the theater, and you will go often, but I will tell you what we will do. We will take a box in the third tier.”

“It is not proper.”

“You will see that it is proper; only without telling anyone, we will slip out as a threesome, with Mrs. Arnold—to the Italian opera, perhaps.”

“You know, I like that idea!” Ada exclaimed. “We will go incognito.”

“Not like today, with the carriage and footmen, you understand.”

“We are indeed independent women!”

“Well, and Mrs. Arnold is an unimpeachable chaperon. What a pity that Helena is still in mourning and does not go to the theater!”

“She would rather play the coquette with her admirers,” Ada replied gloomily.

A week later Ada and Magda really did go to the Italian opera with Mrs. Arnold, and greatly enjoyed themselves. When Solski learned about it, he waved a hand and said to his sister:

“I wanted to give you pleasure, but I did not succeed. I see from this that only Miss Magdalena can bring happiness to our home. Only she has that privilege!”

Chapter XIII. Echoes From the Past

The time came when Magda began to feel that a change was taking place in her relations with people.

Her pupils were calmer during their lessons than before, which gratified her. At the same time, they were a little more timid, which she found surprising. Evidently she herself had grown more serious, as Mrs. Latter, deceased but never forgotten, had always advised her to do.

Magda noticed a similar undertone of diffidence, or rather delicacy, in the behavior of her colleagues. She attributed that to the deference shown her by the professors, who stood when she was present, conversed with her courteously, and avoided the innocent jocularities they had formerly allowed themselves. The professors' kindly treatment of her no doubt resulted from the influence of Miss Malinowska, who for some time had singled Magda out from the group of teachers.

Why? Magda could only guess. After all, she was going to establish a school; so in a year at most she would be a headmistress like Miss Malinowska, who today was treating her as an equal—completely unnecessarily, since Magda understood that she would never be Miss Malinowska's equal in any respect.

It was true that once, when Magda began to speak of her school, Miss Malinowska had interrupted with a smile:

“What—you are still thinking of a school?”

Magda understood, of course, that the headmistress was joking in order to remind her that such an undertaking was not easy.

In other familiar circles Magda also noticed a change. Once the young Korkowicz, passing in a dog cart, had leaped out of it to exchange greetings with her, behaving with an elegance she had not noticed in him before.

Mr. Arnold surprised her greatly by chatting with her on a few occasions about the sugar factory and extolling the merits of English boilers and machinery, which were more costly but more durable and worth more in actual use.

Mrs. Arnold more and more frequently made Magda privy to her domestic affairs, and even entrusted her with information from the other world, which the spirits communicated by writing or knocking.

Even Helena Norska, who lived with the Arnolds, in Magda's presence abandoned her haughty, sometimes sarcastic way of speaking. But apart from her rather cool courtesy, Helena concealed a feeling about which Magda did not like to speculate.

Only Ada Solska always remained the same, full of goodness and sincerity, while Stefan grew rather more serious. Whenever Magda was in his sister's apartment, he came with his dog and listened in silence to the women's conversation, amusing himself by playing with Cezar's mane. But he never ogled

Magda or even tried to be witty; clearly the incident at the theater still troubled him, or so Magda thought, anyway.

That trivial and no doubt only superficial change in people's attitudes toward her worried Magda. Often she asked herself, "What does this mean?" "Why is this?" and answered: "Oh, that is only the way it seems to me." Still the question would return: "But what does it mean? For after all, I am not better or wiser than two weeks ago."

One day in March she was sitting in her study, looking at the Solskis' garden, which was rather small but full of old lime and chestnut trees. The sun was very warm. Ragged white patches of snow on the gray grass melted and steamed; the vapors, drifting upward, flew north like a flock of silvery birds. Warm but stiff gusts of wind shook the branches of the trees, knocking off the remaining icicles.

Though the sky was mild, the air was wet and humid—wet on the paths, the lawns, the trees and the roofs, from which water fell like heavy drops of rain. Spring was emerging from under the white crust of snow like a freshly hatched chick, still nude and damp.

At a distance, beyond the wrought-iron railing that enclosed the garden, pedestrians streamed to and fro on the sidewalk, dressed in their spring clothes and walking briskly.

"That is why people seem better to me," Magda thought, "because they are more cheerful. Spring gives them joy as it gives the trees new leaves; a green tree is more beautiful than bare boughs, and a cheerful person is better than a gloomy one."

In one corner of the garden she noticed a group of children who had found a dry patch of ground and were enclosing it in a fence of sticks. The valet's grandson was there, the porter's granddaughter, the butler's two young sons, the cook's son, the wardrobe keeper's niece—a tiny contingent of the little army of children whose elders served the Solskis.

Magda recalled that in this palace the staff and their families, grown people and children, numbered thirty or forty, perhaps even more—and a strange idea occurred to her. All those people ate, slept, grieved or amused themselves, married and raised children not only without the Solskis' permission, but without their knowledge. They lived in a manner completely different from the Solskis, as the trees in the garden lived with no care for the earth that nourished them.

Who belonged to whom, then? The trees to the earth, or the earth to the trees? The servants to the Solskis, or the Solskis to the servants? Were the Solskis truly the rulers of this palace, in which every family had its own cares, comforts and purposes independent of the will of their masters? And in the end, who were the powerful Solskis if not poor captives whose dinner was supplied by a cook; whose apartments were cleaned and warmed by footmen; whose linen was changed by keepers of the wardrobe; and whose money was parceled out by an administrator?

Was it any wonder that they were not happy?

“My father was right,” she thought, “when he said there was no reason to envy the great. But what am I in this house?”

Her glance skipped to the railing. Behind it pedestrians swarmed along the walk.

“That is what I am: a passerby who appears at one end of the garden, looks at its trees and breathes its air, and after a moment disappears at the other end.”

Such thoughts were painful to her; she saw in them a certain ingratitude toward the Solskis. So to free herself from fretful questions, she went to her sitting room. Its windows looked out on the courtyard. In a chair under the colonnade of the palace sat a porter with gray whiskers wearing a long coat of the Solskis’ livery. He was conversing with a woman in dark clothing who was so heavily wrapped in a black veil that it was impossible to see her face.

After a while the woman said goodbye to the porter and walked unsteadily to the gate. She turned onto the sidewalk, then made her way into the rapid current of passersby that flowed from no one knew where and threw out its drops onto its banks.

“Perhaps a needy woman with a request for Ada,” thought Magda, and her heart contracted.

Then the porter spoke with a young footman, and in a moment a floor polisher joined them.

Again a question occurred to Magda: what did these people do in the palace? For themselves they did many things; they were happy, they were sad, they brought up children, they rested. But what did they do for the Solskis? The porter kept the entrance hall in order. The valet kept Stefan’s wardrobe in order. A maid kept Ada’s wardrobe in order. The administrator kept the family’s income in order.

Here no one changed anything, created anything, moved anything. People only maintained the once-established order in which two noble souls, Ada’s and Stefan’s, were preserved like antediluvian butterflies in a fragment of amber. Their entire staff, each of whom lived a complete individual life, all that staff worked with one purpose: so their masters would not lead, and would not even think about, lives of care and joy, of difficulties and rest from difficulties, of struggles, failures and triumphs.

“Oh, how wicked I am!” Magda whispered. “Why does it occur to me yet again to criticize the Solskis when I am benefiting from their goodness?”

There was a knock at the door and a maid entered with a letter.

“A woman just left this with the porter,” she said.

“A woman in black with a black veil?” Magda asked.

“Yes, ma’am. A person of modest means. She must even be near by and waiting for an answer.”

Magda quickly tore open the envelope and found a letter written in an unfamiliar hand:

“I have come to you three times, madam. But when I was continually told that madam was not at home, I surmised that you did not want to receive me. I understand that, and I am reconciled to the thought that there is no mercy for me, for I am not worthy of it.

“I apologize for my intrusiveness. I was encouraged in it by the goodness you showed us in Iksinow, and above all by the tears I saw in your eyes when you came into our room at the inn. Do you remember? I was weeping then, and, my God! those were our best days. Destitution may not be a great misfortune, nor even sickness; a person is only truly unhappy when he is alone with his fear and pain, when he cannot trust another’s vows, even his tears.

“Forgive me for writing this letter without sense or order, but I suffer so terribly, I need so to speak to someone even in my mind, that I would almost feel happy if I had so much as a stone of my own to kiss or to wet with my tears. I know that there is no one to save me, yet I am writing—like a drowning man who cries for rescue though no one hears.

“Perhaps these are my last words on earth. I address them to you, who were my last hope. For several days I have said to myself: ‘She will save me—at least she will revive my courage, for she has the heart of an angel.’ But I was convinced that it was unlikely; there are crimes which put a person beyond the reach of all compassion.

“Farewell. I adjure you not to look for me. I understand that I cannot rely on help from any source, for there is no power that could avert what I fear. If you would be so kind, remember me now and then, or, better, do not remember me, for that thought—that there are still benevolent hearts—would fill me with despair. Or at least sigh for me. My God! My God! I am so lonely, so forsaken, that if I had even someone’s prayer to keep me company, my heart would be as full as it was in the finest of my concerts.

“Do you remember our concert in Iksinow? Oh, if there were any mercy left in the world, the ground would open beneath me!

“Again I beg you: do not try to find me, madam, for that will do me more harm than good. My only wish now is that no one will speak of me, or hear, or know. Perhaps at any rate I am not so unhappy, only overwrought, and that will surely pass. We artists truly have tightly strung nerves.—Stella.”

Magda hurried to Ada’s room in tears, showed her the letter, and in a few words told her the history of her acquaintance with the singer. Miss Solska calmly assessed the situation.

“First of all, can you guess what she is afraid of?” she asked. “Suicide? That is not likely. Perhaps her companion, the actor, has left her. And perhaps she is...”

Both young women blushed.

“All sorts of things occurred to me,” Magda answered. “Perhaps she is afraid of prison.”

Ada looked grave.

“Stefan would get the police to find her,” she said. “If it is prison that she fears, that would hardly be doing her a service. In any case—do you know her surname? Jozef will go to the address bureau, at least.”

Jozef went and returned within half an hour, with a notation that Marta Owsinska, singer, a resident of the New Town district, had left Warsaw in May of the previous year.

“If she is not registered anywhere now, she has gone into hiding,” Ada remarked. “In that case, perhaps she did well not to come to you in person.”

“I do not know,” Magda whispered, feeling that it was one of the saddest cases she had witnessed in her life. The mystery surrounding Stella could only be compared to the deaths of Mrs. Latter and Cynadrowski.

“Things seem well enough with me,” she thought, “but from time to time misfortune falls like a thunderbolt on someone near me. Is that a warning?”

Anxiety crept over her.

A few days later on her way home from school she met Miss Howard. The distinguished fighter for women’s rights had forgotten her impertinence to Magda and greeted her warmly, even with friendly reproaches.

“You have forgotten me, and, after all, we were such good friends! Do you remember the concern we shared for the departed Mrs. Latter and our efforts to help her? But what is this? I see that you are not in good spirits. Perhaps my company...”

In order to avoid offending her newly recovered friend and to relieve her own worry, Magda, without mentioning names, told Miss Howard Stella’s story and summarized the contents of her despairing letter.

“I do not understand what it is all about,” she concluded, “and I do not know whether to search for her or not.”

“Search? Never!” Miss Howard burst out. “The person of whom you are speaking is a woman, a conscious, independent being; if she desires to remain incognito, it would be an offense not to respect her wishes.”

“The important thing is, however, that we do not know whether she is in hiding of her own volition, or if something is threatening her. It all seems awful—”

“Awful, indeed!” Miss Howard repeated dismissively. “I suspect it is a matter of a commonplace lying-in, and no doubt it is her first, so the poor creature is making a great scene. She is ashamed to have her plight shouted from the housetops, so she compensates herself by writing despondent letters.”

Magda felt as if someone had drenched her with cold water. Poor Stella had fallen from her position as a tragic heroine and been cast as an immoral person of whom it was not even decent to speak.

“In any case,” she said, blushing and lowering her eyes, “the unfortunate woman complained bitterly of being abandoned, and may be without means—”

A light of inspiration flashed in Miss Howard’s pale eyes.

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “Here is an issue that must be raised at once. A woman, a victim, covered with shame because she helps the race regenerate itself, rejected by her partner, which is quite natural, and—forsaken, repudiated, shunned by other women: what ignominy! Plead the case to me in those terms and then I will answer that for five years I have grieved over this state of things, for five years I have urged women on to the struggle—all in vain. May our eyes at last be opened; may we for once understand that the sisterhood of women is essential to society, to civilization, to morality. Let us join together, let us extend our hands, and no one will complain that they have no bread, no roof over their heads, no care when they are ill or in trouble. No one will be forced to hide from public opinion...”

Passersby were beginning to stare, so Magda walked a little faster. They had just reached the Solski palace when Miss Howard asked:

“So, then, am I not right to encourage women to form an alliance?”

“Yes,” Magda said.

“And would you join?”

“Yes, indeed, I and Ada—”

“And so,” Klara said triumphantly, “there is already an alliance of women! With weekly sessions. Dues: one zloty per month. May I enroll you both? Would you like to attend a session?”

“I will ask Ada, although I am almost certain that she will join.”

“I hope so,” Miss Howard replied skeptically.

Magda said goodbye to the impetuous apostle of women’s rights and breathed freely again. She was glad to think that an alliance of women was forming, and she admired Miss Howard, who, in spite of her eccentricities, was transforming a high-minded idea into reality.

From this time on, every woman, including Magda, could think confidently of her future. If she found herself with no occupation, the alliance would give her work; if she had nowhere to live, it would offer her a home, and in case of sickness—care. Under these circumstances, unfortunate women like Stella would not have to fall into destitution and despair. The alliance would give them assistance for which they could repay it later, from their earnings.

When Magda asked Ada if she wanted to join the alliance, her friend’s face flushed with excitement.

“Can you doubt it?” she said. “I would devote my efforts and fortune to such a noble cause with the greatest willingness! For what better can one do,” she added with a smile, “who is likely to be an old maid? Only—”

Suddenly her face fell.

“You do not like Miss Howard?” Magda supplied.

“Oh, it is not that! I have certainly had time to become accustomed to her peculiarities. Only—I wondered—who belongs to this alliance? For I will tell you,” she said after a moment’s reflection, “that the associations of women that I have come in contact with abroad were not at all attractive to me. I saw young women carelessly dressed, looking defiant, smoking tobacco, drinking beer and quarreling like men—except that the men looked well enough even when they were disorderly, but these poor creatures were simply ugly. I had no desire to spend time with them.”

As a result of this exchange, for a few days Magda consulted the women she knew for information about the association Miss Howard had founded. She received varied responses. Some thought it a waste of time, others thought it a harmless diversion, and some spoke of it with enthusiasm. But the general opinion was such that Magda, after she and Ada had agreed on it between themselves, informed Miss Howard that they were ready to join her alliance.

Chapter XIV. A Meeting of the Alliance

A few days later, Magda and Ada were summoned to the weekly meeting of the women's alliance, to be held Saturday night at the home of Mrs. Zetnicka, the owner of a ladies' clothing shop. And on Saturday morning, Magda received a letter that was oddly appropriate to the moment and the situation.

Cecylia, the sister of the apothecary in Iksinow, had written to ask Magda to find her a position as a teacher at a convent school in Krakow or Jazlowiec.

Really, her brother and sister-in-law were so good and loved her so, Cecylia wrote, that she had had to wage a struggle to induce them to let her leave their house. But she was tired of her worldly life, and longed for peace—for some little corner where she could wait for old age without being a burden to anyone.

"Here is a subject for today's session," Magda said to herself, already enjoying the thought of how Cecylia would feel when she learned that a place had been found for her at a convent school, thanks to the women's alliance.

What a triumph for the alliance, and what a relief for poor Cecylia, who, instead of being grateful for one person's compassion, would be exercising the rights all women merited!

And how the other participants in the session would envy Magda! How Ada would marvel!

At around eight in the evening both ladies, very simply dressed, slipped out of the palace. In the courtyard they met Solski.

"Oh, here's a fine thing!" he exclaimed. "An excursion on a blustery evening! Where to?"

"Do not tell him, Magda, dear!—You will find out tomorrow," answered his sister.

"Ladies! At least take a servant—"

"What now? Did you hear, Magda? He orders us to avail ourselves of masculine protection at such a moment! Adieu, my dear sir," said Ada, laughing, "and know that you are dealing with independent women!"

They jumped into a cab and rode to their destination, cheerful, even excited.

Mrs. Zetnicka's living room—large, light, illuminated by a lamp hanging from the center of the ceiling—was also a workroom. A mountain of fabric covered with a sheet lay on one table, while a wire mannequin used for the fitting of dresses nestled into a corner beside the stove. The walls were decorated with engravings from the Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts; a very large mirror stood opposite the door. A great variety of chairs, bentwood and upholstered, attested that the comforts of this house did not include elegant furniture.

Some thirty ladies were gathered there. Of that number, Ada and Magda first noticed several young, cheerful women and several older ones who seemed to have grievances. Most seemed calm and unassuming, like people who have a good many troubles and neither hide nor make a show of them. Ada noticed that most of them were not especially attractive, and sighed with relief. In the company of beautiful women she felt a painful constraint.

The new arrivals were briefly introduced. In a recessed window Magda noticed Mania Lewinska, Mielnicki's niece, who seemed a mature, careworn woman although she had still not finished her final year of school. Beside Mania there were a pair of empty chairs, so Magda pulled Ada over and the three sat together. In that way Ada was able to acquire some information about the other women at the meeting.

The hostess herself, in spite of the large number of orders that were filled in her workroom, never had even ten rubles in accumulated capital; she allowed her workers a share in her profits, and in addition had two orphaned foster daughters. Miss Zetowska, a bookbinder, whenever she was out of work went to nurse very sick people, accepting only her board as remuneration. Miss Ulewska repaired shoes, did fancy sewing and painted on porcelain; she worked from dawn till midnight, and had the early symptoms of consumption, as well as a brother who was attending secondary school at her expense.

On the other hand, Miss Papuzinska played the piano like Liszt, sang like Patti, painted like Siemiradzki, wrote novels like Victor Hugo, and was angry at the whole world, which did not appreciate any of her gifts.

Mrs. Bialecka, a widow, for over a dozen years had cared for women coming out of prison, who lived with her, got domestic work through her, and now and then robbed her by way of thanks. Miss Zielinska, a teacher, by her own work supported her parents and two brothers, who were constantly looking for suitable work for themselves. Miss Czerwinska, also a teacher, who worked for one zloty per lesson, was remarkable for her ability to win donations from her acquaintance for various charitable purposes. One of her students was the director of a factory, another a lawyer in great demand, a third the husband of a wealthy woman. But their tutor, already threatened with blindness, still took only one zloty per lesson and went around in worn-out shoes.

Hidden behind a curtain, Ada listened to these bits of explanation transmitted in whispers by Mania Lewinska and was deeply shaken. At first she wanted to run to the center of the room, fall down, and kiss the feet of these saintly women, who went through life unknown, quiet, simple, sometimes even disrespectfully treated. Then she was overcome with despair, for it became clear to her that the entire Solski fortune would not be enough to satisfy the needs and make up all the shortfalls she saw here. And this, she knew, was only a miniscule fraction of the immeasurable need in the world beyond this room.

She was amazed that no one in Miss Howard's alliance was paying any attention to these extraordinary women. They themselves timidly took cover in the corners of the room as if they were embarrassed, while it was either Miss

Howard, with the title “founding member of the alliance,” who spoke loudest and made the most splendid impression, or her rival, Miss Papuzinska, who was dissatisfied with the world, or Mrs. Kanarkiewicz, the rival of both of them, who had memorized the greater encyclopedia of Orgelbrand.

For about a quarter of an hour, loud talk and movement filled the room. The women walked from one end of it to the other, changed their seats, held conferences in corners. Young women, chatting at the tops of their voices, laughed, usually for no reason; the older and poorly dressed ones spoke in whispers. Most paid no attention to Magda and Ada, but Miss Papuzinska in various ways tried to show disdain for Ada, while Mrs. Kanarkiewicz moved closer to the window frame every minute, as if she wanted a closer look at the wealthy young woman.

During this time Miss Howard was sorting papers on a table on which the hostess had set a carafe of water, a bowl of sugar, a few glasses and a little bell with a glass handle. Then she called:

“Members will please take their seats. I would remind you that a member who takes the floor without being recognized pays a fine of one zloty. We must once and for all become versed in parliamentary procedure.”

Several shabbily dressed women hemmed and hawed, one sighed, and one of the younger ones burst out laughing, but quickly muffled her giggles with her handkerchief. Miss Papuzinska, who was sitting behind Ada, said:

“Please write me up for a zloty, but at the same time I ask Miss Howard—as I have asked more times than I can count—why she herself pays no fines.”

“Because I lead the discussion and must speak.”

“Yes—constantly. A very convenient privilege—”

“I take back the floor from member Papuzinska,” Miss Howard interrupted coldly.

“I do not share Miss Papuzinska’s convictions, but I protest against Miss Howard’s dictatorial tone,” interjected Mrs.—or was it Miss? —Kanarkiewicz.

“And you will pay a fine,” Miss Howard added, making a note. Then she rang the bell and the room went quiet.

“I will read the minutes of the previous session,” Miss Howard announced. “At the last session member Papuzinska presented excerpts from her work: ‘Would it not be advantageous for society if marriage as we know it were replaced by free love...’ The reading of these interesting excerpts,” Miss Howard said parenthetically, “was interrupted, for lack of time, of course.”

“Let us not overdo the explanations!” Miss Papuzinska hissed.

“In the discussion arising from that,” Miss Howard went on, “member Kanarkiewicz put forward a motion (demanding approval without delay) that girls who have been seduced should receive pensions for life. The motion was voted on and rejected thirty to one —”

“And there were thirty of us in all, so one member cast two votes instead of one,” said Mrs. Kanarkiewicz, pale with anger.

“Member Czerwinska,” Miss Howard read, “put forward a motion for the opening of a rest home for elderly and ill teachers, the reason being that at the moment there are three teachers in need of care. Those in attendance agreed unanimously on the urgency of the motion, and founding member Howard recommended canvassing teachers for the purpose of raising funds. She calculated that if each paid only a ruble a month, the alliance would have at least six thousand rubles a year.

“Member Papuzinska proposed that several young women be sent to universities abroad...”

There was a whisper in one of the windows. Suddenly Magda spoke up:

“And what happened concerning the three teachers?”

“Nothing,” Miss Howard answered. And looking sharply into the recessed window, she added:

“Member Brzeska will pay a fine.”

“Why nothing?” Magda insisted. “So they are without care—”

“Each of us cares for them a little. In order to ensure their welfare in a more secure manner, we would need nine hundred rubles a year, and we do not have such a sum at present.”

“Indeed, there will be enough money,” someone said in a strange, tremulous voice.

A murmur ran through the hall. “From where? What?”

“There is someone who will provide nine hundred rubles a year,” the same voice added plaintively.

“Miss Solska will pay a fine of one zloty,” Miss Papuzinska said spitefully.

“Miss Solska will pay a fine,” Miss Howard quickly repeated. “However, respected members, let us celebrate her noble gift with a standing ovation.”

There was a resounding noise of chairs being pushed back and all the ladies except Miss Papuzinska and Mrs. Kanarkiewicz rose, bowing and smiling in the direction of the window where Miss Solska was hiding behind the curtain.

“It is not myself. It is my brother,” Ada protested.

“Let member Solska make no disclaimer,” Miss Howard said reprovingly. “Our alliance accepts no gifts from men.”

“Permission to speak,” said a timid voice in the vicinity of the mannequin.

“Discussion closed!” answered Miss Howard, not wanting to aggravate Ada’s discomfort. She read on:

“Member Papuzinska proposed that several young women be sent to universities abroad...”

“The honor of society demands it!” cried Miss Papuzinska. “For when in America women are already doctors, lawyers, pastors, and in our country there is not even a woman doctor—”

“Or funds for training,” Miss Howard put in.

“So close our knitted caftan factory. It is going bankrupt,” exclaimed Miss Papuzinska.

“Oh, yes! And drive twenty girls, to whom we gave work after pulling them out of prostitution, back onto the street,” said Miss Howard.

“They cost us thirty rubles a week.”

“But we have three hundred and fifty caftans made, which means seven hundred rubles in capital.”

“Caftans that nobody buys.”

“What do you mean, nobody?” Miss Howard demanded indignantly. “Tell us, member Wyskoczynska: how many caftans did we sell this week?”

“Two,” a middle-aged person sitting by the wall said quietly.

Miss Howard’s zeal kindled.

“We are not selling caftans because no feeling of solidarity or even dignity has yet awakened in our women. Because the members of our alliance undermine the project with ill-natured criticisms instead of promoting it. How is it that in a country of seven million people it is not possible to sell a few hundred knitted caftans?”

“Permission to speak?” again inquired the voice from somewhere near the mannequin.

“On this issue?”

“No.”

“Well, then do not take up our time,” Miss Howard answered peevishly.

“I will always insist,” said Miss Papuzinska, “that sending a few women to university is more important for our cause than maintaining a charity workshop.”

The hanging lamp cast a blood-red glare on the room, but no one noticed.

“I protest against the university project,” replied Mrs. Kanarkiewicz, “because every woman can educate herself to the highest level—”

“By memorizing the encyclopedia,” Miss Papuzinska put in.

“That is better than playing the piano when one has no touch, or singing when one has no voice,” said Mrs. Kanarkiewicz. “Establishing relationships with women from highly civilized cultures is more important than attending university. That is why I propose that we send several delegates to various European countries and to America.”

“We have already heard about this,” Miss Howard interrupted wryly. “Member Brzeska has something to communicate about a project of a practical nature. Member Brzeska has the floor.”

Several poor women sitting near the stove began to whisper among themselves.

Magda emerged from behind the curtain, her face red as a cherry.

“If you will pardon me, ladies,” she said, stammering, “I know a teacher in Iksinow, Miss Cecylia... Miss Cecylia finished the Institute, and even received one of the highest rankings. She is very clever, but—disinclined to deal with the world.”

“And I have the right to be disinclined,” Miss Papuzinska said in an undertone.

“So, ladies, Miss Cecylia would like to teach at the school in Jazlowiec... and I am referring the matter to the alliance, so that the alliance, through its connections, can obtain a place for Miss Cecylia, whose surname I will provide later, in Jazlowiec.”

“An absurd idea!” exclaimed Miss Papuzinska. “What can we, progressive women, have to do with a convent school?”

“I am utterly opposed to such schools,” said Miss Howard.

“Where prejudice is fostered!” added Miss Papuzinska.

“Motions involving metaphysical hypotheses should be banned from our meetings once and for all!” added Mrs. Kanarkiewicz.

Embarrassed, Magda retreated into the depths of the window alcove.

“Oh, you bad girl!” Ada whispered to her. “Why did you tell me nothing about Miss Cecylia?”

“I wanted to surprise you,” Magda said, feeling a little aggrieved.

“Returning to the subject of funds for our failing caftan factory—” said Miss Papuzinska.

“No doubt you say it is going bankrupt because it was established at my initiative,” Miss Howard retorted.

“Your institutions hardly interest me,” Miss Papuzinska went on, “but the matter of funds is quite different. Here I advise you, as I have more times than I remember, to raise the monthly membership dues.”

“Never!” Miss Howard said vehemently. “Each woman must pay one zloty per month. We are, after all, a democratic association—”

“And we have around thirty zlotys a month.”

“But if all our women belonged to the alliance, we would have three million five hundred thousand zlotys a month, or—a moment—two times thirty-five is seventy—yes, we would have seventy-seven million a year.”

A moment of silence followed.

“What? What? What?” cried Mrs. Kanarkiewicz, recasting figures on a piece of paper. “We would have scarcely forty-two million a year.”

“What nonsense are you talking this time? Two times thirty-five is seventy, and two times—”

“But, Miss Howard, you do not know how to multiply.”

“I, not know how?” Miss Howard exclaimed, jumping up from the table.

“Look! Here is the calculation!”

“What is your calculation to me?”

“Yes. Yes. Only forty-two million,” said voices from various corners of the room.

Miss Howard dropped onto her chair, biting her lips.

“You want to impose your will even on the multiplication table,” remarked Miss Papuzinska.

“Permission to speak!” once again faltered the voice from beside the mannequin.

“Member Siekierzynska has the floor.”

“The lamp is smoking terribly,” quietly rejoined member Siekierzynska.

In fact, the blood-red flame of the hanging lamp had reached halfway to the fireplace, and was adorning its upper edge with a velvety powder. Flakes of soot like black midges were floating all over the room.

“Oh, my new gown!”

“We look like chimney sweeps!”

“Fine thing, these meetings! And I am just due at a party!”

“Why did you not say something before?” Miss Papuzinska said angrily to the intimidated member Siekierzynska.

“The rules forbade it.”

“It is a preposterous set of rules that ruins a new pair of gloves!”

“Member Siekierzynska deserves to be commended,” Miss Howard said firmly, “for she has proved that we are beginning to learn proper procedures.”

Several ladies laughed. Others protested.

“But you and your conception of order have made us look like a crowd of dishwashers!” exclaimed Mrs. Kanarkiewicz.

In the meantime their hostess turned down the lamp, but the women began to mill around the room.

“With permission,” Miss Czerwinska said shyly, “what is going to happen to our workers? Because we have nothing for the next week, either for food or for daily wages.”

“It is no great matter,” Miss Howard returned. “Food costs two rubles a day and wages three. Let each of us put in what she can now, and we will collect the rest during the week from our acquaintance. Here are five rubles. After all, people will begin to buy caftans sometime.”

Miss Howard put the notes on the table. The other members, looking resigned, began to reach for their purses, or whispered to their hostess:

“I will send some rubles tomorrow.”

“I will bring five zlotys on Wednesday.”

Some put zlotys on the table; it was obvious, however, that it was hard for them even to part with these small sums.

Ada diffidently approached Miss Howard, blushed, and whispered something in her ear.

“Speak louder, member Solska,” Miss Howard said excitedly. “My dear ladies, you may withdraw your contributions, because member Solska will purchase all the caftans that are ready. It is an extremely heartening fact which proves that our women are finally beginning to open their eyes.”

“I am curious about what Miss Solska will do with three hundred and fifty caftans,” Miss Papuzinska asked derisively.

“She will pay seven hundred rubles, and will guarantee subsistence for our workers for half a year,” Miss Howard answered haughtily.

“And she herself will sell these caftans?”

“The caftans can stay in the warehouse,” Ada said quietly.

“I believe, madam, that you would prefer to add another seven hundred rubles rather than take possession of that pile of rubbish that has driven us to despair,” snapped Miss Papuzinska.

The members began to collect their money from the table. The less someone had to take, however, the happier she looked. Only Miss Howard did not touch her five rubles, and when one of the ladies handed them to her, she said without emotion:

“Let them remain in the treasury.”

When she and Magda were on the street once more, Ada squeezed her friend’s hand and said delightedly:

“Oh, dear Magda, how grateful I am to you! For if it had not been for you, I would never have joined this group; the thought would never have occurred to me. Only today have I begun to live; I see a purpose, a worthy field of endeavor. What fine women, except for a few whiners!”

“You do not like Miss Howard?”

“On the contrary: she was always a bit odd, but a good woman at heart. But her two assistants—good heavens!

“But—but,” she added suddenly, “do you know, Magda, that I am angry with you? How could you ask strange women to assist your friend and not mention a word about it to me? After all, we have such connections in Jazlowiec that they will accept her immediately. And here—you heard how you were answered.”

“I did not dare abuse your goodness,” Magda answered, abashed.

“Oh, you did not dare abuse my goodness! So that is how you put the case to me. You give us every day and every hour the alms of your presence, you bring joy into our house, and you yourself never accept the slightest service, even for your friends. Is it not so?”

“Well, do not be angry, Ada, dear. I will never do that again.”

They got into a cab that carried them toward the palace at a light jogging trot.

“Remember, Magda, remember, and never behave so badly to us,” Ada said. “You do not even know what pain that caused me. Remember that our home is your home and that everyone who is important to you is important to us. Remember that, Magda, dear, or you will injure people who owe you a great deal and love you very much.”

They hugged each other in the cab and harmony was restored.

“And write to that lady—what was her name?”

“Cecylia.”

“Write to Cecylia and tell her that there is a position for her, and she must wait only a few weeks—”

“And if the teacher’s position is not vacated?” Magda asked.

“My dear,” Magda answered with a rueful smile, “always and everywhere a place will be found for anyone for whom the Solskis intercede. I have only today begun to understand the power of money and connections. Oh! That power is terrible. And yet Stefan says that there are people who are ready to fall on their faces before any bag of money, even though they derive no benefit from it.”

Magda listened to her friend in amazement. She had never seen Ada so animated, never heard her speak with such certainty. It was clear that the meeting had opened new horizons for her, or at least given her an opportunity to taste the power of her wealth.

“She laid out sixteen hundred rubles in the course of one evening. She created a rest home for three elderly teachers and a fund for the maintenance of twenty poor girls,” Magda thought, looking sidewise at Ada’s face, which was illuminated by flashes from the street lights. For the first time she felt awe, even embarrassment, in Ada’s presence.

“This is truly a great lady. I really know a great lady, who with one word can ensure the welfare of dozens of people! And what am I doing in her home?”

Why did I come here, a teacher, a doctor's daughter? Ha! Surely so I could be useful to others... though I would prefer that my stay here were over."

Until now, Magda had felt herself to be Ada's equal; they had been friends since their days on the benches at Mrs. Latter's school. But now she felt that the common ground between herself and Ada had begun to give way, and that a rift was growing between them because of their positions in society.

"Perhaps she thinks that I will fall on my face in front of a bag of money," she told herself anxiously.

The cab stopped at the palace gate. Ada alighted and walked toward it joyfully, Magda somberly. The magnitude of the building had never oppressed her as it did tonight; the beautiful rooms had never seemed less welcoming; never had she felt such embarrassment in front of the smartly liveried servants as now.

"Footmen, maids, drawing rooms with gilded walls, rosewood furniture! This is not my world... not my world," Magda thought.

At noon the next day Aunt Gabriela asked for Magda. Ada was not at home, but Stefan was.

"Do you know what my sister is doing at the moment?" he asked Magda.

"I think she went out to town," she replied.

"Yes. She has gone to visit our cousins and friends and collect subscriptions for the establishment of a rest home for elderly teachers."

Solski stammered, but after a moment spoke on:

"If this project succeeds, my sister will have had a part in the creation of a noble institution. She will render a service to society. She understands that, and is very happy. Neither our aunt nor I have ever seen her so full of joy.

"We owe it all to you," he continued. "The doctors abroad had prognosticated that Ada would suffer a serious nervous illness if she did not find a purpose in life, and you have helped her to find one. Ada will be happy, and we will have peace of mind about her. All thanks to you, who are becoming the guardian angel of this house."

Magda listened without breathing, not daring to look at him.

"Thank you. Thank you," he said, warmly pressing her hand.

"But I had not supposed that Miss Brzeska was such a zealous proponent of emancipation," Aunt Gabriela remarked.

"I?" Magda asked.

"People have always said that, and in fact even today—tell her, Edyta—" Aunt Gabriela said, turning to her companion, "did we not hear that Miss Brzeska is an ardent emancipationist?"

"Why, yes," that lady affirmed. "All Warsaw says so."

“Never mind about that,” Solski interrupted. “If emancipationists are like this, even one out of three of them, I will join their party. However, I have another score to settle with you,” he said to Magda. “Yesterday you caused my sister pain. You know what I am speaking of. See here, we ask a favor of you. Whenever someone close to you, or anyone you know, needs work or other assistance, do us the honor to bring your request for help to my sister or to me.”

“I beg your pardon—can I really do such a thing?” Magda replied. “First of all, I know too few people, and, secondly, those I know would not be at home in a house like yours.”

“What noble pride!” whispered Edyta, looking at Magda with delight.

Solski waved a hand impatiently.

“Before the matter goes any further, let me explain that I ask this favor as an investor of capital. We people of fortune do not always have great acumen, but one thing we do know—that when we have honest people around us, our wealth is more secure and yields greater returns. You do acknowledge that principle?”

“Certainly... though I am not versed in these matters.”

“So you see—today I need many people to work in my sugar factory. They need not all be highly trained, but they must be people of good faith. And I believe unwaveringly that if you recommended one of your acquaintance to me, it would most certainly be an honest person, for good instincts—which you possess in the highest degree—would warn you against an evil one. Miss Magdalena”—he concluded, taking her hand—“I have a few, even several, rather good positions. So if someone close to you needs work, do us this kindness. Command us.”

Magda thought of her father, the doctor, and her brother, with his passion for technology. At the same time, she felt that she could not recommend them to Solski. So, thanking him for his promise, she replied that if anyone she knew were to ask for help in obtaining employment, she would not fail to inform him.

She took her leave of Aunt Gabriela, Stefan and Edyta and returned to her own rooms. Half an hour later Edyta dropped in, wrapped in a shawl and looking mysterious. Glancing all around her, she whispered theatrically:

“Is anyone here?”

“No,” Magda answered.

Edyta seized her, hugged her, and, holding her close, said more quietly than the rustle of butterfly wings:

“Excellent... You have carried it off beautifully, dear child, with Stefan and with all of them. He will go mad; he will lose his wits! Continue in this way: ask for nothing, accept everything coolly, indifferently, as if you were doing the favor. In this way you will remain in an unassailable position. Give me a nice kiss, and remember my advice!”

And the old gentlewoman slipped out of the room as furtively as she had entered it.

Chapter XV. Echoes From Another World

Excuse me, madam. Mrs. Arnold is here.”

“Has she been here long?”

“She has waited a quarter of an hour.”

A maid communicated this information to Magda on the stairs as she was returning from town.

“And is Miss Ada in?”

“No. She went out at eleven to the working women.”

Magda hurried to her apartment, but neither in the sitting room nor in the study did she find Mrs. Arnold. Only when she glanced into the open door of Ada’s room did she notice Mrs. Arnold behind the portiere, holding a notebook and pencil. The American lady was looking at the portraits of Ada’s parents that hung opposite the bed, and—it seemed to Magda—copying them.

“It is a habit with these Americans to make notes on everything!” she thought.

At the rustle of her step Mrs. Arnold turned around and quickly shut the notebook. Then, without explaining why she had been in Ada’s room, she went through to Magda’s sitting room.

“I wanted to speak with you about some important matters,” she said in French. “But please do not scoff at me, as it would be so natural to do in a country where people do not believe in the spirit world or concern themselves with it at all.”

Magda listened, trying to control her astonishment. Mrs. Arnold sat on the sofa, tucked her notebook away, and went on speaking:

“For some time I have been in contact with the departed—with the mother of Helena and Kazimierz.”

Magda’s eyes widened. She knew that Mrs. Arnold was a spiritualist; that was common knowledge in Warsaw. But until this time she had never carried on a conversation with her about these issues.

“This relationship with her is painful to me,” Mrs. Arnold continued, “not because I am jealous of my husband’s past. Oh, no! But that unhappy woman is suffering very much and demanding something from me, something I cannot understand.”

“She is suffering?” Magda repeated.

Mrs. Arnold waved a hand.

“Oh, it is one of the most awful conditions in which a soul can find itself. Imagine: she, poor woman, is not aware that she has died.”

Magda shuddered.

“How can that be? And what does she believe to be her state?”

“She believes that she is in a home for the infirm, where she is not only kept by force, but denied information about her children. That is a source of excruciating distress to her.”

Magda made the sign of the cross. Assertions of the kind she had heard a moment before were so new to her that she might have taken Mrs. Arnold for a fraud or a lunatic. But the American lady spoke quite naturally and with a tinge of sympathy, like a person who states a fact that has nothing strange about it.

“You rode out with her on the day she left her school?” Mrs. Arnold inquired.

“Yes, but only for a few blocks. She said that she was going away for a few days. Furthermore, everyone knew of her departure; I did not hide the fact,” Magda said apprehensively.

“The departed one thought of you as a second daughter. She loved you—”

“Yes—she was fond of me.”

“It seems to me that she even mentioned wishing that her son would marry you.”

Magda went crimson, then pale. Her breath stopped.

“Never! Never!” she said as if she were choking.

Mrs. Arnold looked at her attentively and calmly went on speaking:

“You would not cut a great figure in the world, but let us leave that aside. How large an estate did the late Mrs. Latter leave?”

“No estate,” Magda answered.

“Are you sure you are not mistaken? Helena has several thousand rubles in the bank. It is true that Kazimierz has nothing, because he lost it, but he still expects to inherit something from his mother. So at least he tells my husband, from whom he borrows some money. So there was an estate—”

“I beg your pardon, there was no estate,” Magda contradicted her. “Last autumn Mrs. Latter borrowed six thousand rubles from Ada. Finally, it was my impression that she left the school because she had no money. The remaining debts were settled by Mr. Solski or by Ada.”

Mrs. Arnold looked very grave.

“In that case,” she said in a low voice, “my husband must give them something. Well! They are his wife’s children.”

Then, taking Magda by the hand, she said agitatedly:

“Upon my word, I do not begrudge anything that my husband has done for them. I do not begrudge that Helena lives with us. Where is she going to live—with her brother? Our income in this country is large enough to enable us to lay out a good deal and have something left over for my little Henry. But I

understand the reason for the departed woman's distress: her children are living on charity, and that must wound their mother's heart."

Magda felt the blood go to her face.

"And add to that," said the American, "that she does not see an end to that state of things. Kazimierz is an idler and a carouser. Some trouble or danger is hanging over him; the spirits have warned me about that. Helena could have done well in the world, but she herself is ruining her prospects. Mr. Solski, if you please, though not religious, is an uncommon man. He is wealthy, he is highly intelligent (he is even a capable businessman, or so my husband assures me), and, most important, he loved Helena to distraction. I saw that—a volcano! But now I see a change. Even today, after a little time in her company, he would be ready to follow her to the end of the earth; all the same, it is not that earlier love."

"Helena annoys him unnecessarily by flirting with other men," Magda said regretfully.

"That would only be a trifle," said Mrs. Arnold, "but Mr. Solski has too much good sense and feeling not to demand some faith, some love for people and for the ideal in his wife. For Helena, meanwhile, such elevated things do not exist. She scoffs at them. And because she is too proud to pretend, she carries herself toward Solski with an almost cynical air, as if to say, 'I will give you my beauty, and you will give me your name and fortune.' That is how she represents herself! Solski does not entirely believe that; he suspects that it is a pose. All the same, it puts him off, and he may abandon the relationship altogether."

"Have you called this to her attention?" Magda asked.

"I have tried to, but to no effect. Furthermore, I dare not urge her to marry for fear she will think I begrudge her her place in our house. But time passes and she goes on in her own way. Another month or two and Solski, who might marry her today with the proper encouragement, may lose his feeling for her."

"They were engaged, and broke it off."

"Such breakups signify nothing. Beautiful women may play hard to get; that may have a salutary effect on men. Only—it will not do to pull the string too hard."

Magda looked at her inquiringly. Mrs. Arnold noticed, and said:

"And so: what I request of you amounts to this. I cannot speak to Helena either of marriage or of her mother's anguish. So speak with her as a friend—"

"Mrs. Latter very much wished for this union, and was quite distressed when she learned that the engagement had been broken."

"You see, then. Perhaps that was one of the circumstances that drove her to her death. A final point: you might find a delicate way of reminding Helena of what the Solskis did for the departed lady. If gratitude and a little fear of tomorrow awaken in her heart, she might treat Stefan differently."

The subject of their conversation was exhausted, and Mrs. Arnold turned to the issue of spiritualism. It pained her that in this country the wealthy and enlightened classes cared too little about the spirit world; as an example, she alluded to Ada, who occupied herself with a material object like a microscope, or a temporal cause like the women's alliance, rather than with the future of her own soul or the present situation of her departed parents.

"Only convince her, and she will be an ardent apostle of spiritualism," said Magda.

Mrs. Arnold looked at something—it was impossible to tell what—and nodded.

"My dear," she rejoined, "I have thought a great deal about how this family might be converted to the true faith, for wealthy, well-informed, influential people can do their fellow men much good. But—how can one convince them? The spirits are not our servants and do not come at every invocation. We who are mediums between this world and the other do not always understand their voices, and so we may err. Often we must resort to purely earthly means, to the help of people, and they are not always, oh! not always worthy of trust.

"Believe me, if it were not for a feeling of obligation, if it were not for the hope that this religion of ours fundamentally alters the world, makes it better and happier, I would renounce my calling. It is so difficult! These contacts with the spirits inflict great suffering. And when as imperfect beings we blunder, what raillery and abuse falls on us! And how that hinders the spread of our faith, in spite of its veracity."

As she was leaving, Mrs. Arnold asked Magda:

"You have known Mr. Zgierski for a long time. Is he a good man?"

"I do not know. He seems so."

"A man so shrewd would be useful, yet he converted so quickly that I hesitate... And Edyta, who lives with the Solskis' aunt—is she a person with nothing to gain?"

"I do not know."

"Can one trust what she says?"

"I hardly know her," Magda answered uncomfortably.

"Here you see how difficult it is to go among people and gather the most elementary information!" sighed Mrs. Arnold. "After all, I cannot ask the spirit of Caesar for an opinion of Zgierski, or the shade of Marie Antoinette about Edyta.

"Well, goodbye," she said, warmly squeezing Magda's hand. "I am sure there is no need for me to ask you to be circumspect in your use of the information I have imparted. It is not possible to tell children everything about their mother, or lay people about the difficulties with which we mediums must struggle. And I

have not lost hope that soon you yourself will be one of us. The spirits have often indicated that you will. Well—adieu!”

After the talkative American had departed, it seemed to Magda for several minutes that she was still speaking. She saw the walls spinning, and she began to be afraid of the spirits—or was it just the empty drawing rooms? —that surrounded her.

“Heavens!” she thought, putting her hands to her head. “A soul that does not know that it has left the body, and imagines that it is in a home for the sick!”

She recalled Mrs. Arnold’s bearing and expressions. Madwoman or deceiver? Neither! An ordinary, good woman, a little verbose, who had offered, out of the deepest faith, her revelations—or hallucinations.

“How did it occur to her that Mrs. Latter wanted to have me married to her son? Second daughter! Well, Helena may have said something to her. In any case this unlikely emissary has reminded me of my obligation. Helena must—must marry Stefan.”

She thought of Stefan, who was almost beautiful in spite of his homeliness, and impressive because of his vigorous nature, his nobleness and his kindness to her.

“Mrs. Arnold is right in saying that when Stefan is near Helena, he feels the force of her charm. How many times have I seen it! Oh, the intolerable womanizer; how he ogles even me! Anyway, Ada does not hide the fact that he is excited by the presence of any woman. It is understood that Helena can have him whenever she likes. So it will happen for the best.”

She sighed quietly and tried not to think of Stefan. Why should he concern her? She respected him, she admired him; that was the end of it. But how noble he was, how splendid in his aspirations, and how good when he restrained himself from flirting with her, his sister’s guest. It was no wonder that there were aristocratic young ladies who would be overjoyed to draw him away from Helena.

But he must be Helena’s husband. No one’s but Helena’s, despite the wishes of all the young gentlewomen. Indeed, she was aristocratic in her enjoyments, in her bearing, and above all in her beauty. Who was her equal, even among those with the grandest titles?

Chapter XVI. Enter Mr. Zgierski

Several days later, at the corner of Marszalkowska and Krolewska Streets, Zgierski stepped quickly out of a lumbering blue tram. His rotund body rolled like a large ball almost to Magda's feet. He bowed elaborately, wiped the perspiration from his bald head and said:

"How fortunate, meeting you! I had even wanted to visit you at your home to pay my very deep respects. Are you not going through the Saxon Garden?"

"Indeed, I can go that way."

"You are always so good. What a hot day it is! I do not like to think that it is only April. The park seems cooler to me than the street, and the spring foliage forms the most suitable setting for you. Have you noticed that light green blades of grass are showing here and there? And buds... upon my word! So tiny it is barely possible to call them buds, but they are. And the sky— how blue, madam! And those few white clouds are like the swansdown with which ladies cover their necks at balls... You look extremely well today, as—as usual, for it is difficult for me to make exact comparisons. I do not know if it is the influence of spring or the sight of you, but I feel a new man—"

"Do you have some business with me?" Magda interrupted.

"Always the same modesty," Zgierski said, smiling sweetly and caressing her with his keen eyes. "Yes, and more than one matter of business."

"You pique my curiosity."

"First of all, something of a personal nature. Whenever I see you, even in passing, I first experience something painful, like a feeling of shame that I am so bad. But the next few minutes compensate me, for I feel as if I have become better."

He spoke so warmly and delicately, and as if from such a deep well of truth, that Magda could not be angry with him, though she was uncomfortable.

"And the other matter?" she asked, smiling slightly and thinking: "An amusing flatterer!"

"The second matter does not concern my personal feelings, and is therefore more important," he said, altering his tone. "It concerns someone in whom you take an interest."

"I have guessed it; it is Helena. Oh, perhaps you think that I have forgotten our agreement—the agreement we made at the Korkowicz house."

"Our agreement?" Zgierski asked, surprised.

"We were going to direct our efforts toward securing her future, and I guessed immediately that you were thinking of the engagement to Stefan that she had broken off so heedlessly. In spite of that, I hope that it will go forward."

“What? A marriage for Miss Helena—with what Stefan? For my name is also Stefan. But if you are speaking of a marriage between Helena and Mr. S., excuse me, but that was not what I had in mind.”

“But I remember your very words: ‘We must concern ourselves with the future of those two children,’ that is, Helena and her brother.”

“I?” Zgierski asked in amazement, standing still on the boulevard and placing his hand on his chest. “Of those two children, as you call them, Miss Helena is taking an interest— after her own fashion, of course—in the young Korkowicz, while Kazimierz is a spendthrift who cares only for money, and an impertinent fellow who repays friendly suggestions with... the most inappropriate responses. I cannot be a party to the plan of which you speak. I wanted, however, to communicate some important information about our noble Stefan.”

“Noble indeed!” Magda repeated enthusiastically.

“A most extraordinary fellow! Intellectual genius, character, energy. There is a man who, quite simply, does mankind a disservice by not placing himself in the highest possible position. Mind—heart—will, and all very strong—in my opinion, that is Stefan Solski.”

As he spoke, Zgierski seemed borne aloft by his admiration, as if he were soaring over the Saxon Garden.

“Ah, you value him as he deserves!”

“But how many battles I must wage on his behalf!” Zgierski rejoined, looking expressively at Magda. “What pits are dug under him! What intrigues—”

“What do you mean?” Magda exclaimed in alarm.

“At this very moment,” Zgierski said, lowering his voice and speaking as one who instructs the uninitiated, “a partnership of venture capitalists is forming, a partnership that wishes to use any means to push Mr. S. out of his sugar factory, though he has already ordered building materials to be brought to the site. They are saying that he stole the idea from them, since they had intended to build a sugar factory in the district next year, and to draw up a contract with him for the beets.”

“Who are these people?”

“Investors of capital... and there are some aristocrats who depend on them. Such people cannot bear for anyone to get in their way, and nothing can make them retreat!” he added quietly.

“How awful!” whispered Magda, looking with fright into Zgierski’s keen eyes, which at that instant were demurely covered by his lashes.

“I—though I am not intimate with Mr. Solski—am circumventing and will continue to circumvent catastrophe, as much as I am able.”

“And what will they do to him?”

“They will sabotage his operation, incite his workers to rebel, see that he is supplied with inferior materials, turn the neighbors against him, and in the end, bring him to bankruptcy. Warn him, and for the rest—do not mention me.”

“What are you saying?” Magda exclaimed indignantly. “Who better than yourself to inform him?”

“As you wish, madam,” Zgierski replied coldly, but his black eyes were veiled yet more heavily by his lashes.

“Mr. Solski,” he added, “ought not to doubt one thing: that he has in me a devoted friend who is not known to him, but who will care for his interests and inform him of any conspiracies against him.”

“How dreadful it all is!” sighed Magda, equally moved by the dangers that threatened Solski and by Zgierski’s professions of loyalty to him.

“We have reached a parting of the ways,” said her companion, again making a deep flourish with his hat and rashly bending so low that his round figure scarcely permitted it. “Thank you, madam, for granting me a moment’s happiness,” he murmured breathlessly, “and I commend Mr. Solski’s interests to you.”

Then he took her hand, looked her fondly in the eye and added:

“Dear Miss Magdalena, let us join forces, and our beloved genius will overcome all impediments.”

One more glance, one more bow, one more turn of the head, and Mr. Zgierski rolled along like a billiard ball into unknown space. When Magda had disappeared from his line of vision, however, he turned in the opposite direction and, looking around archly at the ladies he passed, went for coffee to a certain pastry shop. There gentlemen who, like him, were intently interested in other people’s business gathered every day: middlemen in purchases, sales and the loaning of money, who were engaged in making new acquaintances and gathering information about everything and everyone that could generate income for men with limited capital.

On her return home, Magda, obviously agitated, went straight to Ada’s room and asked for Stefan to be called. When he appeared, she told him about her conversation with Zgierski.

“But why are you so disturbed?” replied Solski, smiling at her.

“Why, because you are in danger—”

“And that concerns you?”

Embarrassed, Magda said nothing.

The brother and sister looked fleetingly at each other.

“Do not be anxious, Magda, dear,” said Ada. “These men will not do anything to Stefan. We have known of their opposition for a long time, but Mr. Zgierski evidently wants to engage in some business with Stefan, and that is why he has told you something alarming.”

“But he is so favorably disposed toward Stefan,” Magda answered excitedly. “He spoke with the greatest accuracy of your brother’s merits and said that although he was a stranger and unknown to Stefan, nevertheless he watches out for him—because he takes an interest in an extraordinary man.”

“Oh! Oh!” Solski exclaimed, clapping his hands. “Mr. Zgierski has done excellently. I must make his acquaintance.”

“What sort of person is he?” Ada asked.

“A cunning swindler, perhaps a little better than some,” replied her brother. “He will bring me all the gossip, some of which might prove useful, and I will give him—fifty rubles a month. It is as much as his usury got from the deceased Mrs. Latter until that income was unfortunately taken from him!”

Magda listened with a glum expression.

“You are annoyed?” Solski asked, turning to her.

“Because—you do not trust a man who speaks of you with the highest admiration—”

“But, yes! I trust him!” Solski replied. “I am even ready to believe that Zgierski has cherubs’ wings, if you assure me of it. For the rest—the time will come when he and I will know each other better.”

He took his leave of the ladies and went to his study, humming to himself.

Ada looked at Magda for a while, then moved close beside her and put her arm around her waist.

“Tell me sincerely,” she asked, “as sincerely as you can: what do you think of Stefan?”

“I think, as Zgierski said today, that your brother possesses every fine quality in the highest degree: mind—heart—will. And beyond that—that he is the noblest man I know,” Magda answered in a tone of deep conviction.

Ada kissed her.

“How good it is, how very good, that you think so,” she said, suppressing a sigh.

“And that is why I say to you,” Magda went on, “that such a man ought to be happy. We all have an obligation to work for his happiness. And I tell you, he ought to marry.”

“You are right,” Ada said softly.

“And we both, and Mrs. Arnold with us, must see him reconciled with Helena. She has her faults, but who is without faults? She is just the wife Stefan needs.”

Ada drew back and looked deeply into Magda’s eyes.

“Can you really be saying this?” she asked.

“Yes—because I am right! Stefan is an extraordinary man and Helena is an extraordinary woman. How beautiful and clever she is, and how proud! I must say, I do not love her as I do Cecylia, the woman for whom you are securing a position in Jazlowiec. But I tell you, when I look at Helena, it humbles me, because I feel that there is something regal about that woman. It is true that she has little value for anyone but herself, but obviously she knows her own worth and the charm that emanates from her.”

Ada shook her head. There was such sincerity in Magda’s words and in her eyes that it was impossible to doubt her.

“And do you not suppose that there can be more perfect women than Helena?” she asked.

“Perhaps in the very highest society, or abroad,” Magda answered naively. Miss Solska laughed.

“Oh, dear! Oh, you! You!” she said, and kissed her again and again.

Then she began to talk to her about the affairs of the women’s alliance: that certainly a rest home for teachers was going to be funded, and perhaps—sometime—a shelter for poor mothers. That in the caftan workshop there were thirty workers, and that some gentlewomen, at her instigation, had bought sixteen caftans. Finally, that she, Ada, had herself been occupied all day with working women and destitute girls, and that now and then she felt pangs of conscience because she had rather neglected her mosses and lichens.

“Imagine, now I am not recording a quarter of the number of observations I used to,” she concluded in a worried tone.

The Easter holidays passed. Magda found them memorable because at that time she met several members of the Solski family.

All the gentlemen, middle-aged and elderly, more and less titled, were unimpeachably courteous to her. But such a coolness wafted from them that conversation with them was a torment to the poor girl. She would have renounced wealth and position and escaped to some wilderness if it had fallen to her lot more often to see these highly respectable men whose every word, look and movement showed that they considered her an outsider, and an unwelcome one.

The younger women pretended that they did not notice Magda; in greeting her or taking leave, they looked at the wall or the ceiling. An aged lady chatted with her graciously enough for a few minutes, but only to say with a smile that she was convinced that Magda had great influence over Ada, since Ada had refused to be coaxed into assisting with the Easter charity collections.

By the third day Magda was telling herself that if the visiting and fraternizing continued, in spite of her attachment to the Solskis she would leave the house. At the same time she wondered if these people would treat Helena Norska the same way, and how Helena would hold up in their company. She told herself, however, that Helena would have known in advance how to deal with

them, and that it was among just such supercilious people that she would be in her element.

“Oh,” she thought, “I am not Helena!”

But the holidays went by, and the visits of the great ladies and gentlemen ended. Magda returned to her routine at the school, where she was the object of growing respect; Ada to the women’s alliance, which, thanks to her, was gaining more members and more money; and Stefan to his consultations with businessmen and engineers about the sugar works.

In the meantime, the sun was rising earlier and earlier, arcing higher in the sky, and setting later and later. The city dried; people put on their spring clothes; street vendors began to sell blue hepatica sprinkled with fragrant orris root. The Solski garden was covered with new grass and its venerable trees with buds, which were waiting to burst open as soon as the next rain should come.

One day Solski came into his sister’s room, and, finding Magda, said jokingly:

“At last we have made an arrangement with Miss Magda’s admirer.”

“With whom?” Magda asked, reddening.

“Not your only admirer, but one of the warmest. Mr. Zgierski!”

“What is your impression of him?” Ada interposed.

“He is in everyone’s drawing room. He is smooth, and wearies one with his elaborate politeness. In sum, he is a man for whom it is not necessary to open doors, because he opens them himself when he likes.”

He paced around the room and snapped his fingers.

“Are you satisfied?” Ada asked.

“I am. This, it seems to me, is a sly dog. I had rather have him behind me than against me—and rather beside me than behind me. In any case, Miss Magda’s recommendation is most felicitous. If you have anyone else to recommend to me, madam, or even several people, or a dozen, I will be obliged to you.”

“No... you must have already heard something... I am sure you have.”

“About whom?” he asked curiously.

“About Mr. Fajkowski.”

“Fajkowski? An excellent name! Fajka, that is a pipe; does he keep a tobacco shop?”

“Now, now! No, he is an apothecary, a dispenser of medicines.”

“Tell us about this Fajkowski, who has so missed his calling,” he urged her.

“Oh, it is a long story. I met Mr. Fajkowski in Iksinow, in the apothecary shop—that is, we bowed to each other. I bowed because he was good to that poor

Stella when she gave the concert in town. Do you remember, Ada? Oh, dear, I wonder what is happening to her. Surely the poor woman has died!”

“Yet another story,” Solski put in. “But what of Mr. Fajkowski?”

“You shall hear,” Magda went on. “He came here to the city, to an apothecary shop. You know, Ada, he lost his former position because he was a sleepwalker. Imagine: he climbed to the second story by the kitchen drainpipe!”

“Aha!” Solski exclaimed. “But is he not a sleepwalker in Warsaw?”

“I do not know. But here he met a teacher from Miss Malinowska’s school. You know her, Ada: Zaneta.”

“The one with the wistful face?” Ada said.

“Not now—or rather—she was cheerful for a time, but now is even sadder. Because, only think! She met Mr. Fajkowski, and they fell in love—”

“Well! Good for them. Does every acquaintance lead to love, or do only apothecaries have that privilege?”

“No more of this exaggeration, Stefan!” his sister chided.

“Oh,” Magda said, “they are in love, but they cannot marry until he has his own apothecary shop or a better position, one that would support two people. For her part, Zaneta says she is ready to do private tutoring if that would settle the matter.”

“Bah!” said Solski.

“Oh, Stefan, dear, do not interrupt!”

“In the meantime, imagine what is happening. The other day, Zaneta stopped me and said—in tears—‘My Magda, they say Mr. Solski will have a doctor and an apothecary at his sugar factory. Ask him if poor Fajkowski could have the position. He is an extremely capable apothecary; he himself does the analyses. And so quiet, so hard-working!’”

“Of course he has already cured himself of sleepwalking,” muttered Solski. “Do I understand,” he added aloud, “that you wish to secure the happiness of this loving couple?”

“What can I do?” Magda answered worriedly, shrugging her shoulders.

“And am I going to give this Fajkowski (why is he not named, for example, Retortowski?), am I going to give this man the apothecary shop at the factory?”

“Oh, if you would only do that!” Magda exclaimed. “They are so sad, so in love!”

“Ada—my sister—” said Solski ceremoniously, standing in the center of the room, “Ada, inform Miss Magdalena that her protegee, Mr. Fajkowski, has the apothecary shop at our factory, but under this condition, that he marry the tearful Miss Zaneta. As long as our opponents do not throw me out of there, you understand...”

Instead of answering, Magda seized Ada and began to kiss her face and hands.

“Ada,” she said in an undertone, “tell your brother that he is an angel!” And tears welled in her eyes when she looked at Stefan.

Solski drew near her and kissed her hand.

“You are an angel,” he replied, “for you not only enable us to make people happy, but you persist in thinking that it is we who are doing them a kindness, when it is the other way around. Yes, yes,” he added, “let the sweethearts marry, and let us help them.”

“Magda has just been wishing to help you be happy,” Ada spoke up. “Before the holidays she enlisted me in a plot to have you reconciled with Helena, and, of course, to unite you—”

“Oh, Ada!” cried Magda, hiding her eyes in alarm. “How could you say something like that?”

Stefan looked astonished and hurt.

“This is your advice?” he asked after a moment’s pause. “Ha! Perhaps I will heed it, and in that event—”

“Good!” Magda whispered.

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Solski rejoined. “We will see how sound your counsel is. Meanwhile, Mr. Fajkowski will have the apothecary shop at the factory.”

He took another turn around the room and walked out somberly.

“Is he offended with me?” Magda asked Ada anxiously.

“Nothing of the sort. Only it is clear that the thought of his relationship with Helena has made him gloomy. But that will pass,” Ada answered.

“How good he is! How noble! What a saint!” said Magda, nestling her head on Ada’s shoulder.

Chapter XVII. Brother and Sister

In the Arnolds' house, Helena occupied a large, cheerful-looking room with very much the same appointments as her old room at her mother's school. The same curtains hung in the window; the same lamp with its blue globe hung from the ceiling; around the room were placed the same furniture and bric-a-brac. Of the latter, the most ostentatious piece was the mirror, the object for which its owner had the keenest affinity.

One afternoon near the end of April, Helena was in that room with her brother. She sat on a blue sofa, looking dejectedly at her dainty shoes. Kazik was pacing about feverishly.

"So," said his sister, "our stepfather does not want to lend you the money?"

"He would give it to me, but he needs it himself."

Helena nodded and smiled ruefully.

"And you think I will never need money," she replied. "You think that I have a large fortune, and that I can cover your insane expenditures with a portion of the income from it."

"I give you my word, Helena, that this is the last time. I have taken a position with the railroad and I will work. To the devil with the companions who have drained me of time and money and brought me nothing! But I must pay this final debt in order to end these relationships."

"A thousand rubles!" Helena said. "That is more than I spent abroad."

"Why, my dear, you spent more than that—although you needed nothing!"

Helena's beautiful face went crimson.

"When do you take this position?"

"Next week."

"And the salary?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"Why are they paying you so much?"

"Oh, that's good!" he burst out. "They will pay for the languages I know, for my knowledge of economics, and, finally, for my connections."

He must have been extremely exasperated, for he stood in front of his sister and said in a voice that almost trembled:

"This is not my fault. I lost money because I tried for something better. And certainly it would have been otherwise with me today, everything would have been recovered with interest, if it had not been for your caprice. When you broke off with Solski, you pulled the ground from under my feet. Solski's brother-in-law would have been treated differently."

“You were, when all is said and done, his future brother-in-law, and what did you gain but debts? At any rate, as far as I know, Solski keeps himself at a distance from the men who have positions to give—”

“He himself would have devised something for me, for he often alluded to my future. Now he is establishing a sugar factory. I could have been an administrator at a salary of four or five thousand—”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! You an administrator—and for Solski?”

“Yes, laugh, when it is you who have ruined my career. To tell you the truth, I often ask myself: whom have you ever cared for in your life? Surely not me. Not even our mother.”

Helena grew grave and looked sternly at her brother.

“Are you not ashamed to toss off such accusations? Whom have you cared about? About our mother, with whom you waxed sentimental whenever you need money? Or perhaps about me—who, instead of having a protector in you, must accept a home with strangers?”

“Our stepfather is not a stranger. Furthermore, he has a family, while I am a bachelor.”

“Marry, then. Be a respectable man and make my life easy. Who knows whether, on the contrary, my prospects have not suffered because of you?”

The bell rang in the anteroom. Helena stopped speaking and Kazimierz, who was about to answer her, bit his lip.

“Apparently it is one of your admirers,” he said gruffly.

“I will ask him about an administrative position,” retorted Helena.

Magda walked in.

A look of aversion flitted across Helena’s face at the sight of her, but a change came over Kazimierz. He greeted her diffidently and a hint of tenderness glinted in his eyes, which had been full of anger only a moment before.

Magda was also a little startled. She had not expected to meet Kazimierz.

“How are you, Magda?” said Helena, kissing her coolly. “Here, you see,” she said, turning to her brother, “ask her for a position, and it will be better than the one with the railroad.”

“Me?” Magda asked.

“Well, Magda, dear, do not pretend,” said Helena. “Everyone knows you made Zgierski your protege, then Zaneta’s fiance. Aha—and, too, some governess from the province.”

At that moment a beautiful little boy bounded into the room and called in French:

“Helena, papa wants you.”

He seized her hand and pulled her insistently toward the door.

"You have not greeted everyone, Henryk," Helena admonished him.

"Oh, it's true. I'm sorry!" he replied, laughing.

He gave Magda his hand, then began to tug at Helena again.

When the child's laughter and Helena's footsteps had died away, Magda said to Kazimierz:

"Is Helena angry at me?"

"Angry, yes, but not at you. Only at me," he answered. "It is hard for her to reconcile herself to the thought that after such hopes and so much spent on my education, I have decided to take a position—clerical, of course—with the railway. I can only imagine," he said bitterly, "how incredulous my former friends will be when they receive the improbable news that Norski has become a railroad official at fifteen hundred rubles!"

"My poor mother," he added after a moment, "did not foresee such a future for me. But I myself, hardly a year ago, saw the necessity of giving up my illusions. And not only on that score—"

"Why are you choosing a profession in such a hurry?" asked Magda, gazing at him sympathetically.

"On the contrary, madam, I have been behindhand," he replied, seating himself beside her. "If I had done this a year ago, I would not have lost money pursuing detestable relationships. I would already have had two or three thousand in salary, and... I could have been thinking of domestic happiness," he added softly, lowering his eyes.

"But what did this sudden intention spring from? Why this choice?" she said confusedly, withdrawing the hand he had taken. "You have just entered the world, so what is the source of this disenchantment?"

"Not disenchantment, only a logical conclusion. To my credit I saw, in spite of my youth, that it was of no use to struggle against fate."

"Fate is against you? I should have thought the opposite," she protested.

He shook his head.

"When I was a child," he said dreamily, his beautiful eyes darkening, "my mother envisioned a career as a diplomat for me. She spoke of it to me often. She made me learn languages, the piano, dancing, all the forms of courtesy, and world history in great detail. At the age of sixteen I almost knew the historical writings of Mommsen by heart, to say nothing of a mountain of works on law and economics.

"Mother was soon convinced that external circumstances made it impossible for me to think of a diplomatic career. But the ambition had been instilled in me. So when I was forced to renounce the future title, Excellency, I said to myself: I will be an advocate for the rights of the people.

"How I progressed in that direction you may have heard. Wherever I was, young people saw their leader in me, and the elderly saw their hope. 'That one

will do something,' they said. I went among the aristocracy and the plutocrats twice—once to obtain an appropriate position, a second time to know them more closely and choose from among them instruments of my purpose. I took part in their diversions, I spent money—true! But I did that by design, not blindly; those contacts, not ideals, were the rungs of my career.”

Magda listened as if he were a prophet. Kazimierz was warming to his subject and growing handsomer every minute.

“But there in the gilded salons,” he continued, “I met with the heaviest disillusionment. There were people who were willing to take advantage of my generosity, but none who were capable of understanding me. They got their share of amusement from my social gifts and in every respect squeezed me like a sponge.

“I must add, it is not only mitres and crowns that have the privilege of covering obtuse heads. Under the Phrygian cap of populism there are gathered far more fools, who moreover are badly brought up, boisterous and self-seeking. The youth of that movement, with whom after a while I established comradely relations, saw that I lived in a higher world—a world to which their fathers had not quite gained access—and they abandoned me. Imperfectly comprehending my plans, they thought I was betraying their cause, and more so because I was not in the habit of confiding my guiding maxims to them over beer and kielbasa. And,” he added parenthetically, “it did me no little damage when those sansculottes learned that Helena was going to marry Solski.

“So ended my career as a defender of the people,” he said with an irony that lent still greater charm to his face. “And because I have no fortune, how can I do better than secure a post in the railway offices? I do not doubt that I will stay afloat, but it is the hope of a shipwrecked sailor who finds himself cast from a powerful boat onto a barren shore—the certainty that, at least, he will not die of hunger.”

Helena’s voice could be heard from the farther rooms. After a moment she walked in.

“Kazik,” she said to her brother, who was standing by the window, “our stepfather is waiting for you. Thank me!” And she held out her hand.

“Are you giving it to me?” he asked. “Oh, how good you are!” And he kissed her again and again on her hand, and then on the lips.

“Our stepfather is giving you the money. I am only guaranteeing the loan,” she replied. When her brother had hurried out of the room, she turned to Magda.

“What has shocked you so?” she asked, looking at her a little sarcastically. “Have you had such a moving conversation with my brother?”

“It is with you that I wanted to talk about some important things,” Magda answered in a tone that surprised even herself.

“Oh, something must be in the wind!” said Helena. She sat at her ease on the sofa and began to examine her little foot. Magda took her place on a small armchair next to the sofa.

“You know,” she began, “that I was the last person to speak with your mother before her death—”

“Well, well, well! What an introduction! And that tone! It reminds me of Miss Howard,” Helena broke in.

But with a coolness unusual for her, Magda went on:

“Your mother took me into her confidence a little—”

“Ah!”

“She often spoke to me of you. And I tell you, you have no idea how your mother longed for a marriage between you and Stefan, and you cannot guess what a blow it was to her when she learned that there had been a misunderstanding between you. Then... in Italy...”

“What now? After such a prologue, I must expect a dramatic conclusion.”

“I do not have the right to tell you everything I know. But I ask one thing of you—and please attach more significance to my words than to the person speaking them. It is this: make it up with Stefan and fulfil your mother’s wish.”

Helena clapped her palms to her ears.

“Am I really hearing this? You, Magda Brzeska, order me in a funereal voice and in the name of my dead mother to marry Solski? You know, my dear, I have never seen such a diverting farce!”

“Which of us is acting out the comedy?” Magda snapped.

Helena folded her hands on her chest and looked at Magda with flaming eyes.

“You come here to make a match between me and Solski—you, who have been flirting with him with all your might for months?”

“I—with Stefan? I, flirting with anyone?” asked Magda, more surprised than angry.

Helena was confused. “So they say.”

“So they say! Excuse me, but what do they say about you, about your brother? What do they say about—”

Here Magda broke off, as if she were terrified at her own words.

“Solski is in love with you...and, they say, is going to marry you... Evidently your season has arrived in his heart,” said Helena.

Magda’s hearty laugh was more convincing to Helena than any argument.

“Perhaps you are not flirting with him,” she said, still more confused. “But if he wanted to marry you, you would marry him in an instant—”

"I? But no one has spoken of such a thing. I have never thought of it, I am not thinking of it, and even if, God forbid, Stefan lost his senses and proposed to me, I would never marry him. I will not even explain myself further to you because I do not understand how anyone of sound mind can believe such rubbish. Indeed, I would not be living in their house if there were the merest hint of such a thing. But as it is, I am living there, and I will go on living there, if only to stop the mouths of gossips, whom I quite despise. It is the same as if it were said that Mr. Arnold was in love with you and you were going to marry him!"

"That is quite different. You are free to marry Solski."

"Never!" Magda said vehemently.

"Excuse me, but I do not understand your reasons," Helena countered. "After all, you are not his sister."

"I respect Stefan, I admire him, I wish him happiness, for he is the noblest of men," Magda said ardently. "But all the attributes he possesses cannot fill the gulf between us. Good God!" she shuddered. "For me—a girl of modest means—death would be better than forcing my way into a social circle that shuns me today. I have my pride, too. And I would rather be a servant in the home of poor people than a member of a family that would treat me like a stray dog," she concluded passionately.

Helena listened with lowered eyes and a flushed face.

"Well, in these times education and breeding erase financial distinctions between people."

"And that is why you can be Stefan's wife," said Magda, seizing on Helena's argument. "Your father was a wealthy landowner whose holdings included whole villages. Your mother was a great lady from head to foot. And you yourself, in spite of your lack of fortune, are a great lady, with a presence that would impress your husband's family. But I—the daughter of a village doctor, whose highest ambition is to have an elementary school! Of course I am attached to the Solskis, because they promised to give me the school at the sugar factory. I will teach the children of its workers and managers; that is my role in their house."

Helena's face, which had been gloomy until that moment, brightened like a beautiful landscape when the sun peeps from under the clouds.

"Forgive me!" she said, bending over and kissing Magda warmly.

"Ah, you see... you see, you bad girl!" said Magda, holding her close. "For all the injustices you heaped on me, you must... you must be reconciled with Stefan. Remember," she added quietly, "that was your poor mother's wish."

"Even so, I cannot take the first step," Helena said reflectively.

"He will take it. Only do not push him away. Oh! I know something about this matter. I do!" Magda whispered.

A quiet sound of boots scraping the floor could be heard from the next room, and Kazimierz stood on the threshold. He was radiant: his eyes, his lips, his face, all his bearing resolved themselves into one great smile. But at the sight of Magda these signs of joy disappeared, a slight frown replaced them, and a shadow of melancholy darkened his eyes. It was the expression that set off his looks to the greatest advantage, particularly when his hair was a little windblown.

Helena was so preoccupied with her own affairs that, without asking her brother about the upshot of his conference with her stepfather, she exclaimed:

“Do you know that there are rumors about Magda and Solski?”

At that moment Kazimierz looked like a man just awakened from sleep. He looked at Magda.

“She has given me her word that she would never marry Solski, and that in any case Stefan has no thought of falling in love with her.”

Magda felt a pain at her heart.

“Moreover,” his sister continued, “our good Magda has excellently accounted for her role in their house. Stefan has promised to put her in charge of the school at the sugar factory, and she says: ‘I will teach the children of the managers and the workers, and that is why I am attached to the Solskis.’”

The beautiful young woman’s every word, spoken with a derisive smile, tore at Magda inwardly.

“How ruthless she is, how insensitive!” she thought.

“I understand none of this,” said Kazimierz.

“You will understand,” his sister said more seriously, “when I add that Brzeska is trying to persuade me, first, to make up with Stefan, and, next, to marry him. Do you hear? That is the advice I have received from Brzeska, from whom they have hardly any secrets.”

“Bravo!” Kazimierz cried, and began to leap around the room. His melancholy fled like a frightened hare from a furrow. “In that case, my Hela, surely you do not want to stand on your right to be repaid a thousand rubles.”

“Rest easy,” she returned, with a victorious air. “I will give you all I have left.”

Magda could not make an inventory of the feelings she experienced at that moment. It seemed that she had fallen into a vortex and would have to claw her way out. She rose and gave Helena her hand.

“Are you going?” asked Miss Norska, not noticing either that Magda had gone silent or that she looked pale.

“Goodbye, madam,” Kazimierz said in a tone that would have done credit to the proudest of the Solskis’ cousins.

“What is happening?” thought Magda, slowly making her way downstairs. In no way could she reconcile Kazimierz’s profound disillusionment with his leaps of joy, or the tenderness he had shown her earlier with his casual goodbye. And that Helena, who had referred to her as “Brzeska!”

But when she was walking along the street in the fresh spring air among the cheerful passersby, her thoughts took a different turn.

“After all, when I am happy, I am not mindful of others around me. And if all this has caused them so much joy, then I have the evidence that I am doing well. Poor Kazimierz will not need to stifle his talents in an office, and will be able to turn his best intentions into reality more quickly. And what of Helena? She is like all gentlewomen: she will hold her own in society, and Stefan will be happy.

“Dear Mrs. Latter, if she could see their joy, would most certainly say: ‘Magda, you are a good girl, I am pleased with you.’ And new life would come into the Solski household as Ada has longed for it to do. And Stefan, that noble man...”

Here her train of thought broke off. She did not have the courage to dwell on the prospect of Stefan’s future happiness.

Chapter XVIII. Of Spiritualism and Atheism

At the end of April the Arnolds invited the Solskis and Magda to an evening party on their wedding anniversary. They announced that a small circle of friends would be present, among them Professor Dembicki.

As it happened, Dembicki was one of the first people Magda met at the party. He was standing by the entry door next to the host and wearing an aggrieved expression. He might have been taken for the butler if it had not been for his threadbare frock coat, which fitted him poorly.

“Why did you not come with us, professor?” Solski exclaimed as he greeted Arnold.

“I have been here since seven,” Dembicki muttered wryly, bowing to all the arrivals who did not know him in order to show that he was no stranger to the conventions of polite society.

Fortunately, Ada Solska seized his hand and whispered:

“Dear professor, you must keep us company all evening, even at dinner.”

“Excellent,” he replied with a smile of genuine good humor, “for I would not have known what to do in all this chaos.”

They sat in a corner, chatting. Dembicki, however, immediately fixed his blue eyes somewhere in space and became unconscious of Miss Solska, which for him was not a surprising but a quite characteristic way of behaving.

In the meantime Magda, whom Solski had conducted into the room, gazed around at the people gathered there. In this enterprise she was assisted by Kazimierz, who was as kind this evening as if he wanted to erase every trace of their previous meeting from her memory.

“How good he is!” Magda thought with delight. “Though he is mistaken if he thinks I was offended then. I knew, after all, that they were distracted by their elation.”

“Notice who these people are,” Kazimierz was saying. “Those stout middle-aged men are owners of various manufacturing firms that do a great deal of business with my stepfather. The German among them, with a heavy reddish beard, is going to install the machinery in Stefan’s sugar works.”

“Aha!” Magda whispered as a sign that the German who was going to install the machinery interested her very much.

“Those young gentlemen—the blond with the badge in his lapel is an engineer; the good-looking dark-haired fellow is a doctor. Oh—and an acquaintance of yours, Bronislaw Korkowicz, who looks as if he were learning the role of Othello at the little theater in Praga. They are all admirers of my sister. I can assure you that each of them adores her disinterestedly, since each is wealthy. Helena cannot tolerate having anyone around her who is not.”

“Is that necessary, do you think?” Magda asked.

“Is a fortune necessary for lovers? I think so; particularly where beautiful, demanding women are concerned.”

“No... Is it necessary for those men to be near Stefan?” Magda asked quietly.

“That is a tactic of my sister’s, and of ladies in general,” he answered. “You ladies have discovered that when it is a question of securing your hold over a man, the strongest shackle is jealousy. True?”

“Excuse me, I do not know.”

Kazimierz bit his lip lightly and went on with his explanations.

“Now notice that very interesting group: those women—neither young nor pretty—that man with the gray whiskers and the other with the blank stare. Do you see how earnest they are? Those are apprentices in spiritualism, disciples and pupils of Mrs. Arnold. Very busy, my stepfather’s good lady! She has lived in Warsaw only a short time, and already in a dozen houses, table legs and bevel squares are speaking with supernatural wisdom. If I did not know that my stepmother—my stepfather’s wife, at least—was completely oblivious to mercenary interests, I would say, as one who predicts the future, that she will make a fortune. Unfortunately, it seems that my stepfather chips in heavily for these relationships with the spirits. Madam, you are better off laying out money for a ball for a hundred people than for one successful seance!”

“Are you joking?”

“I should think so!”

Suddenly someone called Kazimierz away, and Magda settled next to Miss Solska. Ada blushed and played feverishly with her fan.

“They say Kazimierz Norski is a great flirt,” she said to Magda. “Was he trying to charm you?”

“No,” Magda replied, feeling that she was not being quite truthful. “He was describing the other guests just then, and mocking spiritualism mercilessly.”

“Who knows but that he may be right. Isn’t that so, professor?” Ada asked, turning to Dembicki.

“What are you speaking of?” he asked as if suddenly awakened.

At that moment Helena came up in a white gown and for the second time that evening greeted Ada and Magda with a great show of affection. Then, extending her hand to Dembicki, she said with an arch smile:

“I feel that I have been out of favor with you since the unfortunate interchange concerning the binomials of Newton. If you really are angry, I apologize. I would not behave in that way today. I am not the same person,” she added with a sigh. “My own sufferings have taught me that no one should inflict pain on another.”

She was enchanting. She came so near that Dembicki smelled the fragrance of her, and she looked at him with her large, dark eyes. But the aging mathematician replied with stony serenity:

“Excuse me, madam: of what use would the binomial theory of Newton be to you? It is a good introduction to Taylor’s sequence, of course!”

“Oh, you are a monster!” exclaimed Ada. “A lady who looks like a heavenly vision speaks to you and instead of looking into her eyes, you think of Taylor?”

Dembicki was confused. He threw up his hands, unable to answer. Solski, who had been listening to the conversation, stepped in to save him.

“All his adoration of Miss Helena’s beauty he renounces for my sake,” he said, “and so I have the pleasure of being carried away by it twice over!”

“Shall I carry you away for the evening?” she replied, raising her eyes to him.

“Not necessarily,” he replied. “Mrs. Arnold wants to confer with you in your mutual capacity as hostesses.”

He gave her his arm and she leaned on it with the most graceful casualness. He walked away with a fleeting glance at Magda.

But Magda did not notice. She sat with her eyes down, conscious only of the pain that was stabbing her to the heart.

“How lovely Helena looks!” she whispered to Ada.

“Speaking candidly—no,” Ada returned, also in an undertone. “There is something artificial about her.”

Magda’s heart ached even more.

“How quickly the great forget their previous affections,” she thought.

Kazimierz joined them and began speaking with great courtesy to Ada, looking at her tenderly but throwing stealthy glances at Magda. But Ada played with her fan, answered him indifferently and took the first opportunity to walk away with Dembicki in search of a less stuffy room.

“I do not understand what has happened to Miss Ada,” Kazimierz said, obviously disturbed. “She was so gracious to me in Switzerland.”

“You have visited her too rarely.”

“Because for some time I have noticed a change in her. And I am not high in her brother’s regard, so—do you understand what the result of it all is? It is that, unhappily for me, I see you too rarely.”

As he spoke, his face and eyes were alight. Magda truly did look lovely, and several gentlemen had pondered the question of who was more beautiful: statuesque Helena, whose every movement showed her high opinion of her own worth, or gentle, quiet Magda, who thought of herself as quite plain.

A murmur arose from the assembly. Mrs. Arnold's grizzled follower was earnestly presenting evidence that the medium was in a more receptive state tonight than ever before, and that she ought to be asked to hold a seance.

"I would wager," he said to the man with the vacuous eyes, "that we would see something extraordinary. Mrs. Arnold is in the state of arousal in which the will of the medium raises tables and even forces the spirits to appear in material form."

To that the man with the vacant stare replied that it was in the interests of the new science for lay people to see a table flying through the air or some such thing, while Mr. Zgierski, who as if from underground had turned up beside them, declared his readiness to request a seance.

"Well," Kazimierz said to Magda, "if Mr. Zgierski is involved, an apparition is certain. Meanwhile, let us go through to the farther rooms."

On their way they nearly bumped into Bronislaw Korkowicz, who was hiding behind the door frame. He was pale and his lips were white as he watched Helena coquetting with Solski, and not in jest.

"There, you see," Kazimierz said to Magda when they found themselves in a quiet, book-lined room, "today it is possible to examine the way religion came into being. A medium appears; Charcot would have a great deal to say about that. Several fanatics come on the scene, who must as surely believe in something as they must drink black coffee after dinner; some Zgierski is ready to serve as intermediary so as to maintain his position; well, and there is a group of weak minds—in fact the generality—who, if they stop thinking of God and the afterlife, immediately are given over to drunkenness, theft, banditry or gambling..."

"You do not believe in the spirits, then?" Magda asked curiously.

"I?"

"But—in the immortality of the soul?"

"What soul, and what immortality?"

"Well, but you must believe in God," she said almost desperately.

Kazimierz smiled and shrugged. "I should give you a course of lectures in philosophy here," he rejoined, "as I used to lecture to my colleagues at university, many of whom were quite devout. Be under no illusions, Miss Magdalena: let us take life for what it is, and let us take care above all not to let any of its delights be lost. Other people will think of its bitterness for us. And when the last moment comes, we will have this consolation at least—that we did not waste nature's precious gift."

Magda began to feel truly disturbed.

"But—how is it possible to doubt that there is a soul?" she said. "When all is said and done, I feel, I think—well, I am sure that there is a future life."

“Where is it, the soul?” he asked. “In the brain, learned people have discovered fat, blood, phosphorus, millions of cells and fibers, but they did not observe a soul. And where does that soul hide during a deep sleep or a fainting spell, and why does it cease to know about anything, even itself, if a little less blood flows to the brain than when it is in a waking state?”

“Where is our soul before we are born? Why was it not there when the tops of our skulls were soft? Why do our souls grow and reach maturity together with our bodies; why do they reach their peak in our mature years and grow weaker in old age? Is that soul not like a candle flame which barely glimmers the first moment after it is lit, then grows, but when the wax is burned away begins to go out? To speak of the immortal soul is like asserting that the flame endures though the candle burns out. The flame is only the burning candle, and the soul the living body.”

“So there is no future life?”

“Where would it exist? In the grave? In the so-called heaven which is the emptiness between the stars, colder and darker than the grave itself? For the rest, where did this wild pretension to eternal life come from? Would it not be comical for a spark that flashes for a few minutes to hypothesize a hundred years of life for itself? Everything that has a beginning must have an end.”

“This is terrible!” Magda whispered.

“To the sick imagination. But a normal man is so absorbed in life that he has no time to think of death. When he succumbs to it, he does not even know that he has met it. He sleeps without dreaming and would certainly be angry if we should want to wake him.”

“What are you saying?” Magda said, shaking her head in contradiction. “I know that the human organism is ingeniously constructed. But where does it come from, who created it, and for what purpose? If death is a sleep, why wake us from it? Indeed, that would be an injustice.”

“Another illusion, for we cannot rid ourselves of the thought that nature was created by a force like the strength of a man who has purposes, loves what he has made, and feels pity when it is exterminated. But there is no place in nature for that kind of force. The earth revolves around the sun because projectile force drives it forward, and the force of its weight sustains it in the vicinity of the sun. Oxygen links itself to hydrogen and produces water, not because people want to drink it, but by the power of chemical affinity. A seed thrown into the earth yields a plant not because some angel wants it to, but under the influence of warmth, moisture and chemical substances in the ground.”

“That is all very well, but why? Why?” Magda persisted.

Kazimierz smiled and shrugged again.

“And why do the clouds over our heads sometimes arrange themselves in the form of islands, trees, animals, people? Do those forms, which exist for a few minutes, come into being for some purpose? Do they want to live forever?”

Feverish and frightened, Magda plucked at her handkerchief. To her Kazimierz was a genius, and the truth of his words was not to be doubted—at least not now, when she was looking into his wonderful eyes, deep, intelligent, and so sad.

It was clear that he was reconciled to the terrible fate of the human being, so why should she revolt against ineluctable law?

But how she grieved for all those who would die, and whom she would never see; how she grieved for her own soul, which must be extinguished though she loved the whole world! And no one would pity her, no one would extend a hand from the interstellar emptiness more awful than the grave!

Ah! It was a hard evening for Magda. It seemed to her that in the course of half an hour's blithe repartee Kazimierz had demolished heaven and earth, her past faith and her future hopes. And of all that beautiful world nothing remained—nothing except themselves, the two condemned ones.

She was silent, unaware of what was going on around her, and deaf to everything except the storm that had burst so suddenly and caused such devastation in her vulnerable heart. The inner life of a human being is jarred now and then with a force like an earthquake.

At that moment Kazimierz was not thinking of Magda; he was looking at young Korkowicz, whose behavior he was beginning to find worrisome. Bronislaw noticed that and came toward them. He stood in front of Magda and said in a voice that was not normal for him:

“Good evening, madam.”

Magda quivered as if something very heavy were falling down around her. She looked up and saw Bronislaw's pale, perspiring face looming over her. His hair looked unkempt and coarse as hemp.

“How are you, Kazik?” he said, not looking at Magda. “What an Amazon your sister is! One horse is not enough for her; she must have a whole stable, and still likes to return to the ones she has thrown over. Ha! Ha! Such taste...”

It seemed to Magda that young Korkowicz was drunk. In reality, however, he was jealous.

“Do not make a scene!” Kazimierz whispered to him.

“And... because Miss Helena clung so to that Solski...”

“My apologies,” Kazimierz said to Magda, rising. He took Korkowicz by the arm, spoke to him intently for a moment and then conducted him to the distant rooms.

“Perhaps there is going to be a duel!” Magda thought, and her heart began to pound.

But just then there was a stir in the room, and Ada came over to Magda with Dembicki at her side.

“Let us sit together,” she said. “There is going to be an experiment in spiritualism. What were you talking about so heatedly with Mr. Norski?”

“Oh, he is so unhappy,” Magda answered hastily. “Imagine: he spent the whole time explaining to me that there is no soul.”

Miss Solska bit her lip.

“He has expounded that to women so many times that he should have thought up something new by now!”

“To me it is terribly new!”

A crowd of guests came between them and for a moment swept Magda toward a table where Korkowicz was standing near Helena and her brother.

“Bronislaw must be polite,” said Helena, looking eloquently at her admirer.

“There’s more politeness in this world than fair play!” Korkowicz said angrily.

“Bronislaw must be... should be calm,” Helena added. She tapped his hand softly with her fan and, throwing him one more glance, walked away to look for Solski.

For a minute or so Korkowicz looked after her in bewilderment. Suddenly his face changed; the angry expression disappeared, and a look of joy took its place.

“I beg your pardon, Kazik!” he exclaimed, smiling so broadly that his white teeth showed. “Upon my word, your sister is an angel... but she has sharp talons. Sometimes she scratches until the heart is bleeding!”

In the large salon Magda joined Ada and Dembicki once more. At the same time all the guests began to go out to an adjoining room, for someone was saying that a seance would take place there. For a few minutes the salon was empty.

Then, however, Zgierski came in with the gentleman with the vacant stare, who seemed to be completely detached from his surroundings. The two of them took hold of a small round table and began to position it in the center of the room, looking by turns at the floor and at the ceiling, as if they were searching for cracks through which the spirits would visit the Arnolds’ hospitable house.

The guests began to move around again. First to come into the salon and take their places near the door were ladies who were very curious about the spirits, ready to believe in them on the spot, but terribly afraid of their arrival. Then, however, they were pushed forward and scattered along the walls by a wave of already initiated spiritualists, male and female. When they had taken their seats, a beaming Helena appeared on Solski’s arm. The two sat down very close to the table, chatting merrily.

“Look, Magda,” Ada whispered with a sardonic smile. “Do Stefan and Helena not look like a bridal couple?”

“They are lovely together,” Magda said, feeling a pressure in her throat.

Then Helena's other admirers began moving stealthily through the crowd: the blond engineer, the dark-haired doctor and young Korkowicz. The first two looked equally worried; they both looked at Solski with the same aversion. But even common adversity did not draw them together. Each found a place as far away as possible from his rival.

It was quiet in the salon. From the adjoining room Mrs. Arnold emerged, leaning on the arm of a gray-haired gentleman wearing a medal. Fatigue was strikingly evident in her pale face and her whole figure, as if she had been a seriously ill woman taken from her bed. But now and then her eyes flashed brilliantly.

A murmur arose and grew more audible. The guests were roused to attention; they reassured each other, they said "Please!" or "Thank you!" Someone even clapped, and someone else joined in. But they were soon quiet.

Mrs. Arnold sat on a wooden chair in front of a small table. The indispensable Zgierski and the spiritualist with the staring eyes immediately ran up to her, and the man with the medal passed among the spectators with the expression of one who had created the spirits himself and transferred his power over them to Mrs. Arnold.

In the meantime the host, having come upon Ada and her two companions near the wall, moved them to the center of the room and seated himself next to Helena and Solski. That left Magda only a few steps away from the medium.

"It appears to me," Solski whispered to Arnold, "that the sessions take their toll on madam's health. She looks absolutely ill."

Arnold raised his eyebrows, spread his hands and answered, also in a whisper:

"What can I do when she finds her happiness in them?"

Mrs. Arnold must have heard something, for she raised her head and looked fleetingly at Solski.

There was another murmur in the hall. Two servants brought in a screen and set it up beside the table. The gray-haired man drew near Arnold and a brief colloquy took place. The gentleman spoke insistently; Arnold, with obvious dismay, resisted. In the end the other man seemed to yield while Arnold moved to the corner of the room that was farthest from the table.

Then the man with the blank stare turned to the medium and asked something in English. She answered in a quiet, hollow voice. He put his hand to her forehead and said loudly:

"Are you, respected ladies and gentlemen, prepared for a glimpse of the spirits, or do you prefer to stop with a second-rank manifestation of spiritualism?"

"The spirits, please!" called some voices from the crowd, while others cried, "No!... No!... Never! I would die!" The vast majority did not want to see the spirits.

“I must explain,” the man added, “that my bold question is in no way meant to assure you that the spirits will appear. It signifies only that our esteemed medium is exceptionally receptive tonight.”

“That is true!” murmured Solski. He glanced at Dembicki, who folded his hands on his belly, thrust out his lower lip, and looked in front of him as indifferently as if, instead of the world of spirits, he were going to see Emmenthaler cheese, which he did not eat.

The face of the medium began to undergo strange alterations. At first it seemed that Mrs. Arnold had fallen into a peaceful sleep, during which a sickly pallor gave way to her accustomed color and a gentle smile appeared on her lips. Then she opened her eyes, which expressed a heightening amazement. Suddenly she fixed them on Solski and her hair began to stand on end. Her face took on a menacing look and her large eyes flashed a yellowish color like an angry lion’s.

“Give me paper!” she said in English in a strong, metallic voice like a bell, never taking her eyes off Solski. Her look was so piercing that Ada began to quiver, Helena moved her chair back to the next row, and Magda averted her eyes. Solski looked thoroughly displeased. Dembicki sat erect, his curiosity aroused.

In the meantime Mr. Arnold hurried to his wife’s study and reappeared after a moment, looking worried and carrying a pencil and several small sheets of stiff paper, which he handed to the man with the staring eyes.

“Will madam be so kind as to choose one of these?” said that gentlemen, moving toward Magda.

She chose. He put that piece of paper and a pencil on the table near the medium and returned the rest of the paper to her husband.

“Bind my hands,” Mrs. Arnold said in the same powerful contralto she had used before.

A long ribbon-like piece of fabric and some sealing wax were brought to the table.

“Perhaps the gentlemen will be so kind as to bind the medium and seal the bonds,” the man with the vacant stare said to Dembicki and to Solski, who had on his finger a ring with his family’s coat of arms.

The two men approached the table.

“The gentlemen may secure the bonds in any way they please,” said the person with the stare.

Dembicki crossed Mrs. Arnold’s hands behind her and Solski wound the ribbon around them in all directions. Then they tied her to the chair and fastened the ends of the ribbon to its arms.

The man requested that Dembicki and Solski help him place a screen around the medium. After a moment it was as though Mrs. Arnold was in a cabinet, shielded on all sides from the onlookers.

“Please dim the lamps,” the man with the stare commanded. Several gentlemen hurried to turn down the gas lamps until only small blue flames remained.

“You bound her awfully tightly,” Magda whispered apprehensively to Dembicki. “What is going to happen?”

“The American spiritualists’ famous trick,” he replied.

“Oh!” cried one of the ladies, who was sitting beside Kazimierz Norski farther back in the room.

People began to turn their heads, to ask questions—but then all was quiet. From behind a screen the sound of a pencil moving on paper could be heard distinctly. After a few minutes the pencil tapped on the table. The gentleman who was directing the session ordered the lamps to be lit more brightly and began to push away the screen.

Mrs. Arnold was sleeping with her head on the arm of her chair and her hands restored to their former position. But when Solski and Dembicki went over to untie her, they found the seal inviolate and not one knot on the ribbon undone.

“Do you understand what happened?” Solski asked the professor.

Dembicki shrugged his shoulders. “In the fourth dimension it would be possible to unbind her in this way, or—”

At that moment Solski glanced at the paper lying on the table, went pale, and said in a strange voice:

“But those are my mother’s features! Professor, look!”

On the paper was an epigraph in French:

“I desire that my children think more often of eternal things.”

But instead of a signature there was a sketch in pencil of the very eloquent face of a woman, surrounded by clouds.

The man with the vacant look awoke Mrs. Arnold, who rose smiling from her chair. All the guests left their seats, wishing to see the paper with the writing of the spirits, which Mrs. Arnold offered Miss Solska as a souvenir.

Stupefied, Ada looked at her mother’s face. Then she turned to her brother and asked:

“Do you know that this is our mother’s handwriting?”

“Does it not seem so to you?” he replied.

“Oh, yes! I have a prayer written in her hand in my missal. Yes... the writing is the very same.”

The guests began to look again at the paper, which at length made its way to Magda. There were the features of the Solskis’ deceased mother exactly as they appeared in the portrait that hung in Ada’s room. Moreover, it seemed to

Magda that the paper was not the one she had chosen. On that one there had been a barely perceptible dark dot in one corner.

A thought flashed through her mind: “Perhaps Kazimierz is right when he says that no spirit or soul exists.”

But she did not mention what she had noticed to anyone. Perhaps she was mistaken. In the end, what did Ada and Stefan have to lose by believing that their mother lived and cared about them just as she had when they were little children?

The guests were disconcerted. Some openly acknowledged their belief in spiritualism; others more discreetly tried to attribute what they had seen to animal magnetism, electricity or a magic trick. Solski brooded, Ada was irritable and Dembicki again retreated into impassiveness. Nonetheless, however, when they were invited to supper around midnight, everyone had his or her opinion and, it may be, held it with greater zeal than when the spirits were being invoked.

Magda sat near the Solskis at supper, with Dembicki on one side of her and on the other a spiritualist who was trying to proselytize his more distant neighbor in every language. Opposite her sat an elderly man with a formal air, who, after fastening his napkin around his neck, put huge helpings of every dish on his plate and devoured them to the last crumb, shaking his head now and then as if he were carrying on a dispute with someone.

This example, and perhaps hunger as well, acted on Magda so that she ate everything that was served her—fish, game, poultry, ices—and drank various kinds of wine, which Dembicki continually poured for her. As he did so, they carried on a conversation:

“May I pour you some wine?”

“Please.”

“And into which glass?”

“It does not matter.”

Dembicki poured the wine into the largest glass, reflected for a moment, then after a brief pause repeated the question.

“May I pour you some wine?”

There was a ringing in Magda’s head as if she were standing under the waterfall of a rising river, which, having destroyed an area, crushes into rubble the remains of things once beautiful and useful. What riotous waves were breaking in her soul! Stefan and Helena; the séance; the portraits of the Solskis’ parents; eternity and the future life shattered into millions of brain cells and fibers, pounded into a formless mass of grease, phosphorus and even iron in the form of rusty scrap metal, nails and hinges which she had seen sometime at Pocijow.

And at the bottom of this chaos a refrain persistently repeated itself: Use life, for the long sleep is coming! Use life, for the long sleep is coming!

So Magda ate game, fish and fowl and drank all sorts of wine from one large glass. What was the dead Mrs. Latter to her, after all? She was sleeping, metamorphosed into grease, phosphorus and iron. What was the white-haired vicar who once stood over her with the wafer and said: "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come into my sanctuary"? What were the major and even her father, since sooner or later they all would be transformed into grease, phosphorus and old iron?

Coffee was served.

"May I pour you some brandy?" asked Dembicki.

"Certainly."

"And into which glass?"

At that instant Magda felt short of breath. It seemed to her that she was dying. She rose from the table and with an unsteady step passed through to a distant room, where she collapsed on a little sofa concealed by oleanders and burst into tears.

Ada, alarmed, followed her, and because supper was over, Solski made his apologies to Helena and hurried after his sister. He caught up to her on the threshold of the room, which she did not allow him to cross. Shaking her finger at him, she whispered:

"You see, Stefan, I warned you..."

Solski looked as far as he could into the room. Between the trembling oleanders he thought he heard quiet sobs. He pushed his sister aside, hurried to the sofa where Magda lay weeping, seized her hand and said:

"It is my fault, then?"

Magda raised astonished eyes to his.

"You? You are too noble for anyone to be crying through your fault."

Then, regaining her presence of mind, she added hastily:

"It is nothing. I have seen and heard so many extraordinary things today that it has unnerved me. How childish I am!" she added, laughing.

Ada looked attentively at her brother, who was standing beside Magda with the air of a man who is deeply moved and has resolved to take some decisive step. He was just on the point of speaking when Kazimierz appeared and asked cheerfully:

"What is this? Are you planning to faint before our eyes?"

"Oh, no! I am only a little overwrought. I have seen and heard too much tonight," Magda answered, blushing and avoiding his eyes.

"Perhaps that includes our conversation?" he asked with a triumphant look.

"To a certain degree... yes..."

Solski withdrew with Ada to the neighboring room and said angrily:

“What were they talking about, I wonder?”

“If you can believe it—the immortality of the soul. Kazimierz was demonstrating that the soul does not exist.”

“The immortality of the soul!” Solski repeated. “If there were some new ballet or card game with that title, I would believe that Norski was concerning himself about the immortality of the soul!”

“One must always believe what Magda says. She tells the truth.”

“We will see. We will see.”

“But a moment ago you looked as though you wanted to propose to her.”

“And perhaps I would have... too early, or too late.”

“Oh, you see, that is what I have always been afraid of where you are concerned. You are apt to act too hastily—and equally hastily to abandon a course of action.”

Helena came in, reproaching Solski for having left her too long. Stefan made his excuses, but his heart was not in it. More important to him than Helena was the thought that, having wished to arouse Magda’s jealousy, he himself had fallen victim to that emotion. He was jealous—and of Kazimierz!

It was nearly two in the morning. The Arnolds’ guests began making their way to their homes. Riding through the city, Magda was assaulted again by thoughts of immortality, oblivion, iron, phosphorus and grease. Ada was listening to a conversation between her brother and Dembicki.

“What do you have to say about what we witnessed, professor?” Stefan was asking.

“Reportedly, the American spiritualist Slade undid similar knots, and asserted that he was operating in the fourth dimension.”

“Is such a thing possible?”

“In my opinion, the fourth dimension is about as accessible to a human being as the sending and receiving of a telegram is to an oyster.”

“And the drawing of our mother?”

“Not long ago Mrs. Arnold saw the portraits of your parents in your house. When she is in a normal state, she may not remember them; but it is said that there are kinds of nervous excitement that will cause a person to recreate with great precision something little known or forgotten.”

“And the rapidity with which she drew?”

“Perhaps such excitement stimulates and accelerates the reflexes,” Dembicki answered. “For the rest, I do not know.”

“Say what you like, but I know what I know,” was the thought that leaped to Magda’s mind. “Mrs. Arnold copied the portraits of that dead lady, and not even on the paper that was placed on the table for her.”

At that moment she was under the influence of thoroughgoing skepticism—or rather she believed the newly served-up dogma, fresh from the oven of popular cosmology, that the human spirit was a product of grease, phosphorus and iron.

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Boleslaw Prus

EMANCIPATED WOMEN

(Emancypantki, 1894)

Book II
Volume 2



Chapter I. The Rich Man Who Went Looking for Work

When Stefan Solski was a child, his parents conducted their household affairs in a way that was all their own. From time to time, in all the salons and rooms in the center and the right and left wings of the house, the doors were opened wide, and the amazed guest would hear a distant but rapidly approaching clatter, as of hoofbeats. Then he would notice a breathless little lad running through the drawing room like a colt. After a moment the sound of approaching hoofbeats would be heard again, but from the opposite direction. Again the boy would come in through the open door, running, not noticing the visitor, and disappear through another door. The noise of his steps would gradually diminish, only to resound again in the same recurring pattern.

At such times his father, or more often his mother, would blush and say to the guest with downcast eyes:

“Please excuse us, but the doctors have ordered physical movement for our Stefek. We cannot send him into town, and so...”

Because of this, the Solski house was the subject of disturbing rumors, and little Stefan had the reputation of being an unruly child sent by the Lord God to punish his family. In reality, Stefan’s sickness was only boundless energy; and because he was constrained from engaging in the simplest forms of play, he devised exceptional forms for himself.

When, for example, he climbed a tree in the garden, his father, his mother, his aunt, the nursemaid and two tutors explained to him all day long that by climbing trees he might bring embarrassment on himself because children of the very lowest class did it. From that time on, Stefek shunned the trees, but he climbed on wrought-iron pickets—at the sight of which many passersby trembled with fright.

Once he saw a footman’s son slide down a banister, and he slid down it, too. Then, however, he was found out, and his father, his mother, his aunt, the nursemaid and two tutors again began explaining to him that he had disgraced the name of Solski, since only footmen’s children had the right to slide down banisters. From that time Stefek never slid down a banister, but one day he hung by his hands from the railing of the third-floor balcony and circled around the outside of it.

When he ran out to the courtyard or the garden, he liked to engage in horseplay with the servants’ children. It was explained to him that he was behaving shamefully by becoming their playfellow. So he stopped playing with his inferiors—and began to test out his extraordinary strength on young counts and baronets.

“Let us see who is strongest!” he would call when he met a prospective victim. Then he would seize the unfortunate one by the waist—boy or girl, it did not matter—and wrestle him or her to the ground. If he chanced upon someone stronger than himself, he would let him go, then plant himself a few steps away,

lower his head and butt his astonished fellow combatant in the belly, leaving him to wonder what Solski could be thinking of.

As a result, well-born young men and nicely brought up young women avoided Solski during his parents' lifetime. They called him a guttersnipe, and he repaid them with contempt. All the while he grew lonely and was baffled as to why young men did not like him, or why he was not allowed to enjoy the comradeship of the footmen's children in the city or the herdsman's in the country.

When he was thirteen, and no tutor wanted to undertake the next stage of his education, his father sent him away to school, to the third form. Small for his age, with yellowish skin, a large head and slanted eyes, he had hardly appeared there when a pack of boys ran up to him, roaring:

"Look, look! A Japanese monkey!"

Solski heard a ringing in his ears. He threw himself into the crowd, began to flail with his fists, felt hands in his hair and fists in his back—and flew into a frenzy.

Suddenly all was quiet. Everyone had run away. Stefan raised his eyes and noticed that his fist was touching the belly of a gentleman with a puffy face and blue eyes.

"Why were you beating them so?" the man asked calmly.

"Ask them what they were calling me," the youngster retorted insolently, ready to attack him as well.

The man looked at him mildly and said:

"Go to your place. You have good instincts, but they are not well governed."

It was the mathematics teacher, Dembicki. Stefan, still a little giddy, went to his bench, but something had struck a chord in him. No one had ever told him that he had good instincts!

From that time a quiet sympathy formed between pupil and teacher. Stefan behaved very well in Dembicki's class and studied diligently; Dembicki more than once helped him avoid unpleasantness at the school.

In the fifth form, after the deaths of his parents, a plan to test his endurance came into Stefan's head. Instead of going to school, he walked out of the city and rambled about for a couple of days without eating or sleeping. He returned little the worse for wear, but he would have been dismissed from the school for this experiment if Dembicki had not fervently interceded for him.

A week later, Stefan's head guardian came to the school to ask Dembicki to establish himself in the palace and take charge of the boy's education, since he alone had any influence over him. Dembicki refused, but asked Stefan to visit him now and then.

Young Solski found few kindred spirits among his schoolmates, though it was known that he had paid the entrance fees for some of them and that several

were indebted to him for their maintenance. He had hardly any friends because he was brusque and ambitious. He played soccer a few times, and played admirably. Unfortunately, as a member of a team he did not want to listen to anyone, whereas when he was chosen captain, he so imposed his will on others that they were offended and abandoned the game.

At the end of the sixth form he proposed to several of his classmates that during the vacation they should go on a walking tour to Ojcow and the Holy Cross Mountains. He paid the greater part of the cost of the journey himself, and provided his companions with walking sticks and field glasses. He rented the best lodgings for them and took two carts with provisions, a cook and a footman; in a word, he was the most excellent of hosts. But when, without listening to any remonstrances, he began choosing the worst roads and planning marches at night or during rain and storms, his companions deserted him one morning without saying goodbye, leaving the sticks and glasses on one of the carts.

The blow was so painful to Stefan's self-esteem that he did not return to school the following year but went abroad, his heart filled with anger.

Dembicki had awakened his desire for knowledge, but the young man, lacking a direction for his life, indulged unmethodically a wish to know everything. He studied philosophy and social sciences, physics and chemistry; he spent some time at the polytechnical institute and the school of agriculture, without a care for the effects of hearing so many lectures and visiting so many universities during ten years' feverish search for wisdom.

His intellectual development was rapid and broad, but in his heart he kept his distance from people. His early memories made him contemptuous of the aristocracy, and perhaps for that reason he could not bear to be among his peers. He was drawn to the lower classes—to the poor—because he could tell them what to do; but they did not want to acknowledge his authority over them, and did not even always accept the gifts that he tried, without understanding the art of it, to give. Time, tankards, the rapiers of fraternity boys and the fists of university graduates somewhat tempered his impetuous nature, but intensified his bitterness.

After all, he wanted to do good! He was ready to give his fortune to the needy! And if he imposed his will on others, he would certainly find a way to devote his life to those who would be guided by him. Meanwhile, no one guessed how he felt. Indeed, more than once he had seen others preferred over himself—others who offered their services with a bow and a smile and then exploited people's gullibility.

Solski did not know how to bow or smile or insert himself into a group. Between his gloomy, unprepossessing figure and other people a wall of distrust rose higher and higher. No one sensed a warm heart in him, only ambition; and when he offered someone help, people called it caprice.

Once, when he intervened on behalf of a drunken student with some Prussian officers and got himself into a fierce fight, some friends who wanted

to show their appreciation elected him president of a committee that was going to organize a celebration in honor of a professor. Solski donated money for a gift for the teacher and a festive dinner for his friends, which reinforced his newfound popularity.

For a few days everyone idolized him, but when the time came for deliberations in committee, it became clear that it was not possible to consult with Solski, only to listen to him. He imposed his views in such a heavy-handed way that during the third session the young Baron Stolberg flung his pipe on the floor, struck a table with his fist and exclaimed:

“Solski, you can be either a dictator or a cowherd, but you do not possess the qualifications to be an ordinary committee chairman!”

The committee disbanded, Solski had another duel on his hands, and from then on he broke off his friendships. The bitterness within him grew stronger because he felt that he was at fault but did not want to admit it, even to himself.

Then ensued a period in which Solski's exceptional strengths turned in another direction: he began to be interested in women. But in relationships with them he behaved roughly and tyrannically.

He treated them with visible aversion because he had been told from his childhood that he was ugly. He tried to buy reciprocation with money or expensive gifts, but when that stratagem succeeded, he was seized with a desire for disinterested love. He threw his sweethearts over without scruple, but when he himself was betrayed, raged at all women and assailed the most innocent members of the sex with impertinence.

A young shopgirl who had shown herself very attached to him he suspected of having an eye on his fortune, and he drove her away with jeering. To a young gentlewoman who had been attentive to him he said that decent women were divided into two categories: those who wanted to marry well and those who wanted to marry however they could. A rich widow loved him disinterestedly, but to her he declared that the most constant women were those who were aging. Finally, when a second-rate singer abandoned him for an impecunious but handsome artist, he decided that all women were miserable creatures.

Then he threw himself into travel of the most rigorous, daring sort and visited Mont Blanc, Egypt, Algeria and the Sahara in search of adventure. He wanted to sail to America and Australia, but gave up the plan out of consideration for his sister Ada, who had finished school and needed his care. He had seen a storm on the ocean, he had heard the roar of lions in the desert, he had explored the crater of Vesuvius; the upshot was that he had begun to weary of it all and even to think of suicide, from which again the thought of his sister restrained him.

He resolved to return to the world of learning. To that end he went to England and visited one of the most noted philosophers to ask for guiding axioms.

The sage received him cordially. Solski was encouraged, and began to inquire: What is happiness? What is the destiny of man and of the world?—at the same time exposing his mountains of doubt and his pessimistic views.

The Englishman listened, stroking his whiskers. Suddenly he asked:

“My friend, what do you do? Are you a scholar or an artist?”

“I want to devote myself to philosophy.”

“Well, in time. But what do you do just now? Do you work in industry, trade or agriculture?”

“I have my own fortune...”

“Good: a fortune. That allows you to live comfortably. But beyond that, what do you do to have an existence of your own? Perhaps you are a government official or member of parliament?”

Seeing that Solski was reduced to silent amazement, the Englishman rose from his chair and said coldly:

“In that case, pardon me, but I have no more time for you. I have other business.”

If the ceiling had fallen on the desk, Solski would not have been more taken aback than he was at this abrupt answer from the philosopher. He went away humiliated and, for the first time in his life, ashamed that he was nothing and did nothing.

From that time on, everything he saw reminded him of his embarrassing position in a world in which everyone did something. Carters transported travelers, porters carried loads, policemen preserved order, flower sellers supplied people with flowers, merchants supplied them with goods, restaurateurs with food. Only he, Stefan Solski, did nothing, and so felt unsatisfied.

At first, carried away with contrition yet with something like elation, he wanted to be a longshoreman at the London docks. But when he stood by the wharves, he lost his taste for taking a share of the earnings of poor people, who, moreover, looked at him in a way that was none too friendly. Then he thought of going into partnership with some merchant or manufacturer. But each one he accosted, as soon as he caught Solski’s drift, lost interest in talking longer and excused himself, pleading lack of time.

At last, after several months of devising unrealistic projects, he hit on the happy idea that it would be best to return to his own country and find a business he could pursue on his own estate.

He returned. But at the outset his Aunt Gabriela reminded him that Ada had finished school some time ago, that she was living in the home of a woman unrelated to her—Mrs. Latter—and that he, Stefan, ought to care for his sister and take her abroad so the poor child could see a little of the world.

The plan appealed to Solski; after all, caring for one’s sister was an occupation! He asked his aunt to accompany them on the journey. He announced

to his sister that they were going abroad in the course of a week and that he would allow her to take Helena Norska, whom at that period Ada idolized.

At first Solski had little to do with the beautiful Helena, whom he suspected of wanting to make a wealthy match. But in Venice, when a swarm of admirers surrounded her—Italians, Frenchmen, Englishmen and Germans, all well born and wealthy—he began paying serious attention to her. Then he noticed what others had been talking about at the tops of their voices: that Miss Helena had superb blond hair, a lovely way of carrying herself, incomparably beautiful features and an electrifying glance. He was impressed with the pride she showed in her dealings with her admirers and flattered that now and then she looked sweetly at him.

Then, however, from this field of adoring suitors, two began to distinguish themselves for the attentions they paid her: a French viscount and an Italian count, to whom Helena showed more favor than to the others. At that point, not wanting to let it be seen that he was torn by jealousy, Solski left Venice.

The news of Mrs. Latter's suicide deeply shocked her daughter. Helena ceased to appear in company, and when her most ardent admirers dispersed, she stayed for a few months in a convent. Solski saw her there in a black gown, her face white as marble, a sad look in her eyes—and, in consultation with Ada, he coaxed her into a previously unplanned excursion around Italy and Switzerland.

During that period Helena avoided new people and spent whole days with the Solskis. Stefan discovered serious merits in her: she had a keen, logical mind, she had read a great deal, and she was exceptionally courageous. When the three of them traveled to Vesuvius, Ada, seeing the sapphire-colored ocean almost under her feet, turned back when they were halfway up the road, but Helena went all the way to the summit of the infernal mountain. And when, wading up to their knees in ashes, she and Solski climbed to the brink of the crater, where the ground trembled under their feet, the smell of sulphur stifled them and the whole world disappeared behind great exhalations of steam, Helena smiled for the first time in several months, and Solski admitted that she was no ordinary woman.

After that a closer intimacy formed between them. Solski did not hide his feelings, and Helena said he must have a devil inside him. They spent whole days together. When a stormy wind nearly swamped their boat during an excursion on the sea one evening and Helena began to sing, Solski proposed to her.

When Ada learned of this she was saddened, and Aunt Gabriela wanted to leave them and return to Poland. Yielding to the pleas of her niece and nephew, she stayed on, but under the condition that they begin opening their home to visitors again.

The elderly lady was employing the skills of a diplomat. For then a crowd of admirers formed around Helena once more, the French viscount reappeared, and before long a jealous Solski was making such scenes that Helena proposed breaking their engagement.

“We know each other too little,” she said. “You cannot bear the company of other men, and I would rather be dead than have a jealous husband.”

“I am not jealous!” Solski said indignantly.

“You do not trust me, then.”

“So you are determined to break it off?”

The words riveted her attention.

“Yes—determined!” she replied, with a look that galled him. “First, let us see each other as free people, as friends, and later—we will see. More than strength is necessary to win a woman, and you have not yet learned the art.”

“And do you want to be my teacher?” he asked, kissing her hand.

“Indeed!” she answered after an instant’s reflection. “You should get an elegant wife... so I will willingly help you with that task, but I will be a stern teacher.”

“I will not find a more accomplished one than you.”

“We will see.”

Helena showed much wit and tactical skill in breaking off her engagement to Solski, for he had already begun to notice spots on his sun. He still loved her, for she was beautiful, much admired, proud, courageous and full of surprises, but her egotism and coquetry had begun to rankle him. “Does she think,” he said to himself, “that she is marrying my fortune, shielded with the screen of a name? And that my house will become a gathering place for her hangers-on?”

As long as he could see his fiancée and touch her hand with his lips, passion muddled his thinking. But when she was absent, critical and even suspicious thoughts awakened within him.

“Do I not represent a chance for her to marry away from poverty?” he thought. “A comic tale! To escape from the nymphs who are husband-hunting and come upon Diana herself!”

But Helena released him with no melodramatic scenes—indeed, in a humorous way, not withdrawing hope, only stipulating that he win her a second time. So she was disinterested; she had the pride of a great lady; and if some day she showed that she had feelings where he was concerned, she would be sincere, not calculating.

“And in that case, who knows if it is not right to win her again?” he thought. “She has taught me something in a way that is beyond reproach, and I have the wit to profit from it. Many treasures are hidden in that woman, concealed only by necessity; who knows what more is there?”

And from that time his respect for her increased. The great man became humble with her; he began to control his violent nature and behave with refinement.

Aunt Gabriela and Ada were grateful to Helena for so adroitly breaking off the engagement that had caused them so much worry. Ada even began to regret that it had been broken off, but her aunt was skeptical.

“You will see,” she said to her niece, “that this is a cunning woman who has set her cap at Stefan!”

“So what would have been the harm, aunt, if Stefan really had married her?”

“Ah, no more of this, my dear!” her aunt said firmly. “A poor girl with no name, a teacher’s daughter—what would young ladies of good family do if people in society married this sort?”

In the meantime, Helena did not despair. She trusted her beauty too much not to imagine that Solski would return to her when she wanted him to. At that moment, however, she did not want him to for several reasons. First, her stepfather, Mr. Arnold, was going to come and take her on another journey through Europe—Mr. Arnold, of whom it was said, as it usually was of an American, that he was very wealthy.

Secondly, Helena thought she had the right to make the most brilliant match possible, and—since in addition to the French viscount, the Italian count had turned up again, together with a German baron and a very distinguished Englishman—she had a group from which to choose.

The futures of everyone involved, however, were more or less decided in Zurich. Aunt Gabriela went back to Warsaw. Ada began attending university classes. Mr. Arnold arrived to take Helena away, and the first words out of his mouth were that her brother Kazimierz appeared to be a frivolous, wasteful fellow.

For several days the four of them stayed together in Zurich. During that time a close relationship developed between Solski and Arnold, at whose suggestion Solski conceived a plan to build a sugar factory on his estate. Then Solski left for Paris and Arnold and Helena went to Vienna, while the viscounts, counts, barons and prospective lords, seeing with their own eyes that Helena had a family, vanished like fog in the mountains. It was all too clear that none of them had been thinking of matrimony, which left Helena rather disenchanted with men but in no way changed her opinion of herself.

Until he returned to Warsaw Solski corresponded with Helena, and visited her in Budapest, where he found her surrounded by admirers again. But in their own relationship nothing had changed. Stefan read her letters with pleasure, lost his head when they were together, but felt his passion cool when they were apart. Even then he was not genuinely attached to her, but he was impressed by her certainty of her own worth.

“My husband,” she said, “must give himself as completely to me as I to him. I would marry a common laborer who loved me that much, but I would rather die than be the plaything of the most powerful man in the world.”

And Solski listened and thought:

“To win such a woman! It would be harder than a journey to Mont Blanc.”

And for as long as he could see her, he found the thought of winning her compelling.

This was the way things stood when Solski met Magda in his sister’s apartment—and was astonished. Magda was very pretty, but apart from her obvious graces, his experienced eye observed something unusual in her expression. Was it goodness, innocence, joy or compassion? He could not define it. In any case it was something more than human, something he had never seen in any woman, only in pictures or statues by the greatest masters.

Because Ada loved and praised Magda, Solski played the devil’s advocate.

“She is like all the others,” he thought. “Certainly she wants to profit from my sister’s partiality for her.”

Then, however, he made a series of trifling observations that surprised him.

Magda never asked Ada for anything; indeed, she did not want to accept anyone’s services. Magda had been badly treated in the Korkowicz household because of her acquaintance with Ada, but she had not even spoken of that. She had not wanted to abandon those who had mistreated her; she had cried for her pupils and had not broken off her relations with them.

Though it had not been necessary for her to work, she was giving lessons at Miss Malinowska’s school. It was clear beyond doubt that she accepted her place in the Solski palace because of a particular devotion: her love for Ada.

Her stay there had become a true blessing for their household. Magda not only cured Aunt Gabriela’s migraines and devised occupations and diversions for Ada, but had attention to spare for the servants and their children. She visited them when they were sick and interceded for better wages for them when they were treated unfairly.

Even the yard dogs, stray cats and sparrows hungry in the winter found a caretaker in her. Even neglected flowers aroused her sympathy.

Moreover, Magda herself seemed to have no needs, or rather one, which was insatiable: to care for others, to serve others. There was no shadow of coquetry, rather a complete lack of awareness that she was pretty and could be pleasing to men.

“Inconceivable!” Solski thought.

Everyone who came in contact with Magda appreciated her at once: her nature was transparent as crystal. But Solski alone, clever and knowing as to human character as he was, had precisely inventoried the elements of which that nature was composed. In his imagination humanity presented itself as a collection of gray stones, among which one time in a thousand, or more rarely, a jewel turned up. It happened, then, that above those cold, lightless existences

exquisite beings appeared, like burning lamps that invested the gray stones with living features and the gems with radiance, color and clarity.

Those extraordinary beings were geniuses—geniuses of intellect, of will or of heart, and in Solski's eyes Magda was either an incredibly adept dissembler or a genius of feeling.

Solski marveled most that Magda so completely failed to notice that he had become interested in her. The household staff was aware of it; Aunt Gabriela did not withhold her reproaches and reservations; Helena displayed something like jealousy; Zgierski gushed Magda's praises, and strangers sought her favor. All the while she herself, with the most sophisticated hypocrisy or unfathomable naivete, was making a match between him and Helena!

"Perhaps she is in love with that charlatan, Norski?" he thought after the seance at which he had paraded his interest in Helena to pique Magda's jealousy.

But common sense was against this view. Magda had been overwrought, she had even been weeping, but neither from love of Kazimierz nor jealousy of Solski. She was not at all preoccupied with admirers, real or conjectural; those writing and drawing ghosts had affected her, and above all Norski's treatise on the nonexistence of the soul.

That had certainly been the case. For a whole week Magda had not been able to dispel her anxiety. She talked about it to Ada; she did not sleep at night; she grew haggard; and finally she forced Dembicki to give her his word of honor that he believed in God and the immortality of the soul.

Dembicki's solemn assurance on the subject calmed Magda a little. Nonetheless Solski saw that the seed of atheism had been sown in an innocent soul, and so he felt all the more interest in Magda and antipathy for Kazimierz, for whom he had never had much regard anyway.

"What a beast one must be," he thought, "to rob of faith, even of illusions, a poor child who desires nothing more! And what would he give her in return? He, or even the whole world, to whom that poor thing devotes all she is and has, demanding in return only God and hope?"

Solski himself was a very skeptical man, and very inclined to be pessimistic. But he was not an atheist. That was due to the influence of Dembicki, who from time to time showed him fresh, dazzling horizons. The serene, perpetually abstracted mathematician had created a philosophical system for himself. But until this time he had spoken of it only to Solski, and very circumspectly.

Chapter II. Great Oaks from Little Acorns

By this time Solski could have called himself a happy man. If the English philosopher to whom he had paid that unfortunate visit in London had asked him now, "What do you do?" he would have answered proudly, "I am building a sugar factory which I will operate myself."

Solski smiled wryly as he recalled the time when, yawning with boredom, he had made adventurous journeys with no purpose—and when, out of sudden shame that he had nothing to do, he had wanted to be a longshoreman at the London docks, or been ready to ask any manufacturer he met to take him on as a partner.

He himself was a manufacturer today, and what a manufacturer! Several hundred men worked for him, unloading and handling material. Others begged him for jobs, and still others pleaded with him to make them partners. He gave jobs, but accepted no partners.

For what did he want with partners? To have them hampering his movements? To have part of his cash lying in the bank? Solski did not need help. What he himself possessed was sufficient, and more than sufficient. In case of an unforeseen contingency, he had his sister's fortune at his disposal, and the capital of relatives who would not hesitate to lend him as much as he wanted. Aunt Gabriela herself would give him a hundred thousand rubles at any minute without asking what he would do with it, provided she received interest for life if the money were not repaid.

A sugar factory on Solski's property was an important business. First, sugar factories brought shareholders twenty percent or more annually; secondly, Solski owned excellent land, hundreds of acres of which could be converted to a beet plantation. The offscourings of the factory could feed a large number of farm animals, a fact which had been taken into account in the planning. Finally, so that nothing should be lacking to this man whom fortune favored, Solski had on his estate a large waterfall—in other words, energy at no cost, while other sugar factories laid out great sums to keep their steam machines running.

As a result, it seemed obvious to anyone at all familiar with business that if after several beet harvests Solski even burned his factory with no insurance, he would still come out of it all with a fortune. But Solski did not think of burning it; indeed, he had announced that it would be a model factory in every respect.

Its building generated an enormous amount of activity for him, for he had to familiarize himself, if only in the most general way, with several branches of its operation: the cultivation of beets, the raising of livestock, the process of sugar making and the marketing of sugar. He was also preoccupied with the facilities for workers that he planned to install.

Finally—and this was the high point of his vision—Solski gave orders, and he gave orders to people who listened to him, and his orders solidified into a body of iron and stone. He decided how large the factory was to be and where it

was to be situated. In an agricultural meeting, he pointed out which fields would be planted in beets the next year. He set the number of cattle for fattening; he, acting on information from Arnold, chose an English factory to supply boilers and finishing machines.

He was so intoxicated with power that, particularly in the beginning, he behaved childishly, choosing, for example, a very expensive design so that the voices of all the experts would be countervailed by one voice which was not the voice of an expert: his own.

Later on, in conferences, Solski complied with the opinions of the majority; he had demonstrated his power, so he could afford to be practical.

The external signs of action and mastery fired his enthusiasm. Plans hung, lay folded and stood propped up all over his study—plans for buildings, machines, manuals, sugar samples. Jars of beet seeds occupied a place of honor along with a saccharimeter, which Aunt Gabriela took for a new kind of weapon or field glasses.

Moreover, a footman—a new footman every two hours—always sat on call in the anteroom, and several messengers stood at the palace gate to take out letters and dispatches. And for some time Solski held daily briefings with lawyers, farmers, mechanics and agents in the sugar industry, scheduled more meetings with them, and summoned them without notice, or went to them himself.

Eventually he grew weary of all that and convened meetings only when it was necessary. Still later he had times when the whole enterprise seemed distasteful. He could not look at plans and samples; he would not go near the saccharimeter. During those periods he read French romances for whole days, roused Cezar to barking, or rolled about with him on the wide sofa.

The thought of the sugar works was not enough to justify his life. Indeed, sometimes it seemed a kind of modern quixoticism, and he himself a knight errant who, having enough to live on and more, had been inexplicably compelled to work.

“And what for? To wrench a living or a fortune away from others?” he thought.

But it took little to lift him from this sort of apathy. Only let someone say: “That is no business for Solski!” Or, “You will see, he will lose everything!”—let one of his cousins remark that it was an unsuitable occupation, or let a rumor go around that an investment company had arisen and formed with a plan to build a sugar factory in the same district—and immediately Solski bestirred himself. He went back to reading works by experts in the trade. He studied his plans. He called meetings or went to the village to oversee his workers.

And so in the middle of May a large water tank had been put in place on his estate, and more than a dozen buildings had risen there faster than bread with yeast. It was too late to call a halt, the more so because the work was going forward like a stone being pushed downhill. Even his competitors did not speak

of building a second factory, but consulted each other about whether it would be possible to buy out Solski's promising enterprise.

When he learned about this, Zgierski, who was always hovering around Solski, winked ingratiatingly and answered:

"No one will force Solski to sell, no one under the sun, even if he gave him enough money to fill the boilers. It would be another matter," he added with the same confidential air, "if he himself grew bored with the business. To watch for such a moment, to hit him on his weak side and put cash on the table at once, that is something else."

"You think it is possible?" someone asked.

"Good heavens," Zgierski rejoined modestly, "in this world anything is possible. But with Solski it is not easy—"

"But if you want to help us, let it be—by looking out for such a moment," said the interested party.

"What are you saying?" Zgierski said indignantly, but with a pleasant smile. "I am devoted to Solski—loyal to the death. And since I see that occupying himself with the sugar factory gives him great satisfaction, I would never advise him to sell it."

His interlocutor looked disappointed, while Zgierski, after a moment's pause, added with a stern expression:

"It would be a different thing if this project began to wear Solski down, ruin his humor and undermine his health. Ha! At such a time I would even prostrate myself on his threshold and say: 'Kill me, but give up this unfortunate factory, which is shortening your life.' I would do it, upon my honor! Because, sir, those who trust me unconditionally, I—"

His listener's face brightened.

"So you assume that such an eventuality will arise?" he asked. "We see it constantly, as plain as day. Solski will tire of the sugar works. It is not the business for him, is that not the truth, dear Mr. Zgierski?"

"The truth: just a moment! What is the truth, sir?" Zgierski demanded, raising an admonitory finger. "If Jesus Christ himself was silent in the face of such a question, is it possible to pose it to us mortals? Ask me, sir: is this possible or impossible? Ah! Then I will answer: anything is possible in this world."

Both went away full of hope. One of the prospective purchasers of the unfinished factory was convinced that he had found in Zgierski an intervenor friendly to his cause, whereas Zgierski was certain that he was the most faithful of friends to Solski, as once he had been to Mrs. Latter.

He smiled. At that moment in his mobile imagination he saw himself as the director of a strange opera in which Solski was a tenor, his competitors for the sugar concern were the orchestra, and they all played and sang an aria composed by himself—Zgierski.

In the meantime something was happening that Zgierski could not have perceived. In Solski's soul, along with the ambition and ennui that succeeded each other day and night, a new impulse was germinating.

Though he was noble and generous, Solski had an aversion to philanthropy. The very thought of seeking out the unfortunate, helping the needy, wiping the tears of the suffering, the very ring of such phrases, was disgusting to him. Was he, who had kept his own needs within strict bounds, going to feel his heart bleed like an old woman's for the needs of others? Was he, who sought out hardship in order to master himself, going to wax sentimental about the suffering of others? Was he, who aspired to be a man of steel and granite, going to busy himself with drying diapers, wiping children's noses or patching clothing for their mothers? How laughable!

Solski could throw ten thousand, even a hundred thousand rubles into projects that caught his imagination, but he could not perform these lowly services. For those tasks there were compassionate souls, exquisitely brought up young women, or pretenders seeking popularity; he, never.

But the day Magda had become part of his household, Solski, in spite of himself, had begun to care about other people. His sister had offhandedly promised Magda a position as a teacher in the school that was to be set up at the factory. Magda had accepted it, and Solski had confirmed the arrangement.

A few days later Stefan had fallen into a paroxysm of aversion to the work. He could not look at plans; he had no desire to talk with engineers. As he walked around his study or looked at the pages of a half-finished romance, he thought:

"What in the devil do I have to do with a sugar factory? Let those who are hungry for thirty percent yearly returns build one, but I? Obviously this is quixotic..."

But all at once he remembered that he had promised Magda the teacher's position, and his thoughts took a different turn.

"If there is no factory, there will be no school, and that good-hearted girl will be disappointed. And how pretty she is!" he thought, rifling his memory for every detail of her face. "What an instinctive nobility there is about her!"

It was incredible, yet true, that if Solski shook off his apathy, he did so out of fear that he would disappoint Magda. With what astonishment she would look at him if she learned that he cared nothing about the factory! And how would he answer if she asked him, "Why do you not want the sugar factory, then?"

Later Magda, yielding to the pleas of her colleague Zaneta, had asked Stefan to give Fajkowski the pharmacy at the factory. Solski had not thought of a pharmacy, but he had acknowledged that one was needed and promised Fajkowski the position.

Indeed, a man had come again—a man with whom Solski had done some calculations in his moments of disaffection with his project. To sell the factory, which was as yet hardly built: nothing would be easier. But what would he say

to Fajkowski when he asked: “Why have you given up the sugar works? For my livelihood depends upon it, and my marriage to Zaneta, whom you yourself said I should marry.”

With hundreds of people who were working on the building, under contract to work in the completed factory, or trying to obtain work, Solski was not in the least concerned. He saw them in his imagination as a formless mass, like fog, and he cared as little for what they thought of him as for what they would suffer if the project were called off. But Magda, the teacher, and Fajkowski, the apothecary, were people with real lives, people who did concern him. True, it would be possible to make them some reparation. But how would he explain to them why he had given up the factory?

Then Solski no longer envisioned Magda as the teacher of his officials’ children, and even recoiled from the thought that she could occupy such a petty position. On the other hand, he was expecting her to ask him to give her brother a post as engineer in the factory, and make her father the factory doctor. Naturally he would hire them on terms most favorable to them!

But Magda had intimated that she was not thinking of making requests on her family’s behalf, and it made him rather angry with her. He felt that two props had been pulled away, if not from the sugar factory itself, at least from his enthusiasm for it.

After a while he regained his equanimity—again because, for some unknown reason, it occurred to him that such a modest position would not be appropriate for Magda’s father, and that her brother ought at least to be the director of the operation, since he was an expert on every aspect of manufacturing. And so he was impatient for Magda to recommend someone else to him for a position, for he knew in advance that whoever she recommended would become part of the knot securing him to an active life in the world.

Solski had begun to discern in himself the lack of a faculty for engaging with people at close range. He had begun to understand that he himself was an incomplete being and that Magda possessed, to a high degree, attributes he himself did not possess. The difference, he knew, was in the sphere of feeling, but exactly what it was had not yet become clear to him.

Chapter III. On the Prospect of a Sugar Factory

One evening Solski and Dembicki had tea with Ada. The weather was fine, so they sat on a large balcony overlooking the garden. Ada spoke enthusiastically of Mrs. Arnold's clairvoyance and of the progress she herself was making in spiritualism; the spirits had begun to converse with her with the help of the the alphabet and T-squares held in the hand. Magda spoke no less ardently about the latest meeting of the women's alliance, at which Miss Howard had put forward a plan to build a large home for single ladies.

"I am curious about where they will get the money," was Ada's response. "For I am tired of projects that take millions of rubles."

"That is my sister!" Solski exclaimed, laughing. "I remind you, though, that it is not fitting to let your relations with the spirits lead you to neglect the alliance, which has admirable aims and even, sometimes, practical ones."

"First, please do not speak that way of the spirits," Ada answered, reddening. "And secondly—why do I have to go to every meeting with those women?"

"But what would you say if I also, for the sake of some 'ism,' gave up the sugar factory?"

"I would say nothing," Ada answered.

"You would give up the sugar factory?" cried Magda, looking at him in amazement.

"Are only ladies allowed to have likes and dislikes? If my sister grows tired of meetings after a few weeks, why would the factory not weary me after so many months? I assure you," he added, laughing again, "that at your meetings, ladies, you have more variety."

"I will never believe this!" Magda said firmly.

"That my occupation is not a pure pleasure?"

"No. That you would abandon an opportunity to secure the wellbeing of several hundred people!"

"But those people are no concern of mine; I do not know them. Moreover, who ever secured the wellbeing of another?"

"Ah, you speak that way because you have not seen poverty or poor people," Magda answered hotly. "If you had seen the family of the teacher in Iksinow, whose wife works as cook and laundress in her own house while their children wear old dresses! If you had met the carpenter who lives by making coffins, has a sunken chest and no doubt only keeps from dying because no one would make him a coffin! And if you had ever heard the weeping of a woman in a dirty room in a hostelry who came to town to give a concert, was afraid of failing and, furthermore, was hungry..."

For a moment she was breathless with emotion, but then she went on speaking:

“It is easy for you to give up the factory. You have never seen such people. If you met them, I am sure you would never know peace until you had lifted them out of their want. Other people’s misery pains us, follows us, will not let us sleep. It is like a wound that does not heal until we help the poor person with what strength we have.”

“Surely you do not suppose, madam, that I will gather the disabled and fill the factory with them,” Solski said testily. “I must have workers.”

“And they have a right to proper care...”

“Pardon me, madam, but in no factory do the workers starve to death!” Solski interrupted.

“Good heavens! I know something of this (is it not so, Ada, dear?) because women of all sorts come to us with requests that we give their daughters work. I have visited the homes of these people in garrets and cellars, where three families with as many as six children stay in one stifling room. I have tasted the barley soup they cook for dinner a few times a week while they live for the rest of the time on bread and coffee with no sugar. I have even seen children in a bed where they had to lie instead of running about the streets, because they had no clothes...”

“You will allow me to make this point clear,” Solski said in a harsh voice, “that at our factory houses are already being built for the workers who, I trust, will not live on coffee or pack naked children into beds—”

“For you will be the owner,” Magda said with conviction. “And so I do not suppose that you would give up the factory, since you can do so much good with it.”

“How passionate she is!” Ada put in, looking lovingly at her friend. “Set your mind at ease; Stefan will not renounce his child.”

“The sugar factory is not my child,” Solski answered with distaste. “It was Arnold’s idea, and a brilliant one, I don’t deny it, but not mine. It was not conceived in my brain, and now that it has become a reality, I do not feel suited to it. Of course I will do all that is necessary, but without zeal. Nothing in it attracts me,” he added in a quieter tone, “certainly not those pictures from the book of the Sisters of Charity that Miss Magda has so eloquently presented.”

He began to whistle and looked at the sky sprinkled with stars. Magda grew pensive. Ada said:

“Stefek has spells of this sort. As others must sleep after work, he must be bored and melancholy for a while in order to gather his strength. But tomorrow, or the day after, it will pass.”

“So you do not believe that the sugar factory does not interest me and that it is demeaning to jockey for twenty percent or more in interest?” Solski demanded irritably. “Statecraft: I understand it! One who practices statecraft

must be an artist and, like a sculptor, carve out statues from a mass of human beings. Washington, Napoleon the First, Cavour, Bismarck: they were artists who shaped whole societies, and that is a worthy task. But building a sugar mill and pressing the juice out of beets... Really!”

“Here is a strange thing,” remarked Dembicki, who had been silent until then. “Bismarck is an artist because he is one of those who built the German state; but the man who establishes a factory is not an artist because he only creates a factory. It follows, then, that it is more honorable to catch a whale than to create a sparrow; whereas it seems to me that the second task is more difficult, and that he who makes a proper sparrow would be an artist more worthy of admiration than the hunter of the whale.”

Solski, who was sitting with his back propped against the arm of his chair, stretched his legs and looked at the sky. He was rather put out, but Dembicki did not notice and continued speaking:

“Meanwhile, no one among us wants to exercise his creative powers by making sparrows, but wishes desperately to build— a whale, something for which there is neither space nor time nor material. People think the world needs only projects of enormous scope, or even just dreams of them, whereas what the world needs most of all is creators. The man who invents a new boot nail is worth more than the man who dreams of the perpetuum mobile; and the man who establishes a real sugar factory stimulates more useful human activity than a hundred of those who perennially aspire to be Bismarck.

“Try to create a model family, shop, company, workshop or factory, and you will be convinced that such a thing is a work of art, a sculpture formed from human individuals. A sculpture? Rather an organism of the highest order, full of life. Whoever builds such a thing methodically, consciously, rises above Phidias and Michelangelo, and has no reason to envy Bismarck.”

“And the moral of this lecture...”

“...is this, that if you really possess the instinct for organization, the creation of so complicated a factory as a sugar mill ought to be satisfying for you.”

“It is clear that you miss the point on the practical side!” Solski exclaimed. “If you had listened to the conferences about prices and qualities of lime and brick, the depths of foundations, the choice of machines, the wages for bricklayers, the various species of beets, you would have forgotten about your ideals. And if it were put into your head day by day that it is more advantageous to encourage your neighbors to plant beets than to do it for yourself; if it had been thrown up to you that you wanted to spoil your workers by paying them too much; if you had seen how, in agreements with owners of masonry and carpentry enterprises and the like, loopholes were created through which people would be reduced to beggary, you would know what an industrial concern is. It is not a living sculpture, but a machine to press dividends out of beets, workers and farmers. It is not an organism, but a mill that grinds human lives.”

Dembicki listened tranquilly to this fiery speech. When Solski was silent, he took up his argument again:

“The thousands of details involved in the factory keep you from seeing it as a whole. You are like a man in a wood who sees only the trees, and not the shape of the forest.

“This is the time when, instead of letting yourself be discouraged, you should look at these things in perspective. For a time, do not think of beets and dividends, but rather of this: that entirely by design and in spite of hindrances, you are going to create a living, feeling, thinking organism of brick, iron, beets—and people. You are going to create a being that will be healthy or sick, that will thrive and develop or die, and that will be completely aware of its success or suffering, its growth or extinction. And its self-awareness will not be single, but several hundredfold, several thousandfold: the self-awareness of as many people as have a stake in your factory—”

“Well! Well! Well!” Solski broke in. “The professor sits on his high horse.”

“I would remind you that there are two other humble listeners who would like for something to be clarified,” Ada interposed.

Dembicki waved a hand as if to dismiss her remark and said to Solski:

“Above all, do you believe your sugar factory will be a living being, a superorganism?”

“That is a hackneyed analogy,” Solski said.

“But Magda and I know nothing about this!” Ada exclaimed.

“I beg your pardon,” Dembicki answered, “this is not an allegory, but—a simile of the kind that leads to discovery!”

“Well, well!”

“Let us begin at the beginning. The sugar factory will process materials almost like those of which plants and animals are made. Through one gate you will bring in beets, coal, lime and so on. Those beets you will rinse with water as with saliva; you will grind them to pulp with iron teeth; you will squeeze the juice out of them. In another apparatus—which, parenthetically, will absorb great quantities of oxygen, like our lungs—you will expose the beet juice to an elevated temperature. Then you will introduce the lime and coal into the process, you will press it through centrifuges, and finally you will evaporate and pour into molds the sugar, which will go out into the world through the other gate.

“Say: is every stage of this process not similar to the nourishing of plants and animals? And does the sugar mill not remind you, for example, of a cherry tree, which absorbs carbonic acid, oxygen, water, ammonia, and calcium salts, and then alters them, circulates them through the various parts of its organism, and finally exudes, through its bark, the cherry resin that children search out?”

“I used to eat that,” Magda whispered.

“So did I,” added Ada.

“Moreover,” Dembicki continued, “when there are too few or too many beets in the sugar mill, when a surplus of sugar appears in the warehouses, or when the processes in one of the buildings are not going forward in just the right way, then the factory becomes sick. The workforce wastes away, its numbers diminish, the pulse of activity weakens; then the buildings may even be empty, the walls may crack and give way like the boughs of a rotten tree. The possibility of death is also the evidence of life.”

“But, dear professor, life of that sort does not concern me—life that consists of digesting and excreting and, in the most extreme case, of death. If I am going to be a social activist, I want to deal with the soul, and with the collective soul. Do you hear?” Solski insisted.

“With the soul?” Dembicki repeated. “It is precisely of the soul I was speaking, and I am convinced that even in today’s factories the two prime powers of the soul exist: will and thought.

“Will at the very lowest level manifests itself in impulses to pull toward something and to pull away, like those we observe in certain protozoans. Do you not agree, however, that the drivers and their carts that will carry in the beets and carry out the sugar at your factory will fill the role of the cilia and antennae that grow from the bodies of protozoans and, seizing their quarry, disappear?”

“A higher level of will is represented by force of habit. Well, but that must exist in every factory where large numbers of people carry on their activities in repetitive patterns. The monotonous actions of machines also remind us of habit.

“The next level of will is the work of the creator, in which impulse and habit are marshaled in pursuit of a particular goal. In a factory, such goals are embodied by special master workers under whose direction crews rinse beets, grind them, press the juice from them. Finally, the highest embodiment of the factory’s will is its purpose, which is embodied in its technical director.

“I move to the subject of the factory’s mind. Its basis consists of impressions from the outside world, and the receptors of those impressions are agents who ascertain the price of sugar, beets, coal, wood and labor.

“On a higher level, there is memory. In the factory its organ will be lists of inventory, wages, expenditures for material, and revenues from the product. The creative work of the factory’s mind you will assign places in the laboratory and in the technical and administrative office. And finally the controlling idea, which pervades the entire life of the factory, its development and its cycles, you yourself represent when you see in your sugar mill, not a press to squeeze out dividends, but an organism that will fulfill some purpose in the world.

“Add to this that every factory in existence has its own individuality. There are logical factories and stupid ones, honest ones and dishonest ones, moral ones and immoral ones, free ones and others hobbled by creditors. Think of all that and say whether, beyond the beets, beet residues, sugar syrup and dividends, you do not discern the contours of a spirit that is only distinguished from a human spirit because it has several hundred consciousnesses instead of one.”

“Stefek, the professor is right,” Ada said. “A collective spirit exists in the factory.”

“But there is no place in it for sympathy and compassion like Miss Magdalena’s,” Solski countered.

“You are in error,” Dembicki remarked. “The factories of today are still very primitive organizations. Do you not think, however, that the current turmoil in the working world might not exist if genuine human feelings could find expression in the workplace; if one worker with a sorrow in his life shared it with others; if managers cared about ameliorating the pain and contributing to the wellbeing of those who execute their orders?”

“For the rest, we live in a period in which the influence of that element—human feeling—is beginning to germinate in factories. For how else do you explain the hospitals being built for workers, the schools and care facilities for their children, the yearly and weekly recreations, the emergency relief funds, even the orchestras? None of these arrangements increases the volume of sugar or other product or raises dividends. To what, therefore, should they be attributed, if not to the awakening of feeling in the collective spirit that transcends workers and machines?”

Solski struck himself on the forehead.

“Professor: you are right!” he cried excitedly. “Only at this moment have I understood Miss Magdalena, and... myself. I can be the mind and the will of the organism that is my factory, and she... its organ of feeling.”

Magda trembled in her chair. Ada and Dembicki stared. Solski recovered his poise, took Magda’s hands and said with a smile: “Pardon me for speaking of us as a pair. But just at that moment I recalled your ennobling views and my response. Yes, you are right, while I was wrong.”

He took his leave of everyone and walked out, but called back from the threshold:

“Only, professor, do not steal my sister’s heart—or Miss Magdalena’s.”

“Dear, precious professor!” cried Ada, squeezing both Dembicki’s hands. “You have put life into Stefek again.”

Chapter IV. The Soul Moves as It Will

There is no one who does not look, some winter day, at a cloudy window pane. There is nothing in that sight that arrests attention; it is translucent glass, which through the action of steam appears like muslin, and there is nothing memorable in that, nothing that stimulates curiosity.

Then a chillier wind gusts over the yard, the temperature falls several degrees, and the foggy pane is transformed in an instant. The moist muslin surface is covered with rich embroidery: with pictures of the leaves of strange plants or the feathers of unknown birds. From mist springs articulation, from monotony form and variety.

Something similar was occurring in Solski's soul. From his childhood he had seen his palace full of servants and his farm swarming with people and animals; for several months he had watched the building of his sugar factory. His imagination was engaged. What was each person doing in the rooms, in the field, on the scaffolding around the new walls? How much was the work costing him and how much profit would it bring? However, all of it had seemed like a gray fog that numbed him with its sameness and made it impossible to discern the cast of each person's countenance, the state of his soul.

Only this evening all that had suddenly changed. Something had crystallized, like moisture on the window panes.

At first, as he had sat at tea with Ada and the others, Solski had been annoyed with Magda. Her solicitousness about carpenters, schoolteachers, itinerant actors, seemed idle sentimentalism of the sort he found insufferable. It affected him like a mawkish, boring melody played on a flute.

"If only I didn't have to hear about all this weakness, sniveling and misery!" he thought impatiently.

Then Dembicki had spoken up, and in his somewhat tedious professorial tone had begun to expound things Solski knew—things he had read and pondered hundreds of times, but which had conveyed nothing to him. Family; workshop; work within a small circle; social organism; ah! what hackneyed phrases!

But in this lecture there had been something unusual. It was the conviction with which Dembicki had put forth his argument. It had seemed as if the man were looking into space and really seeing something spiritual growing out of the working machinery, out of every cluster of human beings whose energies were concentrated on a goal.

"Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I will be," Solski thought. And suddenly several impressions converged in his soul: his farm and his factory, Dembicki's didactic speech and Magda's emotional one. He saw, as if lightning had flashed in his mind, things he had never seen before.

It seemed to him that his palace staff of several dozen persons had dissolved in a miraculous cauldron from which only one person emerged. But that person

was a giant, with hands, a chest and a head cast, as if in a foundry, from many hands, chests and heads. This giant, rather well dressed and sufficiently fed, sat in front of the palace gate and from time to time moved furniture with one small finger, or with a breath blew dust from the rooms. Once in a while it looked at Solski and carried out an order of his without hesitation, but without zeal.

In the country the same thing happened. The farm hands from all sectors of his estate fused into one, whose stomach, hands and figure were equivalent to several hundred stomachs, hands and bodies. Only the head seemed disproportionately small on a figure enormous as a rock ledge on a mountain.

This giant, ragged and poorly shod, worked sluggishly, moved ponderously, and looked apathetic and distrustful.

Pacing quickly around his study, Solski contemplated these creatures of his imagination with pride. He had not only understood Dembicki's theory; he had even created a way of embodying it! From this time on, not only would he know that the house, the factory and the farm had their own organic lives; he would see those lives in their true forms and dimensions.

Only then did Solski understand that he was the master, the wizard, who binds giants to himself with the help of a talisman: the key to the cash box. With this key he moves them from their places, wakes them from sleep, spurs them on to work, and evokes either joy or sadness from his enormous slaves. Indeed, other men did the same; but they did not even comprehend what they were doing—did not see giants, but only petty fragments of them, only incommunicative glances.

Still walking around his study, Solski looked now and again through the window, where the moon in its last quarter was rising slowly over the rooftops

At last! At last he had found what he wanted so much: power over something of importance. One giant watched over his comfort; a second tilled his fields; a third would labor in his factory. Each of them could still grow, could take on a healthier complexion and a better humor if it pleased him; or each could vanish from the face of the earth if he wanted it to.

But who would be so wasteful as to destroy such beings? Only a madman, surely, or a man who had not seen them and enjoyed his power over them. Indeed, let them grow and take on strength, let them be well dressed, well fed and content, let their sluggish movements become adroit, their apathetic faces expressive. Above all, let their heads reach their proper size, and let them love Solski.

Here were the living statues he would form! Here was the work he had craved for so many years! Only now did he understand that farms and factories were worthy of his talent and attention.

Because good fortune never comes alone, that same day yet another happy accident had befallen Solski, perhaps the happiest of all. These giants of his: they had needs of which he was not always aware. Furthermore, insofar as they understood human language, it was no doubt the language of the heart, which

Solski did not possess. He had energy, he had an inventive mind, but he was devoid of sentiment, there was no getting around it.

And, lo! at that moment, who should find herself under his roof but Magda, a creature so sensitive that sympathy and kindness seemed the warp and woof of her nature? She seized another person's need in flight, felt it and hit on the immediate response. She alone would be able to converse even with the giant whose stomach comprised several hundred stomachs and whose head was equal to more than a dozen heads.

So there were three things: material for the living statues, the sculptor who wanted to hew them, and the gangway between the material and the sculptor: Magda.

Solski threw himself on the sofa, pressing his hot forehead.

"She is poor," he thought. "Yet what is money to me? She has no name, but she will have mine. She has no connections! No, she has connections... the connections that are most important in life to me. And where will I find such sensitivity and such immeasurable feeling? That is a dowry my millions could not bring me!"

He exhumed from his memory all the women he had loved or admired. They were witty, intelligent, beautiful, elegant, original, but—not like her! They were diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, all worth possessing, but none was what Magda was: a beam of light without which jewels would have no beauty.

"If I married her," he thought, "could I ever betray her? Of course. I would betray her a hundred times for anyone I found attractive. But could I be done with her? Never! No more than I could be done with my own heart."

"But perhaps she loves Norski," came the thought. "Her weeping at the Arnolds'... her blushes... her avoidance of his looks..."

He sprang from the sofa.

"Could it be?" he whispered. "But my whole life would be ruined!"

He went to the anteroom, put on his overcoat and ran out to the empty street. He came back to his house when the moon began sloping toward the west and dawn showed in the east.

"I must clarify this matter and bring it to a head," he said as he undressed. "Ada will agree to it immediately. Aunt Gabriela will sulk, but she will give in. Well—and after all, not everyone in our family is too ill-natured to be able to appreciate Magdalena."

At the same hour that her future was unfolding in Solski's mind, Magda was finding it impossible to sleep. The sudden shift of Ada's interest from the alliance of working women to spiritualism had frightened her, while the acrid tone in which Solski had spoken to her a few times had wounded her pride.

"Great people," she thought, "easily change their inclinations and... slight others. I prefer to leave before they drive me out."

Then she felt sorry for Ada, who might think Magda was discarding her on a whim, and finally she decided to wait a few weeks—a few days, at least.

“It is true that on his way out, Stefan admitted his mistake. But what a tone he used when he said that he would not gather the disabled and fill the factory with them! And what an answer he gave Dembicki!

“This is not my world—not my world! I must escape from here,” she thought, seeing that dawn was just breaking in the courtyard.

Chapter V. Another Echo of the Past

For several days Ada Solska had noticed that something was troubling her brother. He read and executed everything pertaining to the management of their estate, but he had no appetite; he sat up far into the night; he avoided Magda, or spoke to her briefly and dryly. At times he dropped into his sister's room and walked around without a word, like a man who has something to confide but cannot find the courage.

One afternoon, when her brother had not come to her at the usual time, Ada took a ball of yarn and a crochet hook and made her way to his study, where she found him pacing more feverishly than usual. She sat on a leather sofa, unwound some yarn and fell to work on a scarf for her aunt, though she had never shown much aptitude for crochet. Cezar greeted her by bounding around and wagging his tail; but seeing that she took little notice of him, he lay down on the tiger skin and went to sleep.

Sunlight streamed in through the windows, painting the study with streaks of glare and darkness. Whenever the light struck Solski as he walked back and forth, Ada saw that his face was drawn and his eyes were hollow. In the shadows he looked gray all over.

"It is good that you have come," he remarked.

"So I see," she rejoined, not taking her eyes from her work.

"Have you guessed what I want to talk to you about?"

"I do not even need to guess. I saw the same thing last year in Italy."

"That was entirely different."

"And you said that Helena was different from all other women."

Solski stopped in front of his sister.

"Does that mean that you are siding with Helena?" he asked.

Ada folded her hands on her lap and raised her eyes.

"Do not be angry, dear," she said, "but I would never want to play the matchmaker where you are concerned. I was thinking of something else. Many people in our family are certain that you are going to marry Helena, though at the moment other rumors are circulating in the city."

"Enough about Helena!" Stefan burst out. "She herself broke off with me and everyone knows it."

"Not everyone. Not even Helena herself and her family. Lately she has refused some engineer who proposed to her. Mrs. Arnold, in spite of the fact that the spirits told her that Helena is not going to marry you, sometimes alludes to your marriage in my hearing, while Helena's brother..."

Here her voice broke.

“While Kazimierz Norski—” she said, regaining her poise with an effort, “Kazimierz Norski did not accept a position offered him by the railroad,” she concluded quietly, “because he counted on becoming your brother-in-law.”

Solski, looking at his sister, did not miss a single change in her face or the tone of her voice. His eyes smouldered, but only for a second. Then he shrugged impatiently.

“My accounts are closed with Helena,” he said. “If there were two women in the world to choose from—she and another—I would choose the other.”

“Admirable constancy,” Ada whispered.

“Perhaps you will manage to be more constant?” hissed her brother, his eyes flashing.

Her face darkened.

“Why do you flirt with her, then?” she asked gently.

“Because she flirts with me,” he retorted, laughing. “You are one of the emancipated. Surely you believe in equal rights.”

Ada drew her brother to her and kissed his hand. Then she put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the forehead.

“Do as you like, marry whom you like. I will not stop loving you,” she whispered.

“Nor I you,” he answered. “And so I do not tell you, do as you like. You will always do only what a woman with dignity ought to do.”

“I will be an old maid. True?” she smiled.

“You will be old Miss Solska.”

“I know. I know. Let us speak of you. You have decided to marry Magda, or so you think today, at least.”

“Yes. And you must help me.”

“By no means! Why, after all, do you need my help? Propose to her yourself.”

“But if she does not love me?”

“I cannot help you as to that, or this: that you cannot cast her off if you grow tired of her.”

Solski sat down by his sister and took her hand.

“Listen—” he began.

“I know what you are going to say. She is unlike other women. I have heard it many times!”

“No,” he said. “It is that I love her differently. Before, when a woman pleased me, it aroused an animal in me. I could have devoured her; I almost felt the deliciousness of biting her. With Magda it is different.”

“True! Every time you carry on a conversation with her, and even when you only look at her, I am embarrassed for you. Men like you are dreadful with your love!”

“Be patient,” he said in a pleading tone. “Do you know, if you told me to describe her features, I swear I could not do it, there is so little of the influence of the senses in my feeling for her. I know she has lovely hands—lovely little feet—a neck like ivory—the bosom of a goddess. A particular fragrance wafts around her. But I can barely recall her features. My nerves play no role. Yet how I know her soul! And I could not say that of any of the other women I have found attractive.”

Ada shrugged.

“You do not believe that this is not sensual love but an attachment not of this world? Listen: I know that this is a naive child, that she does not know life; but she has excellent judgment, and her intellect grows from day to day. She is more mature today than when she came to us.”

“That is true.”

“You see it, then. She is also very energetic; she is the personification of activity and strength.”

“True.”

“But it is not stony, steely strength, which breaks everything or shatters itself. It is the pliable strength of a beam of light, which moves as a wave and envelops one from every side, disappears and then appears in a different place—and always full of grace!”

“A very apt comparison.”

“That is why I experience her as a spirit in female form,” he said very softly. “She does what she does, but you cannot lay hold of her. And there is more: she has so little egoism that she seems devoid of earthly traits. Has she ever asked you for anything? For others, yes, but never for herself. She needs neither position nor money, nothing for which mere human beings are always jostling. And, Ada, have even you noticed how she eats?”

“With great refinement...”

“For she does it as though she never felt hunger and did not even know the dishes had flavor. She eats only to hide her heavenly origin; she pretends to eat as she pretends to have human form, without which we could not know of her existence.”

“Poetry again!” Ada remarked.

“Let us call it that. But think of her mood. Is it not the picture of the sky on a fair day? When she comes to us, does everything not become brighter and warmer? Sometimes she is sad; but then it is the divine sun momentarily veiled by clouds. And her tears... for I have seen tears in her eyes... are they not like

May rain that falls on the ground to sprinkle all that grows with diamonds in which we see the sky?"

His sister looked at him dumbfounded.

"My dear," she said, "repeat to her what you have said to me, and ask for her hand."

Solski sprang from the sofa and again began to stride around the study.

"What is the meaning of this hesitation?" she asked

"I do not know," he answered. "At any rate, I do not know her past nor her family," he added vehemently.

"Magda's past?" she exclaimed, eyeing him closely. "My dear Stefan—God forgive you! Magda has no past, or none that would give anyone a moment's unease. As to her family, she is descended from the Strusis, as you know. Her parents work, but they need no charity; their demands are so modest that less than a hundred thousand rubles would provide for them as long as they live. The mother, who, it seems, is a little overbearing, writes Magda nagging letters, but the father is rather like Dembicki. In letters to Magda, at least, he lets fall expressions like the professor's. Well: surely you would accept Dembicki as a father-in-law! Though I warn you that with her father you would have to look to yourself, for though he is a village doctor, he is an uncommon fellow. He may make stipulations for the happiness of his child."

Solski was silent. Suddenly he stopped in front of her and said:

"And if she does not love me?"

"Try to win her heart. You will surely manage it," she answered proudly.

"And if... if she loves someone else... someone else..." he repeated.

"Whom?" Ada whispered.

Solski bent over her and whispered in her ear:

"Kazimierz. Did you hear?"

She looked down. Her hands went limp. Her face darkened, then took on a yellowish cast.

Her brother looked at her—looked at her—then raised his clenched fists over his head and exclaimed hoarsely:

"Cur! I will crush him under my foot."

She rose from the sofa, looked calmly at the enraged young man and said:

"Stefek—you will do nothing to him."

She walked out of the room, leaving her brother, who was nearly frothing with fury, but knew that he would do nothing to Norski because his sister did not want him to.

Magda returned from school around four. There were traces of tears in her eyes and such sadness in her face that Ada was filled with wonder.

“Has she been talking with Kazimierz again?” she wondered, and seethed with anger. She wanted to feign a headache to avoid talking with Magda, but after a moment her magnanimous nature won out over those suspicions. Holding her friend close to her, she asked:

“What is it? Have you listened to another treatise on the soul?”

Magda looked at her and shrugged. The gesture dispelled Ada’s misgivings. She kissed Magda even more warmly and said insistently:

“Has something painful happened to you? Tell me: what is it?”

“Not to me!” Magda replied, sitting on the sofa. “You know Mania Lewinska, with whom the student Kotowski fell in love while she was still in school.”

“He has jilted her?”

“On the contrary, they have been engaged for a year. But, no! I will start at the beginning. You have no idea what a sad story it is.”

“Wait—” Ada broke in. She touched the bell and when a footman appeared, said:

“Tell your master to come to us.”

“Ada, what are you doing?” Magda exclaimed, hiding her face in her hands. “Although—I do not know. Perhaps it will be better if Stefan does hear about this.”

Solski came immediately. He seemed so haggard that Magda looked at him and burst out: “Are you ill?”

But at that instant she lost her composure and averted her eyes.

“Nothing is wrong with me,” he answered, his good humor restored. “My head aches from lack of sleep, but that will pass.”

And because Magda was quiet and obviously troubled he added:

“A chat with you ladies will make me well.”

“Magda wants to tell us something just now,” Ada put in.

“I only wanted to tell you...”

“You will see that it will be better if Stefek hears,” Ada said. “We are both very interested in anything that affects you.”

“That is not good!” Magda said under her breath.

Solski sat down, keeping his eyes on his sister, and Magda began:

“Do you remember, Ada, that before your journey abroad, you were angry with Helena—”

“She was angry with me,” Ada interrupted, “because Romanowicz had stopped lecturing us in algebra.”

“Just so,” Magda said. “At that time, I went to her from you in the hope of reconciling you, and she seized me by the hand and pulled me to the door of Mrs. Latter’s study. Imagine what I saw and heard in spite of myself: Mania Lewinska’s uncle, a stout, gray-haired man, doing—can you think what? Proposing to Mrs. Latter!

“He was just telling her that he had a country estate with no debts, and even a little cash. Naturally Mrs. Latter laughed at his proposal (her husband, after all, was still living), but she did not seem indifferent to the goodhearted old gentleman. I think it may even have been because of that that she did not dismiss Mania after the incident with Kotowski.”

“When he was a university student, Kotowski fell in love with Mania, and now he is her fiance,” Ada explained to Stefan.

“And a doctor,” Magda added. “Now, let me tell you: when Mrs. Latter suddenly left Warsaw, she made her way to Mielnicki’s estate and—and drowned in the river near his manor. But he—only imagine!—had been at her school in Warsaw that very day. There he said, as if he had been seized with a premonition:

“‘She went to me! We passed each other on the road!’ I heard him myself. And he returned to the country immediately.

“What will you say when you hear that, after he stopped at the ferry and inquired whether such-and-such a lady were there, one of the ferrymen raised the sheet and showed him Mrs. Latter’s remains on the ground? Poor Mielnicki shrieked and fell down, stricken with apoplexy.”

“But he is still alive,” Solski interposed.

“Alive, but paralyzed,” Magda continued. “Last year he put his estate out to lease and came to Warsaw with Mania, who nurses him like a daughter. But they are poor because the leaseholder does not pay, and Mr. Mielnicki cannot liquidate the money he has in mortgages.

“Mania wrote today to ask me to visit them. I went, and saw a sad sight. They have three small rooms and a kitchen. In one room Mania gives lessons to pupils who come to her. They pay her five or six rubles a month. Mr. Mielnicki sits in an armchair in another room.

“Heavens, how he looks! So thin... and skin the color of the ground hangs down on his face. He cannot move and speaks poorly. He must even be deranged, for when I came in, unknown to him, he began to complain that people were robbing him, and that the maid pinched and beat him. It was fearful, how he complained that Mania did not care about him, that she left him for whole days without oversight! And meanwhile she, poor thing, teaches girls in the house or scrambles to find more pupils, for otherwise they would have nothing to eat!”

Having said that, Magda restrained her tears with difficulty. Her voice trembled and broke.

“Poor Kotowski helps them as he can. But although he completed his medical training and was abroad for year, he does not have a practice. Oh, Ada,

if you had heard Mania's weeping and the shouts of her uncle, it would have broken your heart.

"Stefan!" she said suddenly, folding her hands. "Only you can save them! If Kotowski were the factory doctor—oh, no, you are angry with me. Send me away, but help them!" Tears stifled her speech.

"Saint!" Solski whispered. He seized Magda's hand and began kissing it passionately. "Our house is blessed, for God has sent you here."

"Stefan! Think!" his sister cautioned, extricating Magda's hand.

Solski rose from his chair like a drunken man. But he regained his senses when he noticed that Magda was staring at him in amazement.

"What is the name of this young doctor and where does he live?" he asked.

Magda gave him Kotowski's full name and address. Solski bowed and said as he left the room:

"In a few hours I will inform you of the status of this matter."

He had hardly closed the door when Magda turned apprehensively to Ada.

"Heavens, is Stefan offended?"

Ada looked at her in surprise.

"Magda, dear," she said, "are you pretending, or—do you really not see?"

"What?"

"Well—that Stefan is happy to carry out your recommendations because they are so noble."

At dinner an hour later Solski was absent, and Aunt Gabriela was quite unbending. She looked down her nose at Magda, asked her no questions, and if Magda addressed her, answered her reluctantly.

"Madam Gabriela must have someone in mind for the position of factory doctor, and is angry with me," Magda thought with terror. "But let it be so, as long as something comes of this for those poor people! In any case, I have lived here too long. Soon all the world will want to ask Solski for a position, and in the end he will be as sick of me as his aunt is today. I must get away as soon as possible!"

Chapter VI. The Student Who Became a Doctor

Meanwhile, Solski, who had sent Kotowski an urgent request for a meeting, was impatiently awaiting the young physician. He was announced around seven.

Many things had changed from the time when Kotowski, as a student, had served as go-between for Miss Howard and the publishers who printed her articles about special benefits for illegitimate children. Above all, Miss Howard's own views on the question of illegitimate children had undergone a fundamental change since her antagonist, Mrs. Kanarkiewicz, a member of the women's alliance, had become an advocate for unwed mothers.

But Wladyslaw Kotowski had hardly changed. He was the same person as a year and a half before: a young fellow with sunken cheeks and hair bristling like a hedgehog's, shut into himself, taciturn, somber. Instead of a threadbare uniform he wore a black frock coat frayed at the seams, but his pants were as rumpled at the knees as in the old days.

Kotowski walked into Solski's study with his head up, smoothing his hair and wearing an expression that proclaimed his self-confidence in the presence of a magnate. But the great man sized him up at a glance and saw that, beneath the arrogant upstart air, his visitor was deeply abashed and trembled inwardly with undefined hope.

"Your grace condescended—I received a letter from your grace—" Kotowski began, and lost even more of his composure when he looked at Solski's Tartar face, which was radiant with energy.

"My dear sir," Solski said, pressing his hand, "first of all, do not call me your grace. Please take a seat," he added, pulling up the chair, "and let us have a chat."

Kotowski sat down and his eyes misted over. "What does this infernal man want with me?" he thought, looking at Solski's diminutive figure, which was making a more and more powerful impression on him.

Solski was aware of that. He sensed that the young doctor was rather in awe of him, but not for self-serving reasons.

"I like this man who would be Brutus," he thought, and said aloud:

"Mr. Kotowski, I have heard many good things about you."

"About me?" Kotowski asked as if he were affronted.

"From Miss Magdalena Brzeska."

"Ah!"

"And because I am building a sugar mill and I would like to provide my workers with honest caretakers, I offer you a position as factory doctor."

Kotowski did not thank Solski; he looked at him as if he could not believe his own ears.

“The conditions are as follows: a brick house with a garden, several acres of land, horses, provender for them, and a salary of fifteen hundred rubles a year. Will you accept?”

Kotowski was stupefied. He began to gesticulate without speaking.

“So you accept,” Solski said.

“With permission—” replied the young man, rising from his chair, “I am very—very—grateful... I never thought... But—”

“But what?” Solski inquired, frowning slightly.

“Does... does Kazimierz Norski have anything to do with the sugar mill?”

Solski took a step back.

“He does not,” he answered quickly, “and he will not. But why do you ask?”

“Because if Norski were at the factory, I would not accept a post there,” Kotowski answered.

When he heard that, Solski felt such a strong sympathy for the young man that he could have embraced him. But he mastered himself and said with a grave look:

“Pardon me for asking for a more detailed explanation. Why would you not accept a place in an institution with which Mr. Norski was affiliated?”

“Because he is, if you will excuse me, a blackguard,” replied Kotowski, vigorously tousling his hair. He was not a physiognomist, so he felt that he was putting his position at risk by offering such a harsh assessment of Kazimierz.

“You have used a strong term, sir. Are there facts—”

“You will see that there is a ripping yarn here,” said Kotowski, who had not been able to banish the ring of the tavern from his speech. “This squire Mielnicki, my fiancée’s uncle—after Mrs. Latter drowned, he made over four thousand rubles on a mortgage in Warsaw to Kazimierz, her son. It was the most secure asset the old man owned. It yielded regular interest, which he needs badly these days.”

He shifted in his chair, moaned and tugged at his hair, but went on:

“And this is what happened. This Norski talked the debtor into giving him the money, and in April he took it. In vain we asked Norski to take a four-thousand-ruble interest in another mortgage from which we could have raised what was owed him early in the fall. In vain we explained that old Mielnicki, paralyzed, demented, would have nothing to eat. We did not mean to retract the gift, only to transfer it. But Norski refused to give in, asserting that he had debts of honor. Well—he took the money and the old man is destitute.”

If someone had given Solski thousands of rubles, it would not have given him as much satisfaction as Kotowski gave him in recounting these events. But he maintained his composure and said mildly:

“Does anyone except yourself know of this?”

“The notary and our debtor. By now Mielnicki has no friends to take an interest in him. Finally, not only was the original deed of gift all in order, but moreover, every time the old man recovers his senses he asks about Norski’s health and whether he got the money he made over to him. Mielnicki has no idea of his situation. He always thinks that he is wealthy and that he is being exploited by my fiancée.”

“Do you authorize me to make use of this information some time?” Solski asked. “I may never do it, but—an occasion might arise...”

“Indeed I do. The consequences would be nothing to me. In the end that man had the law on his side—”

“Never mind about that. But I swear that Norski does not and never will have a place in any institution with which I am connected. And now—do you accept the post of factory doctor?”

“Oh... oh...”

“Until the factory is in operation, you will be our doctor here, in Warsaw. When anyone in our house seeks medical advice, you are obliged to provide it. Your salary will be the same as at the factory, and, in addition, five hundred rubles for lodging. You enter upon your duties the first of May—”

“It is already the end of May,” Kotowski said under his breath.

“The period specified is necessary to standardize the bookkeeping. But—but—you have debts, of course. How much do they amount to?”

“About five—five hundred rubles,” Kotowski answered, nearly terrified.

“The administration of the factory will pay your debts and subtract the sum from your salary. That is—from your bonus. You will want to report to the administrative office tomorrow around noon and it will perform the transaction. And now, thank you and goodbye.”

Kotowski got up, briefly shook the hand proffered him and dropped onto his chair again. He muttered “Aha!”, rose again, and instead of walking to the proper door, moved toward the bedroom. Solski had to conduct him to the anteroom.

There the young fellow, having recovered a little of his presence of mind, remembered that it might be in order to say a warmer word of thanks to the man who had in such a singular way become his patron. Seeing that the door to the study was closed, however, he went downstairs, walking unsteadily. Only in the courtyard, in the chilly evening wind, did he feel a pressure in his chest and burst into tears.

At that moment he had forty pence and his fiancée half a ruble.

“Am I dreaming? Have I gone mad?” he thought, wiping his eyes. “But if this is a dream, God, do not wake me from it, for reality is too much for me.”

Out of sight behind a pillar near the entrance to the palace, the doorman observed the young man’s extraordinary behavior, and when he heard him weep, could not believe his ears. But his disbelief did not keep him from informing the valet, who immediately informed his master.

Solski understood that the young doctor had been deeply affected by the meeting. He understood that Kotowski had been ground under by poverty, that he had suddenly been put in the way of a very good living, and that the transformation had wrung tears from him. And for the first time Solski knew happiness so great, so immeasurably deep, that it alone could fulfil his whole life.

His fortune, his duels, his ocean voyages, his mountain-climbing expeditions: what were they worth in comparison with one man’s tears of joy?

“All thanks to her. And how many such days may I yet have?” he thought. “She, only she... always she; with every noblest feeling!”

At this point the thought bore in on him that if Magda had recommended Kotowski, she must know about Norski. And if she knew, it would be very difficult for her not to despise him. So she could not love Norski, and he, Solski, need not give himself any uneasiness about such a rival!

He walked around the study. At last he said to himself:

“Why am I hesitating? I must conclude the matter at a stroke, immediately.”

He rang for a servant.

“Is Miss Brzeska asleep yet?”

“She is not sleeping, sir. She is reading in her room.”

“Go to Miss Ada and ask if I might visit her.”

“The mistress is lying down. She has a headache.”

“Aha!” Solski sniffed and thought, “Again I will be delayed by more than twelve hours!”

Upon reflection, however, he admitted to himself that such obsessive proposals made no sense. It was necessary to prepare Magda, and, for that matter, his own family. From that quarter he envisaged a daunting struggle.

“Resolutely, but slowly!” he told himself.

Meanwhile Magda, sitting in the lamplight with her book, stopped reading from time to time and thought:

“Will Stefan give Kotowski the position? Poor man; perhaps he will not like him. With these great people, everything depends on the moment and on their taste.”

She recalled the passionate enthusiasm with which Solski had listened to her account of Mania's misfortunes—and his strange expressions.

“Why did he kiss my hand so? Oh, well, it was nothing in particular... a whim.”

Suddenly she was full of self-recrimination for her ingratitude to the Solskis. But that feeling quickly passed and gave way to suspicion. Ever since that memorable conversation with Kazimierz, icy winds of skepticism had blown through her mind more and more often. Everything seemed uncertain and untrustworthy—even what she herself did, even her own life.

In her eyes the whole world had lost the meaning it once had; everything in it was only grease, iron and phosphorus; everywhere she had begun to see in things the traces of a rotting corpse.

Chapter VII. The Dangerous Sides of Gratitude

At around one o'clock the next day, the headmistress of the school summoned Magda to her office. There beside a smiling Miss Malinowska stood a weeping Mania Lewinska, who at the sight of Magda folded her hands and fell at her friend's feet, sobbing:

"Oh, Magda! Oh, madam! Such a great kindness! Wladyslaw will have a garden, a brick house and fifteen hundred rubles. God bless you..."

Dumbfounded, Magda looked at the beaming headmistress. Only when Mania began kissing her hands did Magda recover from her surprise and raise her to her feet.

"What has happened to you, Mania, dear?" she asked. "Did Kotowski get the position, then? Praise God! But why are you thanking me in this strange manner?"

"Because we are so grateful to you, madam..."

"Madam?" Magda repeated. "Why are you speaking to me this way?"

Mania was confused and fell silent. Miss Malinowska prodded her:

"Well, Mania, though you will only be a doctor's wife, I am sure Madam Solska will not be unmindful of the ties of friendship."

Magda's eyes widened. She pressed her hands to her forehead and looked first at Miss Malinowska, then at Mania, as if through a fog.

"What are you saying?" she whispered.

"My dear," Miss Malinowska said, "you really do not need to disclaim, in front of us, the connection you have formed—"

"The connection I have formed? With whom?"

"You are engaged to Mr. Solski—"

"Merciful God!" Magda exclaimed, wringing her hands and turning to the headmistress. "Is that what you say? But that is a lie, a slander. They both, Ada and Stefan, promised to put me in charge of the school at the sugar factory. My position there is infinitely lower than Mania's. Good God, what are you doing to me? Good God!"

Magda's distress was puzzling to Miss Malinowska.

"How can this be?" she asked. "You are not yet engaged to Solski, then?"

"I? What are you saying? I am going to be the teacher in the factory school. Who has been spreading such wicked rumors?"

"I heard it from Mr. Zgierski," Miss Malinowska said indignantly. "After all, he is Solski's right-hand man."

"Ah! Mr. Zgierski?" Magda repeated. "But it is a lie that compromises me in front of the Solskis and their family. I live with Ada. I rarely see Stefan. I am

going to be the teacher at their school. Oh, dear God, what are you doing to me? There has never been any talk of such a thing between us, and there never will be.”

“My dear, do not say ‘there never will be,’” Miss Malinowska said, embracing Magda.

“There never will be!” Magda repeated firmly. “Stefan ought to marry Helena Norska. That was her mother’s dearest wish and I have set about persuading Helena to fulfill it. So think, ladies, how wrong it would be of me to entertain such a declaration from Stefan!”

Mania looked anxious; Miss Malinowska looked amazed. At last Miss Malinowska said worriedly:

“Dear Miss Magdalena, return to your class. There is some misunderstanding here and it is better if we say no more about it.”

Magda said goodbye to both ladies coolly and went to her classroom. But less than a quarter of an hour later she went out, feeling that she was not in control of herself. Every whisper, every movement, even the sight of the girls sitting on benches caused her so much nervous irritation that she began to fear an attack of madness. She saw Mania kneeling before her and addressing her as “madam,” and a smiling Miss Malinowska calling her “Madam Solska.”

“My worst misgivings are confirmed! What am I to do?” she whispered as she hurried downstairs.

On the street she began to recover her composure, so she decided to walk on, seeing that the stroll was restoring her peace of mind.

She could not delude herself: widely circulated gossip had made her Solski’s mistress or his fiancée. Mistress—that term could be dispensed with. Magda was certain that no one who knew her would believe such a thing. Anyway, no one would suppose that Miss Solska would befriend and share her home with her brother’s paramour.

But what was she to do if they believed she was Solski’s fiancée, and had believed that for some time? How else could she explain the deference paid her on every hand at the school, the extraordinary kindness Zgierski had shown her, or the conversations in which Mr. Arnold had recommended—to her!—machines from English and American factories? Finally, had not today’s scene with Mania Lewinska and the words of Miss Malinowska proved that even those closest to her saw in her the future Madam Solska?

In spite of the tranquilizing effect of the walk, Magda’s head began to swim. What would Stefan think of her—Stefan, who at her request had conferred such benefits on people who were strangers to him? Would he not feel contempt for her, after she had urged him to marry Helena? For of course he had the right to assume that she, by some tactless remark, had given rise to these rumors, the more because the people for whom she had interceded with him were the first to believe them.

“What can I do? What can I do?” she thought in despair.

There was nothing to be gained by returning to Iksinow. For several months she had been writing her parents that she would not open a school there because she would have the school at the sugar mill. So now she must find a position in Warsaw, which, with the vacation coming on, would not be easy.

Leaving that aside, however, she still had several hundred rubles in cash. But how to tell Ada that she was going to move out? What reason would she give? That public opinion had made her Stefan’s fiancée?

One of two things would follow such a revelation: either Ada would laugh at what the gossips were saying, or she would be offended. But would it be proper for Magda to speak to someone about the matter, if she could do so without exposing herself to suspicion? Or was it even seemly for her to think about the rumors? To the Solskis, after all, they would be, as they were to her, so monstrously absurd that it was impossible to take them seriously. After all, that same rumor mill that was marrying her off to Solski today might put out a report tomorrow that she had taken someone’s money.

How long had it been since it was said (though only fleetingly) in Iksinow that Cynadrowski had killed himself because of her?—whereas the magistrate’s wife was perhaps still saying that Magda had thrown Eufemia at Cynadrowski, or at least arranged for them to take walks together.

Partly consciously, partly involuntarily, Magda made her way toward the Arnolds’ lodgings, and when she found herself at the gate, went in. Something drew her, just at that moment, to see Helena.

She found her in the salon chatting cheerfully with Mrs. Arnold and Bronislaw Korkowicz. Magda was a little taken aback at the sight of Korkowicz, but Helena greeted her with no sign of uneasiness.

“How fortunate that you are here, my dear,” she said to Magda, “for I have some business with you.”

She excused herself to Bronislaw and walked out with Magda to a small room furnished like an office.

“Surely you know,” she said without preamble, “that Kazik does not have the position with the railway that he told you about.”

“What happened?”

“The usual thing: I loaned him money and he lost the motivation to work. The fellow makes my life a misery!” Helena exclaimed, then added:

“My Magda, you see Stefan very often, so drop him a hint. Could he not find Kazik something to do? He is a bit lightminded, but he is not without ambition, and he respects Solski. I will wager that if Solski took him under his wing, Kazik would work.”

“She is just like the rest of them!” Magda thought angrily, but she said aloud:

“My dear, it seems to me that you should be the one to make the case for your brother.”

“I will speak to Solski as well,” Helena rejoined quickly, “but Stefan does not like Kazik, so I would like to have my way cleared. Magda, dear, do this for me. You see Stefan more often than I do, and you are fond of Kazik.”

“I?” Magda blushed.

“Well, do not deny it. We know something about this!” Helena said, kissing her. “But do it quickly, for I want to speak to Stefan any day now.”

“So at least she does not assume that I am engaged to Solski!” thought Magda, sighing with relief.

As they returned to the salon, Magda stopped Helena.

“Helena, listen... pardon me for speaking of this...”

“Of what?”

“Do you think,” Magda continued, “that Solski will be willing to fulfil your request if he sees Bronislaw Korkowicz here?”

“Oh, my dear!” Helena laughed. “You are still so naive.”

She pushed her toward the door and they both went into the drawing room.

Magda sat there only as long as was necessary to learn from Mrs. Arnold that Ada was making great progress with spiritualism, and to see with her own eyes that Korkowicz was undoubtedly in love with Helena, who for her part was letting him feel the force of her charm. She left feeling indignant with Helena but more at ease about her own affairs.

“Obviously,” she thought, “the rumors about Stefan and me have not spread very far. Otherwise they would have reached Helena, and she would have communicated that to me. Still, perhaps she did hear something more, but after being assured some time ago that there was nothing between us, considered it too ridiculous to bother about.”

Then she felt ashamed.

“How presumptuous I am!” she said to herself. “I have no sense! If even Helena finds these reports incredible, can I believe that Ada or Stefan will attach any significance to them—to such foolishness? Perhaps they have already heard them and shrugged them off, while I have been dramatizing them... Oh, I wish I could escape!”

These thoughts gave Magda a pain at her heart, but she was more tranquil on her way home. In the end it occurred to her that Solski would make no more of these rumors than she would have if someone had said she was going to marry the schoolteacher in Iksinow, who already had a wife.

She was even more at ease at dinner.

Aunt Gabriela, who had been distant toward her lately, was not there. Stefan, after having been gloomy and irritable for some time, was in an exceptionally

good humor. He told Magda what an excellent impression Kotowski had made on him. Near the end of the meal he ordered a bottle of wine to be brought and pressed the ladies to drink the health of Mania Lewinska and her future husband.

When they had emptied their glasses in one draught he said:

“And now, Ada, to the health of the patroness of the lovers, Miss Magdalena. And she herself must drink her thanks.”

If any worry had lingered in Magda’s heart, that second toast banished it. At that moment the conversation with Mania and Miss Malinowska seemed a comic misunderstanding, and her own exasperation childish.

“Could anyone be upset at such a trifle? The very idea of leaving the Solskis and relinquishing the factory school! Oh, I never will have any sense!” she told herself, laughing as she had not laughed since she was a schoolgirl.

When Solski had kissed her hand (in gratitude for putting him in the way of meeting Kotowski) and gone away, and the two women found themselves in Ada’s study, Magda, under the influence of the prandial conviviality, said to her friend:

“You know, I was at Helena’s today and she told me that Kazimierz has no position with the railroad. She asked—you cannot guess what!—that your brother let Kazimierz work for him.”

Ada looked at her coldly.

“Who is going to speak to Stefan about this?” she asked.

“Helena herself, of course. But she wants someone to smooth the way.”

“And who will undertake that?”

“Perhaps you, Ada—if you want to.”

“I? No!”

“In that case, I must be the one!” Magda exclaimed with a smile.

But Ada froze her with a glance. Her plain face went white, then red, and her slanted eyes glared at Magda, frightening her.

“You? And what concern is Kazimierz of yours?”

“What does that mean?” Magda thought. “I have never seen her like this.”

But in a moment Ada was herself again. She hugged Magda impulsively and began kissing her lips, eyes and hands.

“Do not be angry with me, dearest Magda. The wine has affected my nerves,” she whispered. “But please do not ever speak of Kazimierz to Stefan. Never, do you hear? And even more, do not speak on his behalf. Stefan does not like him.”

“I will not say a word on anyone’s behalf,” thought Magda, burning with shame. Ada’s look and the tone in which she had made her argument felt like an

insult. And again, as when the two of them had returned from the meeting of the women's alliance, she saw a great gulf between herself and Ada.

This minor incident, seen against the background of the earlier one, formed a turning point in Magda's life. A change set in in her disposition that was imperceptible at first, but quickly deepened.

In the course of the next several days, Magda lost her good spirits. She smiled less often and more sadly, and an apprehensiveness began to color her relations with Ada and Solski. She rarely went into Ada's room, and in her own apartment she spent her time in the study without looking into the sitting room. Dinners at the family table were a strain, and she began to lose her appetite.

She did not sleep well. Once when a worried Ada came to her in the night, she found Magda dressed and sitting at her desk without a light.

In vain Ada, perhaps feeling herself a little at fault, redoubled her tenderness toward Magda. She kissed her hands; she read to her in bed in the evenings; she devised recreations. Magda showed her gratitude and reproached herself, but she could not recover her cheerfulness; she was timid and troubled.

"She is in love with Stefan," Ada thought, exhausting all her resources in the effort to help Magda regain her spirits. "Ah, if only the matter were concluded!"

She did not confer with her brother, however, for she surmised that he had noticed the change in Magda and was taking steps that involved their kinsfolk. She felt that something important was going on in the house. There were signs: Stefan's edginess, Aunt Gabriela's anger, and Stefan's frequent visits to various relatives, who paid reciprocal visits and spent long hours in conversation with him.

Ada guessed all this but did not betray her suppositions to her brother. At that time she was afraid to speak.

Meanwhile, not only from day to day but from hour to hour Magda felt more despondent. She had lost her faith—faith that the Solskis loved and respected her, faith that she could be necessary to someone, and, finally, faith in order and justice in the world.

The darkest memories and most pessimistic conclusions spun themselves out in her mind. Mrs. Latter, a woman full of intelligence and energy, had perished. So had Cynadrowski, a brave, generous young man. And poor Cecylia, the personification of love and goodness, had renounced the world to hide behind the grating of the convent.

If such people were defeated in their struggles with life, what might she meet—she, a weak, silly, faulty girl? Indeed, she had learned her own value, or rather lack of value! And she was certainly approaching, step by step, a situation from which there would be no way out.

Once it had seemed that she had powerful friends: the Solskis. For a time their home had seemed an impenetrable shield and their favor a bedrock on which

she could securely base her modest existence. Today, because of her, poisoned barbs of gossip were aimed at that house, and that favor—but what sort of favor could the Solskis, magnates, feel for a lowly being like herself? Probably pity, which they had shown her for half a year, and contempt, which Ada in spite of herself had allowed her to see.

Dejection and sadness did not keep Magda from fulfilling her obligations. Every evening she made corrections in her pupils' copybooks; every day she did her classwork at school. But her dealings with people, rather than palliating her inner turmoil, aggravated it.

When the pupils in her class behaved well, when the headmistress greeted her warmly, when one of the professors paid her a compliment, she thought:

“The rumors that I am engaged to Solski must be circulating again.”

But when a student laughed out loud, or a professor spoke jocularly to her, or eternally busy Miss Malinowska hurried past her with no more than a nod instead of pressing her hand, Magda felt that everyone knew of her burdensome situation in the Solskis' house. At such times she remembered Ada's haughty look and cold tone:

“You? And what concern is Kazimierz of yours?”

“Certainly he concerns me,” Magda answered inwardly, “because, like me, he is slighted by you.”

She was in such a humor, or rather so out of humor, that her peace was undermined not only by contact with people but even by the philosophical disquisitions of Dembicki, the only person whom she trusted and whose lofty views she found enlightening.

Chapter VIII. A Summer Evening

Early in June Ada invited Dembicki for an evening's conversation about the spirit world. Stefan came as well, in a calmer mood than he had exhibited for some time, and the three sat together on a balcony. Magda, who was attending a meeting of the women's alliance, was expected later.

While Ada was pouring tea from a silver samovar, her brother asked:

"What, now, you are still not tired of the meetings about spiritualism?"

Ada nearly spilled hot water on her hand.

"How can you suppose such a thing?" she demanded. "At any rate, I am not surprised that you would joke about it. But I am sure that if you knew as much about spiritualism as I do, you would find yourself at the beginning of a new epoch in life—you and the professor and all the world."

"Be careful, professor," Solski put in. "A pupil of Haeckel speaks. Ah, women!"

Dembicki rubbed his neck and looked out at the garden.

Ada flushed. She handed each man a cup of tea, poured one for herself, and said, striving for philosophical serenity:

"Gentlemen, are you not aware of the discord that has existed for at least a hundred years between religion and science?"

"We are," said her brother.

"It proceeds from this," Ada continued, "that science cannot answer questions that touch on the soul, and religious tradition does not agree with scientific discoveries. At the same time, spiritualism, through the communication it fosters, abolishes the grounds of the misunderstanding. On the one hand, it provides factual proof that the soul exists after being disconnected from the body, and on the other—also thanks to communication with supernatural beings—it offers a corrective for a multitude of erroneous or poorly understood religious traditions."

"Oho!" Solski erupted.

"Yes, indeed, my dear," Ada went on, warming to her subject. "Read, for example, Allan Kardec's book on Genesis, miracles and prophecy. That is not the Bible! It is a lecture on astronomy, geology, biology and psychology. How shrewdly he explains the miracles of the New Testament—and with what respectful tolerance he treats the legend of the Old Testament, which brings a smile of condescending pity from our contemporaries."

She turned indignantly toward Dembicki, who had made a motion with his hand as if to stifle a yawn.

"You do not agree, professor? I will give you the book."

"I beg your pardon, madam," Dembicki replied. "All Kardec's writings sit in our library, from which, I add parenthetically, they are very rarely removed by its owners. I know the book you mentioned. The author is clever and well read. In the chapters devoted to the question of the spirit, there is a medley of metempsychosis, Christian doctrine, and a smattering of views that it is possible to derive from the exact sciences. The entire section dealing with Genesis is a popularized exposition of current astronomy and geology. His critique of the doctrine of a six-day creation is—why, fair to middling. Kardec purports to show the compatibility between the biblical legend and modern research, but he fails to note the important points in the legend, which as a matter of fact his predecessors hit upon."

"Important absurdities, no doubt!" Ada exclaimed.

"Women are always extreme!" Solski remarked.

Dembicki made a wry face, rubbed his neck again and asked: "What do you call absurdities in Genesis?"

"As a matter of fact, this, that a firmament in the heavens was created on the second day. Do you hear, Stefan? A kind of ceiling! And this, that the sun and moon only came into being on the fourth day, while we already had light on the first," Ada said, speaking more heatedly as she went. "Finally, that is not only my opinion, but the opinion of all learned people."

Dembicki nodded in his chair and looked at the black trees in the garden, which the light of a lamp was painting here and there with green splotches. After a moment he said:

"It is singular that what the learned people in your camp, Miss Ada, take for absurdity in Genesis is what I find most amazing."

"For its absurdity?"

"No, ma'am. For its interesting and, above all, unexpected commentary on Laplace's theory about the creation of our planet."

"Well, professor? No doubt this will amaze me as well," Solski remarked.

"According to Laplace," Dembicki said, "the entire planetary system at some time formed a gigantic nebula, a kind of finely spun cloud in the shape of a round bread roll more than one billion two hundred million miles in diameter. This nebula revolved around its center every two hundred years, more or less. But from time to time lesser clouds tore themselves from the nebula, and out of their condensation planets formed: Neptune, Uranus, Saturn and so on.

"According to Laplace's theory, the earth, when it first came into being, was also such a cloud, more or less in the form of a ball with a diameter of more than a hundred thousand miles. What does the Bible say about this, however? That the earth was without form and void, and darkness moved upon the abyss. Nothing more.

“Imagine, Stefan, that you were standing on the surface of that ball of gases and looking toward its center, about fifty thousand miles from you. It seems that you would see a terrible chasm under your feet.”

“I expect so!” Solski muttered.

“At that point, then, there is no absurdity, and now the interesting part begins,” Dembicki continued. “The Bible describes the earth in its beginnings as ‘dark,’ from which one may infer that our planet was not so hot as to shine, as Laplace and the geologists believed. According to them, there was a time when the earth’s temperature was two thousand degrees or more, while according to the Bible the temperature was lower than five hundred degrees. It is possible to dispute this, but proof is needed that it was not as the Bible said. On this point one might say that Genesis lays out a field for examination by geologists.

“The Bible says, moreover, that for the earth, days and nights were already beginning at that time—or, as Laplace would have it, a terrestrial nebula began to rotate on its axis...”

“And light?” Ada inquired.

“...and it is interesting that according to the Bible, the solar nebula began to shine. What we now call the sun, that ball burning at white heat, did not yet exist. There was only a faintly glowing nebula shaped like a flat bread roll, twenty million miles or more in width. From the earth, it must have looked like a gigantic spindle filling half the sky. When the right end of the spindle reached the meridian, the left was just rising; when the right end began to sink in the west, the left was just approaching the meridian. So there was a pale light in interplanetary space, but it was not the sun’s.”

“And the firmament, the ancient ceiling, which is nothing more than evidence of the limitations of our sight?” Ada insisted.

“There would be a ceiling. According to Laplace, planets and satellites, when they tore themselves away from the central nebula, in the beginning took the form of rings. A ring of that kind encircles Saturn to this day, and our moon, when it tore itself away from the earth, had the form of a ring of cloud. Do you think that if that configuration of things had sustained itself until our times, we would not have been justified (if we lived, for example, near the equator) in speaking of a firmament suspended over our heads? And did the firmament in those times not stretch from the equator toward both poles?”

“Well, the professor speaks like an advocate for the theologians!” Solski said.

“Not at all. I only juxtapose, without prejudice, Laplace’s theory with the Bible, in which there are two more interesting propositions.

“The Bible asserts that the sun—in the contemporary sense, that is, a burning ball—and the moon, as a glowing body, came into being during the same period, and that during that period the sun was larger than the moon. Today the apparent diameters of both those bodies are nearly equal, but a logical

conclusion of Laplace's theory was that the diameter of the sun was at some time greater than that of the moon. What is more arresting, however, is that according to the Bible, land, seas and the world of plants came to be before the moon and sun were created!"

"A word," Ada put in. "You maintain that there is not a flagrant disparity between the Bible and science?"

"Indeed," Dembicki said with even more emphasis, "I am even of the view that the Bible poses several crucial questions that demand resolution by modern astronomy and geology. Is it true that the sun and moon, in the sense I explained earlier, came into being during the same epoch? Is it true that plants existed on earth earlier, and that the earth was never so hot as to shine?"

"Well," Solski remarked, "the conversion of gas into a solid causes a rise in temperature."

"Yes, but a high temperature may be lowered when the heat radiates," Dembicki said. "It is an interesting question; our understanding of the age of the earth depends upon it. If the earth at the moment of its creation had a temperature of two thousand degrees, as Bischoff says, then before it cooled to two hundred degrees, three hundred and fifty million years must have passed. To that one must add thirty-five million years for the planet to cool to zero; whereas if in the beginning the heat of the earth hardly exceeded five hundred degrees, it would have taken no more than a hundred million years for it to cool to its present temperature. Given that ratio, it would surely be possible to posit shorter geological epochs, in which case the estimated age of the earth and the entire planetary system is lessened by several hundred million years."

"I had not thought, professor, that you were so orthodox!" Ada said softly.

"I am only cautious," Dembicki replied. "I do not like to move from an old house to palaces that only exist in the planning stages, and with imprecise plans. The Bible is an old house in which several dozen generations of Europeans have been brought up—well, and no evil has come of it. The old building has its fissures, but it is more reliable, for example, than the Indian legend according to which a flat earth rests on an elephant, the elephant stands on a tortoise, and the tortoise swims in a milky sea. The Bible is also on a higher level than Greek mythology, which said that the giant Atlas held up the sky, and the human race was born from stones thrown at his back by Deucalion and Pyrrha.

"Today we have a new mythology: spiritualism, which draws astronomy and geology into its system, but does not advance them. Meanwhile the ancient Bible, though it does not advance science either, nevertheless raises complex scientific questions which are perfectly reasonable."

Ada's color had risen as she listened to what in her opinion were blasphemies against spiritualism and science. Suddenly she said:

"So perhaps, professor, you would be able to furnish a scientific explanation for the legend of the flood."

“How strange!” Dembicki answered, smiling. “The fathers and doctors of spiritualism elucidate all the legends of the old religions, above all the ones from the Bible; and in the meantime their youngest adherents set against those traditions new forms of unbelief. Allan Kardec believed in several floods, one of which destroyed the mammoth and the mastodon and left erratic boulders in its wake.”

“Well,” Ada remarked, waving a hand carelessly, “properly speaking, that was not a flood, but the Ice Age. The earth’s crust was formed, not by violent cataclysms, but by a gradual process that was accomplished during the course of hundreds of thousands and millions of years.”

“Then you do not believe the Bible or even Kardec?”

“I do not believe in cataclysms!” Ada answered irritably. “Science does not know anything that in one brief period can agitate the water on the earth’s entire surface so that it would reach the highest mountain peaks—”

“Science, if you will excuse me, does know causes sufficient to make water rise to such heights.”

“Think, Ada,” Solski added, “what gigantic floods there are today, or how entire territories cave in as a result of volcanic explosions.”

“Those are minor phenomena,” Dembicki said. “There are agents in nature that are capable of setting off floods more or less like the one described in the Bible.”

At that moment a rustling could be heard in the salon and Magda came out to the balcony. Her gentle face had a timid or distrustful expression that had disturbed the Solskis for several days.

“You have returned from the meeting?” Ada asked.

“Yes.”

“Are they angry with me for not coming?”

“On the contrary, they speak of you with gratitude.”

“What is this, Magda, dear? Why are you answering me that way? Why do you not sit down?” Ada exclaimed. She kissed her friend, helped her into a chair beside her brother and set about preparing tea for her.

Magda seemed uncomfortable in such close proximity to Solski. Every now and then she shielded her eyes with her long lashes as if some glare were bothering her. Solski was also in the grip of a strong feeling, and to keep from showing it he began to speak:

“Do you know how we have been entertaining ourselves, Miss Magdalena? Ada and the professor have been debating about which has more authority, the myths of the Bible or the revelations of spiritualism.”

“Oh, this spiritualism!” Magda said.

“What?” Solski exclaimed. “You do not believe in spiritualism?”

Magda raised her arms slightly.

“What is it possible to believe in these days?” she whispered. Then she was stricken with fear that Solski would take her remark as a reproach.

“Good heavens,” she thought, “how awful it is for me with them. How I wish I did not live here!”

Her sensitive ear had seized on something artificial in Solski’s tone. He was trying to be natural, but felt at a loss in Magda’s presence.

Dembicki noticed that between these three, who were at heart so kindly disposed toward one another, some tension had developed. Taking advantage of a momentary silence, he remarked:

“Miss Ada does not believe in the possibility of the biblical flood. I affirm, however, that powers capable of causing it do exist.”

Magda shivered.

“Are you cold? Perhaps we must get you a shawl or take you to your room?” Ada asked solicitously.

“No, dear. The evening is warm. It was only that death looked me in the eye.”

“Perhaps it is unsettling to you to hear of the flood?” asked Dembicki.

“No, indeed. It is an interesting subject,” Magda assured him.

“At any rate, the event of which I will speak might take place once in three hundred and thirty billion years! Our earth will certainly not exist long enough for it to occur, particularly since it happened once already, in Noah’s time. Such surprises do not repeat themselves in nature.”

“But please describe this force which raises the sea to the peaks of the mountains!” Ada exclaimed, laughing.

Dembicki raised a hand and pointed to the dark blue patch of sky that hung over the silhouetted trees. “It could come from there,” he said.

Both the women felt a chill. Solski raised his head and looked at the corona borealis, which was directly opposite the balcony. Dembicki said:

“Imagine that at some time the following item would appear in the press: ‘Astronomer So-and-So has recently spotted in the constellation Taurus, just next to the sun, a new heavenly body, which he believes to be a planet. At the moment, observations have been interrupted because it is obscured by the sun.’

“After a few weeks, when the public would have forgotten about the phenomenon, another item would report on it in more detail: ‘The new heavenly body is a comet, or rather a gigantic uranolite equal to the earth in size, or greater; it is located outside the orbit of Jupiter, but is rapidly approaching the sun in a straight trajectory. What is most interesting is that its path appears to lie on the ecliptical plane. It is possible to see the body with the naked eye for an hour before sunrise.’

“That information, while of no interest to the public at large, would occupy the attention of astronomers for a week, and for the moment would disturb others familiar with astronomy. They would say: ‘If that uranolite is moving toward the sun along the ecliptical plane, it must of necessity cross the path of the earth. When will it do so?’

“‘If the comet, or more properly the uranolite, crosses the path of the earth before December or after, we can safely view the extraordinary sight. But if the intersection occurs in December, it will be terrible. There may be a collision of two enormous masses, one flying at a speed of twenty miles per second and the other at least as fast. It is obvious that both masses will be transformed into clouds of fire.’

“There is no need to say that during the ensuing weeks, a multitude of articles and brochures would be circulated that debated the question: ‘On what day will the uranolite cross the path of the earth?’ Naturally the authors would assert that there was no question of the earth’s coming in contact with the unexpected wanderer, even though everyone knew their paths would intersect in December. Optimists would affirm that at that time the earth would be ten thousand miles from the aberrant body, while pessimists would conjecture that the distance would be one million miles.

“‘But in that event,’ the pessimists would say, ‘we will only see a star several times greater than Jupiter, and it will quickly move across the heavens from west to east!’

“‘That will not be the end of us,’ the public would say to itself, turning its attention back to its everyday troubles.

“The most acute, however, would be struck by the fact that, while astronomers made no pronouncement on the question, strange things were occurring in observatories.

“The mathematicians continually erred in their calculations, and so uncertainty prevailed as to the speed of the heavenly body. In the end, unknown to the public, one astronomer hanged himself, a second took poison, and a third blew his brains out. When their calculations were examined, it appeared that each of them had concluded that if the uranolite moved at a speed of thirty kilometers and two hundred and fifty meters per second, it must inevitably collide with the earth.

“In the end, the governments of civilized nations forbade anyone to write about the impending phenomenon because many people were going mad from fear. Nothing was reported except a notation by several observers that one night in mid-December a heavenly body similar to a full moon would appear, increase in size during the course of several hours, but disappear before sunrise.

“That was true. However, the astronomers who wrote that notation, not knowing the precise velocity of the uranolite, were not prepared to calculate the dimensions that transient moon would attain or how close it would come to the earth.

“From June until September the new star approached the constellation Gemini. It rose after midnight and was as big as Mars. In October it looked like Saturn, and in November it was still less brilliant than Jupiter. It rose longer and longer before midnight, grew in magnitude slowly but steadily, and drew near the constellation Cancer.

“At that period the newcomer in the heavens was already beginning to make its influence felt on the earth: not actually on her water or atmosphere, but on her most elevated points—that is to say, on civilization at the highest levels.

“European peasants, laborers, and the petty bourgeoisie heard something of the new phenomenon but had no time to pay attention to it, for they were absorbed by their concerns about food, clothing and heat, which they never had enough of. American Indians, dwellers in India and China, and people of the darker races did not even pay particular attention to the small luminary, thinking it was one of the planets that shine for a while, then disappear, to appear again in other constellations.

“But it was otherwise with the civilized classes of Europe, whose nerves were on edge. They had the wit to understand the impending danger, but they were incapable of mastering their fear, for they lacked faith. Everyone jeered, so to speak, at the idea that the end of the world was coming, seized on the caricatures to which it gave rise, and rushed to farces and operettas composed around that theme; but they thought and they spoke only of the comet, and every day their despair grew. In the glimmer of the ominous star they saw the blankness of life and the nullity of their beliefs.

“Brilliant industrialists, who had joined oceans and dug through mountains, lost heart; all their knowledge, all their machinery could neither speed up the movement of the earth nor slow the comet flying toward it from the side. The financial powers trembled when it was explained to them that in the face of the potential disaster, billions were no better insurance than a pauper’s rags. Despair overwhelmed philosophers who had taught that the human race is the only god, for they saw with their own eyes how easily humanity could lose its head, and how casually any tiny particle of infinity could crush it.

“The wise went mad; fools were stupefied with fear. Alcohol, morphine and chloral were ingested in unbelievable quantities.

“It was the natural reaction of people who a year earlier had loudly extolled the power of science, that today they repudiated it with contempt, cursing education and envying simple people. In an extremely popular brochure one lunatic made the case that astronomy was a fraud, and heavenly bodies only sparks that could not damage the earth even if all of them were to fall on it.

“Legends of the end of the world began to be unearthed, and very learned men presented their evidence that nothing in the current year threatened us because, according to the Talmud, six thousand years had not passed since the creation. A singular form of madness arose: a mania for travel. Millions of wealthy people rushed about in no particular direction, without destinations, searching

for a safe place. But wherever they stopped, by the sea or in the mountains, the terrible star shone on them, now brighter than Jupiter.

“In the beginning of December the alarm that prevailed among the enlightened classes communicated itself to the common folk. But the peasant, whether he was afraid or not, had to thresh the grain, split the wood, cook the food, feed the livestock. In whatever spare time he had, he went with a group to the church or the roadside shrine to the Holy Mother and prayed. From childhood he had known and believed that some day the end of the world must come; so when the termination of all things drew near, the simple folk feared, not annihilation, but judgment. Among them sorrow reigned, piety grew, and crime almost disappeared. A man concerned with the salvation of his soul did not drink, did not brawl. He had no need to steal because his wealthy neighbors gave him their surplus.

“Amid the general hysteria, only two kinds of people retained their self-possession: soldiers in arms and sisters of charity. The soldier knew that any sort of death should be met courageously. The sister, commending her spirit to God, had no time to think of herself, for she was too busy lightening the suffering of others, whose numbers were increasing daily.”

Dembicki rested, drank some of the tea Ada handed him, and continued:

“Imagine a mountainous country in the northern hemisphere, a kilometer above the level land and several hundred miles from the ocean. Let us suppose that in this fortunate place, the moment when the heavenly body or comet intersected with the earth’s path occurred at night. Think: what would the inhabitants have seen?

“At around eight one evening in the middle of December, something would appear in the east together with the constellation Cancer: a bright round object like a full moon, only larger. This extraordinary moon would have strange properties.

“Above all, it would give the impression that it was not moving together with other bodies in the heavenly vault, but standing still not very far above the eastern horizon while the constellations were moving through the sky behind it: Cancer, then Leo, finally Virgo. But this stationary ball would grow very rapidly. At nine o’clock its diameter would be twice as great, at ten four times, and at midnight eight times as great as the diameter of the full moon. At that last hour it would be so enormous that it would be equal to fifty or sixty full moons if at the same time it were not undergoing rapid changes of lunar phase. This upstart moon, which had been full at eight, at nine would begin to wane, and at twelve would be in its last quarter. In that form, half of it would be equal to twenty or thirty moons. Then, however, the quarter moon would begin to diminish so quickly that while at one o’clock a gigantic sickle would be seen in the sky, about fifteen minutes later it would be invisible.

“These phenomena would have signified that the unknown body had crossed the earth’s orbit at midnight and flown on toward the sun.

“If there had been an astronomer among the inhabitants of this favored country, he could have made calculations on the strength of the observations described above. And he would have concluded that this body, as large and as heavy as the earth, traveled by the earth at a distance two times less than the distance between the earth and the moon.

“The residents of this happy land, and the astronomer’s neighbors, seeing that the celestial anomaly had disappeared without doing them harm, would surely have been carried away with joy. But the astronomer himself would not have rejoiced, for he would have read with apprehension messages arriving every few minutes from other observatories nearer the sea. His calculations would have told him that this was not the end of these phenomena, but only the beginning, and that the comet, whose disappearance had so cheered his fellow citizens, in traveling by the earth had exerted over the earth’s surface an influence seven hundred times greater than that of the moon. The moon, as is well known, drives the oceans’ tides.

“The majority of the communications from points on the seacoast attested that from six in the evening a sudden, strong outgoing tide had been observed. The astronomer would have known what that meant: that on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans two mountains of water had begun to form, and by midnight they would have risen to three hundred and fifty meters in height, with bases of more than ten thousand square miles of ocean surface.

“Within a few hours after midnight, messages announcing an equally rapid and unusual incoming tide would have begun arriving, while in the morning—no messages would arrive at all!

“You will understand the cause of this,” Dembicki said, addressing Ada, “if I add by way of explanation that in some European ports the usual incoming tide reaches ten meters in height. And because the pull of the alien body on the sea would be seven hundred times greater than that of the moon, it would be possible that the water in those ports would be strong enough to create a wall more or less equal to Mont Blanc!

“Think, madam, of the height of the seacoast: a few hundred meters at most. Add to that that this unprecedented agitation of the water would persist, not for several hours, but for several weeks, and that it would be accompanied by a vaporizing of the water that is beyond our power to conceive of. Say, madam, whether these immeasurable rains and deluges would not constitute a flood like the one of which the Bible speaks.

“At such a time, what would become of Central America, of Africa from Upper to Lower Guinea, of northern Australia and the islands in the Indian Ocean? Finally, why look so far afield? Do you think, madam, that the rest of the mountain of water that would arise in the Atlantic Ocean would not inundate Spain, France, Belgium together with Holland, and above all Great Britain?

“If someone were to visit western Europe a year after the frenzied elements had quieted down again, he would be stunned to find only the wreckage of those

lands which been so full of life. There would be neither cities nor roads, fields nor forests nor people.

“And after this no doubt fantastic narrative, would you care to assert that there is no force in nature which could create a universal flood and propel water to the peaks of the mountains?”

“A ripping yarn!” muttered Solski, recalling Kotowski’s interjection.

“I see from this that you are a spiritualist already, professor, or will become one,” remarked Ada. “For spiritualism does just this: rather than negating ancient traditions, it explains them with the aid of scientific fact.”

Dembicki only rubbed his ear, while Solski asked Magda:

“Perhaps you are also a spiritualist?”

“I do not know what I am!” she replied.

Her mind was in tumult. She could not imagine what purpose Dembicki had had in his lecture on the possibility of the flood. She failed to notice that, in the view of the philosophical professor, faith made people more resistant in the face of danger. It was the other side of his narrative that struck her: the uncertainty of life and the fragility of the world.

When she had said goodnight to the others and gone to her bedroom, she felt as if the floor were unsteady under her feet. The glare of the street light through her window frightened her. It seemed to her that she was seeing that baleful astronomical apparition that was going to rip the ocean from its old bed and flood the earth.

“What good is it,” she thought, “that the world and everything in it were brought into being from nothingness?”

Chapter IX. Why Should Friends Part?

Every year a young tree puts forth a branch that in time puts forth more branches; so from a young soul new strength bursts forth from time to time and becomes the source of a multitude of feelings, capabilities and actions. But as on a broken branch the leaves and flowers dry up, in a sick soul feelings become embittered, energies weaken and thought unfolds chaotically.

Magda remembered her spiritual awakening perfectly. A mundane circumstance had brought it about: Mrs. Latter's financial troubles.

Until that time the world had presented itself to her in a very simple way. Heaven, like the background of Raphael's Madonna, was woven of the wings and heads of angels; on earth, people, as at the festival of a patron saint, formed one mass absorbed in work and prayer. That in that picture someone was dressed better or less well, that someone involuntarily jostled another, that someone else wept—those were trifles. According to Magda's convictions in that earlier period of her life, they were only accidents and appearances. In reality, prayer and goodness filled the hearts of people, and the entire throng was bathed in a divine radiance that transfigured all those bowed heads and brooding faces.

Amid this uniform brightness the person of Mrs. Latter became, as it were, a new fire from which two previously unknown beams, purple and black, fell onto Magda's spiritual horizon. From that time people began to distinguish themselves from each other in her eyes. Mrs. Latter in despair; Dembicki driven out of her school by the pupils; the carpenter; the impoverished teacher and his mother; Cynadrowski, who had killed himself; and all the suffering, careworn, abandoned people she knew, appeared as if dressed in purple, while a shadow more or less black fell on Joanna and Miss Howard, who had caused trouble for Mrs. Latter; on Eufemia, who had made Cynadrowski so unhappy; on the apothecary and the notary, who had spoken maliciously about Stella.

Raphael's heaven, however, full of heads and angels' wings, and the crowd on earth praying for salvation, remained in their places. Against the background of golden light that flooded the earth, she could only see here and there a red stain of suffering or a black stain of wrongdoing.

At that period Magda's wisdom and her aspiration could be summed up in these words: help the needy and comfort the afflicted. Those catchwords, once sown in her heart, had gradually grown to encompass all humanity and the whole world, living and dead.

Her relationship with the Solskis, especially in the beginning, had reinforced her image of a world illuminated by the heavenly effulgence. To her, Ada had been a yearning angel, and Stefan a benevolent genius who had not yet endowed all the suffering with happiness, or married all the women who loved him, only because the sugar factory was not completed. But from the moment the first loaf of sugar was poured off in the factory, the last tear on earth would be dried.

In the course of time Magda's faith in the power of the Solskis and their devotion to humanity began to weaken. But her picture of the world remained the same in its general outline: the choir of angels above, the prayerful mass of people below; here and there a suffering or less righteous person introduced into the scheme to give the others someone to comfort or pardon.

The development of this soul filled with mercy and dreams was interrupted in a manner so brutal that it was like a kind of murder. It was as if a traveler lost in thought had suddenly felt a blow from an ax, and then another. And while he was staggering, stained with blood, more blows had fallen on his unfortunate head.

One evening at a gathering at the Arnolds', Kazimierz on a whim had lectured Magda on his own system of philosophy, which was neither his own nor a system. But his lecture was so succinct and clear, and Magda's faith in his genius so great, that under the force of it her idealized image of the world fractured like ice when the river thaws. And before she had time to recover herself, another blow fell: Mrs. Arnold's mystifying feat with the drawing purportedly executed by the spirits.

And so in one hour, in the same drawing room, two precisely contrary developments occurred. Ada Solska, a skeptic and student of Haeckel, believed in the spirits who drew the picture, while Magda, until then full of simple faith, ceased even to believe in her own soul.

Her heaven filled with the heads and wings of angels vanished in an instant like a theater set, exposing a wilderness more appalling than the grave itself. The radiance that had fallen on the earth from above was extinguished and the world was swathed in black crepe. Against that backdrop the fire of human suffering cast a lurid glare.

From that moment Magda's soul was like a shattered mirror. Everything was reflected in distorted form, expanding and taking on strength with each new shock. Ada was no longer a sad angel but a jaded wealthy woman who amused herself today with the spirits, yesterday with the women's alliance, and before that with her, Magda. Stefan was no longer a benevolent genius but a capricious magnate who not only had no intention of filling his factory with the disabled, but even of tolerating views incompatible with his frame of mind at a given moment.

The world of the spirit had been extinguished for Magda, and, worse still, had dissolved into nothingness. A world covered with funereal black was left, and on it a mass of human beings suffering for no reason that anyone knew.

And because a human being must have a purpose, must fix her attention on something, Magda, with the energy of despair, began to reflect on a fashionable slogan: work for future generations.

"It is not well with us, so let it at least be well with them," she thought. "We either do not have the means to live satisfying lives, or we let the hobgoblins of

prejudice spoil our existence. May those who come after us find the means that are lacking to us, and not encounter prejudice.”

But due to an odd coincidence, before that idea could ripen in her mind, Dembicki, without in the least intending to, had frightened her with his imaginary narrative about the flood. Again she was confronted with a question: what was the value of humanity and the friable crust on which it lived? Was it more than an anthill in the forest that a passing animal or a rotten branch could smash?

At that moment Magda had none of her old ideals. She believed neither in the other world nor in this one, nor in heroes, nor in prayer. Her soul was crushed, torn apart, and much time was needed for new tissue to form. In the meantime her nature was infected with a growing irritability and with the self-centeredness of those in pain, who have no concern to spare for anything except their own suffering.

Seeing her in this state, Ada was certain that she was in love with Stefan, and was seized with anger at her brother. But Helena Norska attributed Magda's mood to love for Kazimierz, and thought to herself, smiling:

“What a stupid creature!”

It did not occur to either of these ladies that unhappy love holds no exclusive rights to the rending of the human heart, and that a deadly storm may erupt in a person for reasons that are not erotic but metaphysical.

Magda needed rest—rest at any cost, rest in some corner apart from people, where she would not see Miss Malinowska or the professors at the school. Rest in such a solitary place that she would not meet Mania Lewinska, who had fallen at her feet in gratitude because her fiance would become the factory doctor; where she would not have to see, several times a day, stiff, cold Madam Gabriela, or Ada's worried looks, or, above all, Stefan. Magda felt that the man was on edge, but that in her presence he made an effort to master himself, and she guessed, not without the greatest alarm, that she was the cause of his state of mind. She—but why? So the rumors had reached the Solski palace!

“Oh, if only the vacation would come!” she said to herself.

The sight of Solski was becoming unbearable to her. She began to fear him as a sick man fears death. At times it seemed to her that if she were left alone in a room with him, she would jump out a window.

A few weeks of silence and solitude would restore her equilibrium. But there was no silence, and there could be none. For no one guessed Magda's real frame of mind; she had not confided in anyone, and the wave of life rolled along with all its petty, unpredictable events and embroilments. A sound, happy person pays no heed to this everyday welter, while those whose nerves are in an unhealthy state lose their heads about it, and the truly unhappy drown in it.

One Sunday in the middle of June Ada came to Magda's room, with Stefan not far behind her. As she greeted him, Magda lowered her eyes and turned pale. Stefan looked at her attentively and said with much feeling:

“You do not look well, Miss Magdalena.”

“I am a little tired.”

“Then give up working at the school!” he burst out. But he got the better of himself and added:

“When all is said and done, it may be that you are fatigued, but sometimes it seems to me that I notice something else about you. I am afraid to think that you are unhappy with us.”

There was such regret in his voice that Magda’s heart fluttered.

“How could there be a better place for me?” she said softly, blushing.

“You feel unwell, then?” he persisted. “You must hide nothing from us, Miss Magdalena. What would your parents say if they found out that we had not known how to take proper care of you? Finally, what would I be worth”—he said vehemently—“if in our house such a very dear guest... were suffering without help! If you will allow her, Ada will call for Dr. Chalubinski this very day.”

Magda raised astonished eyes to his. His brusque but impassioned tone had made an impression on her. She felt her distrustfulness began to vanish.

Suddenly the bell rang in the entrance hall. Solski let go of Magda’s hand. After a moment a footman came in and handed Magda a note, saying:

“The gentleman asks... if you could see him...”

Glancing at the note, Magda was so taken aback that both the Solskis were amazed. Then she gave Ada the paper, on which “Mientlewicz” was written in enormous letters.

“Who is that?” Ada asked.

“My—it is a friend of my parents from Iksinow.”

“The proper thing is to receive him,” Ada said.

“If we would be in the way—” Solski put in, preparing to make his exit but looking curiously and uneasily at Magda. A suspicion had awakened in his embittered heart.

“How could you be in the way?” Magda replied. “But I apologize at the outset in case my acquaintance does not make a favorable impression. He is a good man, only—a little provincial...”

At a sign from Ada the footman went out, and after a minute Mientlewicz appeared. He was the same as ever, with close-cropped hair, a bristling mustache, a fine suit and brisk movements.

“My warmest greetings, honored madam!” he exclaimed from the threshold. “Your parents send their love, and all Iksinow sends regards. Your esteemed mother intended to send a peck of asparagus—”

“Mr. Mientlewicz,” Magda said by way of introduction.

“Solski,” said Stefan, and offered him his hand.

He understood the cause of Magda's discomfort then, and understood it still better when Mientlewicz, hearing the name of his host, stiffened and seemed to lose his powers of speech.

"How are you?" Magda asked, pressing her guest's hand. "What news is there from Iksinow?"

Mientlewicz threw himself onto the chair that was shown him and sighed deeply several times. Then he began to speak with heightened energy, hardly stopping for breath:

"Ah, what news? The good doctor and his wife are both well, the vicar and the major also. Zdzislaw has sent your parents two thousand rubles—"

"Really?" Magda asked joyfully.

"Upon my word! Zdzislaw has an excellent position near Moscow; ten thousand rubles a year. He was a little unwell, but it has passed."

"I know; he wrote me. And how is it with your businesses?"

"Well enough on the whole. I am engaged to Miss Eufemia—"

"Eufemia?" Magda repeated.

"Yes. The three of us have arrived together, in fact: her mother, herself and I."

"Is that so?"

"We are making an expedition to the city. My ladies intended to pay a call on you today, madam, but we must all be at the Korkowicz's for dinner."

"The Korkowicz's?"

"Yes," Mientlewicz went on, "for I have arranged for Mr. Korkowicz's beer to be sold on every branch of our railroad, and then—"

"Ah, yes. And what more of Iksinow?"

"Everything is as you remember it, madam. Miss Cecylia is leaving for Jazlowiec in July..."

"Please be so good as to remind her that she promised to stay for a while with us," Ada interposed.

"With great pleasure," Mientlewicz responded, bowing. "What more is there to tell? Aha! Old Cynadrowski died."

"Died?" Magda repeated in such an odd tone that Solski's attention was fixed on her again.

"That actor, Sataniello, reportedly died as well," Mientlewicz continued, "while Mr. Krukowski"—here he smiled playfully at Magda—"is living in Vienna with his sister, and it is said that he writes pieces for newspapers here from time to time to keep up his spirits."

Solski spoke up suddenly:

“Are you speaking of Mr. Ludwik Krukowski?”

“Yes,” Mientlewicz answered, rising quickly from his chair. “I had the honor to be a friend of that highly respected gentleman, and I flatter myself—”

“And do my parents expect me for the summer holidays?” asked Magda, feeling more and more troubled.

“Not at all!” Mientlewicz answered with a yet kinder smile and an air that simply terrified Magda, still more because Solski’s unwavering gaze was leveled at her.

Though Magda had asked him nothing about it, Mientlewicz was emboldened by the Solskis’ hospitality and began to speak of his personal happiness. Over the course of the last few months he had fallen desperately in love with Eufemia, and become convinced that she had loved him for a long time. Eventually he let drop that his dealings with Korkowicz would bring him several hundred rubles a year, and that Mrs. Korkowicz was a lady almost as distinguished as his future mother-in-law, the magistrate’s wife. At last he said goodbye, first to Solski, then to Magda, then to Ada, promising that his fiancée and her mother would not fail to pay their respects the next day.

When the visitor had gone out, bowing vigorously and deeply, Solski suddenly asked Magda:

“Do you know Ludwik Krukowski? He is our distant cousin. I have not seen him for several years, but I heard that he was involved in a tragic love affair in some provincial place. Perhaps in Iksinow?”

Magda looked at him as if she were in a trance. In her mind memories of Eufemia, of Cynadrowski’s death, of Ludwik’s proposal and Mientlewicz’s visit today mingled, distorted by her nervous tension.

“Did you know Krukowski?” Solski repeated.

“I knew him very briefly.”

“What dramatic occurrence took place in his life—in Iksinow, surely?” he asked, never taking his eyes off Magda.

“Some—misunderstanding,” she answered quietly, feeling embarrassed for Eufemia.

“What sort of impression did he make on you?”

“He seemed a good man... a man of fine character. You know, Ada, dear,” she said to her friend, “it was from Ludwik’s sister that I received that bracelet with the sapphire. She gave it to me the day I left home, but where am I going to wear it?”

Solski’s tension was dispelled. If his cousin had been involved in a disastrous romance in Iksinow, it could not have been with Magda, or his sister (who was known to be a person of a stern cast of mind) would not have presented Magda with a gift.

He recovered his good humor and began to joke that Magda was condemned to spend the whole summer with them because her parents had refused to allow her to go home for the vacation. Taking his leave of the ladies, he added (in spite of a baleful look from Ada) that he would go to Iksinow and foment such intrigue that her parents would renounce her forever.

“Oh, you will not succeed,” retorted Magda, feeling a little more cheerful herself.

“We will see!” he said, kissing her hand.

“Stefan, dear,” Ada interrupted briskly, “go and—think how best to accomplish the business at hand,” she added, with a note of urgency in her tone.

When Solski was by himself again, he clutched his hair with both hands.

“I am going mad!” he thought. “If there is anyone I ought to be suspicious of, she is surely not the one. No, this must be concluded! Our family will have me with her or it will not have me at all.”

Similar thoughts were suggesting themselves to Ada, for after her brother went out, she said:

“Either my head is in a muddle, or everyone in our house has a bee in the bonnet.”

Then she began to hug Magda and kiss her. She whispered more affectionately than usual:

“Magda, dearest, I see that something is troubling you. I have had more experience than you, and I tell you, one never has to give way to despondency. Often a person thinks she is in a situation with no way out, and sometimes after a few days the matter is cleared up and takes the most favorable turn.”

Magda looked at her in bewilderment. But instead of explaining these cryptic remarks, Ada hurried out, avoiding Magda’s glance.

“What do they want? What are they playing at with me?” Magda thought. Again she was filled with misgiving and with a compelling desire to leave the Solskis’ house.

Neither Stefan nor Aunt Gabriela were at dinner, only Ada and Magda. They conversed in monosyllables, and the servants carried dishes into the kitchen untouched.

After coffee Ada embraced Magda again with a feverish tenderness and went upstairs to Aunt Gabriela. She spent an hour alone with her, during which the raised voice of first one lady and then the other reached the ears of the ever-alert Edyta. Then both the aunt and the niece wept. Then Madam Gabriela, ordering the shutters to be closed, lay down on her chaise longue and told Edyta in a peevish tone that she wanted to be alone, while Ada, red-eyed but smiling, went out in her carriage to town.

An atmosphere like that of Judgment Day pervaded the palace. The servants hid in corners and whispered. To calm her overwrought nerves, Magda

began to review her pupils' old copy books and correct exercises that had already been corrected.

At around seven o'clock the impatient electric bell sounded in the entryway. Then there was a rustling and an exchange of words, and Eufemia hurried in in a silk gown with a long train. A great heap of bracelets and chains dangled from various parts of her person; at least half of them looked as if they were made of the new gold and brass alloy.

It seemed to Magda that Eufemia had become even more beautiful—that her figure was in its full womanly bloom. Wrinkles showed at the corners of her eyes, but they were very delicate.

“How are you, dearest Magda?” she exclaimed in a tone rather like her mother's.

She kissed Magda very affectionately several times, then dropped onto a couch and began to speak:

“What is this (at this point she looked around the room and darted a glance at the neighboring doors)—Mr. Solski is not here? It is said that he is most frightfully ugly, but there is no harm in that. Imagine, I have left mama with Mrs. Korkowicz (those ladies love each other dearly), and I myself have come flying to you on wings of impatience. You know, I am going to marry Mientlewicz. It is not a distinguished match, but he is a good man and loves me so that he cannot live without me. Ah! These men! They simply lose their heads about us. Only think: at the Korkowicz's we came across an epidemic of enamored hearts. The young Korkowicz, what do you call him—”

“Bronislaw.”

“Yes, Bronislaw said that he would blow his brains out if his father did not ask on his behalf for some young lady's hand—”

“For Helena's?”

“Yes, that is just the name. Mrs. Korkowicz is in despair, and because of that even has a quarrel with you.”

“About what?”

“How do I know?” Eufemia rejoined. “She explained it to mama in great detail, but Mientlewicz keeps me so besieged with his attentions that I cannot take part in conversation. But—but, my Magda, I have a favor to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“My darling, perhaps you could secure a good position for Mientlewicz in the sugar factory. For indeed, he has an income, but it is not very large or very secure. And above all, we would have to live so far from Warsaw and—from you.”

“How can I get a position for Mr. Mientlewicz?” Magda asked a little impatiently.

Eufemia looked at her indignantly.

“After all, you asked for positions for Fajkowski, Cecylia, and someone else, and they were given them.”

“By chance.”

“Ah... you know,” Eufemia replied with injured dignity, “I never expected that you would refuse me this trifle. We would have been together. Well, but it is plain to see that you do not wish to maintain your old friendship with us. People’s fortunes change... Let us say no more about it. I have my pride as well, and I would rather die than importune.”

Magda bit her lip. Eufemia’s speech had almost caused her physical pain. Eufemia was aware that her presence was unpleasant to her friend, so after a few minutes she told Magda goodbye with barely concealed resentment.

“God, snatch me away from here,” Magda whispered after Eufemia’s departure. She felt as if she had fallen from a chaos of immense doubt into a muddy whirlpool of intrigue and antagonism.

“Already the rumors that I am engaged to Solski have reached Iksinow,” she thought despairingly. “I must escape from here as soon as possible.”

But when she remembered that she must talk with Ada about her decision and explain her reasons for leaving the Solskis’ house, her courage failed her again. Her strength was exhausted; she was like a leaf on water that floats where the waves carry it.

Magda did not see Ada the next morning. When she returned from the school around one o’clock, however, a maid brought her a note from Aunt Gabriela requesting a moment’s conversation.

Magda felt hot, then cold. She was certain that such a conversation would touch on the rumors that were circulating about her and Stefan, and that today everything would be over for her in this house. She went upstairs with a pressure at her heart, but full of resolve.

She found Aunt Gabriela in the company of the aged lady who during the Easter holidays had directed bittersweet reproaches at her because Ada had not wanted to help with the collections for charity. The elderly woman, who was wearing a black wool gown, greeted Magda with great gravity. Aunt Gabriela, for some reason unknown to Magda, kissed her on the forehead with lips cold as marble.

When Magda was seated opposite both ladies like an accused man before his judges, Aunt Gabriela began:

“We wanted—”

“That is, I asked,” the older lady interrupted.

“Yes,” Gabriela corrected herself, “the countess wanted to speak to you concerning a very delicate matter...”

Everything went black before Magda's eyes, but then she recovered her presence of mind. The old lady fixed her with round eyes and said slowly, plucking at her black dress:

"You know Miss Helena... Helena..."

"Norska," Aunt Gabriela prompted.

"Yes, Norska. Do you know of her relationship with our Stefan?"

"Yes," Magda whispered.

"And certainly you have heard that Stefan's family—properly speaking, I—that we do not wish for him to marry Miss Norska."

Magda said nothing.

"You see, my dear," said the elderly lady in a somewhat gentler tone, "I feel it necessary to account to you for my opposition to Stefan's bringing Miss Norska into our family."

"Do you wish me to inform Miss Norska of your reasons?" Magda asked, feeling uncomfortable because she did not understand why she was the recipient of these highly unusual confidences.

"That does not concern me at all. I know the young lady only from photographs and—by reputation," the dowager answered. "I only wanted to explain my position to you—"

"So that you, dear child, will not be under a misapprehension about our family relations," Aunt Gabriela interposed.

The thought flashed through Magda's mind that these women's intentions with regard to her were not hostile. That moment of insight passed quickly, however, and she was plunged into deeper darkness than before. She understood nothing—nothing—about what the two ladies wanted from her. Indeed, she was beginning to be afraid that they had been spurred on by the rumors to inflict some insult on her.

"Please permit me," said the older woman, her bluish lips trembling now and then and her fingers tugging more and more frequently at her woolen gown, "permit me to speak quite candidly... candor, in my opinion, should form the basis of human relations..."

"Please, your grace," Magda replied, looking boldly into the round eyes that froze her heart.

"Stefan," the lady continued, "is a very good match. Even if it were not for his name and fortune, he would still be welcomed in our circles and able to find a wife there. For we also appreciate the merits of intellect and heart, which, unhappily, are too rare.

"You see, Miss Magdalena, if Stefan would be worthy of our respect even if he were poor and unknown—if even then he would have the right to find a wife in the appropriate sphere—you will surely not think it strange, Miss Magdalena,

if for such a man as he is today, we would like to find a wife who is... not an ordinary person—”

“Fortune has nothing to do with it,” Aunt Gabriela put in.

“Do not say so, Gabriela, for no one must be led into error, even out of courtesy,” the elderly woman rejoined. “Fortune, name and connections mean a great deal. Therefore, if the woman Solski chooses possesses none of those assets, she must compensate for them with personal merits: a fine mind, a good heart, and, above all, love and devotion.”

“Consequently, someone who possesses them—” Aunt Gabriela began.

“But Miss Norska does not possess them. From all I hear, she is an egotist who wishes to advance herself with the aid of her beauty and talent for coquetry. Indeed, you yourself told me that even when she was engaged to Stefan she was receptive to the attentions of other men, which is improper in general, and, in this case, wicked.”

“Oh!” sighed Aunt Gabriela.

“Here is the summation of what I wished to tell you,” the countess continued, her round eyes gazing at Magda, her blue lips trembling more and more. “I was against this—Miss Helena, not only because she had no fortune and no name, but because she did not love Stefan, but herself. The wife that Stefan would take under such conditions would be indebted to him for everything, and should be completely devoted to him. She should be willing to sacrifice everything, not excepting her own family. That is the only sort of woman we could accept.”

“Well, but that would be too severe a demand,” Aunt Gabriela protested. “Stefan would not set such a condition—”

“But we can,” the older woman replied vehemently. “We would have the right to accept Madam Helena Solska and not to accept her brother, her stepfather or her mother, if she were living.”

Magda was not able to assess the intentions that had led the women to speak to her in this way. She felt, or suspected, that she was the object of a personal affront, and anger seethed in her tender heart.

“Then, miss, do you acknowledge that I have my reasons for —” asked the aged lady.

“I do, madam!” Magda interrupted. “There was a time when I advised Helena to marry Mr. Solski. It seemed to me that they would have found happiness together. But if I were asked for my opinion on the matter today, I would say: ‘Hear me, Helena: for a girl without a fortune, death is better than a brilliant match. For the worst of people, when they lie in their coffins, receive their due measure of respect, but here people are treated only with contempt.’”

She rose from her chair and bowed to both ladies. The older of them looked at her, visibly upset, and Aunt Gabriela said quickly:

“You did not understand what we meant, Miss Magdalena! The countess did not—”

“Indeed!” Magda replied, and walked out of the room.

When she was alone in her study, still in a ferment, Ada hurried in and said, smiling:

“What is this? Have you met our great aunt at close range? What a relic, is she not? But what has happened to you, Magda, dear?”

Magda gripped Ada’s hand and said, squeezing it convulsively:

“Give me your word that you will not be angry. Give me your word, for there is something I must ask of you.”

“Of course I give you my word that I will do anything you wish,” Ada replied, astonished.

“Ada, dear... I am leaving here,” Magda whispered.

At first Ada did not grasp the meaning of the words. She shrugged her shoulders slightly and drew Magda to the sofa. When they were sitting down, she inquired calmly:

“What does this mean? I had no idea that anyone in our house had offended you.”

“No one has offended me,” Magda said feverishly, “but I must—I must go away. I have wanted to tell you for a long time, but I did not have the courage. Today, however, I feel that to stay longer—”

“But what is the matter? I do not understand you, and—I almost do not know you,” Ada answered, looking at Magda in distress.

“Do you think I know myself? Something has happened to me. Everything in my soul is broken, disrupted, destroyed. Honestly, quite often I wake in the night and ask if I really exist.”

“Then you are overwrought or ill. But what have we done to bring this about?”

“You—nothing. You have been better to me than anyone on earth,” said Magda, kneeling and leaning against Ada’s knees. “But you do not know what I have been through here, and how many terrible memories persist. When I am out in the city, I am calm; when I return here, it seems to me that in every room, in every corner I see my thoughts, and they wound me like daggers. So let me go away, dear Ada,” she whispered tearfully. “Think as if a person stretched out on a bed of fire were begging you.”

Ada was shaken.

“At least allow me to take you to your parents,” she said.

“What for? I have work here that I cannot abandon. Anyway, was it from my parents’ home that you took me? I came to you from the city and I will return to the city.”

Ada brooded.

“I do not understand. I do not understand anything!” she said. “Give me one good reason why you must run away.”

“I do not know. Ask a wild animal why it runs away from the park, or a pine why it withers in the orangery. I am not in my proper environment, so every trifle pains me... every bit of gossip...”

“Ah, gossip!” Ada interrupted. “My dear, we do not have the right to hold you prisoner, but you must talk this over with Stefan.”

Magda covered her face with her hands.

“You have no idea how I would wish to avoid that conversation. But I know that it must take place.”

Ada looked at Magda and nodded.

“I will send him to you right away,” she said, and left the room. She was calmer, however, than she had been a minute earlier.

Very soon Stefan appeared. He sat down by Magda, who was weeping, and asked gently:

“Where do you intend to live?”

“With Miss Malinowska or with one of the ladies in the women’s alliance,” she answered, rubbing her eyes.

“This week,” Solski said in a low voice, “I will go to your parents to ask for your hand.”

Magda’s tears stopped. She huddled against the sofa and cried, trembling:

“Oh, do not do that, for the love of God!”

He stared at her and repeated:

“I want to ask for your hand.”

“It cannot be!” she answered, frightened.

“You do not want to be my wife? I know that I am ugly to look at. I have many flaws...”

“You are the noblest man I know,” she broke in. “You have done me so many kindnesses. I owe you so much.”

“But—my wife—”

“Never!” Magda exclaimed fervently, even desperately.

“You love someone else, then?” he asked, not raising his voice for a second.

Magda breathed quickly, tugged at her handkerchief, threw it on the sofa and answered:

“Yes.”

Solski rose.

“In that case,” he said, still in the same even tone, “I beg your pardon. I would not have presumed to encroach upon the rights of another.”

He bowed and went out calmly with a measured step, but his eyes were darkening and his lips were white.

When he was standing in his study, Cezar ran up to him, jumped up and rested his powerful paws on his master’s chest. Solski stepped back and kicked the dog.

“Get away!”

Cezar’s eyes flashed, his teeth showed and he snarled threateningly. Solski lost control of himself. He seized a steel yardstick from his desk and struck the dog on the head with all his strength.

Cezar fell onto the carpet. His great body shuddered and a little blood flowed from one nostril. His paws twitched; his body went rigid. He was dead.

Solski rang and the footman on duty appeared in the doorway. He looked aghast at the dog lying on the floor.

“What happened, sir?” he faltered.

“Take him away!”

The body was still warm. Pale with fright, the servant took it by the forelegs and dragged it to the stairs, then down.

A few minutes later Ada came in.

“I understand everything!” she said irritably. “I have just come from Aunt Gabriela, where I learned that the countess read Magda a treatise on the obligations of the young woman who marries Solski. Aunt says that it was unsparing. What, then? Have you seen Magda?”

Solski looked out the window with his hands in his pockets. After a moment he answered:

“I have seen her, and... I was refused.”

“You?”

“I. By Miss Brzeska,” he added quietly.

“There is some misunderstanding...”

“Everything is clear. She loves someone else.”

“Whom?”

“Do not think very hard; it will come to you.”

Ada sighed and looked down. She saw blood on the carpet.

“What is that?” she asked in an altered voice.

“I killed Cezar.”

“You killed him?” she shrieked.

“He barked at me.”

“You killed him—because he barked?” she repeated, moving slowly toward her brother.

Their eyes met for an instant. Fury, still unassuaged, smoldered in his; in Ada’s something like rebellion flared.

He turned his head and looked out the window again.

“I am going to the country today,” he said. “Perhaps you would care to come?”

“No,” she answered curtly and went out of the study.

When Ada returned to Magda, she found her curled up on the couch in the very place Stefan had left her. She was quite pale, and her eyes were full of regret and alarm.

“You will let me go, Ada?” Magda whispered, looking pleadingly at her friend.

“I have no right to object. But at least remain with us until you find lodgings.”

“I will find them today. It is just three o’clock.”

“Do as you like,” said Ada, not raising her eyes.

Magda fell on her knees in front of Ada, kissed her hands and whispered:

“Are you angry? Do you despise me? Oh, if you knew how unhappy I am!”

Ada kissed her forehead and raised her to her feet.

“I am so distraught,” she said, “that I cannot collect my thoughts. I would not dare propose anything to you at this moment. But if there is ever anything I can do for you... remember...”

They both wept. Then Magda washed her eyes and dressed to go into the city.

As she stood in the doorway after saying goodbye to Ada one more time, Ada asked as if she had just been seized by a new idea:

“Tell me: things were very bad for you at the Korkowicz’s, but you regretted leaving them—”

“Yes.... things were bad for me there, but I could bear that. With you it has been better for me than at home, but—I do not have the strength.”

They said a few parting words and Magda vanished into the entryway.

At around six in the evening, when the Solskis’ chaise had left the palace, Magda returned to her apartment. There she packed her things and left the palace with the old valise she had brought from Iksinow.

No one said goodbye to her; the servants were nowhere to be seen except for the watchman, who hailed a cab for her, and the doorman, who carried her valise looking as if he had never seen her before.

At eight that evening Aunt Gabriela and the old countess came to Ada's study.

"So, then," said the elderly woman, seating herself in a chair, "I hear that you have a quarrel with me concerning Miss Brzeska."

"Quarrel? No. But something that might have happened for the best did not happen," Ada replied.

"Ada, my dear," her great aunt said, looking tranquil, even satisfied, "you are an emancipated woman, Stefan is a poet, and Gabriela loves you both to distraction. So the three of you formed a plan that might have been very pretty for the theater but was impractical in life. Think: would such a marriage make sense? Solski and a governess? On the honeymoon it would be perfect for them. Then he would be bored with her, she would be unhappy, and a new family about whom you know nothing would descend upon your house—"

"They are, as far as I know, very decent people," Ada interposed.

"Oh, what sort of answer is that?" said the old lady. "Decent people are one thing, but our social sphere is another, and it would never accept them. What has happened is for the best, and I congratulate myself for being candid and that young lady for showing such proper pride. If, of course, apart from all this, something else is not concealed..."

"You wrong an innocent girl with those suspicions."

"Not at all, my child. But I am so old that I do not trust people I have not known from childhood. In future you will know that it is not fitting to seek even acquaintances except in the proper sphere."

And so the old lady continued her preachments, but Ada was not listening. She thought with bitterness of how her brother had killed Cezar, and then of the man for love of whom Magda had renounced marriage to Stefan.

"How she must love him," she thought. "How she must love him!"

Chapter X. What Does a Wise Man Do—Or a Gossip?

Within a week Solski returned from the country. The servants gathered in the entrance hall to welcome him; his valet accompanied him to his room.

As he changed his clothes, Solski asked:

“Is Miss Ada at home?”

“Yes, your grace, in the laboratory.”

“And my aunt?”

“The countess has a headache.”

“A migraine?”

“Yes, your grace.”

Solski thought his aunt must regret the loss of the miraculous healer who with a touch of her hands had dispelled the migraines.

He dressed and remained in his study for a quarter of an hour, waiting for Ada. But when she did not appear, he went to find her. She was bent over a microscope, making a drawing of a lichen. She rose to greet her brother, but without her usual enthusiasm.

“How are you?” she asked, noticing that he had been in the sun and that his complexion was the better for it.

“Extremely well,” he answered. “I slept ten hours a day, and for the other fourteen I was never off my horse. It was very good for me.”

“Thank God.”

“But you look unwell. You have returned, I see, to your old occupation. It seems to me, however, that your laboratory is—one might say—bare. Aha! The flowers are gone. And where are the canaries?” he added with a smile.

His sister looked sternly at him and returned to her microscope.

“Listen, Ada,” he said, “do not look at me that way! I know what this is about: Cezar. It was a miserable thing I did—a kind of madness—and I would give anything to bring back that princely dog, but... it is too late.”

Ada’s expression softened.

“You see,” she said, “the evil of letting passion carry you away! You could kill a man in anger.”

“Oh—well! It actually seemed to me for a while that I had lost my mind! But I have to take my luck as it comes... To be turned down—turned down by such a dove as Miss Magdalena... and for whom? For a rogue like Kazimierz. Women have abnormal brains, there is no getting around it.”

Ada’s pencil fell to the floor. She picked it up and said:

“Have you heard the news? Helena Norska is going to marry the young Korkowicz.”

“She cannot marry the old one, after all, for he has a wife,” Solski answered blithely. “Young Korkowicz? On the whole, a felicitous choice. A blond, beefy chap with a silly face; he ought to be a good husband.”

“I am glad that you are not upset.”

“Not a whit. I tell you, a horse and fresh air are wonderfully efficacious. When I left, I was edgy as an hysterical woman, and today I am so calm that everything amuses me. I would laugh at the top of my lungs if I heard, for example, that Miss Magdalena were marrying Norski, who after holy confession had reformed and promised not to gamble...”

Ada was drawing so diligently that she did not answer her brother. He walked around her table, looked her in the eye, and made his way somberly out of the laboratory.

He walked around Ada’s apartment as if he were looking for something. For a moment he stood still in front of the door beyond which Magda had been living a week ago. He even touched its handle, but then withdrew and hurried downstairs to the library. He found Dembicki sitting beside a window, studying some notes.

“Good day, professor! What news?”

The mathematician raised his blue eyes, rubbed his forehead and after a moment’s thought replied:

“We have a new shipment of books—”

“Ah!” Solski waved a hand impatiently. “If you never have any more news than that, it will not be long before this chair is covered with lichens like the ones my sister is nursing!”

“What a peculiar prison this house of ours is!” he said, strolling around the room. “One person is moaning with migraine, another is brooding over a new consignment of books, and the third—the best, for she is a twenty-year-old girl—is developing a squint from peering into a microscope in the orangery, which at the moment is like a heated oven. Ah, these women, these women! Did such an epidemic as this emancipation run rampant among them in your day?”

“I do not recall,” Dembicki answered. “In my time there were more husbands and money to go around. There was no need for women to hunt for work outside the home. Fewer of them led abnormal lives, so eccentricity was rarer among them.”

“Were they always silly and bad?” Solski growled.

“They could be, they could!” Dembicki affirmed.

“They not only could be, they were always and all silly and bad!” Solski exploded.

“What a vile role they play in the world!” he added with rising bitterness. “The huckster grabs you by your buttonhole and promises mountains of gold if you go to his stall. When you agree to go in—incredible!—it all becomes more expensive! He looks at you as if he has done you a favor. He orders you to beg him on your knees for his wares. He charges exorbitant prices. And no sooner does he have you where he wants you than he begins to look for another customer. That is woman! She is the Danaidean cask that is never filled, but in it noble feelings are dissolved, and great intelligence, and great fortunes.”

Dembicki waved a hand.

“You men are just as bad!” he said. “One day you are overflowing with happiness when a woman lets you kiss her feet, and the next day you complain that because of her you are losing your mind and your money. You run after her like dogs after meat. Each of you wants to possess her, and when at last she capitulates to one of you, you all snarl at her.”

“My dear professor,” Solski broke in, “you know formulas like no one else, but please concede that I know women better than you. I have seen proud ones who snubbed princes and sold themselves to brewers. I have seen good ones and wealthy ones who, instead of devoting their hearts and fortunes to the suffering humankind they themselves weep over, waste money on scientific experiments a real scholar would find less useful than mending a doormat. I have known angels of innocence and paragons of good sense who, instead of giving their hands to worthy men, prefer to marry fools who do not have even the nerve to be criminals.

“Nature lays many a trap for a man, and one of them is a woman. In the moment when you think you have found the better half of your own soul, the veil falls away and you see—what? A mannequin with sparkling eyes and moist, smiling lips. These are not your formulas, professor, which one can trust like the word of God. These are perpetual illusions, living, swathed in dazzling light and crowned with soap bubbles. Instead of falling to your knees before this miraculous apparition, spit, and you will see what reality emerges from it.”

“You would not be flying into such a fit if you would rely on universal truths instead of unfortunate experience,” Dembicki countered. “Lunatics of both sexes, coquettes and Don Juans, peddlers of feminine graces and peddlers of masculine honor—all these are occasional aberrations, not the law of things.”

“Very interesting!”

“A woman,” said Dembicki, “above all is, and must be, a mother. If she wants to be anything else—a philosopher trailing a rustling silk train, a reformer with bare arms, an angel who brings happiness to all humanity, a jewel demanding a gold setting—then she steps out of her role and becomes in the end either atrocious or ridiculous. Only when she appears in her role as a mother, and even when she aspires to that goal, does a woman become a force equal to us or greater.

“If civilization is an edifice worthy of admiration, woman is the mortar that braces its single bricks and makes a unified mass of them. If humanity is a net that fishes out the spirit from nature, women are the knots in that net. If life is a miracle, woman is the altar on which the miracle comes to fruition.”

“With our help.”

“There is nothing to praise in that! Say what you will, in that business men are arrogant accessories who do not even understand their role. When it is necessary to tunnel a thousand meters under the ground; to sail thousands of miles from land; to forge iron bars; to wrest victory from the enemy under a hail of bullets; to roam like a vulture over dizzy abysses in nature and in the soul, man is in his element. But when it comes to bearing, nourishing and bringing up miners, mariners, soldiers and thinkers, one frail woman cannot be replaced by a legion of laborers, heroes and sages. Her motherhood is wiser than all of you.

“It is here that a misunderstanding begins that would be comic if many injuries did not result from it. For hundreds of years there has not been a schoolboy who believed that the earth is the center of creation; but today highly educated men still imagine that their various appetites are the fulcrum of society.

“Man,” Dembicki intoned didactically, “who harnessed fire to power his transport, put a yoke on the ox and bred the domestic swine from the wild boar, moving forward under the impetus of his triumphs, believes that woman, as well, ought to be his property. That her mind is not someone else’s mind, but his mind; that a woman’s heart is not someone else’s heart, but his heart, which he is free to wound and tread on because he has another in reserve—his own.

“A childish illusion! Woman never belonged, never belongs and never will belong to man. She will never be entirely given over to him, as we require of her. She will never be his property. Man and woman are two worlds, like Mars and Venus. They see each other, they gravitate toward each other, but they never intermingle. Venus does not abandon her orbit for Mars, and woman does not renounce her destiny for man. And if women are someone’s property, they are at any rate not ours. They belong to their real or potential offspring.

“If the masculine world understood that woman is not the complement of man but a distinct, independent force that often associates itself with him to fulfill the destiny that links it to future ages, we would not hear these outbursts of masculine petulance. Woman, you said, is the huckster who drags you by your buttonhole to her stall and then orders you to pay more dearly. You err. Woman is the force that employs you for higher purposes. Well, and she has the right to demand that, in that partnership, you bear your share of the costs.”

Dembicki reflected for a moment, then continued:

“Your error is so farreaching that you not only take woman for a type of domestic animal foreordained to be your special object of pleasure; that is only the beginning. There is in women a force that deprives you of reason, will and personal dignity. That force is the grace that emanates from feminine nature like a flower from a tree or a glow from a fire. Feminine grace is one of the most

complicated of natural phenomena, and, besides a myriad of external conditions, requires above all the unencumbered development of feminine nature.

“You find this miracle attractive. So in spite of the fact that none of you has the skill to create a rainbow or a flower, you have the effrontery to demand that a woman be, for your sake, full of grace every minute. If she is so poor that she is cold and hungry or so sad that she is in tears—if she is sick, afraid, or hampered by her circumstances—that is of no concern to you, because she is always supposed to be full of grace for your sake!

“And because it is easier to impose on masculine stupidity than to change the workings of nature, you created whole categories, whole domains of artificial graces and mystifications. When, however, through a moment’s awkwardness on the parts of women you recover your own judgment, you begin roaring to high heaven: ‘Mannequin! Soap bubble! Spit on it!’

“And I advise you, Stefan,” he concluded, shaking a warning finger, “do not spit! For you see, between the soap bubbles the beam of a rainbow really may come into view, and spittle will not reach it.”

Solski walked feverishly around the library. Suddenly he stopped in front of Dembicki and asked:

“Have you seen Miss Brzeska?”

“I have.”

“What, then?”

“Nothing. She lives just now on a fourth floor that I could hardly reach, and my heart nearly gave out on me. But she seemed more herself than when she lived here on the second—”

“Why did she move away from us?”

“My dear Stefan, I marvel that she remained here so long. After all, the woman left her parents so as not to live and eat at their expense. Why would she accept those benefits from you? For the rest, I do not know the reason; I can only guess. I might be wrong.”

“Do you suppose,” Stefan said in a tone of rising excitement, “that that is why she seemed on edge in her last days with us?”

“I do not know about that, but it is likely. It seems, as well, that her disposition was affected by the influence of that—that Norski and his talk of atheism.”

“That cur!”

“There is nothing to be angry at in that. Such proselytizers are sometimes useful as emetics.”

Solski turned around, snapped his fingers and whistled. Then he stood in front of Dembicki again and said:

“And do you know that I asked Miss Brzeska to marry me?”

"I heard something of that from your sister."

"She refused me. Did you know that?"

"In such cases a young lady has the right either to accept the proposal, to delay her answer, or to refuse. I do not see a fourth strategy."

"Indeed there is a fourth!" Solski stormed. "She could order my footman to throw me out the door!"

"That would be a form of refusal."

"You are comical with these categories! I say that I have been spurned for a swindler and a buffoon, and he has calculated that that would happen!"

"What buffoon?"

"Norski, of course! The woman loves him to distraction."

Dembicki shrugged.

"You doubt it, professor?"

"It is not that I doubt it; it is none of my business. Only—I have known Miss Brzeska for two years, and until now I have not observed in her certain prerequisites for being in love. I suppose that others have been in love with her. But she—!"

Solski rubbed his forehead musingly.

"She is not in love with anyone? That would indeed be interesting! On what do you base this supposition?"

"On simple facts. As a student—a model pupil, let it be noted—Miss Brzeska had to work eight to ten hours a day. Hardly had she finished school when she became a classroom teacher, which involves ten hours' academic work per day, not counting other duties as scheduled. In the present period, while she was living in your house, she worked at the school, or for the school, again some ten hours daily; apart from that she maintained a strong interest in the affairs of the women's alliance as well in as a host of matters concerning other people, and, finally, in the question of the immortality of the soul.

"A young woman who works so much cannot develop the erotic side of her life. And she must be still more withdrawn in that respect if she occupies herself with, and even worries about, religious and philosophical questions."

"Why would that hinder her?"

"It would be a great hindrance. Human strength, physical and spiritual, is like capital, which can be continually expended to meet various needs. If someone has thirty rubles a month and spends that much on food, lodging, clothing, books and the support of others, then there is nothing for music and the theater. So if a young woman uses her entire fund of disposable energy on exhausting mental work, on caring for her loved ones and even on philosophical systems, where can she find the strength to love someone to distraction, even if it were not Norski but an angel?"

“I did not think of it that way!” Solski said as if to himself, in a tone full of regret.

“I must add,” Dembicki remarked, “that my judgment corresponds with some facts about Miss Brzeska’s life that I know. Someone else, knowing her less well or better than I do, might form a different opinion. In very complex phenomena such as biological, psychic and social developments, ten points, or facts, demarcate a completely different type of curve than five facts. For that reason it is necessary, when speaking of matters relating to the aforementioned sciences, to refer constantly to observation, since pure deduction leads to false conclusions.”

“Oh, what pedantry!” Solski interrupted indignantly. “While my heart fails me for fear I have impugned an innocent girl, you lecture me on logic! Be well, professor. Your wisdom is like a saw that cuts a living man in two.”

He pressed both Dembicki’s hands and left him, still extremely irritable. The professor adjusted his position in his armchair and once more began to review his notes.

From that time on, Solski paid no attention to the sugar factory. He stopped calling meetings. He neither took nor sent letters or dispatches. He held no conversations with his engineers. The footmen dozed in his anteroom, vainly awaiting directives. Meanwhile their master walked back and forth through every room in the house—and longed.

In days now gone, there had been several times when he had seen Magda returning from the school. So now, between one and three in the afternoon, he could not get the better of a raging desire to look through the window at the courtyard. Every day at that time a restlessness seized him, and he thought that he would see Magda at any minute—that even by mistake she might come rushing into her old apartment.

Now and then he stole to her rooms, sat in the chair behind her desk, looked back at the door and listened: would the bell not ring? But the bell was silent and Magda did not appear in the palace yard.

“Why has she not come to us?” he thought, and immediately answered his own question. She had not come because she had been subjected to an indignity in the house. His kinswoman, the most important person in his family, instead of taking Magda to her heart as he had asked her to, had announced to her that if she wished to marry Solski, she must renounce her own family!

And had he himself managed the thing any better? A Jew and a peasant haggle over a horse for an hour, and in the meantime he had wanted to conclude a bargain for a wife—a human soul—in a few minutes. For his conversation with Magda had lasted no longer than that; and in what sort of tone had he made his argument?

“What have I done? What have I done?” he repeated, holding his head in both hands.

One time he tore himself away from the house at two in the afternoon and hurried in the direction of Miss Malinowska's school. He walked along the street for a quarter of an hour; he passed a group of students returning from their classes. But he did not see Magda.

"Have I gone mad?" he wondered. "No page ever hovered so timidly around a daughter of royalty as I around this governess!"

He felt a resurgence of his pride, and for one day he occupied himself with the sugar factory again. He convened a meeting, he sent out several letters; but in the evening he slipped out to the house where Magda was living.

Her room on the fourth floor was lit and the window was opened. At the moment Solski looked at it from the other side of the street, a muslin curtain billowed like a sail filled with wind.

"Someone came to see her," he told himself. "But who?"

Jealousy tore at his heart.

All the next morning he brooded. Why had Ada not been to visit Magda? Had they quarreled? Surely not. What, then? They were certainly the warmest of friends.

Suddenly he stood still in the middle of the room and clenched his fists.

Could Ada really be in love with Norski? They both had stayed in Zürich for some months. Norski had visited her almost every day. They had gone on excursions together. Then something happened between them... "Ah!" he moaned.

At the thought that his sister was in love with Norski and might feel a rivalry between herself and Magda, Solski wanted to beat his head against the wall, to run out into the street, to scream. Rage struck him like a blow to the brain.

That Norski, that hypocrite and gambler, had taken Magda and his sister from him!

After that violent spasm of feeling, however, he was suddenly calm again.

"I think I will shoot that roué in the head some day," he said to himself.

Toward evening he met with his mechanics and agents, only to confirm that the building of the sugar factory was going well. The walls were ready for the roof to go up any day; the cauldrons and machinery were on their way from Gdansk to Warsaw; the waterwheels were ready, and there had been no unforeseen expenses.

Solski listened but remained preoccupied, and when the participants began to disperse, signaled Zgierski to stay. The plump little man smiled, sensing that an intimate conversation was about to take place. Being of a diplomatic turn, he began to make an inventory of the subjects about which he might be questioned. Helena Norska? Magda? A possible sale of the sugar factory? What they were saying about Solski in the city? What they were saying about why Magda had

moved out of the Solskis' house? Perhaps also what people thought of Miss Ada Solska, who not long ago had been an emancipationist, and then had become a spiritualist, and now was a misanthrope who did not show herself to anyone?

Solski sat in his armchair and held out a box of cigars to his guest. Zgierski took one, kneaded it between his fingers and pared off one end, all the while looking at the door. He trembled inwardly at the thought that they might have some of the Solskis' superb wine brought in, for he was extremely fond of it, and—he was afraid. He liked it because it was good, and he was afraid of it because it loosened his tongue, sometimes too much.

As he vacillated between hope and fear, Solski asked:

“Is there news?”

Zgierski's black eyes grew smaller, became no more than sparks. With a honeyed smile he inclined his head profoundly and said:

“Miss Norska is going to marry Bronislaw Korkowicz. The wedding will take place in Czestochowa within a few weeks. Because of that, Kazimierz has broken off relations with his sister.”

“I wonder if Miss Helena will invite me to the wedding. That is the only development that would give me a reason to spend a few hours amusing myself in the Korkowicz's drawing rooms.”

“May I tell her so?” Zgierski asked with a face full of delight. “But no!” he added. “It would grieve her excessively to hear that her vengeful stroke had so little effect.”

“What did she wish to avenge?” Solski said, yawning.

“An unfortunate mistake!” Zgierski sighed. “It is said, and Miss Helena believed until the moment Miss Brzeska moved away from this house, that—”

“That what?”

“That you had transferred your regard from her—that is, from Miss Helena—and honored Miss Magdalena...”

“Ah!” Solski muttered, looking indifferently into Zgierski's glittering eyes. After a moment he added:

“A proud little thing, Miss Brzeska. She could not sleep at night and she lost weight, imagining that my sister was making her an object of charity.”

He was silent, then spoke again:

“Proud, but a good child. She brought cheer to our house, which, I might say, can be dull. She cured my aunt's migraine. A sweet girl. I would be sincerely gratified if my sister could find some acceptable way to secure her future. For what sort of fate awaits poor teachers?”

Zgierski was a little disconcerted.

“Miss Magdalena,” he said hastily, “need not fear for her future. Her brother is the director of several large dye works near Moscow. He has a sizable

income and is making a fortune. She herself is the designated recipient of a bequest that will amount to several thousand rubles in Iksinow."

"From whom?"

"From some major."

"From some major?" Solski repeated. "Why?"

Zgierski raised his eyebrows, lowered his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. Solski felt as if someone had turned his head and shown him a new horizon. He almost felt a pain in his neck.

"How do you know this?" he demanded.

"A magistrate's wife from Iksinow was staying here with her daughter and future son-in-law."

"Ah!" Solski whispered.

"I met the ladies at the Korkowicz house and learned a few details."

"Interesting!" Solski said. "What could they have to reproach her with?"

"It is all childishness! Both ladies, well, and Mrs. Korkowicz, cannot pardon Miss Brzeska some innocent flirtatiousness—"

"Flirtatiousness?"

"Oh, what woman does not have it in her repertoire?" Zgierski smiled. "In any case, that is why Miss Brzeska had to leave the Korkowicz house—"

"We took her from there by force," Solski interjected.

"Yes... yes... but for some such reason Miss Brzeska also left Iksinow."

"She has spread such devastation!" Solski laughed.

"Childish behavior... provincialism," Zgierski said. "Be that as it may, it happened that some postal official in Iksinow shot himself... He had an odd name: Cynadrowski."

"Cynadrowski? Cynadrowski?" Solski repeated, not concealing his dismay. He propped his elbows on the arms of his chair, covered his eyes with his hands and whispered:

"Cynadrowski? Aha! Aha!"

He remembered Magda's confusion during Mientlewicz's sudden visit. He recalled the conversation during which the guest from Iksinow had alluded to the major and to the death of one Cynadrowski, and how Magda had been taken aback when he did so.

"Aha! Aha!" he repeated, exhuming his memories of Mientlewicz's visit and feeling his suspicions aroused.

Zgierski perceived that his information was acting on Solski, perhaps too strongly, in fact. He bowed low and his round body on its short legs moved toward the door.

“So Miss Magdalena has a past?” Solski thought. “Bah! And even a dramatic one. So someone shot himself in the head? So this is how the innocent maiden looks in reality—the girl Dembicki said had no time to think of erotic matters! So much for what the dear professor knows about women... although... Why did he conclude his tiresome lecture with that remark that someone who knew Miss Brzeska very well might form a different opinion? Aha! Shrewd old codger!”

He rose from his chair and began to pace around his study, having almost recovered his cheerfulness. Now and then the thought flashed through his mind that what Zgierski had said about Magda seemed vague and might be mere gossip. There was even a brief moment when he intended to investigate it. But then the wish was drowned out by a flood of feelings and rationalizations.

Above all, how could he investigate, and why should he? Perhaps he ought to invite Fajkowski, the dealer in medicines from Iksinow, for a chat, clap him on the shoulder in a friendly way, and ask cautiously over a glass of wine: what was this about a bequest from the major to Miss Brzeska?

No, Stefan Solski would not do that. He had neither the knack for it nor the desire to widen the circle of his acquaintance with those beneath his station; the number of such people with whom he had to deal was already an annoyance to him.

Today everything was clear. The charming Magda, like all women, deceived the male sex, either for gain or for no reason at all. That was why she had caused trouble for the brewer Korkowicz, driven someone in Iksinow to suicide (no doubt unintentionally), and acquired several thousand rubles, perhaps intentionally!

While she was living with the Solskis, she had secured a post in the sugar factory for Fajkowski, who could have compromised her by recounting events in Iksinow. And when she saw that her charitable action had made a favorable impression, she began to lure him, Solski, with compassion and sympathy. Her work at the school, her attachment to Ada, the healing of his aunt’s migraine, her care for the servants in the palace—all had been gambits to attract him!

Suddenly a man named Mientlewicz had arrived in Warsaw with his fiancée and her mother, and Miss Brzeska, aware that she might be exposed, had taken herself from the palace in a most theatrical manner! A prudent move, since within the week she might have been asked to leave.

Solski, still pacing, bit his lips and smiled. His new theory about Magda’s character was deficient in certain respects, but it had the virtue of clarity, and it agreed with his view that women were miserable creatures.

So he believed his theory. He closed his eyes to doubt-provoking details and believed it. For the loss of his ideal love, for his wounded pride, for all the follies he had allowed himself on her account, for the longing that was eating away his heart, he surely had to have satisfaction. So he believed that Magda was a perverse woman.

The next day he went to his sister's apartment, haggard but resolute.

"Ada," he said, "will you come abroad with me?"

"What for?"

"For diversion... to breathe fresh air. The heat in Warsaw is wearing on my nerves—well, and so are the people."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I will go for some weeks to Winternitz, then to the mountains... then to the sea... Come with me, Ada. The hydropathy will do you good."

"I am going to the country," his sister answered coolly.

A few days later, two weeks after Magda's departure, the Solski palace was empty. Ada had gone to the country with Aunt Gabriela and her collection of mosses and lichens, and Stefan had gone abroad.

The servants breathed more freely. Life in the palace had been unbearable lately. The master and mistress had hardly seen anything of each other, and the master had been so irritable that even the old valet trembled at the sight of him.

Chapter XI. In a New Nest

In a certain house on a street that was not a main thoroughfare but was nevertheless quite busy, a childless widow, Mrs. Burakowska, kept lodgings for women. Her establishment occupied half the fourth floor and consisted of one large flat comprising several rooms and a kitchen, together with several smaller rooms with separate entrances.

Mrs. Burakowska rented those smaller rooms, with housekeeping services, to tenants who took their board with her. And because she was skilled in household matters and had a large kitchen, several other people from the city came to her for dinner. The tenants, and the men and women who came for the meal, together numbered about twenty persons.

Mrs. Burakowska had a great deal of work to do, but she would have had a good living from it if it had not been for one trifling circumstance: Providence had blessed her with a brother a year older than herself, and a sister a dozen years or so younger.

The sister, Miss Klotylda Pasternakiewicz, was mistress of a hundred and one trades. She was skilled at shoemaking, bookbinding and embroidery. She painted on porcelain, played the piano, sewed underlinen, and made beaded frames and leather wreaths. In spite of the most diligent labor, however, all these arts brought her barely ten rubles a month.

Miss Klotylda's much older brother, Waclaw, was more practical; he did nothing, but was continually seeking occupation, which forced him to spend time in pastry shops and restaurants.

Mrs. Burakowska's husband, a landowner, had died five years earlier and left an estate from which his widow received three thousand rubles in cash. If it had not been for the sister who practiced a hundred and one arts and the brother who knew only one: loafing, Mrs. Burakowska, with her boarding house, might have held on to those three thousand rubles and even added something to them.

But because of the obligations that had fallen on her, Mrs. Burakowska's fortune did not increase. Indeed, her diligently managed accounts showed that in four years of independent labor she had lost twelve hundred rubles of her capital. In another six she would lose the remaining eighteen hundred. After that—?

After that, she thought, the good God would send her death, and would Himself care for her younger sister, that most industrious possessor of a hundred and one skills, and her older brother, who was seeking occupation.

If anyone had come into that woman's room when she was doing the evening accounts; if he had peered into her brain, which was overflowing with calculations about her household economy, and her heart, which was full of alarm; he might have thought:

“Oh, how miserable is the lot of an independent woman, and in what an offhand manner the so-called weaker sex is exploited by men!”

But because no one did the accounts with Mrs. Burakowska and no one saw her fearful heart, people imagined that she was delighted with her life. She was good-humored; she devised different dishes for dinner every week; she moved briskly around the apartment, the kitchen and the rooms with separate entrances from six in the morning until midnight. What, then, could she be in need of?

A cashier in a wholesale establishment from which medicines were sold to apothecaries had been living at Mrs. Burakowska's pension for two years. She had a salary of forty rubles a month, and worked from eight in the morning until eight in the evening except for the dinner hour. After ten years, during which she had no time to think of herself, the young woman felt one day as if something was wrong with her, and then felt—nothing at all.

When she came to her senses in a room at the rear of her place of work, she saw above her a man with a gray mustache, who explained to her that she must spend a few months in the fresh air.

She was startled to find herself in that room rather than at the cash register, with the owner of the business himself pleading with her to go to the country. And because she was given a leave of absence and a promise that no one else would take her position, early in June she went out of the city to her cousin, whom she had not seen for eleven years.

There she was warmly received and told that she should not think of returning to Warsaw before the end of the year. The cashier from the pharmaceutical supply house could not get over her surprise that during the time she had been at the cash register receiving invoices and money or making change, her cousin had not only married, not only had one child who was eight years old and another who was nine, but had even, it seemed, grown older.

Such changes had never entered the mind of the cashier, who was taken up from eight in the morning until eight in the evening with receiving money and disbursing change. She could not calculate how people so swiftly grew old and children grew up, although for ten years she had been an independent woman and even a clerk in a pharmaceutical supply house!

At Mrs. Burakowska's boarding house, the result of the cashier's departure for the country was the sudden vacancy of a room with a separate entrance. And because the women who belonged to Miss Howard's alliance provided each other with mutual support like Jews, within several hours after leaving the Solskis Magda, through the intervention of Mrs. Zetnicka, had been taken under Mrs. Burakowska's wing.

With her heart pounding not from fatigue but fear, Magda climbed to the fourth floor of her new residence. The aroma of kitchen spices met her in the corridor; in the entryway she heard the rattle of a sewing machine; and in the living room that also served as dining room she saw a slender woman with chestnut hair—it was Mrs. Burakowska herself—to whom she handed a note from Mrs. Zetnicka.

“You want to live here?” asked Mrs. Burakowska, wiping her greasy hands on her thick apron.

“Yes, if you please, ma’am.”

“We have one room with a separate entrance, and with cleaning service and full board, for thirty-three rubles a month.”

“Indeed, ma’am, I will pay today.”

“Really? What a pity!” Mrs. Burakowska sighed. “For this room, with furniture, will only be free until August.”

“That is a difficulty, ma’am,” Magda said. The whirring of the sewing machine never stopped.

At that moment a handsome dark-haired man who might have been in his early forties walked into the living room that was also the dining room. He looked at Magda with the eye of a connoisseur, and said to Mrs. Burakowska in an undertone:

“My dear, do you have half a ruble in change? For I have a hundred-ruble note, and I must meet someone in the Saxon Garden.”

“My brother... Pasternakiewicz, Miss Brzeska,” his sister said by way of introduction, taking half a ruble in large coppers and small ten-kopek pieces out of an old purse.

Magda blushed; Mr. Pasternakiewicz bowed with the air of a man who was going to change a hundred-ruble note. In the next room the sewing machine whirred constantly and the smell of sauces spread through the flat.

Magda moved to the room with the separate entrance that very day, and when she opened a window that looked out on the street, she heard the muffled growl of the sewing machine in the next room.

She lay down on the undersized bed, but she could not sleep until two in the morning. At daybreak she heard Pasternakiewicz returning from the Saxon Garden, though it was not possible to tell from his footsteps whether he had changed the hundred-ruble note.

Soon after that the rattle of the sewing machine started up in the neighboring window, beside which the machine’s operator, Miss Pasternakiewicz, worked for only ten rubles a month, though her shoemaking, bookbinding and embroidery were much admired, and though she painted on porcelain, played the piano and made beaded frames and leather wreaths.

For the next few days Magda felt dazed by all this, but in a pleasant way. It seemed to her that she had returned from a journey to a faraway place, and that her stay with the Solskis had ended long—very long—ago. Her new quarters, though somewhat cramped, made her feel safe. In her room, with people moving about outside the door and the noise from the street floating in through the window, she was less afraid of the comet Dembicki had spoken of, and she had no time to think of eternal nothingness.

Her room nestled, so it seemed, near the very pulse of everyday life. Beginning early in the morning, maids or vendors with baskets of meat and vegetables moved about the corridor. There was the smell of the heated samovar; there were the sounds of coffee and tea being handed around and the wardrobe being cleaned. Mrs. Burakowska's tenants hurried to their work in the city, and the maids tidied their apartments. Then Mrs. Burakowska shouted to the cook or exchanged terse sentences with her about what there would be for dinner.

The smells of cooking would begin to drift through the corridor, and from one to three in the afternoon the men and women who dined regularly at the pension gathered, then hurried out to their work again. In the meantime, on the street four stories below the ceaseless noise of footsteps could be heard, together with the rattle of cabs, carriages and bakers', butchers' and haulers' carts. Sometimes a loud cry rang out; sometimes a funeral procession passed by, but so quickly that it seemed that the deceased was not a cold corpse—a nonentity—but a person hurrying on business to the cemetery.

What a difference between this raucous corner of the city and the Solskis' lonely salons, where silent servants appeared and disappeared like shadows—where a person lived in fear of the sound of his own footsteps and, engulfed by emptiness from every side, was oppressed by a sense of nonentity and death.

On the third day after she moved to the boarding house, Magda noticed that her pupils at the school were paying a great deal of attention to her, and that there was something extraordinary in the way the teachers and professors greeted her and talked with her. Even Miss Malinowska, during a pause in her schedule, took Magda to her room and said:

“What is this—you have moved out of the Solskis' house?”

“Yes.”

“And you refused Solski's proposal?”

Magda said nothing.

Miss Malinowska shrugged and continued:

“How do you intend to spend the vacation?”

“I will stay in Warsaw.

“Would you like some teaching assignments?”

“I would be very grateful.”

“I will give you a few of the better ones. Well, well! Not every woman would have risen to the occasion so heroically. Reject Solski! Really, it seems a dream,” Miss Malinowska said.

As Magda was leaving the school around two o'clock, Miss Zaneta intercepted her on the stairs. She looked around in every direction, then, holding tightly to the railing, whispered with a more apprehensive air than usual:

“Whatever have you done, Magda? Poor Fajkowski will certainly not get a post at the sugar factory now!”

“Why not?” Magda asked, seeing that Zaneta was close to tears. “Is your fiance going to suffer because I moved out of the Solskis’ house? Think of what you are saying. Mr. Solski is so honorable that when he gives his word, he never retracts it.”

“Do you think so?” Zaneta rejoined quietly, and a gleam of joy appeared on her anxious face. “But you have been foolish. How can one refuse to marry Solski?”

“You would not speak that way if you knew his aunt, and above all his great aunt,” Magda thought. “Oh! I would die among those women.”

On the street, however, fear overtook her. Might Solski not want to retaliate against those for whom she had obtained positions?

“He will not do that,” she told herself. And it occurred to her that Solski really was a good man.

In that case, should she have refused him, and in such a curt way?

Magda ate dinner at Mrs. Burakowska’s with the second group of diners. Several teachers were there, one lady bookkeeper, an elderly male clerk, and finally a student who had just taken an examination. All these people ate rapidly and chatted with their mouths full, for each had to hurry back to work. Only the student, who did not have the money for the full-course dinner, ate slowly, trying to make up for his small portion by eating great quantities of bread. His sunken cheeks and cavernous eyes took away Magda’s appetite. She could not fight off the thought that even that poor fellow’s lot might have been different if she had not broken off relations with the Solskis!

As Magda was drinking black coffee, she was informed that a lady was waiting in her apartment. One name leaped to her mind: Ada!

With a pounding heart she went to her room and found—Miss Howard, who at the sight of her rose from her chair and flung her arms wide open. She looked like the cross at a roadside chapel.

“Hail!” Miss Howard exclaimed. “Hail, heroine on two counts!”

Then, seizing Magda in her embrace, she said in a burst of zeal:

“You have won my admiration, Miss Magdalena. In one motion you have trodden down a magnate and—a man! Yes, if all women behaved in such a fashion, we would bring men down to their proper level. Arrogant brutes! Your magnificent action is worthy of a person of democratic convictions and an independent woman!”

Then, after quieting down, Miss Howard told Magda that after her refusal Solski had fallen into such a rage that he had killed his dog.

“Killed Cezar?” Magda repeated, turning pale. “How do you know?”

“Yesterday I saw Solski’s trustee. You know: a very pleasant middle aged-gentleman.”

“With something about his legs,” Magda put in.

“Yes,” Miss Howard went on, “he has somewhat... eccentric legs, but—a very nice gentleman. He was bringing Miss Solska’s monthly contribution to our alliance, one hundred rubles.

“I confess to you, Miss Magdalena,” she added after a moment, seeing a shadow on Magda’s face, “that Miss Solska’s contributions of a hundred rubles are mortifying to me, particularly today, after your beautiful action. And I will tell you that I never despise the very rich more than when I must accept their offerings. But what can I do? The expenses of our alliance are growing.”

She brooded with a gloomy air, but after a moment her face began to brighten and she continued with a smile:

“That trustee of Solski’s is a singular man. No one could call him handsome, but there is something in his eyes... He is a widower. When he comes to me, he sits for hours at a time. He set up the account books for me and gives constructive suggestions. I think that if it is incumbent upon us women to enter into marriage—the anathema!—we ought to marry such men.

“But those proud gentlemen, those lords of the world,” Miss Howard said, her voice rising like that of a preacher warming to his sermon, “should never know the pleasures of married life. Ah, Miss Magdalena, you have done excellently, refusing Solski; the sight of him fills me with fear and loathing. What a passionate, gloomy creature he must be! An absolute inquisitor! Ha! Ha! Ha! He wanted to eat a pretty woman like an oyster, and here—smack! he got his knuckles rapped! He thought a modest teacher would think of his wealth and forget about womanly dignity.

“Miss Magdalena,” she cried, jumping to her feet, “you behaved like Joan of Arc with this—this insatiable man who is unaccustomed to defeat. So, be well! If you need teaching assignments, let me know, and remember that you have a friend who holds you in the highest esteem. Miserable men!”

Long after Miss Howard’s departure, Magda’s mind was still in a turmoil. It seemed to her that the fervent apostle of women’s rights comprised two persons. One hated wealthy men; the other accepted what they offered. One despised men and marriage, but the other—who knew if she would not marry?

“How cruel of Solski!” Magda thought. “He killed Cezar...”

But then it occurred to her that if Solski’s bowlegged trustee wielded such a powerful influence over Miss Howard that she was ready to marry him, why did Solski not deserve a woman’s attachment?

“He never said that he loved me!” she whispered, feeling exasperated.

Then she remembered that Solski had done more than that: he had fulfilled her every wish. And how he had talked with her, looked at her, kissed her hand...

Only now, and not yet clearly, a question began to frame itself in her mind. Had she done well in refusing Solski? She stifled the doubt, displeased with herself that it had even arisen.

Steps resounded in the corridor: Mrs. Burakowska's boarding clients, the third shift of them, were returning from dinner. The sewing machine in the room beside Magda's began its whirring, the smell of hot grease grew stronger, and Magda heard Mrs. Burakowska's voice lamenting:

"Look, the cat has eaten the veal cutlet! My God! My God! Can things really have come to this? A guest broke a plate, Marianna broke the ladle, the cat ate the meat. Oh, curse the luck—oh, calamity take you!"

The thought came to Magda that in this house everything revolved around veal cutlet. The maids were hurrying to town for it. The diners were rushing to the table for it. For that cutlet Miss Pasternakiewicz's machine hummed sixteen hours a day; hungry cats hunted that cutlet; because of that cutlet Mrs. Burakowska was falling into despair. Nothing but veal cutlets! They reigned supreme here. They held sway over everyone's minds and hearts.

It had not been so in the Solskis' home, where no one at all was preoccupied with food. They were concerned about giving work to people who needed it; they talked about the spirits and about whether a factory was a living being with thoughts and feelings; they debated about the women's alliance or the possibility of a universal flood.

And a strange thing happened. The Solskis' house, from which Magda had torn herself as from a bed of torture, she began, after several days, to miss. It had been quiet there; through the windows they had gazed at the trees in the garden. And above all, apart from her work at the school, Magda had had someone to envelop in her care. Indeed, Ada, that great lady, had clung to her, had sought her company and her caresses like a child who needed to love and be loved.

"What have I done?" Magda whispered, wringing her hands.

And Solski, a brusque, strange man, but seething with immeasurable strength... a storm in human shape, which had nevertheless grown mild before her. True, he could be as frightening as a storm, when one finds oneself between its waves and the dark. But—how beautiful a day seems when it is gone for ever!

At that instant Magda saw clearly what the Solskis' house had been to her. It was a world in which material interests did not exist. There for the first time she had encountered people who were seriously occupied with social questions, with mysteries of nature and the spirit. There she had had a loving woman friend and known a man whose regard for her had no self-interest in it. There at last she had had a distinct goal for her future: to be the teacher at the factory school.

And to think that she herself had torn down such an edifice of happiness with her own hands—that she had brushed aside a chance that only comes to one person out of millions.

After this outpouring of longing for what was past, a new reflection presented itself. If Solski returned to her, would he not arouse alarm that she would not be able to master? Would he be able to appeal more successfully, more eloquently, to her feelings, and bind her to him not only with admiration and gratitude? Would Ada never sweep her with the look of an aristocratic woman,

never repeat words the very tone of which had cut Magda to the heart? And Aunt Gabriela and the elderly countess, and all the Solskis' kinfolk whom she had met at Easter—would they treat her differently than before?

No. And so she could not live in that enchanted world which, though she grieved for it now, had fed her with bitterness.

Evening fell slowly; the smells, the commotion in the hall, the noise of the street, all grew faint. Magda closed the window, lit her lamp and began writing a letter to her father. She told him about everything that had happened to her and asked his opinion and advice. When she had finished she felt relieved.

Magda's experience in the Solski house was widely talked of in Warsaw, and during the next several days she received a great many visits. Ladies of modest means from the women's alliance came to see her singly and in pairs, inquiring timidly whether she needed money or anything else, and offering their services. Women previously unknown to her, some of them quite elegant, visited her, claiming that they wished her to teach their daughters or other young female relatives. Some tactlessly steered the conversation to Magda's relationship with the Solskis, and, finding her unresponsive, departed displeased.

Dembicki came as well. He apologized for not having visited her before; he had had another heart attack and had to avoid stairs. He asked with an air of concern if Magda would not like to give his niece, Zosia, lessons during the summer vacation for an hour each day at twenty rubles a month.

Magda received the professor with joy and, for her part, asked that she be allowed to teach Zosia, but at no cost to him. After much discussion and persuasion, Dembicki agreed to Magda's plan; obviously he wanted to maintain relations with her.

But he made no mention of what was happening with Solski; he only went out repeating his promise to visit her as his strength permitted. After his departure Magda was overcome with sadness, for she understood that her friendship with the Solskis was indeed at an end.

On the day after Dembicki's visit, Zgierski made his way to Magda's room. He took a turn around it, smiled, darted glances from one side to the other, and asked, as if he were reluctant to do so, who lived near her and who had visited her. But with no word or movement did he betray that for his standing with Solski he was indebted to her.

Indeed, near the end of the visit he adopted a patronizing expression and tenderly squeezed Magda's hand, looking suggestively into her eyes and declaring his readiness to sustain her with his counsel and friendship.

"I will visit you often. I think evening is best, is it not? Sometime we can go for a walk... a ride..."

As he spoke, he made such odd maneuvers with his velvety hand and his melting glances that Magda was furious. She replied that she would not wish

him to fatigue himself on her account at any time of day and turned toward the window.

Zgierski seemed loathsome to her. She could not forgive him either for the gossip he had started up about her, or for the insinuating attentions with which he had hoped to cheer her.

Zgierski lost no time in leaving her apartment. He had such a superior mind, however, that he not only felt no anger toward her, but was able to assess her with a cool head.

“A pretty girl!” he thought, toddling carefully down the stairs. “She is royally offended... Well, what she will become is still unknown.”

In fact, a few days later he gave Solski quite an unfavorable account of her, but it included only what he had heard from the magistrate’s wife at the Korkowicz house. In his dealings with the Solskis Zgierski was in certain essential respects almost unimpeachably truthful.

Of all the expressions of fellow-feeling that Magda met with at that period, the most important was a proposal from Miss Malinowska. The headmistress not only sought out the best teaching assignments for the vacation time for her, but made a firm offer to accept her as a teacher at the school after the holiday. At that, a weight fell from Magda’s heart; she would be free of anxiety at least for a few years.

At around the same time Mrs. Burakowska mentioned to Magda that she could remain with her as a tenant until September, at least, for she had heard from the dealer in medicines that the cashier had requested a longer leave.

Amid so much evidence of good will, Magda began to recover her happy disposition. She decided not to think about the Solskis, or about death and nothingness—only to live from day to day, working and keeping her ear attuned to the daily life around her that whirred and swirled, rattled and gave off aromas.

To be sure, sometimes memories revived: memories of the spacious rooms in the palace, the starry skies over the garden, Dembicki’s lectures, Ada’s caresses. To be sure, sometimes she saw before her the half-savage, noble man who had loved her in such a peculiar way. But Magda understood that those were only apparitions—ghosts—which nothing would restore to life, while time would efface them. If only it would be soon!

The fashion of taking an interest in Magda only lasted perhaps a week. After that she received fewer and fewer visits, she was offered services less often, and she was rarely asked about her relationship with the Solskis. At last everything returned to normal, and if someone’s steps reverberated in the hall, they were bound to be Mrs. Burakowska’s or those of her maids and the people who came for dinner.

But one day someone knocked vigorously at Magda’s door. There was a rustle of silks, and into the cramped little room came Helena Norska, cheerful, stylishly turned out and more beautiful than ever.

“Well, how are things with you, heroine?” she exclaimed, hugging Magda with unusual warmth. “I am behind time in visiting you because I do not like to mix with a crowd. But I have come today to say—brilliantly done! I will even tell you that you surprised me.”

“How?” Magda asked coldly.

“By giving Solski the gate, of course,” answered Helena, on whom Magda’s suddenly distant attitude made no impression. “Oh, how he tripped himself up, that Don Juan in a satyr’s skin. Ha! Ha! Ha! He wanted to humiliate me, and he fell on his face in the mud.”

“You know, Helena, that I understand none of this,” Magda broke in, flushing.

“You will understand in a moment,” Helena continued, as usual preoccupied only with her own affairs. “A couple of days before you moved out of the Solskis’ house, Stefan came to me—”

“To ask you to marry him?” Magda asked quietly.

“I did not give him an opening!” Helena replied, frowning. “I wanted to do something to further Kazik’s interest, and I asked Solski to give him a position. I thought that, if he had found places for a few of your proteges...

“And do you know what I got for it?” she said angrily. “He refused to me so roughly, that... I know what sort of person my brother is, but I would never allow Solski to blurt out opinions about him that I do not want to listen to.” Her cheeks flamed.

“Naturally I told him goodbye for ever. And that evening, when, as usual, Bronislaw proposed to me, I accepted him. I thought the poor chap would lose his wits! He went pale. He was petrified. Then he fell flat on the floor at my feet and confessed, sobbing, that if I had not married him some day, he would have taken his life. He sat in our house until two in the morning, and though Mrs. Arnold reminded him several times that it was time to tell us goodnight, he did not stir, but looked me in the eye until it was quite exhausting. He did not have the courage to leave; he was afraid some evil magician would steal his treasure. Oh, these men!”

“You should not scoff at them,” Magda said.

“But who has a greater right than I?” Helena asked, smiling. “I have looked at these specimens and seen my fill. One brute, or lunatic, was ready to kill me or lie down at my feet: Stefan. A second repeated from morning till night that he could not live without me: my fiance. Finally a third, the best, is angry at me for ruining his career by rejecting Solski and accepting Korkowicz! Did you hear? My brother has such a quarrel with me about it, he has threatened outright to break off relations with me! I ordered him to go out the door and not show himself until after Bronislaw and I return from abroad. A fine lot, these men of the world, eh?”

“When will your wedding be?”

“In two weeks, in Czestochowa. But dear Kazik will not be there. For once he must understand that, now that mother is dead, I am the head of the family—I who lend him money, I who pay his debts, and, most decisively, I who can force him to go to work.”

“Will you and Bronislaw live abroad?”

Helena looked at her in amazement.

“Really, Magda,” she replied, “I would not have supposed that you knew me so little. We will live in the country, in Korkow, where my future husband must manage the brewery and make a fortune like his father. If the business goes well, we will come to Warsaw for the carnival season, and go abroad for a couple of months in the summer, living, you understand, very frugally. I do not want to drown for lack of a few thousand rubles like my mother, and leave a daughter to the charity of strangers. I must have my welfare assured and have my brother put his life in order. He will certainly visit you; at present he is staying with some banker in the country. See, now, be so good as to repeat what I have told you to him. Our departed mama gave him his head, but I will curb him.”

Magda felt a lively sympathy for Kazimierz. He was not, in her opinion, a perfect person, but in comparison with his egotistical sister he deserved a measure of sympathy, at least.

Helena rose from her seat and said:

“Do you understand Solski’s plan now? After I dismissed him, he wanted to humiliate me and—he proposed to you. Then you also rid yourself of him, and I... well, surely he comprehended that Korkowicz, who adores me, means more to me than Solski, who wants to impress me.”

Helena went out, and pain overwhelmed Magda.

“So he proposed to me in order to aggravate Helena? Is that what high-born people do?”

Very late in the afternoon Mr. Pasternakiewicz, Mrs. Burakowska’s brother, paid Magda a visit. Dressed with modest elegance, smoothing his fragrant beard, he chatted with Magda while looking at her through a monocle, a practice which in his opinion made a strong impression on the fair sex.

He questioned Magda about whether she was enjoying the food at dinner and whether she had become acquainted with his sister’s other boarders and lodgers. He spoke briefly of his life, which had begun under the best of circumstances, passed in the finest society and been distinguished by the most excellent behavior. In the end he declared his readiness to go for walks with Magda, or to the theater.

He might have impressed Magda as being a good, somewhat eccentric man like Krukowski in Iksinow if for a few moments he had not reminded her of Zgierski. She listened to him with only half her attention, answered him briefly, and thanked him dismissively for the proposed walks and visits to the theater.

Pasternakiewicz excused himself, feeling irritated.

“Provincial goose!” he muttered when he found himself in the corridor.

But Magda still wondered:

“What sort of people are these great men, then? They avenge themselves on one woman by proposing to another? And would Solski have ascribed as little value to me as Helena Korkowicz will?”

Chapter XII. Kazimierz

A few more days passed. The school vacation began; Miss Malinowska went to the country. Magda, having gotten the private tutoring engagements the headmistress had promised her, hurried from house to house. Fortunately they were not very far from her lodgings.

Before dinner she worked from nine o'clock to two; then from four to five Dembicki's niece came to her. The rest of the time she was at leisure, and lonely. Almost no one visited her. Only once, late one evening, Mania Lewinska dropped in. She was frightened; she had come to find out whether Solski would keep Kotowski on as the doctor for the sugar factory or dismiss him.

That, Mania explained, would be a terrible blow. For if Kotowski were the factory doctor, they would marry in the autumn, but if he could not remain in that excellent position, they would all be lost. The debtors were not paying Mielnicki any interest; she had no work because of the vacation; and all their household would have to live for a few months on Kotowski's salary. So without that salary—

“You understand, Magda, dear, what would happen to us!” Mania finished with a sigh.

Magda comforted her and explained, as she had to Zaneta, that Solski was too noble to destroy their happiness for no reason. She succeeded to some degree in reassuring Mania, but the visit intensified her own bitter feelings.

“How many people could curse me,” she thought, “if Solski really were vindictive.”

But he would not be vindictive. And her very faith in Solski's character became a new source of distress. For if he had been less noble, Magda would have felt less injured by his having proposed to her only because Helena had decided to marry Korkowicz.

“How fortunate that I told him I loved someone else,” she thought.

Her refusal had averted further humiliation. But that did not change the fact that Solski had treated her shabbily—that he had been ready to take her as his wife only to show Helena that he did not care for her!

“See,” his action said, “the beautiful Helena means so little to me that anyone—even her friend, Miss Brzeska—can take her place.”

Why had he wronged her, this man who was so exceptional, so wise, so good? Had she not appreciated his qualities? Had she ever caused him pain? Had she not revered him though he filled her with terror?

And then a miracle came to pass, such a miracle as sometimes happens in the heart of a woman. Wise Solski—noble Solski—Solski, who had fulfilled all Magda's wishes, who had humbled himself before her—had been a stranger to

her, and wakened only a feeling of admiration mingled with fear. But this Solski, whom Magda believed to have slighted her—this Solski began to interest her.

By inflicting pain, he had engendered feeling.

During the past several weeks, something had gradually been erased from Magda's memory: vast, silent rooms, an old garden filled with greenery and the twittering of birds, Dembicki's disquisitions, Ada's embraces. Everything was being obliterated, but against that fading background the wild-spirited magnate was more vividly etched, with his ugly face, violent gestures and burning eyes—the man who made some happy and trod others into the dust.

From the beginning, as she passed from the home of one pupil to the home of another, Magda had gone out of her way to avoid the Solski palace. Later, however, when a sense of injury had begun to assert itself, she went that way on purpose. Some sweet, terrible regret awakened in her heart when she saw the great doors closed and the windows shuttered as if someone had died there. Tears rushed to her eyes when she heard the joyful shouts of children in the garden.

If he had apologized to her; if he had even said, "In my determination to vex another woman, I did you an injustice"; she would have forgiven him. She would have had proof that in his eyes she was not insignificant. But if he were to propose now? Ah! Magda could not think of that. She would refuse him. She would refuse him and she would die, hearing only his answer to one question:

"Do you truly love me now?"

"Do you love me... do you love me?"

Magda repeated the phrase several times, and astonishment swept over her. Until now those words had amazed and troubled her. She knew that in such a case one had to give an answer and behave in some manner. But what, and how?

Today, however, at the thought that Solski might say to her, "I love you," the phrase assumed a solemn significance. It seemed to her that such a word on his lips would be a great occurrence in nature—that it would fall on her like death. At that lightning bolt all her intentions, her fears, her affections would fade away. Heaven and earth would fly into infinity somewhere, pushed away by that man.

But she would not hear those words from Solski. He would never say what he had not said heretofore. It had been easier for him to propose marriage so as to humiliate Helena!

One day, as she was coming home to dinner along Niecala Street, Magda saw several steps in front of her a young man with his head lowered and a top hat pushed down over his eyes. As he walked he nodded in a way that seemed to show a certain contempt for the world. Now and then he struck his light-colored trousers with his slender cane, perhaps as a sign of nervous excitement.

Before Magda could tell that the young man so pulsating with melancholy was Kazimierz Norski, he had already noticed her, in spite of his deep abstraction,

and greeted her. Magda gave him her hand, upon which Kazimierz offered to walk with her through the Saxon Garden.

Magda did not care for male company on the street, and she knew how to rid herself of such company when it was unwanted. But she consented to Kazimierz's proposal. In her eyes he had always been the son of the headmistress she had so venerated, and an unrecognized genius. In her imagination he occupied a position apart from other men, almost like Solski's—except that in Solski Magda felt a power, an authority impossible to resist, while in Norski she saw a charming imp whose insolence she found disturbing and whose atheistic theories pained her at her heart.

As Magda and her attendant demon in pale gray trousers turned into a side street on their way to the Saxon Garden, Kazimierz suddenly exclaimed, waving his walking stick:

“So you threw Solski over!”

And because Magda was silent and embarrassed, he went on:

“I do not venture to guess at the motive for that noble resolve, but I must congratulate you. For—I pass over trifles which would make him an insufferable husband for any woman—madam, Solski is a lunatic. His whole life has been a series of misadventures because of his desperate need to seem superior.”

“He is an intelligent, noble man!” Magda interrupted.

“He has dazzled you with his philanthropy, but when you refused him, he killed the dog he loved out of spite. Finally, madness has reigned in his family for a long time. Vague allegations circulated about his father's death. Miss Ada, in other respects an uncommon woman, is inclined to melancholia. An uncle of theirs shot himself. Although,” he added after a moment, sighing, “one does not need to be insane to blow one's brains out, at that.”

Magda stole a glance at him and noticed that he had grown a small, very blond beard, but was neglecting it—a sign, surely, of quiet desperation. She wanted to communicate to him that at least a part of the reason for his suicidal bent was known to her.

“I had a visit with Helena...” she whispered.

“Oh, you did?” he exclaimed, surveying her with an expression of bitterness and resignation. “So you know everything!”

“I understand that you had a falling out over her marriage to Korkowicz.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” he laughed dryly. “Because Korkowicz is only a brewer? Oh, Miss Magdalena,” he said agitatedly, “let her marry the man who does the hauling for the brewery! Let her be the doorkeeper's sweetheart, as long as it is for love. I would have been the best of brothers to her. I would have defended her honor against fools.”

Magda looked at him, astonished.

"I assure you," he went on, "that that would not even have been a sacrifice on my part. For then only narrow-minded people would denigrate my sister. But any decent, intelligent person would respect her, would understand that such a woman was battling outdated prejudices, that she had a heart. But no one, unfortunately, suspects my sister of having a heart!"

"So why would she marry Korkowicz?"

"Because Solski waivers like everyone who is half demented, and above all because she wanted to beat me down. She knew that my future and my connections depended on her marriage to Solski. A good sister as indifferent to love as she is would have married Solski to further my goals. A sister not quite so good would at least not have created a scandal when I was about to secure a good position. But that sister of mine just accepted Korkowicz so that my plans would be dead and buried."

"She broke off with Solski on your account—"

His face reddened. "A likely story!" he answered belittlingly. "I have heard it, but I do not believe it. She behaved abominably, and now she wants to play the martyr. What a comedy! Don't I remember how she even envied me mother's caresses? I saw it once in the flash in her eyes... in her movements... hatred of me."

"Ah, Kazimierz—"

He was silent, but waved his cane furiously.

"Madam," he began after a moment, "a couple of weeks ago a banker, an acquaintance of mine, was ready to engage me to deal with correspondence at a salary of two thousand rubles a year to start. More recently, however, when I asked him to make good on his promise, he gave me a position—but at a salary of six hundred rubles. And what faces he made!"

He stood still for a moment on the street, threw his head back, then inclined it again and walked on, speaking as if to himself:

"Is it worth while to live in a world in which everything is governed by chance and trickery? Where are my ideals, my goals? Poor mother! Ah, I feel that something of her remained to me as a legacy: a craving to crumble into dust, as Leopardi says.

"The last wretch on earth, if he has a sister—has her. She may not help him, but at least she talks with him, comforts him, cherishes him. And I? I have a sister whom I can't help despising..."

"My deepest respects!" said a sweet, sonorous voice just then and Zgierski hurried by them, rotund, smiling, hat in hand.

Kazimierz looked after him gloomily.

"I am certain," he said, "that this person has been watching us."

"For what purpose?" Magda shrugged.

"He likes to know everything, for it brings him profit."

“Ha! Let him know...”

They left the park. Kazimierz continue to pour out pessimism like a fountain; finally he stopped in front of Magda’s lodgings and said goodbye.

“May I visit you now and then?” he asked.

“Please.”

“At what hours?”

“I am free after six.”

He pressed her hand for a long moment, looking into her eyes as if to say, “You are all I have left in the world.”

That, at least, was how Magda understood it. Before she went upstairs to the fourth floor, something had formed in her mind: the sense of a sacred obligation.

She would not allow Kazimierz to lapse into despair. She would lift him out of the abyss of doubt. She would spur him on to work, devise words of comfort, rekindle the waning sparks of great purposes. These were difficult responsibilities, but she would find the strength. For she felt the spirit of the departed Mrs. Latter revive in her heart—Mrs. Latter, who had sometimes called Magda her second daughter.

Of course she must allow Kazimierz to visit her at her lodgings, for where else would she learn of his concerns, comfort him, raise his spirits and restore his courage? Let people say what they liked. Was she not an independent woman? Would every person of real goodness not respect her for being a sister, almost a mother, to a brilliant man hounded by fate and by other people?

And since God was her witness that her feelings were sisterly, she need not shrink from showing them. Only according to Kazimierz’s philosophy, God...

But what of it? Two people believed in her: Dembicki and her father. They were the only ones who counted.

So Zgierski had seen them? All the better! He would start up rumors, and in that case Magda’s sacrifice would be very great indeed. And the soul of Kazimierz’s departed mother, Mrs. Latter, would bless her all the more—if she had not, unfortunately, disintegrated into atoms of iron, phosphorus and other elements.

And perhaps gossip about them would reach the Solskis as well; that would be best of all. Let Solski think she was in love with Norski, since he had had the effrontery to ask for her hand to spite Helena, who had rejected him.

Magda ate little at the table, did not converse with the other diners, and did not even finish the meal. When she went to her room, Mrs. Burakowska’s other boarders were unanimous in remarking that something serious must have happened to Miss Brzeska, for she had a feverish look.

In reality, she was excited. Her soul was alight with a new and sublime purpose: to take the place of the abandoned man’s mother and sister, to rouse his

genius and send it soaring. She even remembered love stories and poems that showed that a woman could either inspire genius or murder it.

The position of women had never yet seemed so exalted to her, and she had never been so proud of herself, as at that moment. What to her were the women's alliance, the school in Iksinow or the school at the sugar factory? To rescue a genius for humanity: there was a goal! And how rarely such a problem presented itself to women!

When she had finished giving Dembicki's niece her lesson that afternoon, and was devising a plan—first to comfort, then to elevate, then to inspire Kazimierz—a letter from the day's post was brought to her. She recognized her father's handwriting on the envelope.

The old doctor had written at length, contrary to his habit. He informed Magda that he had learned of Solski's proposal and her refusal from Mientlewicz and the magistrate's family; that her rupture with the Solskis had given rise to the wildest rumors in Iksinow; and that as a result of it all, her mother was very angry with her

"But it is nothing. The gossip does not concern me," her father wrote, "for I know you too well. Your mother, or rather her thwarted ambition, will calm down in a few months."

"As mama likes," Magda whispered, feeling that she would never have the open-hearted bond with her mother that she shared with her father.

"You ask," the doctor continued, "what I think of your rejection of a fine match. My dear, the most essential things that either connect or separate us are our faith, our sympathies—like or unlike—and our purposes. And because those moral differences customarily associate themselves with differences of fortune and position, I would never advise people with an overriding disparity between their positions or fortunes to marry."

"I did not know that papa believed so deeply in differences founded on class!" Magda thought.

"You are obviously not created to be a great lady..."

"To be a great lady, no, but to be Stefan's wife—why not?" she said to herself.

"You were unhappy in the palace, which shows that the environment wealth creates does not agree with you. The Solskis' aunt, great aunt and all their family humiliated you, which shows that vast moral differences must exist between you. Finally, you were intimidated by Solski, which may be a symptom of aversion..."

"It was not aversion," she whispered, close to tears.

"In the end, what happened happened for the best. A person must have work and care as he must have bread and water, for he wastes away with constant amusement as he would waste away if he fed on nothing but sugar. And because

you have a healthy spirit, instinct pushed you away from these temptations, and that happened as it should have.”

Magda put the letter by for a moment. She felt aggrieved that her father had spoken favorably of her rejection of Solski, and she almost agreed with her mother, who had been exasperated by it.

Her father wrote next about her brother:

“Imagine: Zdzislaw has made a fortune, and to my great shame has sent us two thousand rubles. We have put aside five hundred for you, and you may have it at any time. The only trouble is that, running around his factories—for he manages three!—the boy is exposed to illnesses. He even had pneumonia, which, thank God, has passed. In any case I have advised him to go to the mountains for a few months’ rest, for the aftereffects of pneumonia are not to be taken lightly.

“Zdzislaw also wrote me that he would be most happy to have you in his house, which is in dire need of a mistress, for his expenditures are greater now, while he himself is withering without a woman’s care. If you would go to him, you would do him and us a great favor. In a couple of years, when he has amassed a fortune, he wants to return to Poland and establish a dyeing works here. Then you would be a woman on your own ground, and you could teach children—the children of people who work for your brother, not for a stranger.”

In the end the doctor informed her that Miss Cecylia had received a letter from Miss Solska and was even then on her way to Jazlowiec.

The news of her brother’s illness shocked Magda, and her father’s proposal opened new horizons before her. So she had someone to look after, someone close to her who needed a caring hand. So she could have her school, a school that would indeed be her own. She could teach children and see to her parents’ welfare. How much good she could still accomplish in life!

She wanted to write to her father and to Zdzislaw immediately and tell them that she agreed to their plan. She went to her little table, she began to look for paper—but then it occurred to her that she need not be hasty. After all, she must stay in Warsaw until the end of the vacation, for she had teaching engagements, and she could not break her agreement with Miss Malinowska without giving her notice.

“I will write to Zdzislaw tomorrow... in a few days... and to Miss Malinowska at the same time, to tell her I will not be a classroom teacher at her school. She is a woman of such integrity, and she has been so good to me,” she told herself.

And in the time she had yet to spend in Warsaw she could comfort, elevate and inspire her other brother, Kazimierz.

“Yes, I must revive his courage!” she thought, feeling that at that instant Kazimierz’s genius had paled a little in her eyes. Zdzislaw was not a genius, but he sent his parents money and thought of establishing a factory of his own, like

Solski. In the meantime Kazimierz was fighting a terrible battle with himself—about going into the office of a bank!

Kazimierz was losing so much of his glamour in her eyes that Magda was angry at herself for comparing a genius with an ordinary fellow like her brother. And she felt all the more strongly an obligation to Kazimierz, whose mother and sister she had planned at noon to replace, while by nightfall she was thinking of abandoning him to his fate.

For the next several days Magda did not write her brother or her father and did not see Kazimierz. Her attention was absorbed by her teaching sessions, which were gradually lengthening from an hour to an hour and a half, though the remuneration remained the same. But she had to accelerate her efforts. Her pupils had examinations to take after the vacation, and their parents and caretakers reminded Magda ever so sweetly that time was flying and that the young ladies benefited most from the subjects that Magda herself went over with them during the lesson periods.

At around seven one evening, after she had returned home very tired, Magda was sitting with her head propped against the arm of her sofa, looking at the ceiling and listening to the whirring of the sewing machine. Just then Kazimierz came in.

With a smile he handed her a lovely rose, kissed her hand and said:

“This is to thank you...”

“What for? Please sit down,” Magda answered, blushing because her room was so cramped and not one piece of furniture belonged to her.

“What for?” he repeated. “See: I am at my banker’s, thanks to you.”

“Ah—well done!”

He shook his head.

“It is such a fine action that before I met you near the Saxon Garden, I was thinking seriously: which is better, to be a correspondent in a bank, or to shoot oneself in the head? I even had a revolver ready.”

Magda remembered fleetingly that Krukowski had announced that if she married someone else, he would shoot himself with a revolver. A revolver, apparently, was *de rigueur*!

“You see,” she remarked, “that it is possible to grow accustomed to anything.”

“Even to the title of bank agent, but upon condition—”

“That...”

“That to the hideous cave called a bank office a man carries heaven within himself.”

“You believe in heaven now?”

“I believed in it before.”

His visit was gratifying to Magda, but she felt an undercurrent of uneasiness within herself. Was it concern, even deeper than she had been conscious of, for her brother, who was leading a lonely life hundreds of miles away?

Were the pale walls of her small room shadowed by the memory of Solski?

In the meantime Kazimierz was saying:

“In those days I was convinced that we could have heaven on earth. Yesterday I was shown our main safe. Do you hear? I am already saying—our safe! I have seen money in my life, but for the first time I saw a million rubles. How many bags of gold—oh, ever so many—how many bags of silver as well! And heaps of banknotes! These packets of ruble notes, ten-ruble notes, hundred-ruble notes, piled on each other, make a strange impression: they are impressive. One looks at this hoard and thinks: there is money, the reward of human endeavors, the source of wellbeing, the thread that connects people to each other. It was an intoxicating sight.”

Magda thought of another man, one who could manage a vast amount of money without being intoxicated by it and only made it do his bidding, like harnessed animals.

“When I went out of the treasury,” Kazimierz continued, “I saw through the window, on the other side of the street, a poor woman with two children. Who knows, I thought, if that impoverished lady does not have nobler instincts and feelings than my employer? And what kind of order is there in a world where one person leads a dull life at the height of earthly power and another, no worse than he, weeps for herself and her children?”

“How easy it would be to remedy this condition! How simple it would be to keep my banker from being sick with excess and that unfortunate from being sick with want! It would only take one little thing—”

“Social reform?” Magda put in.

“Love,” he replied.

“Oh!”

“Yes, madam. In nature, self-preservation is the first law of survival. A human being, driven toward his own goal, will crush his fellows like a ball shot from a cannon. But if he loves them, he will restrain himself.

“Ah, love! If love ruled the world, the gale that breaks branches would kiss them; the lightning that shatters the trees would glide around them and warm those that were chilled with its ribbon of fire. With love the commonplace brick would take on the radiance of a diamond, flowers would nestle to the human bosom, and people... people would be happy! The hospital, the prison, even the miserable bank teller’s cage would be paradise when that sweet guest built its nest there.”

“Why did the other one never speak like this?” Magda thought as she listened to him. “But perhaps he did—to Helena.”

Suddenly she regained her presence of mind and withdrew the hand that Kazimierz was passionately kissing.

“Is that not allowed?” he asked.

“It is not necessary.”

“And if a man dying of thirst asked you for a drop of water?”

Magda was silent, brooding; Kazimierz very gently took her hand again and kissed it.

“What a trance you are in,” he whispered. “Why?”

“I was thinking of your mother.”

The young man shivered as if he had been drenched with cold water. “A strange kind of sentimentality!” he said to himself, and fell into a bad humor.

Just then Mrs. Burakowska poked her head into the room.

“Excuse me—am I disturbing you? Perhaps I could bring a samovar? And send out for ham?”

“Ah, if it is for me, thank you anyway,” Kazimierz spoke up, his self-possession entirely restored. “I have another engagement.”

He took his hat and said goodbye to Magda. Mrs. Burakowska vanished.

“But will you be at Helena’s wedding?” Magda asked.

“I assure you that I would prefer not to live in anticipation of the weddings... of either of my sisters,” he answered in an ironic tone.

When he had gone out, Magda felt only fatigue from the day’s lessons and a kind of disappointment with herself because she had hardly elevated Kazimierz’s spirits at all that day, or awakened his genius.

“In any case,” she thought, “he knows that I will fill the place of his mother and sister. He himself saw a sister in me, and I reminded him about his mother.”

Chapter XIII. More Echoes From the Past

Several days passed peacefully for Magda. No one visited her; she grew more comfortable with her new pupils; and the noises in her lodgings no longer grated on her nerves. The people, the smells, the racket on the street and the hum of the sewing machine in the large room had so insinuated themselves into her senses that they seemed to her like silence.

She was able to collect her thoughts, to look inside herself. And when, during solitary evenings, she did so, she noticed that from the welter of changes, feelings and impressions of people that filled her soul, something was emerging like a pale light on a distant horizon.

It was not a new view of the world or the human soul or a new goal in life, but something quite different: expectation and anxious curiosity.

She had strange dreams. Once it seemed that she was being pursued by a crowd of men that looked like Zgierski and Pasternakiewicz, each of whom wanted to go to the theater or for a walk with her. These proposals were absurd and offensive, but she knew that such a walk or visit to the theater alone with a man could surely be very enjoyable. If Zdzislaw were in Warsaw, she would assuredly take a long walk with him to see what it was like.

Another time she imagined that she was Miss Howard, talking with Solski's bowlegged trustee. She asked herself: what did they talk about when they spent several hours together, and what way had he found to teach Miss Howard to keep the account books that had made that staunch enemy of the opposite sex call him a nice man?

Then again she dreamed that she was engaged to be married, like Zaneta or Mania Lewinska. She did not know who her fiance was, but in spite of that her heart was overflowing with tenderness. Who was the chosen one? Never mind; it was enough that he was the man to whom she would belong forever, body and soul. She was awed but fascinated as she thought of such captivity. She felt that in just such a bond, in complete forgetfulness of self, lay some unknown happiness.

Then against this backdrop of unclearly articulated desires appeared the silhouette of Solski. Another time she heard Kazimierz's passionate words and felt his irritating kisses on her hands. It seemed to her that all men, even passersby on the street, were eyeing her in a certain way, as if each one wanted to force his will on her and shackle her to himself forever.

Today none of them mattered to her. Yet she felt that the one who would be her future husband would be dearer than anything in the world.

"What childish notions are swarming through my head!" she thought.

But she soon remembered that this was not the only time she had been plagued by such uneasiness, and by such—no doubt—unhealthy dreams. There had been one such time while Mrs. Latter was alive, in the winter. Magda

remembered that at that time every walk she took caused her torment, for she saw, even if she kept her eyes down, that men were looking at her in a peculiar way that she found irritating and intriguing.

That frame of feeling had dissipated rapidly, however, under the influence of Mrs. Latter's troubles, the disarray in the school and her removal to her parents' home. And when she had recovered from her typhus, all these outlandish thoughts had been extinguished so that no trace of them remained. In Iksinow she had simply been bemused when Mientlewicz or Krukowski spoke to her of love, or when Eufemia tried to ensnare men with her charms.

"What is it like?" she had asked herself in those days, just as at this moment, examining her own feelings, she thought:

"Am I falling seriously ill again? Where is this anxiety coming from? What are these strange fancies?"

A young bird must feel this inquisitiveness when its wings grow. Lilies of the valley must feel such apprehensiveness in the spring, when they begin to be covered with buds.

During all this time Kazimierz was nowhere to be seen.

"Is he offended with me?" she thought. "Or perhaps he has left the bank?"

For some minutes she reproached herself for not speaking to him warmly enough when he was with her; but was it her fault that she could not find a greater store of tenderness within herself?

"I was always cold. I always had too little heart!" she told herself.

On this new landscape of the mind, peopled by the figures of various men, two stood out in bold relief: Kazimierz and Solski. They alternated in her thoughts, creating one whole but inspiring quite different feelings. The memory of Kazimierz evoked vague expectation and curiosity; the image of Solski brought on apprehensiveness and embarrassment with no definite cause.

She felt that even during his mother's lifetime Kazimierz had begun to introduce her to a world of unfamiliar feelings, and was still offering himself as her guide; a handsome, eloquent guide indeed! To follow his lead... yes... but she could only remain in the new world with Solski. She sensed that the country opening before her was the motherland of great storms, in which one must have a strong, decisive protector like Solski. Above those dark precipices from which the winds of fear gusted, it would only be possible to close one's eyes and entrust oneself entirely to—Solski.

Such involuted dreams were profoundly disturbing to Magda. She was incapable of interpreting their meaning; she felt only their unaccustomedness and an allure against which it was impossible to struggle.

In the middle of July, when Magda had returned for dinner after her teaching engagements, she was informed that a lady had been waiting for two hours in her room. It was Cecylia. With a little shout they seized and embraced each other.

“How good you are to have come at last!”

“Magda, how beautiful you look! Heavens, you went out of Iksinow hardly more than a child, and today you are every inch a woman. You are a little worn, but none the worse for that,” Cecylia said.

“I am a year older.”

“And you have been through so much, poor dear!”

“How are things in Iksinow? How are my parents?”

Cecylia had not changed much. Magda saw the same alabaster complexion, the same graceful movements. Her hair had grown quite gray, but now and again her eyes glowed with joy. She began telling Magda that her mother was a little angry with her; that her father, the major and the vicar had instructed her to hug Magda a thousand times; and that Mientlewicz was really going to marry Eufemia.

“Where are your things, Cecylia, dear?” Magda interrupted her.

“Sent by railway some time ago. This evening I go to Krakow.”

“You will have dinner with me—”

“I myself have already arranged it. Your landlady was even kind enough to agree to send it to us here.”

In fact, after a short while a maid whose cleanliness left something to be desired set the table and brought dinner for two.

“When did you leave Iksinow?”

“Imagine—on Tuesday. I spent two days in the country with Miss Solska,” Cecylia answered, looking a little worried. “As long as I live I will be indebted to her for this place in Jazlowiec.”

“What was your impression of her?”

“You know—I cannot say that the impression she created was pleasant. She seemed proud, closed into herself, fretful...”

“What has happened to her?” Magda whispered. “Did she say anything about me?”

“She said nothing, but she asked extremely detailed questions about you. If you can believe it, somehow she knew about the major’s bequest to you, about that concert of Stella’s, and about Cynadowski’s death. But she knew as if she had not heard about them from you.”

“I can guess,” Magda replied bitterly. “The magistrate’s wife met a certain Mrs. Korkowicz at her home here in Warsaw, and one Mr. Zgierski was there as well. Ah, Cecylia, how differently I see the world now! I am beginning to believe that there are many evil people in it—truly evil.”

She was silent for a moment and then said:

“Surely Ada harbors some resentment against me.”

Cecylia looked around involuntarily and said in a lower voice:

“Resentment—no. Indeed, it seems to me that she loves you very much. But do you know what occurred to me sometimes as we spoke of you? You know, she—she is—it is as if she were jealous of you.”

“Of me? Ah—yes!” Magda cried. “I remember! When we were still at Mrs. Latter’s school, her brother came, and turned his attention to Helena Norska. At that very time Ada told me that she envied Helena. ‘Because,’ she said, ‘if my brother is in love with Helena, he will stop loving me.’”

“Aha!” Cecylia repeated. “That must surely be it. Unquestionably.”

After dinner Cecylia went out to town, and when she returned, remained with Magda until evening. At nine Magda took her friend to the station and they said goodbye, weeping and promising to write each other as often as possible.

“I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that of your own free will you are locking yourself into a convent—a prison,” Magda said.

“For you do not know how the world can weary one, and you do not comprehend what a relief it is to feel that one is closer to eternity...”

“If only there were an eternity!” Magda whispered.

“You do not believe in it?” asked Cecylia, surprised. “But there is.”

Conductors were issuing the final call to board and slamming the doors shut.

“Be well, Cecylia, dear!”

Cecylia leaned out of the train car and said:

“There is, Magda. There is.”

The bell—the whistle—and the train began to move.

“Be well, Cecylia!” Magda called once more.

“There is! There is!” answered a sweet voice above the noise of the rushing cars.

“There is... there is... grease, phosphorus, iron and nothingness!” Magda thought. “But what of that? It is all the same as long as we taste happiness in this life.”

The next day, almost at the very moment when Magda was wondering what was happening to Kazimierz, he arrived in person. Precisely at six in the evening he knocked at her door, greeted her diffidently and again offered her a wine-red rose.

Magda blushed as she noticed for the first time that the other rose was still standing in a vase on the table, faded to a pale version of its former hue. If anyone else had presented her with something of such an intense color, she might have broken off relations with him. But such a show of confidence on Kazimierz’s part only aroused her curiosity.

“What next?” she thought, laughing inwardly.

She was certain that it would be something innocent and poetic. What she not taking the place of his sister and his mother? And because she herself had a plan for replacing his sister and his mother, it seemed to her that the whole world ought to understand her intentions, Kazimierz above all.

“I thought you had left Warsaw,” she said.

His lips trembled slightly; someone here was thinking of him!

“No,” he said, “I will tell you what you suspected: that I had left the bank.”

Magda looked at him in amazement.

“How did you know?”

“Under certain conditions a prophetic faculty awakens in a man,” he answered, avoiding Magda’s eyes. “But do not be anxious on that score; I am not giving up the bank. I have been finding new fields for observation there... a new world! And at moments it seems to me that fate only appeared to have put me in the business of drawing up contracts, as it made Fourier a commercial agent, whereas in fact it set me in the very center of the road that was my calling.”

Magda was completely absorbed in what he was saying. This was not just a man whom she found particularly interesting; this was a genius—awakened, unfortunately, not by her.

She emitted a muffled sigh. Kazimierz moved so close to her that he was touching her gown. He said:

“When I entered our office, I found myself, as the poets would have said, in the center of the world’s darknesses, in the laboratory of the social sicknesses of the day.

“Imagine that my principal, thanks to his connections in foreign countries—and to the telegraph—knows more than a dozen, more than twenty hours earlier than other mortals, when various financial instruments are rising or falling in value. That allows him to buy one set of securities at a profit and sell others at a profit, or at least without a loss, to various poor or naive people who do not receive dispatches from abroad.

“Add to that that in my principal’s inner chamber, people swarm like flies in a butcher’s stall: usurers, grain merchants, foresters, distillers, sugar manufacturers and a hoard of less easily identifiable figures, not excluding even Mr. Zgierski. All these people, who act with apparent independence and each on his own account, are only agents of our bank. They get instructions as to the purchase and sale of grain, wool, houses, city squares, inheritances, anything you like. It would not surprise me if in our office women were sold into Turkish harems or slaves to South American planters.

“With us everything bought, sold, rented or loaned must bring a profit, and not an inconsiderable one...”

Magda was listening with rapt attention, astonished by what she was hearing. At that point in his narrative, Kazimierz delicately took possession of her hand.

“That banker must be a clever man,” she remarked, “for he derives profits from his exceptional abilities...”

“No, madam, he does not need to be clever at all. He earns profits because his office is a gathering place for fools whose pockets are emptied by knaves. The office is like a forest to which one lures an animal, then whistles to the hounds and gives the signal to the hunters. The hunters shoot the hares and hoopoes, the dogs get the offal, and my employer collects the toll—from the animal in the forest, from the hunters—and even skims off something from the entrails given the hounds.

“That, madam, is called doing business on the grand scale. And that is the point from which I begin,” he added passionately, “as a reformer of society.”

Magda looked at him admiringly, not daring to withdraw the hand he was pressing more and more tenderly.

“In our office,” he went on, “I have become aware of yet another social problem. Several women work there in small rooms as far removed as possible from the front. They glue things, they write things, they forward things, they do calculations— how do I know what else they do?”

“Here is the curious thing. Our female colleagues, as I know from the older bank officers, arrive at the office earliest and leave latest, work like ants, are punctual, docile, and, in general, model clerks. But those women earn far less than their predecessors, men; they receive, for example, fifteen rubles instead of thirty, or twenty-five instead of forty.”

“What an injustice!” Magda exclaimed.

“And it is exactly that issue that I will raise some day. I will give society to understand how women are exploited, wronged, robbed.”

“And has no one paid any attention to this until now?” Magda asked heatedly.

Kazimierz hesitated and modestly lowered his eyes.

“Well... in Europe something is said about the operations of banks, and... about the exploitation of women...”

“Yes, Mill has written on the subjugation of women,” Magda observed.

“But no one in our society dreams—”

“Ah, indeed—Miss Howard often alludes to it. You really must cultivate a relationship with her. She takes a great interest in such injustices.”

Instead of answering her, Kazimierz softly touched Magda’s dress with his knee, but the dress quickly withdrew, and her hand with it.

Kazimierz was not angered by this. He knew that in such cases crude precipitousness spoiled everything, while gentle persistence conquered. A woman is like the coastline that water washes up to inch by inch with subtle touches and withdrawals, to be followed by renewed approaches.

“I am very glad,” Magda said in an icy tone, “that office work keeps you occupied. I imagine that your mother would be happy if she could hear these keen observations—”

“Still holding out! We even have mother entering the scene!” thought Kazimierz. “Pity the poor dear cannot invoke a husband’s honor and her faithfulness to him!”

“I am... very... happy!” Magda repeated, beginning to be worried by Kazimierz’s stubborn silence. With a nervous movement she rose from the sofa and looked out the window.

“The sun is setting,” she said. “How time flies...”

It was a signal to him to leave, and not a particularly diplomatic one. But instead of being worried by it, he looked at her flashing eyes and flushed face, rose, and wished her goodnight. He tried to kiss her hand but she would not let him.

“Oho!” he thought as he hurried down the stairs. “She throws me out the door... she does not let me kiss her hand... we are moving forward quickly!”

On the third floor he passed Pasternakiewicz, who was on his way up. The older man paused on the stairs, looked behind him through the railing and muttered:

“Aha! Norski is hanging around here! Is there an inheritance for the taking?”

When Kazimierz had gone, Magda turned back toward the door. Her pulse throbbed in her temples, her eyes hurt, her face burned, but her heart was at peace.

Magda understood that Kazimierz wanted to take her to that unknown country which she had seen for several days in her chaotic dreams. But she was surprised rather than moved. If Solski, in opening the secret recesses of the soul, had so pressed her hand in spite of himself, so involuntarily touched her dress, she would surely have fainted!

But Solski had never disclosed his feelings or stolen touches or caresses. And just then it seemed to Magda that Solski had flown from her to somewhere very high above the level on which she found herself with Kazimierz pressing his knee to her dress.

“An ingenious man, though!” she said to herself, thinking of Kazimierz. “Really quite ingenious! What extraordinary discoveries he has made at the bank.”

All night she dreamed of Solski and Kazimierz. Kazimierz pressed her hand, touched her with his knee and talked to her about his extraordinary discoveries; Solski stood aside with his hands in his pockets and looked with condescending compassion at Kazimierz.

Magda awoke, angry at Solski. The fact that someone had money was no reason to jeer at poor but gifted people who had thought of exposing the inner workings of banks and redressing injuries done to working women. But when she went out to give the day's lessons, she forgot about Solski's spite and Kazimierz's future reforms.

After dinner, at which Pasternakiewicz darted vaguely significant looks at Magda, Mrs. Burakowska rushed out to the corridor after her boarder, pressed a note into her hand and said:

"This lady was looking for you here today and left her address."

"What sort of person?" Magda asked, and read the address: "Nicodema Turkawiec. Street—number—"

"An ordinary woman," Mrs. Burakowska said. "A blue dress, a yellow shawl with red and green flowers, a hat with a feather and a linen parasol! You would think she had taken the clothes off the backs of several wealthy women to get herself up like that. A full face, heavy features..."

"But who is she and what did she want?" Magda asked. "I have never heard such a name."

"She said that since May some—unmarried lady, very poor, had been staying with her."

"Stella, perhaps?" cried Magda, striking her forehead.

"Yes—Miss Stella is staying with her," Mrs. Burakowska said in an odd tone. "But for two weeks she has not paid, and she is close to death. This Madam Turkawiec wanted to put her in a hospital. But then her tenant and patient, who was afraid to go to the hospital, sent her to the Solski palace to find you—"

"I must go to this address immediately," Magda said.

"By yourself?" asked her landlady. "Madam Turkawiec is—a midwife," she added quietly.

"Oh, it is all the same to me!" Magda replied feverishly. "So Stella is so sick... and there is such misery there. How much does she owe that woman?"

"She owes eight rubles, and she is so poor that she has nothing to buy a pint of milk with or fry a piece of beefsteak. A barber-surgeon who tends the sick out of compassion told her to drink wine—"

"I am going this minute," Magda broke in. "Perhaps you will give me change for twenty-five rubles. Good heavens! Where will I get wine for this poor woman?"

At that moment a door that had been standing ajar opened wide and Pasternakiewicz came into the hall.

“You can get good wine at Fukier’s, at Krzyminski’s, at Lesisz’s,” he said. “But if you will allow me, in the meantime I can furnish a bottle and accompany you there.”

“Indeed,” Magda answered quickly, “I will ask you for the wine, please, if you would be so kind, but I will go alone. It is not far from us, and the sick lady may be disturbed by visitors.”

Then Mrs. Burakowska changed the twenty-five rubles and Pasternakiewicz, with an elegant bow, handed Magda a bottle of good wine. He appraised it at three rubles and accepted payment like a man of breeding.

A quarter of an hour later Magda found herself on the street indicated in Madam Turkawiec’s note. It was in a corner of the city not much frequented; there was little activity except when dogs chased each other. Here and there were fences bearing signs that read “Property for sale.” There were, however, a few large buildings and a small palace in Warsaw Renaissance style, surrounded by a crenellated wall.

Madam Turkawiec occupied a space in the topmost story of a wooden house with chocolate-colored walls, white window frames, green shutters and a gate of dirty yellow. Below was a little shop occupied by a cobbler and a cabman. By the gate gleamed a plate with the inscription “Midwife on the second floor.”

With great trepidation Magda climbed the staircase—which resembled a rickety ladder—to the attic. There she found herself face to face with a woman wearing a short skirt and a light caftan.

“Am I addressing Madam Turkawiec?”

“I am Madam Turkawiec. And whom do you wish to see, miss? For everything here is in strict confidence.”

“You were looking for me today. It seems that Miss Stella is staying here.”

“Yes, here! She is staying, but she does not pay. She does not want to go to a hospital, and she will die on my premises any day. These are the returns I get! Fifteen rubles a month, every comfort, secrecy as in the holy confessional, and still they do not pay—”

“How much does she owe you?”

“Pardon me, eight rubles. And for accommodation for the child, and for the barber-surgeon, who is worth ten doctors, and my own exertions, running to find you for two days...”

Madam Turkawiec, for all her lamentations, seemed a good enough woman. Magda handed her ten rubles, upon which the worthy midwife kissed her hand and declared her readiness to obey Magda’s every command.

“Where is the sick lady, Miss Stella?” Magda inquired.

“Here—just here. I gave her a separate room. For, dear miss, when I see an educated person, I would bend heaven and earth for her. Your Kaska, your Maryska, miss, can lie in anywhere and go to work the next day. But a cultivated

lady—ah, missy, dear! Countesses sometimes stay with me. What is strange in that? A prince, even a bishop, may break a leg. So it is with this. Oh, here, little miss... But may the Lord God have mercy on this poor woman even at the last minute!”

“She is that ill?”

“There is no question about it, miss. Today or tomorrow it will be time to measure her. If a rich man were so ill, gentlemen from three funeral parlors would be here saying, ‘Dear Madam Turkawiec, that one—there—let me know directly and you will not regret it!’ But if a poor person is dying, even an undertaker’s man would rather be attending a hearse than be here. Ah, miss,” the woman prattled on, kissing Magda’s hand again, “even in consecrated ground a poor person gets a shallower bed, and in a few years his bones turn to sugar. And I—I tell you, miss, ever since I found out about that, I drink tea without sugar!”

Madam Turkawiec delivered her endless treatise beside the tumbledown staircase, not hurrying to unlatch the door to her clients’ quarters. At last she opened it.

Gloom, dirt, closeness and a stale smell were the first things that struck Magda on entering this singular establishment. She saw at a glance that she was in a garret filled by two rows of cubicles that resembled the booths seen at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. At that moment Madam Turkawiec seized a peg on one of the little doors, tugged at it, and opened the door, which moved aside like the door to a railway car.

Magda saw a cubicle long enough to hold a bed, but so narrow that it was hardly possible to walk between the bed and the wall. There was only half a window—the other half belonged to neighboring cubicle—and a little table with empty bottles that had held medicine and now smelled of alcohol, and a straight chair. Shreds of wallpaper dangled from the wall over the bed, while the side partition was plastered with newspapers and cuttings from illustrated magazines. The sick woman lay on the bed; her head was turned toward the window.

“Is it you?” she asked. “Ah, how good you are!”

Heat and a sickening smell of diapers made it difficult for Magda to think clearly. She had seen want, but not in a form so dreadful. Foul air; moans coming from no one knew where; soft slurping sounds, laughing in one cubicle, food in another, and in the middle of it all a woman transparent as white wax, lying in a soiled cap and nightshirt under a tattered quilt with dust-covered wadding bulging from its rents.

Magda mastered herself and looked at the sick woman. It was really Stella.

“What has happened to you?” she asked after a moment.

“I am ill. Ah, how good you are! Oh, I have a favor to ask... What is in that bottle? Is it wine? Is it for me?”

She fell back on the pillow, stretching out a hand pale as plaster.

Magda uncorked the bottle and gave the sick woman a little wine in a cup that had not been washed for a long time.

“A bit more!”

Magda poured again.

“More... more... pour half a cup. So little... Ah, what a wine! Life is returning to me.” And she raised herself and sat up on the bed, which creaked at her every movement. A delicate rosininess returned to her white face, her eyes took on a little luster, and her parched lips regained a coral tint. Amid the stench and dirt, she was almost beautiful.

Piercing moans resounded from a distant cubicle.

“Just a moment—just a moment!” Madam Turkawiec called, and hurried out through Stella’s door.

“It is nothing!” Stella said, smiling at Magda, who was terrified. Then, seizing her hand, she began to whisper in her ear:

“I am not so sick. I only pretend to be so the old woman will not send me to a hospital.”

“It would be better for you in a hospital.”

“If I could pay!”

“You will pay. They will give you a room of your own. I know some nuns...”

“And if so—” Stella replied, still smiling, “then let them send me to the Hospital of the Infant Jesus. My little daughter is there.”

Magda was shocked and indignant at the sick woman’s simple lack of shame. But Stella said almost cheerfully:

“It is just for her, for my daughter, that I would like to ask—would the Solskis, who are so wealthy, provide something for her upbringing? In that case she could be taken from the Infant Jesus Hospital. Oh, miss, I do not ask for myself, but for her. After all, it is not her fault that her unhappy mother cannot care for her. Please... It is said that you have influence with the Solskis.”

“But how will I recognize her?” answered Magda, to whom another idea had suddenly occurred.

“It will be easy to recognize her,” Stella whispered. “She was put there a month ago. Oh, for two days I thought I would go mad, having no word of her! Ask for a girl whom a policeman found beside a letter box two months ago. She had a cross of gold wire around her neck, a bottle of milk with a nipple by her and a note fastened to her shirt: ‘She was christened with water; her name is Magdalena.’ I named her after you... When they took her from here I began to bite my fingers, beat my head against the wall and scream like that one over there.”

In a far corner a moan rose to a crescendo, then quieted down. Sounds of uneasiness could be heard in all the cubicles. Cold sweat appeared on Magda's face.

"More wine, please—may I? Oh, if I could only leave here! But I owe eight rubles..."

"It is paid," Magda interrupted, "and here... in the meantime..."

She tucked thirteen rubles under the sick woman's pillow.

"You dear! You saint!" the patient exclaimed tearfully, and began to kiss Magda's hand. "But I am only borrowing it. I will repay it. I swear I will repay this, and what you spend on the little one."

She collapsed on the pillow again and began to gasp for breath, clutching her chest and looking fearfully into Magda's eyes. After a moment the attack passed; the sick woman grew calm and spoke on:

"I do not want to be in the hospital for long. Oh, if I could go to the country! I am certain that I would recover my strength in a week, and create a sensation in the world. All the theaters would fight for me... for you have no conception of what happened to my voice. Once here I sang a few bars of 'If with the morning sun,' and the old one and her patients gave me an ovation. 'What a wonderful voice!' they said. I burst into tears like a child..."

"Do not tire yourself," Magda said timidly.

"Nothing tires me, nothing!" Stella chattered feverishly. Her face had flushed brick red and her lips had a carmine tint. "A week in the country and... you will see... For every ruble I owe anyone, I will repay a hundred. Europe—I will make a tour of Europe... and I will be happy again, as I was once..."

"Were you happy?" Magda asked, not hiding her surprise.

"Oh, yes! Could I live through this if my memories did not fill this dreadful kennel with a golden aura? I do not see ugly walls or doors that make me feel as if I were caught in a trap. I see halls full of listeners... bouquets flying... delight in men's faces, the scowls of women who envy me... and the clapping. Encore! Encore! Stella, bravo! And that tyrant of mine, who was always jealous of my success... Ah, miss, you do not know what it is to be an artist! That is such a beautiful world, such a heaven, that if a person once sees it, the memory of it can transfigure whole years of misery. Ah, one year of success on the great stages, and then let me die... in the last act... under the bouquets."

She flung herself back down on the bed, then said suddenly:

"Miss! Please listen... You will hear something for which I would be showered with gold."

And she began to croon in a very weak but strangely sweet voice:

"Once from his sweetheart... a certain king... for his faithfulness to her... received a chalice of pure gold..."

Her eyes closed and she was silent. Just then the door opened heavily and Madam Turkawiec entered.

“Do not work yourself into screams, madam,” she began.

“But she has fainted!” Magda broke in, quite alarmed.

Madam Turkawiec bent over the patient, then replied:

“Oh, no. No. She has fallen asleep. Any day she will fall asleep on me for good—”

“She must be taken to a hospital,” Magda whispered. “Do it... I will repay you.”

Madam Turkawiec looked at Magda and wagged her head.

“First,” she said without in the least lowering her voice, “no hospital will take her. Next, she will not go, and third, she will die here any hour.”

Magda could not control her grief. She slipped out of the cubicle and onto the stairs with Madam Turkawiec behind her.

“She does not feel very bad,” Magda said, taking a moment’s rest.

“Excuse me, miss: what is that ‘not very bad’ worth?” answered the mistress of the establishment. “Indeed, she hasn’t even the tiniest bit of lung! The fellow keeps her alive with his skill, but I cannot bear to see such torment. She will not last a week.”

Magda felt a light shudder go through her, so she said goodbye to the proprietress, promising to return the next day. As a sign of deep respect, Madam Turkawiec took her by the arm and carefully conducted her down the stairs.

“This is a hopeless business, miss!” she said. “When she sings, she is completely out of her senses, and when she comes to, she is still not in full possession of her faculties. A week, ten days, and it will all be over. Please think kindly of me. After Michaelmas I am moving to that building there... I kiss your compassionate little hands.”

Magda felt so terribly despondent that when she found herself on the street she decided not to think of Stella at all, or of Madam Turkawiec’s establishment.

During her conversation with Stella, Magda had remembered the elderly sister of charity she had met at the Korkowicz home: Mother Apolonia. She had not visited the sister in spite of the older woman’s heartfelt invitation. She would visit her this very day and, invoking the memory of her great aunt Wiktoria, request that the nuns care for Stella and her daughter. Magda herself would supply the money—a hundred rubles, two hundred, even the entire sum her father had allotted her. But extricate the sick woman from that foul place or take care of her and her child: those things she could not do.

For the first time in her life, Magda had encountered a problem she had neither the wit, the strength nor the courage to solve. In her heart she was always drawn to the poor and abandoned, but the kind of misery she had seen in Madam Turkawiec’s lying-in rooms aroused unutterable aversion.

If anywhere, it was there of all places, amid the stench, the groans of an unknown woman and the ravings of the dying singer, that she had understood utterly Kazimierz's philosophy: that a human being is an agglomeration of particles of fat, phosphorus and iron that crumble away into nothingness. They must crumble away into nothingness! Let anyone who wants to understand that not seek out healthy, working, smiling humanity; let him look at the human beings who give new life its beginning amid moans, or expire, singing in a fever and dreaming of their triumphs.

A familiar face roused Magda from these meditations.

"With my respects—good day! How are you, dear lady? What has brought you to this deserted quarter, to these poor houses that are barely standing? Let me guess, let me guess. Oh, a sentiment of blessed charity!"

Magda recovered her alertness. In front of her, doffing his hat, stood Zgierski, who tenderly pressed her hand.

"I have been with someone who is seriously ill, and now I am going to St. Kazimierz," she answered. "What is the shortest way there?"

"I will conduct you," he said. "Who is the sick lady? Perhaps my connections..."

A cab stood at the corner. Magda noticed it, thanked Zgierski for his willingness to accompany her, and ordered the driver to take her to Tampka.

Zgierski stood looking after her for a moment. Then he walked back toward the house from which she had come.

He liked to be informed in minute detail, even about trifles.

Chapter XIV. A Walk

After a journey of perhaps a quarter of an hour, which seemed endless to Magda, the cab began the descent to the lower reaches of Tampka. It passed the Konserwatorium and stopped opposite a short roadway leading to a gate with a small iron crucifix on top.

“Here,” the driver said.

Magda got out and walked through the shapeless dooryard to a building with a façade like a prison or hospital.

“How dreadful life here must be!” she thought.

In the entrance hall she found herself face to face with a young nun, who asked her what she wanted.

“I would like to see Mother Apolonia.”

“Do you have... some favor to ask her?”

“My name is Brzeska. I am acquainted with Mother Apolonia,” Magda answered irritably, seeing how readily they assumed that she had come for help.

“There are several persons in the waiting room just now,” the sister replied. “But if you are an acquaintance of Mother Apolonia, we may go to her.”

She walked forward quickly and Magda followed her, through the corridor, to the stairs, down the stairs. They entered several large rooms, but Mother Apolonia was not there. During all this time Magda was looking around carefully at her new environment. She was struck by its astonishing cleanliness and by the pictures on the walls, the little altars in the rooms and the inscriptions above some of the doors: “God is watching us!”

“We must look in the garden,” said the nun. When they found themselves there, she told Magda with apologies that she must leave her for a little.

The garden was neither large nor ornate, but what a contrast with Madam Turkawiec’s premises! There all was heat and stench; here were cool breezes perfumed with the fragrances of plants. There everything was stifling; here there was greenery, and against this background even buildings that looked like hospitals did not grate on the nerves. There was Stella’s feverish song or the moans of the unknown woman; here, silence—or rather the twittering of birds and the laughter of children floating from somewhere unknown!

By the singer’s bed, Magda had seen to her left a dirty wood engraving showing nymphs bathing. But here, when she looked to her left, she noticed a cross that rose from a knoll planted with flowers and almost rested its dark arms on the clouds.

This tranquil picture illuminated Magda’s memory like a flash of lightning. She seemed to see her childhood; to see that she, the woman here in the garden, was not, after all this time, the child who had made the sign of the cross at the sight of monastery walls and knelt before crucifixes. The thought broke over her

that that pious child had died—and she felt a burden press down slowly on her heart.

At that moment the young nun appeared.

“Please be so kind as to come with me to the waiting room,” she said without raising her eyes. “Mother Apolonia will be there directly.”

They retraced their steps to the corridor and then the nun led Magda into a small room.

When she had been left alone, Magda felt an undefinable alarm. She was frightened by the vaulted ceiling, the thick masonry, the white walls, and above all the Christ who looked meditatively at her from a little crucifix. Her nerves were strained; she imagined that she would hear the rustling of the heavy convent curtains, which would shut her out of the world forever. She moved toward a window; just then the door opened quietly and a gentle voice sounded behind her.

“May Jesus Christ be praised. You remembered to come to me at last, you naughty girl! And I had been expecting your visit for six months.”

Magda kissed the vigorous old lady’s hands and rather awkwardly made excuses for her lapse.

“Well, well, I am not angry,” Mother Apolonia said reassuringly. “Sit down. You women of the world are too busy to think of your great aunts’ friends. What brings you to us?”

Magda told her about Stella, her illness, her child, and the place in which she was lying, and asked for help for the unfortunate woman.

The sister rubbed her hands together and now and then shook her large headdress.

“Oh you! You!” She waved a threatening finger at Magda. “Not for nothing has the report reached even us that you are one of the emancipated. What peculiar acquaintances you have! Of course we must care for that unhappy person and the fruit of her sin, but what a woman! God knows how long it is since she has been to confession. And you, instead of thinking of her soul, took her wine without even asking the doctor’s opinion.”

“I assumed—”

“That wine would help a dying person more than being reconciled with God,” the sister broke in, and a shadow fell on her mild face. “Those women in your camp,” she continued, “say a great deal about the rights of women, but completely forget about the laws of God. Then they give children to the hospital and die themselves in the houses of women of doubtful worth.”

“You are angry with me...”

“Not at all!” the nun replied, embracing her. “You have the features of your great aunt Felicissima, and that is enough for me. Even though you have followed the current of the times for a little way, you will return.”

“Do you think such returns are possible?”

The sister raised her head and looked searchingly at Magda. She pondered for a moment and answered:

“If a person is not able to turn back on her own, God blocks her way.”

Magda quivered and went pale.

“Well! There, there, now,” the nun said gently, noticing the change in Magda’s face. “Someone will call on that unfortunate woman this very day and see what can be done for her. Leave her address with me. If you want to see that poor child, I will give you an authorization.”

Magda gave her Stella’s address. The nun went out and returned immediately with a note.

“Give this to Sister Maria at Infant Jesus and she will direct you.”

Magda kissed the woman’s hands.

“Come here from time to time,” said the sister. “I will not scold you for speaking imprudently. But, you know, I am old and I am a nun, but I have seen something of the world. My headdress did not cover my eyes. Some bits of advice might do you good, particularly since, poor thing, you are working at a distance from your mother. Goodbye.”

She kissed Magda, made the sign of the cross and led her out into the hall.

“Come now and then...”

“Strange...what a strange world,” Magda thought as she hurried to the gate. She was so overwrought that the nun’s words came back to her, filling her with fear that the cross behind the building would fall from its flowery hill and obstruct her way.

When she returned, exhausted, to her apartment, she could not get over her amazement at finding herself there as the clocks were striking five. Was it just two hours since she had left home and gone to find Stella? No—surely a month had gone by, perhaps a year. For was it possible in the course of two hours to meet with such contrasts, to feel as much and live through as much as she had?

In fact, she had seen neither very many nor very extraordinary things. A sick woman and a nun; Madam Turkawiec’s lying-in ward and the convent garden; the nymphs among faded newspapers and the cross amid the greenery. How did these few things waken so many impressions in her, as if each of them were a whole world? And was it possible that two hours had divided themselves into many units of time, each of which had expanded into a century? The conversation with Madam Turkawiec on the stairs—one century; the visit with Stella—thousands of years; the journey by cab—another century; the dooryard, the waiting room in the convent, the conversation with Mother Apolonia—an eternity, surely!

Sitting on her hard sofa, Magda fell to dreaming. In her mind’s eye she saw, in turn, two images: the pale, almost luminous face of the ailing woman

against the backdrop of the dirty bed, and the good-natured visage of the nun in the vaulted room; the moans of the unknown woman behind the row of partitions, and the laughter of invisible children in the garden.

Then the pictures underwent a change: once she saw Stella in the convent yard and the nun in Madam Turkawiec's quarters. Stella seemed even sadder in her new surroundings, but nobler; but Madam Turkawiec's establishment vanished like fog in the nun's presence. The moaning was silenced, the smacking noises were nowhere to be heard, the ugly walls disappeared, and in place of the bathing nymphs a cross appeared, with its foot in the flowers and its arms in the clouds.

Then from somewhere unknown the shadow of Solski appeared. He was also compassionate but stern, like the nun. In his residence, as in hers, monastic silence reigned, and the dark trunks of trees garlanded with greenery could be seen from the windows.

And she, Magda—what was she? Was her cramped little room not like the cell where Stella lay? Was there not the same heat? Were the kitchen smells so different from that stench? Was the whirring of the unseen sewing machine less abrasive to her than the moaning of the sick woman?

“What have I done? What have I done?” she thought, and added in her despair: “Why did I leave Iksinow?”

Oh, if only she could escape stifling Warsaw and go to the country! If only she could sleep and not wake up—or at least forget these distressing apparitions.

Sometime after six there was a knock at the door and Kazimierz appeared. At the sight of him Magda nearly shouted for joy. Here at last was a real person, not a spectre. His presence was so unexpected, such a new element against the background of her imaginings, and above all he reminded her in no way of Stella or the nun.

“This greeting would make me very happy,” said Kazimierz, “if it were not for the strange expression I notice in your eyes. What does it mean? Has something been troubling you?”

“I do not know what to call it. I was upset, I suppose.”

“Women are nicest when they are upset.”

“Are they? But just guess where I have been!”

“Giving lessons? No. With Ada, perhaps?”

“With the nuns. Until just now I have not recovered my peace of mind.”

“What has affected you so? I assume no one wanted to lock you in the convent against your will.”

“The convent itself affected me... the crosses, the silence... Kazimierz,” she said fervently, “there is something about it, some indefinable force which I would call holiness. For how else would you explain the influence the convent exerts on us?”

“On some people,” he answered. “I saw several monasteries in Italy—lovely buildings, by the way. And I admit, they inspired the contemplative levels of my nature—”

“Ah, you see! There is something about them that is not of this world.”

“No, madam. Not something of another world, but something of another time. The monastery with its strong walls, the thick grating on the windows, the cells in which stern monks sleep on boards, calls to mind the age of steel armor, of castles surrounded by crenellated ramparts, of hooded flagellators and medieval instruments of torture. At the sight of such monuments, doubt arises in the mind of the viewer: where am I, what am I? A sense of duality forms: a person feels himself on the boundary of two worlds, one of which is real while the other is a fantasy decked out in tangible form. That legend brought to life for the senses affects our mood, and the image of things long dead but having the appearance of life imbues us with melancholy. But apart from melancholy daydreams, which may upset a sensitive person, there is nothing there: no adumbrations of another world, no holiness.”

As she listened to this, Magda pressed both hands to her forehead.

“But you are truly suffering!” he exclaimed.

“It is stifling here... just as...”

“As in the convent?”

“Oh, no! I could breathe there. There is a little greenery there.”

“Do you know what? We must go out, and right away,” he said in a tone that left no room for resistance. “I will take you to the Botanical Garden, by force if I must!”

“It is late.”

“It is not yet seven. An hour’s walk in the fresh air will revive you.”

“Ah, so be it!” she replied. “Perhaps a walk really will calm me.”

She put on her hat and a wrap and they went out into the street. Kazimierz motioned to a cab, but Magda demurred. So they walked to Nowy Swiat Street and got into one of the omnibuses that ran between Zygmunt Square and Belweder.

The journey was slow. The sun was setting; dark clouds with a red gleam were appearing in the southern sky. At last they reached the Botanical Gardens and went in.

Though it had been a beautiful evening, the garden was not crowded, for rain was coming on. Kazimierz, however, met several acquaintances—men and women to whom he was obliged to bow—and they, noticing that he was with a beautiful lady, darted curious looks at him.

Kazimierz was troubled, and from time to time glanced stealthily at Magda. But she was not conscious of other people or of his looks. She walked on, seeing images visible only to herself, hearing voices inaudible except to her.

In order to avoid meeting people, Kazimierz chose the least frequented walkways, where, indeed, they met fewer and fewer passersby.

“How good it is to be here!” Magda exclaimed, standing still on the path.

“You see, I was right.”

“Yes. I felt that I needed something; what I needed was to see grass and clusters of trees. In this twilight I seem to see a forest... a large forest. Will you also tell me,” she added with a burst of feeling, “that in the forest, as in the convent, there is nothing? Nothing? No supernatural force which, without the help of the senses, makes its argument to our souls?”

“Why has this propensity for metaphysical if not mystical questions awakened in you today?” he replied. “What has happened? You are always so sensible!”

“I want to learn the truth: does a dying person perish utterly? Do those who shut themselves away in the convent deceive themselves of their own free will? If the world is made up only of chemical elements, why does the look of a forest make a different, a spiritual, impression on me? Oh, look there!” she said, throwing herself onto a bench. “What is that? A dozen or so trees covered with a cloud of leaves? But indeed I perceive something there, something that calls to me from those trees. Ah, it calls to me so that I would weep, so that my heart breaks, is torn out of me toward something. What is it, then?”

“Unconscious, inherited memories. Our prehistoric forebears lived at some time in the forests. There they found food and shelter from the weather and their enemies; there they emerged victorious over gigantic animals. All this together sent profound reverberations through the collective nervous system.

“After the demise of those distant ancestors,” he continued, moving closer to Magda, “there remained in our brains a cluster of atrophied cells. Amid civilized life these vestiges are mute, but among forests, mountains, caverns, the long-extinguished songs begin to resound: the pain, the fear, the hope, the joy, the triumph. These atavistic echoes are the voice that calls to you, that mysterious, unearthly something. Apart from that there is nothing.”

Darkness fell; clouds gathered. The garden was empty. But the flowers were more and more fragrant, the trees hummed more audibly, and a breath of passion seemed to rise on the air.

Kazimierz felt a light tremor. He seemed unable to think clearly.

“What a strange evening,” he said to himself.

Magda spoke up:

“Your explanations are abominable!” Then she added more quietly: “If everyone believed as you do, happiness would go out of the world.”

A pulse beat heavily in Kazimierz’s temples, and he felt as if he were choking. His body was burning. Words began to elude him, but once more he forced himself to concentrate and said in a stifled voice:

“Happiness does not go out of the world, but it goes out of us like wine out of broken bottles. The world! How is it the world’s fault that people build themselves iron gratings and devise tortures?”

His thinking grew muddled again. He wanted to take Magda’s hand, but—he rubbed his forehead. Suddenly he asked:

“Have you ridden a train at night? Have you seen a stream of sparks flying from the locomotive? Each point of light rises into the air, then falls among the plants in the field and dies after a moment. That flashing stream is humanity; the individual sparks are our lives. But what would you say if those sparks, instead of flying, flaming and flaring for the course of their momentary existence, buried themselves in the earth or voluntarily extinguished their own light, their own joy? What would you say? Death, which plunges us into oblivion, is not unhappiness. But to repudiate simple, puissant delights—to withdraw one’s thirsty lips from the drink of pure water—that is anguish and suicide.”

He leaned his hand on the bench so that it touched Magda’s fingers, and he felt that they were as hot as his. In the twinkling of an eye he forgot where he was and whether it was light or dark around them. He felt a prickling in his hands and feet; his voice grew more and more subdued. He moved close to Magda; her arm was touching his. He began to whisper:

“Now and then two sparks fall beside each other. Then their glow... the fire that consumes them... grows more powerful; two existences grow into a thousand... two sparks shine like the most brilliant star. Would it not be wicked to separate those two beings? And would it not be madness if one of them snuffed out her own light and her neighbor’s?”

It was growing darker and the hum around them was louder. Two breezes blew over the garden by turns: the warm one from the city and the cooler one from Lazienki Park. No one was walking on the paths. Only the swaying trees bent toward the earth or pushed their tops away from each other, exposing the dark blue clouds. Sometimes high on a tree a heavy limb shook, or a smaller branch tore away and fell in playful leaps onto the grass.

“Terrible—but beautiful!” Magda said, resting her head on the back of the bench.

“Like my love for you,” he whispered.

He seized her by the waist, pressed his lips to hers and began to kiss her with a reckless fervor.

For a moment Magda sat dead still. Suddenly she tore herself free from his embrace, and when he reached out to her, repelled him as if he had meant to strike her.

“Ah!” she burst out. “If you had known what I was thinking about, you would not have done that!”

She stood in the middle of the path and began to tidy her hair. At that moment the first drop of rain fell.

Kazimierz rose from the bench like a drunken man, but he was in possession of his senses. He had heard such outrage in Magda's voice that he regretted not only the kisses, but even his passionate declarations and the walk itself. He felt that it had all been foolish, and that this woman, rather than being his kindred spark, was entirely alien to him.

They were beginning to be spattered by raindrops that fell sparsely at first, then more heavily.

"I do not know where to go," Magda said suddenly, with indignation trembling in her voice. "Please take me out of here."

"I am at your service."

They went towards the observatory, but the iron gate was closed. Then Kazimierz proposed that they return through the depths of the garden to the lower gate leading to the observatory.

The rain fell more and more heavily; thunder could be heard in the distance. Magda folded her arms over her chest and stepped quickly along the unfamiliar paths. Kazimierz pulled up the collar of his jacket and walked behind her, thinking:

"To the devil with this! How absurdly it has turned out!"

His passion, dashed by Magda's behavior, seemed now to be dissolved in the streams of rain that flowed from his hat, shoulders and arms.

In the end they emerged onto the boulevard, but because there was no cab, they ran through the driving rain without umbrellas to St. Aleksander Square. Magda, pushing her way steadily ahead, was silent. Kazimierz followed her, thinking:

"A comical situation, and not a pretty one! I wonder what she is thinking."

Magda was thinking angrily that she was dripping wet and late returning home. At moments she recalled the scene on the bench, and it seemed like a dream—or part of the strangeness of the oncoming rain.

"So that is what love is like? Well, well! So it is for this that women die in Madam Turkawiec's care! Ah, Mrs. Latter could not have demanded this of me. She would not have had the right!"

Only a few hours earlier, Kazimierz had still seemed brilliant, interesting, congenial. Now all his charm had vanished and he was only a fellow who, against all the decencies, had seized her and kissed her like a madman.

"I wonder," she thought, "if he will have the courage to look me in the eye?" She felt that she herself could have looked him in the eye without a qualm if he had not become disgusting to her. His hot, coercive kisses had made her feel as if he had pulled her by the ear during their walk!

At last they happened upon a cab. Magda flung herself into it without looking at Kazimierz.

"May I escort you back?" he asked.

“As you like.”

Drenched and dejected, he climbed in under the carriage roof and sat on the edge of the seat. Magda did not even move away from him; she only looked out of one of the side of the cab while he looked out of the other.

Finally they arrived at their destination. Magda gave the driver two zlotys and, without returning her companion's bow, hurried in through the gate. Kazimierz rode home muttering:

“Oh, fine!

Kazimierz was well versed in his art and knew that it was perfectly proper to kiss women when they themselves wanted him to, even if they seemed to be warding him off. He knew it was possible to kiss a woman unexpectedly, when the thing could be turned into a joke and, in some cases, very friendly relations established afterwards. But today his inborn aesthetic sense warned him that the business had turned out distastefully—as if instead of kissing Magda he had taken her purse from her pocket.

“I do not like this!” he thought. The thought was not an effect of conscience or shame, for it was not in him to be ashamed of what he had done, but he was chagrined that it had happened as it did, without rhyme or reason. Say what you would, he had behaved with the woman to whom Solski had proposed marriage as he would have with a cook!

As Magda, wet to the skin, walked into the hallway in her lodgings, three doors opened one after another. Pasternakiewicz peered out of one, a woman tenant glanced out of another, and Mrs. Burakowska herself came running out of the third, exclaiming:

“What happened to you, miss? You must have gotten soaked just now! Where were you caught in this terrible rain?”

“I was at the Botanical Garden... with some friends,” Magda said, and went to her room to change her clothes.

Her face burned with embarrassment. So it had come to this, that she, Magda, Brzeska, had to lie!

She drank some tea, lay down, listened to the hum of the rain and thought of what had happened to Joanna. How long ago that had been, but how vivid the memory was! The rain had poured then, too, and Mrs. Latter had been waiting for Joanna just as Mrs. Burakowska had been waiting for her. Joanna then, like Magda today, had been with Kazimierz, who had undoubtedly kissed her on the lips, just he had kissed Magda today.

She—and Joanna! So this was what she had come to in the course of two years!

She put out her lamp and closed her eyes. Again the nuns' flower-filled garden appeared with the cross and, as if in the distance, the dying Stella's cubicle. It seemed to Magda that that unknown woman whose moans had floated to her ears was Joanna, and that in a year... perhaps two...

She heard with startling clarity the voice of Madam Turkawiec: "Please think kindly of me... After Michaelmas I will not be residing here, but there."

Her father... her brother... Ada... Solski... in Magda's thoughts all those faces mingled.

"What have I done? What have I done?"

She stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to keep from screaming, buried her face in her pillow and sobbed. She sobbed exactly like Joanna in the infirmary at Mrs. Latter's school.

All the next day Magda did not eat, nor did she go out of the house. In the afternoon she gave lessons to Dembicki's niece and on her landlady's advice drank a couple of glasses of tea with lemon.

"Miss Brzeska got a chill on that walk," Mrs. Burakowska said to her brother when she returned home in the evening.

"As if she only got a chill!" he answered. Do you know who brought her home? Norski!"

"Who told you that?"

"The doorman. He recognized him when he leaned out of the cab."

"Well, where is the harm?" she said placatingly. "Indeed, Miss Norska came for a visit with Magdalena. After all, who escorts a woman in the rain if not a man? You yourself have escorted quite a few."

"It is one thing for me to do so. It is another thing for Norski, an idler and seducer who takes his inheritance from the living. If he could filch several thousand rubles from that paralytic, Mielnicki, he will not stand on ceremony with Miss Brzeska's innocence."

Pasternakiewicz had his say and his sister listened attentively.

The next day Magda went to town. She stayed with her pupils for an additional hour and at around three in the afternoon walked into Infant Jesus Hospital by the side gate from Szpitalna Street.

In the courtyard Magda saw two people in percale caps and cotton smocks, like cooks. One had a bandaged face; he pointed Magda out to the other, who carried his hand in a sling, and began to laugh when he saw a pretty young woman. Thinking they were lunatics, Magda ran into the nearest hallway in a fright and fortunately met a nun.

"The orphans are in that wing," said the nun after Magda had explained the purpose of her visit. "I will take you to Sister Maria."

She walked quickly to the second floor and into a corridor that seemed astonishingly long to Magda. They passed door after door, all numbered, all closed; behind them, Magda guessed, lay the sick. The air was saturated with the odor of carbolic acid and with silence. Once they met an orderly rushing down the hall with a bucket, another time a patient in a cotton smock and cook's cap, then a doctor who looked like a butcher in his thick apron.

Magda felt uneasy; the numbered doors intrigued and mystified her.

“Where are the sick in this place?” she thought.

On her left she saw a large window and beyond it, on a lower level, an enormous room filled with beds in two rows, all of them occupied. A nun and a pair of orderlies moved among the beds.

“What is that, please? Magda asked her guide.

“A ward for those with fevers,” the nun answered, hurrying ahead.

“How many are there?”

“Sixty beds.”

“Sixty!” Magda thought. “Is it possible that there are so many sick people in Warsaw? And more in other wards!”

They turned left; the smell of carbolic acid was omnipresent. After a while Magda heard a peculiar cry like the sound of a mechanical toy. Then she heard another and another. Just then another nun came out of a room and Magda’s guide handed her a note.

“Ah, this is the lady,” said the nun, and introduced herself as Sister Maria. “Yesterday Mother Apolonia asked me about a girl, Magdalena, who wore a cross of gold wire and came to us a month ago. There is such a girl.”

“May I see her?” Magda whispered

“Please,” said Sister Maria, opening another door.

Magda hesitated on the threshold, but went in. She saw a spacious room with open windows that looked out on the garden. The room was light, even sunny, but cramped because of the large number of beds and cribs. Seven or eight women with faded complexions could be seen walking or sitting down, feeding children, adjusting them in their cribs, or talking among themselves. One mother held two babies in her arms.

“She feeds two?” asked Magda, surprised.

“Sometimes three,” the nun replied.

Several children were crying with voices like dolls’. One, who was sitting in the arms of his wet nurse, arrested Magda’s attention with his exceptionally intelligent look. He was not yet a year old, but one could imagine that he might burst into speech or ask a question. All the infants were sickly.

“There is the girl,” said the nun, pointing to a cradle in which lay a little creature with wrinkled bluish skin and each leg no thicker than the finger of a grown person.

“My God! How thin she is,” Magda cried. “Is she ill?”

“Weaker and weaker. It is only a matter of days.”

“But you must make her well—I have money for her—” Magda said in a trembling voice.

The nun shrugged her shoulders.

“What can be done is being done. That little one even has her own wet nurse, but...”

“Perhaps she is in need of something else?” Magda persisted.

“She has all the resources at our disposal. She has no mother and—no strength, which only God can restore.”

“So nothing can help her? Nothing?” Magda repeated in a voice full of grief and rancor, not daring to touch the unfortunate child.

The nun was silent.

Magda said goodbye to Sister Maria and almost ran from the hospital. The smell of carbolic acid was choking her, and her heart was torn by the sight of the orphans and by their voices, which had nothing human in them.

At Warecki Square she took a cab and rode to Madam Turkawiec’s place. Just as at Magda’s first visit, the owner of the infirmary for women was standing in the entrance hall, talking with the servant who was washing linen for the patients and their children. When she saw Magda, Madam Turkawiec interrupted the conference about the laundry and exclaimed:

“Oho, you are here! There’s nothing for you to fatigue yourself for, miss.”

“How is that? What?” Magda stopped halfway up the stairs.

“They have already carried your friend out—”

“To the hospital?”

“No. To the cemetery. She died at noon yesterday, but she drank all the wine...”

“Why did you not inform me of this?”

“Because two nuns were here yesterday and the day before. They saw her and they sent a doctor. And while this was being done, they forbade me to inform you.”

Magda told the conscientious mistress of the institution goodbye and went out to the street.

“Death... everywhere, death,” she thought. “Whoever comes close to me dies.”

She did not regret Stella’s passing. Indeed, she felt that the unhappy singer could have done no more for herself in this world.

On her return home, Magda ate dinner with a lively appetite; later she gave Zosia her lesson. Her peace of mind returned, as if her personal suffering had dissolved amid the odors of the hospital, the silence of the convent, the inhuman cries of the abandoned children, the immeasurable misery and the human devotion she had witnessed in these few days.

“Death... death everywhere... death all around me,” she repeated.

Without knowing why, she thought of Solski and felt a pressure at her heart.

“Well, all that is finished now,” she told herself. “My God, one—only one walk! I would not have supposed it possible that something so simple could keep me safe from Stefan.”

Evidently some hope that Solski might return to her had still been smoldering in her heart a few days earlier, together with the fear that she would yield to his renewed proposals. That was the last echo of the not-so-distant past, the shadow Solski’s retreating figure threw on her memory. But today everything had ended: Kazimierz had stifled that echo and driven the shadow away. Nothing remained!

That evening she wrote a long letter to her brother and another to her father. In the first she offered to come to her brother for several years, even for the rest of her life. In the second she informed her father of what she had proposed to Zdzislaw.

“Before I leave,” she thought “I will go to Ada and thank her for everything she did for me and for Cecylia. I am sure she will part with me in a loving spirit. After all, I have not deprived her of her brother’s affection.”

A week passed; the beginning of August drew near. Mrs. Burakowska, her tenants and her diners treated Magda with increasing coldness, hardly saying “Good day” or “Good evening.” But Magda paid no attention to these signs of indifference. She thought of her brother and how to organize a household for him. She waited impatiently for his summons.

One day, just after Zosia’s lesson, Mientlewicz paid her an unexpected visit. He shuffled, bowed and announced that his wedding with Eufemia would take place in the middle of August; that her parents and the major sent her greetings; that the market square in Iksinow was being repaved. But his eyes were lowered and he wore an expression that aroused her anxiety.

“You have something painful to tell me,” she broke in, seizing his hand.

“Something to tell you?” he repeated. “Eh—no. I only wanted to ask you, for I am returning home tomorrow, and there is a rumor here—”

“What rumor?” Magda went pale.

“Perhaps about the walk in the Botanical Garden!” she thought.

“Because—excuse me, madam—eh! Why should I beat around the bush when it is certainly nonsense?” he went on in a worried tone. “This is what they are saying, if you will pardon me... that you were at some midwife’s, and at the foundlings’ hospital.”

“So I was.”

“You?”

“I was at Madam Turkawiec’s to visit Stella, who died there, and at the hospital to see her child, who is dying.”

“To visit Stella? So that poor woman died!” he exclaimed. “And you visited her?”

He rose from the sofa and, constantly scraping his feet on the floor, kissed both Magda’s hands.

“You are surely a saint,” he whispered.

“What is strange about what I have done?”

“But people—” he continued, “people, I beg your pardon, are—swine. I say only this much—”

He rubbed his eyes, kissed her hands again, bowed, and hurried from the room.

“A dyed-in-the-wool provincial,” Magda thought with a shrug. “Rumors excite him.”

At the moment Mientlewicz walked out the gate, Kazimierz walked in it, bound for Magda’s apartment. With an air of malicious triumph he repeated to himself as he started up the stairs:

“So this is what you are, miss? You act like an angry queen—and you write anonymous letters to force your admirer into marriage. And I was taken in!”

He knocked at the door, stepped into Magda’s room with an insolent look, and just on the threshold took his hat off.

At the sight of him Magda frowned. In that moment the elegant young man made a poor impression on her; not only had she ceased to believe in his genius, but even his charms seemed commonplace.

“What is he compared to Solski?” she thought.

Her contemptuous thoughts were so clearly reflected in her face that the vigor that had propelled Kazimierz there abandoned him. He greeted her diffidently and timidly sat on a chair by the stove—the more timidly because Magda did not ask him to be seated. After a moment he mastered himself, however, and when Magda asked indifferently:

“What brings you here?”

...he grew angry and retorted, looking her arrogantly in the eye:

“I wanted to ask—what is this rumor that is circulating about you?”

“About me?” she asked, and her eyes flashed. “About the walk on which you were my guide?”

“No, madam. No one will learn about that from me. On the other hand, a great deal is being said about your visits to a hospital and to some person...

“Miss Magdalena, who would be so rash...” he added in a softer tone.

But she was furious.

“My parents and my brother know of my visits to the hospital and to that lady, and they certainly do not condemn me for them.”

Kazimierz was silent. He rubbed his perspiring forehead.

“Is that what you had to say to me?” she demanded after a minute.

“That is not all, if you please,” he said irritably. “I wanted to ask as well if you do not know this handwriting... though it seems to be altered...”

He reached into his pocket and, looking her sharply in the eye, handed her a letter with the lower half cut away.

Magda took the paper calmly and read:

“A decent man, if he lures an innocent, inexperienced girl away on lonely walks, should be mindful of the obligations he incurs. For although it is certainly not the first time he has happened to go for a walk with an unsophisticated girl, an exception must be made for this one because of her beauty and her noble character, and because, apart from her good name, she possesses nothing...”

Magda read the letter in amazement. Suddenly she struck herself on the forehead and whispered:

“Ada! Ah, so this is—the jealousy?”

Kazimierz leaped from his chair.

“What are you saying?” he cried. “This is Ada’s writing?”

He tore the letter away from Magda, scrutinized it and said:

“Yes... the writing is altered, but it is hers.... Aha! Aha! And I—blind—”

“It seems that you have recovered your sight already,” Magda said with a sarcastic smile.

Kazimierz looked first at the letter, then at Magda. He had never seen her this way; he had not even suspected that the unassuming, naive child could make her point in such a tone and smile so ironically.

“What has she become? She is a different woman!” he thought.

He put the letter away, inclined his head and folded his hands.

“Miss Magdalena,” he said in a voice full of emotion, “I did not understand you. You were the best, the noblest of sisters to me. Even more: you were the voice of my unhappy mother. Will you ever pardon me?”

He waited to see if she would give him her hand. She did not.

“In a short time I am going to my brother—very far away,” she replied. “Since we will never see each other again, I can say that—that what you did does not concern me.”

Kazimierz stood still for a moment. Finally he bowed and went out.

“He will go to Ada,” Magda thought. “He will explain to her that he was the noblest of brothers to me. Well, and they will marry. Ah, Ada! She was jealous—of that?”

She looked at the door and laughed quietly, not at Kazimierz, but at how she had changed. She felt that she was a completely different person and that the old Magda, full of joy, seeing the world through a rose-colored lens, was no more.

Chapter XV. Kazimierz Becomes a Hero

Kazimierz, who had long been fortune's favored child, for a few months had seen his luck take a turn for the worse. Ada Solska was offended with him. Stefan Solski was treating him with disdain. He was received coolly in the salons: his elegant friends were shunning him; influential people were not offering him desirable positions. Finally his credit foundered so that even the usurers began refusing to lend him larger sums.

All these manifestations of the bitterness of life Kazimierz attributed to his wicked sister Helena, who instead of marrying Solski had flirted with other men right and left and then married Bronislaw Korkowicz, a brewer's son!

"It is Helena's fault," he thought every time he was confronted with another painful development. His aversion to his sister, like an umbrella, sheltered him from the winds of failure that lashed him in the face from time to time.

But the winds suddenly blew up into a storm.

On the third day after his walk with Magda in the Botanical Garden, Kazimierz received a letter from Piotr Korkowicz, who summoned him to a conference about a matter of important business.

"What does this brewer want with me?" he wondered. For a moment he thought of challenging Bronislaw Korkowicz to a duel because his father's letter was not written with the requisite elegance. Then he wanted to write to the elder Korkowicz and tell him that anyone who had business with him, Kazimierz Norski, should come to him in person. In the end, feeling some misgiving, he decided to go to Korkowicz and give him a lesson in politeness.

At around two in the afternoon the next day he went to see the brewer, who received him in his office—without a coat and vest, for it was a hot day. For that casual reception Kazimierz was ready to make a scene. But he calmed down as he looked at the older man's powerful hands, and only said to himself: "Brawny as a bear! What can he want with me?"

The old brewer did not keep him in suspense. He sat down, his bulky body filling an armchair, and motioned his visitor to a seat on a chaise longue.

"You are aware," he said, "that since Tuesday your sister has been my daughter-in-law? They exchanged vows in Czestochowa and have gone abroad for a month."

Kazimierz nodded indifferently.

"And so," Korkowicz went on, twisting his beard, "since Tuesday you have been a member of our family."

"I am very flattered," Kazimierz replied coldly.

"I—not much," the old brewer retorted. "But I hope—"

"Did you ask me here to speak impertinently, sir?"

“Not at all. I asked you here so that, after deliberating together, we might put a bad business on a better footing. You took from one Mielnicki, a paralytic, four thousand rubles. In the meantime, the squire has nothing to live on. We must put this matter right—”

“What concern is this of yours?” Kazimierz blurted out.

“If you please,” Korkowicz said, flushing, “I am not familiar with upper-class notions of good and bad behavior, but my brewer’s sense teaches me that it is not right to fleece cripples who have nothing to put in their mouths. And you fleeced Mielnicki. You took four thousand rubles that he needed desperately.”

“Mielnicki owed my mother that money. He borrowed it from her—”

“Oh!” Korkowicz answered, waving a hand. “You live under an illusion. Your mother, rest her soul, could not lend to others, for apart from her debts she had nothing.”

“That is not true—”

“I am not lying!” Korkowicz shouted, striking his desk with his fist. “Ask Zgierski! Ask her landlord! Ask Fizman, who for several days before her death refused to loan her several hundred rubles!”

“Fizman?” Kazimierz whispered, turning pale.

“Yes, Fizman, who more than once loaned the deceased lady money on your signature—yes, and hers.”

As he spoke, the old brewer winked his left eye hideously, and Kazimierz hung his head.

“I know you, you youngsters!” Korkowicz said in an admonitory tone. “I have a son who kept company with you in the taverns. Now his wife will get him under her control, the rascal—I am sure she will. He will learn that it is worse to be beaten with a woman’s slipper than with a father’s fist. The young cur! But that’s beside the point. Four thousand rubles must be paid back to Mielnicki, for the old man is dying of hunger.”

“Someone has misled you,” Kazimierz replied much more temperately. “Our mother had an estate. Indeed, she did not leave debts, but cash—”

“The deceased woman left nothing but debts!” Korkowicz broke in. “The money you and your sister received after her death came primarily from Arnold, secondarily from Solski. If you do not believe that, ask their trustee, Mydelko, the bowlegged one, who, the ass, is going to marry that lunatic Howard.”

“Miss Howard?” Kazimierz whispered in spite of himself, and then was silent.

“Finally,” Korkowicz went on, “your mother’s estate is not my concern. Repaying four thousand rubles to Mielnicki is. Take yourself to my lawyer, execute the legal formalities with Mielnicki, and I will pay four thousand rubles together with the interest from April.”

Kazimierz sat as if he had turned to stone. Korkowicz spoke on:

“And here is my advice to you: throw over the banker. Go to my brewery and learn how to run it. Then I will send you abroad, and when you learn how to brew beer as it has never been brewed before, I will find you a decent brewery that will give you an independent living. Well, what, then?” the old man finished, clapping Kazimierz on the shoulder.

“I have no inclination to be a brewer,” Norski replied, “and Mr. Mielnicki must have owed my mother four thousand rubles, for he told me so himself.”

Korkowicz rose heavily from his armchair.

“If it gives you pleasure to imagine that Mielnicki was in debt to your mother,” he said, “I will repay him what is due to him without your participation, for I do not want people to be tattling about my daughter-in-law’s brother. Your humble servant, sir!”

Kazimierz stood up, obviously troubled. He barely nodded to Korkowicz as he hurried from the house. A few hours later, however, things appeared to him in a more cheerful light.

“If this maltster wants to make Mielnicki a present of this money, let him do it,” he thought. “What is it to me? Mielnicki is a good fellow who admitted that he owed my mother money. But he is certainly not so stupid as to give me four thousand rubles that he did not owe.”

With this rationalization Kazimierz recovered his peace of mind. Unfortunately, a few days later he received an anonymous letter that read:

“A decent man, if he lures an innocent, inexperienced girl away on lonely walks, should be mindful of the obligations he incurs. For although it is certainly not the first time he has happened to go for a walk with an unsophisticated girl, an exception must be made for this one because of her beauty and her noble character, and because, apart from her good name, she possesses nothing.

“It is to be feared, however, that a man who feels no scruples with regard to a paralyzed elderly man will not hesitate to exploit a naive girl!”

Rage overwhelmed Kazimierz after he read the letter. So the matter involving Mielnicki was known and talked of in the city! But who could be the author of the unsigned note? It must be Magdalena Brzeska, who wanted to use this stratagem to drag him into marriage.

It was under the influence of this thought that Kazimierz had hurried to Magda’s lodgings. If she had written it, he would have exposed her, and in return for the affront to his honor he would even have had the right to engage her in the pleasures of lovemaking. In any case, he had cut off the conclusion of the letter. For if Magda were not the author, why should she find out about Mielnicki?

Yet Magda had read the letter indifferently, like a person who had no intention of marrying him. More important: in spite of herself she had let it be seen that she recognized Ada’s handwriting.

“But of course!” he thought, reading the letter for the tenth time. “Of course! And I did not recognize it at once!”

He returned home and took a few letters from Ada out of his desk. They had been written long ago, in Switzerland. The way the letters were formed was almost identical; the author of the anonymous communication had not greatly cared to hide the similarity.

The winds blew from every side like a cyclone as Ada's letters started up a multitude of recollections. How many evenings he had spent in her residence in Zurich! How many outings on the lakes they had taken together; how many hours they had passed alone in the valleys strewn with fragments of rock, cut with fast-running streams, lushly carpeted by plants with intoxicating fragrances!

How attentively Ada had listened to his social and philosophical theories! How she had blushed when he greeted her and grown sad when, after a few hours, he had gone away! And in all that time she had never given away, with one word or with the slightest sign, that she and her brother had paid his mother's debts.

So Ada had loved him even then. But why had her feelings cooled later? Perhaps because of an aversion to Helena, who had exasperated Solski?

But the rumors about Kazimierz and Mielnicki had most certainly reached Ada and her brother.

Kazimierz paced feverishly around the room, which was not lit though the twilight had come on. Yes, that unfortunate business with Mielnicki was ruining his prospects! The knowledge of it had reached all his acquaintance, found its way into the salons in which until lately he had been so favorably received.

"But who let it out? Zgierski, surely... Aha, I know..."

He struck his forehead as he remembered Kotowski.

Kotowski had the most compelling interest in this because he was going to marry Miss Lewinska, the niece of the paralyzed man. He must have told Solski, for he was Solski's physician. He must have spoken of the matter with anyone who would hear, and he might have had a multitude of listeners, for there were many who were not well disposed toward Kazimierz.

"Kotowski!" he repeated, and imagined that he saw the gaunt face and disheveled hair of the young doctor, who had been present at a meeting in Miss Howard's apartment at some time and become embroiled in a dispute. Then he recalled that even his mother, on some occasion or other, had set Kotowski up as a model for him... unpolished, priggish Kotowski.

"I always felt antipathy for him!" he thought. "Well, I will repay him. He has ruined my life; I will ruin his."

From the time he had become Solski's doctor, Kotowski had prospered in Warsaw. He lived on the second floor of a building on one of the main streets; he had an examining room of his own and had begun to develop a practice among the city's wealthier residents. At first his slipshod dress and brusque manners with his patients were considered offensive, but after several successful cures

it began to be said that because he was exceptionally clever, he must be a little eccentric.

Before noon one day, two gentlemen presented themselves at Dr. Kotowski's residence: Palaszewicz and Rozbijalski. They gave their cards to the neatly dressed elderly woman who answered the door and stated that they had business of a personal nature with her master.

The doctor kept them waiting for several minutes, as befitted a self-respecting physician. Finally he emerged, bowed carelessly on the threshold of his office and asked:

"Who wishes to be first?"

"We both wish to speak to you at the same time, sir," the elegant Rozbijalski answered politely, running his fingers through his ruddy side whiskers.

"On behalf of Mr. Norski," sternly added the no less elegant Palaszewicz, who sported a protruding mustache.

"Norski?" the young doctor repeated. "What is his problem?"

"Mr. Norski enjoys the best of health—" answered the well-bred Rozbijalski.

"Allow us to be seated," the equally well-bred but less warmhearted Palaszewicz interrupted.

"We have come, however," Rozbijalski continued, in the tone of one who touches on a delicate issue, "because of rumors you, respected sir, are alleged to have disseminated concerning the respected Mr. Norski, and which have besmirched his honor."

"His honor?" Kotowski repeated, stunned.

"The question is this: did you, sir, tell someone that Mr. Norski swindled four thousand rubles from a certain Mielnicki, a man paralyzed and infirm in his mind?" Palaszewicz spoke up.

"That money was returned to Mr. Mielnicki yesterday. So neither I nor my fiancée have a quarrel with Mr. Norski," Kotowski replied in some confusion.

"But did you speak to anyone about the matter?" Palaszewicz persisted.

"I told a few people, for indeed it was so."

"And did you speak to Mr. Solski about this painful affair?" Rozbijalski asked mildly.

"I did."

"Your information was inexact and caused Mr. Norski great moral damage," Palaszewicz said. "For that reason, Mr. Norski demands satisfaction."

"What does that mean?" asked Kotowski, growing more astonished every second.

“Excuse me, sir—that you would be so good as to send us your witnesses and we will arrange terms with them, either for the retraction of the rumors or for a meeting,” said Rozbijalski.

“A duel, then?” Kotowski exclaimed.

“Most probably.”

“And if I do not agree to a duel? After all, what I said was true.”

“In that case, Mr. Norski will have the honor of compelling you,” answered Palaszewicz.

“Compelling?” Kotowski repeated.

Both visitors stood up and Rozbijalski said:

“I should think the best thing for you to do, sir, is to send us witnesses. Tomorrow at one o’clock in the afternoon we will await them at Mr. Palaszewicz’s residence. You have the address.”

They bowed, then vanished so quickly that Kotowski rubbed his eyes.

“Are they mad?” he said to himself. “Why should I have to fight a duel with that blockhead?”

The doctor did not think of the sick that day, but went to visit his friend, the lawyer Menaszko. He told Menaszko about the quarrel and asked his advice: would he not be within his rights to bring an action against Norski and his witnesses for threatening him?

“Calm yourself!” replied the tall, thin lawyer, who fortunately had no clients. “Rather let us go to Walecki, who arranges duels. He will manage the business—”

“What?” Kotowski demanded indignantly. “So you, a progressive man, would consent to a duel, a foul relic of the Middle Ages? And with that fool?”

But progressive Menaszko appeared to be extraordinarily conservative when his friend’s skin was in question. So Kotowski, very worried, went willy-nilly to Walecki, taking the lawyer with him. On the way he muttered:

“Incredible: I, with that blockhead!”

Walecki, a man short and stooped but with burning eyes, was at home. When he was told why his visitors had come, he asked Kotowski:

“Are you a good shot, sir?”

“I? Of all the ridiculous—”

“Buy yourself a fowling piece, then, and shoot at a target from morning till night. I will see to it that the matter is delayed for a few days.”

“But I have no intention of dueling!” Kotowski burst out.

“Then why have you come to me?” Walecki rejoined. “Hire yourself two escorts and let them defend you if Norski has a fancy to thrash you with a stick.”

“Oh?” Kotowski retorted. “Very well, I will shoot, if you are both against me.”

“We are not against you, but what is to be done?” Walecki answered with a sigh.

“Indeed, I have a fiancée—a wedding in the autumn—and Norski, that blockhead...”

“If your fiancée tries to stop you, release her from your engagement, for there is no way out of this,” Walecki said as if he were delivering a sermon.

“How can that be—no way out?”

“If you back out, first, Norski may beat you. Second, you will lose your practice and your position with Solski, who will not have a coward around him. Third, no one will want to hold out a hand to you, least of all I. Fourth, your fiancée herself will throw you over if you become a laughingstock. It is folly to be headstrong in seeking a duel, but to turn one down is not practical, for from that moment any dolt can insult and belittle you. So learn to shoot.”

“So I am going to die at the hand of that idiot?”

“As long as you cannot prove that Norski behaved dishonorably, you have no right to refuse him satisfaction.”

“The devil take your satisfaction!” Kotowski groaned, clutching his head. “Here are friends, indeed! Confound it! To perish because of such an ass!”

In the end, however, he empowered his friends, Walecki and Menaszko, to do with his body as it pleased them. Pursuant to that decision, Messrs. Walecki and Menaszko informed Messrs. Rozbijalski and Palaszewicz that they were at their service.

The arrangements took three days. During that time the unhappy Kotowski, instead of receiving and visiting the sick, bought a fowling piece and from morning till evening shot from his entrance hall at a target nailed to the wall of the bedroom. He paused from this labor only for dinner with Miss Lewinska, who saw immediately that her betrothed was troubled, and in the course of half an hour learned that the cause of it was a quarrel with Norski. But he carefully avoided telling her about the duel.

The fatal time arrived at last; it was on a Friday. At six in the morning Walecki and Menaszko awakened Kotowski, insisting that he dress quickly because a doctor was waiting for them in the carriage.

“Why the devil a doctor?” he asked as he washed his face.

“You may be wounded.”

“Oh?” he exclaimed. “So I am going to be wounded, perhaps even killed? In that case I prefer, from the start, not to go. The devil take such settling of scores in the name of honor!”

Nevertheless he rinsed away the soap, put on his clothes, and at six-thirty climbed into the carriage, squeezing against his fellow doctor, who looked as if he would have liked to ask Kotowski for the addresses of his patients.

The hero, as he approached the scene of the drama to come, looked out the window during the entire journey, but did not recognize the streets along which he rode. Nor did he ask where they were going, for he felt a certain relief in imagining that the contest would take place somewhere far away. He would even have been completely happy in this deplorable situation had it not been for the behavior of his companions, who conversed impassively of open-air theatricals, of hot weather, even of horse races long past, and paid no attention whatever to what for the last few days had most concerned him.

Suddenly Walecki spoke up:

“Thank God, we are nearly there!”

“Thank God!” Kotowski thought, looking around alertly.

They were riding along the bank of the Vistula toward a forest.

At that moment the unfortunate Kotowski experienced a variety of emotions. He hated Kazimierz, and even the Vistula and the forest. He despised the other men in the carriage. But above all he felt regret and self-pity.

“Hallo—stop!” he cried.

“What do you want?” Menaszko inquired.

“I am getting out. The devil take this duel!”

The doctor smiled. Menaszko seized Kotowski by the arm.

“Have you gone mad, sir?” he demanded, looking at him with enormous eyes that burned with the fire of hell.

“Why should I risk my life because of that fool?” Kotowski exploded. “I have a fiancée. I have patients. I am a man of progressive convictions and I have no intention of promoting the survival of foul medieval customs—”

“Very well!” retorted the exasperated Walecki. “Get out and—go hang yourself! For after such a scandal, there will be no reason for you to return to Warsaw.”

“Yes. Good... Then I will go to this miserable duel. But remember that my blood is on your heads.”

They were in the Bielanski Forest. The carriage stopped, they alighted, and Kotowski noticed that his companions (Walecki carried something wrapped in leather in his hands) were beginning to show signs of great concern for him. They chatted with him about the races, but he heard nothing, for his attention was absorbed by the leather packet rather than by his friends’ witticisms.

Then he had a happy thought.

“What a pity that Solski is not in Warsaw! He, a wealthy bachelor whose proposals two women have refused, and an amateur dueler in the bargain, would

not bind me over to be prey for that bandit. He would fight the duel, for I know he does not like Norski. Then we would see who would sweat, Solski or Norski! In any case, not I.”

So he thought, sweeping his doleful glance over the Vistula, which seemed very wide; around the trees, which seemed very high; and even around the sky, which seemed to have moved very close to the earth, though it brought the unlucky man no encouragement.

His opponents were still not there. But before Kotowski had time to think, “Perhaps they will not come at all,” they appeared among the trees, moving so fast that it angered the young doctor.

Bows were exchanged and the witnesses clustered together. “Perhaps there will be no duel?” thought the involuntary hero—and a moment later he heard the tapping of ramrods in pistols.

From that moment poor Kotowski neither saw anything nor understood what was said. Only when Walecki placed him opposite Kazimierz did he whisper:

“Perhaps—perhaps, sir, you will make a statement—”

“What statement?”

“So that we would be reconciled...”

“Surely you will issue a retraction, then?”

“Why should I retract when what I said was true?”

“In that case,” Walecki said quietly, “aim for his head, lower the pistol toward his hip, and do not pull the trigger hard, only squeeze it slowly. At the command, move from your place.”

Walecki moved back and joined the other witnesses. Kotowski saw opposite himself the rather pale but smiling face of Kazimierz.

“March!”

Kotowski moved from where he stood, but, seeing his opponent’s pistol pointed toward him, closed his left eye and placed his weapon in front of his right one so that he saw as little as possible.

“Oh, why are the pistols not as thick as the pine trees?” he thought.

At that instant Kazimierz fired. Walecki began roaring commands:

“One—two—three—halt! Mr. Kotowski forfeits his shot. Halt!”

Then, assiduously fulfilling his duty as second, he hurried to Kotowski and took him aside for a moment.

“Is the duel over, then?” Kotowski asked, and sighed.

“What? Damn it! Didn’t you hear that you were going to shoot up to three rounds? But we will stop the proceedings after the second because you both have behaved well.”

“Make a statement... Perhaps we can be reconciled?” whispered Kotowski.

“Aim at his head, lower the pistol to his hip and squeeze the trigger slowly,” Walecki answered.

He went back to join the seconds. Someone handed Kazimierz a freshly loaded pistol.

At this point Kotowski noticed that the doctors had spread their gleaming instruments on the grass, and that the seconds were standing very far away from him.

“So that is how it is?” he muttered, seeing that those who were doing the offices of friendship for him had abandoned him and thrown him on the mercy, or the merciless rage, of his opponent, who had ceased to smile and wore a malign expression.

“March!”

Anger and desperation overwhelmed Kotowski. It was clear to him that Norski had set out to injure, perhaps to kill him. In the twinkling of an eye a calm as cold as ice gripped his soul. He aimed at his opponent’s head. He began to lower the barrel toward his adversary’s hip, slowly squeezing the trigger.

The shot hit completely unexpectedly, and when after a moment the smoke dispersed, Kotowski saw no one standing opposite him.

His opponent lay on the ground on his right side. His legs were drawn up under him. His face was white.

“What the devil—” thought Kotowski, too astonished to comprehend what had happened.

Both physicians and all the witnesses ran to Kazimierz. Kotowski stood where he was and looked on. After a few minutes, Walecki hurried over to him.

“Well, sir! You gave it to him,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Right lung pierced clean through.”

“That is absurd!”

“Go and see, then.”

“But I did not want this!” Kotowski moaned, tugging at his hair.

“It is not a question of what you wanted, but of what you did.”

“Oh, bloody hell!” Kotowski cried in despair.

Menzsko approached them and, together with Walecki, took the unhappy victor under the arms and forcibly conducted him to the carriage.

“I did not want this! I did not want—”

After a moment the carriage left for Warsaw.

When he had challenged Kotowski to the duel, Kazimierz had envisioned various outcomes: that his opponent would fall down on the spot; that he might be shot in the arm or leg; and even that the young doctor, terrified and unfamiliar with weapons, might shoot one of the seconds. In a word, Kazimierz expected anything—except that he himself might be wounded.

As he fell, Kazimierz felt no emotion and did not know when he fell, or how, or why. But once finding himself on the ground, he noticed that he was in a completely comfortable position which he had no thought of changing, particularly since he was with equal suddenness overcome by a profound indifference to the world.

If he could have formulated his thoughts at that time, this would have been the gist of them:

“Here I lie (though I do not know where) and here I will lie as long as I please, for so it pleases me.”

When the doctors had adjusted his position and begun to unfasten his coat and remove his vest and shirt, Kazimierz decided to play a trick on them and pretend that something had really happened to him. He closed his eyes and rested his head on someone, but with difficulty restrained himself from chuckling. Only when he felt a pain under his right shoulder and heard the word “bullet” did he say to himself:

“Have the doctors gone mad?”

He had no desire to open his eyes. Someone touched him on the right side of his chest and somewhere under his right shoulder blade, and he felt a burning pain in those places. He experienced vague internal sensations: not pain, but a sense of obstruction and strangeness. He wanted to cough; he began to be ill; he felt hot. A cold sweat broke out all over his body, and at that moment he was miserable. But he did not lose consciousness; it was not that he only wanted to show that he had not lost it, for that did not matter to him.

During this time, which amounted to nearly an hour, the doctors attended to Kazimierz while his friends hurried toward a monastery near by. They found a house with a room that could be rented for the use of the sick man and returned to the forest with two bearers carrying a litter.

Then Kazimierz open his eyes and asked:

“What is that for?”

He meant to add: “I will go on my own,” but a stabbing pain in his right lung kept him from finishing. Fright and drowsiness came over him, and it seemed to him that he swayed and grew queasy. These pains were not excruciating, but they were severe enough that he felt two streams of tears on his face. Then once again he ceased to care about anything.

When he recovered his sense of his surroundings, he saw a large whitewashed room in which both physicians were seated at a rude table. A window opposite him was covered with heavy linen. Later—the wounded

dueler had lost his ability to measure time—an unknown man, with the help of an elderly lady, put ice packs on him, one under his shoulder blade and another on his chest.

Kazimierz wanted to ask something; instead he cleared his throat, and felt such a sharp pain that he made up his mind never to cough again. He noticed as well that that unbearable pain pierced his chest with every careless breath, so he decided either not to take a breath at all, or to do so very carefully.

From that moment breathing became his most important business. Breathing was the source of his greatest pains, fears and pleasures. It seemed to him that suffering lay on his chest in the form of a snake. The cold monster slept, but every time Kazimierz tried to exhale fully, the snake bit him with a fang like a burning nail. At the very thought of that unnerving pain, Kazimierz was so filled with dread that he exerted all his wit to keep from breathing deeply. He bit his lips for joy whenever he succeeded in cheating the sleeping snake, and he barely kept from leaping from the sheets when he devised a way of breathing with the lower part of his lung. It was not proper breathing, but it did not induce pain.

In the meantime the unknown man and woman changed his ice packs, the one under his shoulder blade, the other on his chest. Now and again Kazimierz saw leaning over him the doctor who had assisted on his behalf at the duel.

After a while the sick man fell into a doze and dreamed. He imagined that he was a pupil at his mother's boarding school and that his professor (was it not Dembicki?) had ordered him to give a lecture on Kotowski.

"Kotowski? Kotowski?" he repeated, feeling troubled and thinking that he knew something about this subject, but he could not recall what. Was it a man, a machine, or perhaps some part of the world?

"Kotowski? Kotowski?" he repeated again, his whole body hot with fear that he would get a bad grade.

Once he overheard a conversation:

"Has he been spitting blood?" asked a deep voice.

"Only once or twice."

"Fever?"

"Very light, and it is already passing."

Kazimierz opened his eyes and saw a powerfully built man with a beard. It was Korkowicz. The sick man recognized him, but did not remember his name. On the other hand, he understood perfectly that if he could remember the name of that man, he would give a lecture about Kotowski without a mistake, and perhaps get a perfect grade.

He was very upset about his loss of memory and the extraordinary muddle of things that filled the whole room—that sat on the windows, the tables and the stove and even crept under the quilt with him.

Later he ceased to worry about the lecture on Kotowski. He no longer imagined that he was a schoolgirl. He did not even dream; he only slept.

When he was given milk or wine, it left a bad taste in his mouth; when his position in bed was adjusted, it seemed that his arms and legs were made of lead and connected to him only by threads. He was very tired and dispirited and wanted only to sleep. He even intended to say that no one should bother him, but he held his peace, convinced that to open his mouth and move his tongue was too great an effort.

Only on the eighth day after he was wounded, toward evening, did he come to himself. His mind cleared and, noticing an unknown man in the room, he spoke up suddenly:

“What the devil—so quiet—”

“Oh... is that you speaking, sir?” replied the unknown person in a tone of amazement.

“Who are you, sir?” Kazimierz demanded, shifting on his pillow. “Are none of my friends here? What is happening?”

“I am the barber-surgeon,” answered the mysterious stranger. “But there is a lady in the yard who has been coming to inquire about you for three days.”

“My sister, no doubt. Let her in.”

The barber-surgeon went out, and, it seemed to Kazimierz, did not return for an excessively long time. Then the door opened and a woman hurried in. She wore a black wrap and a thick woolen veil. She quickly drew near the bed, fell to her knees, and, pushing aside her veil, began to kiss the hand that dangled from the covers.

“I thought,” she whispered, “that they would bury us in one grave.”

It was Ada Solska.

Chapter XVI. A New Horizon Is Revealed

After the walk in the Botanical Garden, Magda was convinced that the son of her deceased headmistress could behave in a most tasteless manner, and that she had never really loved him.

But during his last visit to her, the character of her admirer had been displayed in a new light altogether. He was an egotist; such a profound, naive egotist that he could not even hide his elation when he surmised from the anonymous letter that the wealthy Miss Solska was in love with him. Once before Magda had seen him so transparently gratified, when at the Arnold's house she had assured Helena that she would not marry Solski. How delighted he had been then, how he had danced for joy, and how differently he had begun to treat Magda!

Egotist! Magda had heard the word hundreds of times, but only today had she understood its meaning. An egotist is a stone that only comes to life and grows beautiful when it suffers, or when it can exploit someone. But in the face of other people's misery it is blind, deaf, even cruel.

"How angry he was at me for visiting Stella and her child," Magda thought. "Contemptible man!"

At that moment Magda felt cold and bitter. She began to suspect that all people were egotists, and that in this desert of stony hearts a scant handful of people from Iksinow, the Solskis, and a little group of nuns were oases.

Eufemia and her mother, Mrs. Korkowicz, Zaneta, Helena, Zgierski, and multitudes, multitudes of others—were they not egotists?

"Ah, if Zdzislaw would only answer my letter," she said to herself.

A small incident soon occurred that reinforced Magda's conviction that selfishness was the law of the world.

The day after Kazimierz's visit, Magda was busy from noon until two. After the lessons the mother of her pupils came into the room—a woman witty and pleasant in her circle of friends, but abrupt and unforgiving with servants and teachers. This lady, very stylishly dressed, ordered the girls to leave, looked arrogantly at Magda, and said:

"I have been thinking. Perhaps my daughters will not be taking the examination just now. So... goodbye, and here is what you are owed."

She handed Magda a little wad of notes, nodded, and went out.

Magda nearly burst into tears. Fortunately she was saved by her new view of things—that selfishness ruled the world—and she controlled herself. She went out to the entrance hall, where no one handed her her wraps, and when she found herself on the front stairs, counted the money she had been given.

It was two rubles short; but instead of worrying, Magda laughed. The distinguished lady's odd behavior made sense to her.

The examinations would have taken place the next week; Magda and her pupils had completed the course and were reviewing. By shunting the teacher aside so brutally the employer hoped to save money, and had saved doubly. She did not need to pay for the final week—and she had paid two rubles less than were due for the lessons completed!

Magda had heard a good deal about this lady, who entertained scores of people at her gatherings but drew execrations from seamstresses, servants and teachers, any number of whom she had cheated out of several zlotys.

All that was true. Yet as recently as a week ago, such thoughts had not come to Magda. If she had been dismissed in that fashion a week earlier, she would have attributed the fault to herself, cried her heart out and fallen into despair.

Today she laughed at the selfishness of people. One would compete for a rich wife; others, if no prize so large were in view, at least at strategic moments would rid themselves of teachers and save two rubles on their wages.

“Oh, if Zdzislaw would write back!” she thought. “Perhaps there, where he lives, people are different. After all, there are poor people, and they know how to be grateful.”

She remembered the family of the teacher in Iksinow; Cecylia; Stella; the Korkowicz's laundress. They all had shown her kindness, for she alone had been kindly disposed toward them—toward those who were abandoned or suffering.

And, see! A great change had come about in her quite suddenly, in broad daylight and on a busy street. Her heart had turned away from the wealthy and complacent to the forsaken and the afflicted. At that instant she understood (as she had perceived instinctively from childhood) that she would only be truly happy when she could devote her life to those who were abandoned and suffering. She saw that if fate smiled on one of them, he would reject her without thanks and forget her without regret. But what was the harm in that? After all, there would never be any lack of people lonely or in pain, and she wanted only to serve them.

“Oh, if Zdzislaw would write back soon!” she said to herself. “After a few years we would return here. I would be caretaker, doctor, teacher to his workers, and if they did not need me, where is the place with a shortage of the unfortunate? This one hungry, this one ragged, that one sick, another unable to look after his own children: that is my realm, not the salons in which the crop of selfishness is cultivated.”

The day passed peacefully, but Magda's bitterness grew by the hour. There were moments when she thought she would be dismissed from the other house where she gave lessons. She was not dismissed, however, and indeed was kindly spoken to at her comings and goings. That household was not wealthy; no parties for scores of persons took place in it; and there was no likelihood that teachers would be discharged from it for no cause.

But the next day at nine in the morning a tired and feverish Mania Lewinska visited Magda unexpectedly.

“Oh, my dear, my precious,” cried Mania, throwing herself on Magda’s neck, “only you can save us!”

“What has happened?” Magda asked calmly, thinking:

“Perhaps Kotowski has lost his position, and this poor creature will tell me to marry Solski to get it back for him.”

“Imagine, my dear,” Mania said, “that Wladek Kotowski has had some misunderstanding with that unbearable Mr. Norski—”

How long had it been since Mania Lewinska had knelt before Magda, not daring to address her as anything more familiar than “madam”?

“Some serious misunderstanding,” Mania went on.

Magda looked at her in amazement. Miss Lewinska’s flow of words continued.

“Wladek does not want to tell me anything, but I am very, very uneasy. You are a close friend of Mr. Norski’s, so find out what this is about and appease him! Wladek and I are to marry before long, so if, God forbid, there is a duel—”

At this point she burst into tears. But Magda was unmoved by her despair and irritated by her demand.

“Have some consideration for me, Mania,” she replied. “Not long ago you asked me to obtain help for Wladyslaw from Mr. Solski, who was going to be my fiance, or so you thought; today you send me to Mr. Norski. Why?”

“You get on so well with him,” Mania sobbed. “You are his friend... he is often here... you go for walks with him.”

She cried so that Magda felt a twinge of compassion for her.

“Hear me, Mania,” she said, cradling her despairing friend. “Mr. Norski does not come here often now. He is estranged. But do not cry. At the moment he is thinking of marrying rather than of dueling, so put your mind at ease.”

Mania’s lovely eyes dried at once.

“Really?” she said. “So he is marrying? Ah, thank heaven! Thank heaven! A person who thinks of marrying does not harbor such a terrible intention as... to fight a duel.”

“Finally, my dear, why would there be a duel between these gentlemen when they may not even know each other?” Magda inquired.

Then Mania began to recount that her uncle, Mielnicki, had claimed that he was in debt to the deceased Mrs. Latter—which seemed not to be the case—and that, as a result, he had set aside four thousand rubles for her children, which at the most critical moment Kazimierz had taken from him. She added, however, that the four thousand rubles had been repaid with interest on behalf of Kazimierz by Mr. Korkowicz, whose son Helena Norska had married.

Hearing this, Magda felt pity and contempt for Kazimierz. She knew that Mielnicki had not been in debt to Mrs. Latter.

After this conversation the ladies parted from each other warmly. In Magda's memory, Kazimierz was buried forever. Mania Lewinska returned home with her peace of mind restored, soundly judging that if Kazimierz were thinking of marrying, he could not risk himself in a duel with Kotowski, who, moreover, as a physician and a man of progressive views and great vigor, might do his opponent great harm.

"I would have worried as well!" thought Mania, walking along the street while all the gentlemen turned to look at her. "Surely that Norski would have been insane to challenge Wladek to a duel... Wladek, whom even I am afraid of sometimes!"

Again a few days passed peacefully.

On Saturday, as Magda was turning from Marszalkowska onto Krolewska Street, a light carriage blocked her way. Out of it jumped the elder Korkowicz, who seized her by the hand and began to speak:

"How are you, madam? A good thing that I have met you. I am in such difficulty..."

"Does he want me to be his children's teacher again?" Magda thought, taken by surprise.

"Imagine, madam," he said breathlessly, "that ass Norski was in a duel with Dr. Kotowski yesterday and got a bullet through his chest—right through!"

"Who?" Magda exclaimed.

"Norski, of course. That Kotowski is a raging animal. He spared him on the first shot, but on the second he let Kazik have it so that now he's lying, the beast, unconscious in a cabin in the Bielanski Forest. But... but... my Bronek has already married Helena Norska. She'll give him a run for his money! She'll just show him!" he said so loudly that people on the street looked around. "A queen of a woman. By God, I'd have married her myself. In a year there'd have been nothing left of me, but what a time I'd have had—"

"But—" Magda interposed.

"Excuse me. That wounded man, though a greater rascal than my Bronek, was always a fellow of some distinction. Now he is our relative, and if Satan's imps are not to take him away, needs diligent supervision—motherly care! The barber-surgeon and the old woman who is attending him are not enough. The word is that you know the nuns from St. Kazimierz (so my wife says, anyway), and so, dear Miss Magdalena—"

"What can I do?"

"Go to those nuns and ask them to delegate one or two of their number to take that fool under their care. I'll pay as much as they want; three hundred, five hundred rubles. After all, we cannot just leave the fellow there, for he is a child of the upper class—of good family. And with such, it's as with an English piglet. If you don't get it a veterinarian right away, it's better to slaughter it. Well?"

“Yes, I will go to St. Kazimierz,” Magda answered.

“God bless you, Miss Magdalena !” cried the old brewer. “I would carry you there, but I must dash off to the surgeon and with him to Bielany. I will not let my daughter-in-law know about this evil turn of events, for it would spoil Bronek’s honeymoon, and he is such a stupid creature that he would get upset and go into debt again. Be well, madam! My dearest regards!”

He pressed Magda’s hand and jumped back into the carriage, which sagged under his weight. The impatient horses crouched on their hindquarters, then moved on.

Magda was so frightened that instead of continuing to Krakowskie Przedmiescie she went toward Graniczna Street. Only after walking a few hundred yards did she regain her presence of mind and retrace her steps.

“He was in a duel? So I misjudged him when I thought he was on the hunt for a wealthy young woman. Shot in the chest like Cynadrowski... perhaps he will die. Death, death all around! The warnings are more terrible because I do not know where they are coming from.”

Her heart was pounding; her head was spinning. On the corner of Ewangelicki Square, under the open sky, she drank some soda water that a peddler was dispensing from a siphon, and it calmed her.

“Gravely wounded,” Magda thought, “and he is lying in Bielany under the care of a barber-surgeon and an old woman. He is suffering and abandoned, almost like Stella! If Helena were here, I would watch over him with her... although she might think I was in love with him and wanted to marry him.”

She felt so weak that she got into a cab and ordered the driver to take her to St. Kazimierz. A few minutes later she was waiting for Mother Apolonia in the receiving room, which she did not find oppressive today. Perhaps she was less attentive to her surroundings than before.

Gliding footsteps could be heard in the hall and the elderly lady walked in.

“May Jesus Christ be praised... How are you, my child? I see that you have not forgotten me; or perhaps you have another singer... Oh, but you are drawn,” said the nun, embracing Magda.

“I am worried,” Magda replied, and told the older woman the purpose of her visit.

Mother Apolonia listened attentively, but her face clouded over and her large headdress began swaying rapidly.

“My child,” she said after a moment, “really, a man wounded in a duel is like a man who commits suicide. Well—for that matter, God will judge him. Now, then, we would not have the temerity to refuse the Korkowicz such a service if it were not that we are short of sisters. We have so few of them that we cannot send them to private persons without compromising our own patients. Let them take him to a hospital. But you appear unwell.”

“This incident has frightened me. Surely you have seen wounded people; can a person live who has been shot through the chest?”

“Everything depends upon God. If God wants to save someone, He saves them in spite of the most serious wound. For the rest, men are like cats: shoot a man through the head, the neck, the chest and he is restored to health if God pleases. You and the Korkowiczses need not be apprehensive.”

The aged woman was watching Magda closely. Suddenly she said, taking her hand:

“Eh—my child, attend to what I have to tell you. Come with me; I will show you our institution. One cannot upset oneself over the accidents a frivolous fellow brings on himself of his own accord. But it is true that you women in the world, who are so intrepid in drawing room conversations, lose your poise when you are near the sick.”

As she spoke, Mother Apolonia began to conduct Magda around the building. She showed her the modest chapel; before its door nuns fell to their knees, their white headdresses inclining forward. Then they walked around the large bedrooms for orphans and the nuns’ small rooms, in each of which stood several beds screened from each other by curtains. Then they went to the large rooms where orphans who appeared well cared for were learning to sew and mend linen.

Everywhere Magda was struck by gleaming cleanliness and serenity, a strange serenity that soothed her agitated soul. She felt that she had left all bitterness and pain on the threshold of this singular institution whose inhabitants seemed like a bustling army of ants.

“Here is our refectory,” said Mother Apolonia, opening the door to a room with two windows. “At that table sit the Mother Inspector, the Mother Assistant, the Sister Steward and the Under-steward. At those two tables are places for the sisters of my order, and behind that pulpit at dinnertime one of them reads the meditation for the day.”

“You do not converse with each other at dinner?”

“But that would not do!” Mother Apolonia answered, as though the very idea were scandalous. “In general we converse very little, for there is no time. And here, you see, is a chapel for evening prayers...”

“What do you ladies do in this institution? Excuse me for asking...”

“Everything. We supervise the kitchen, we do the washing, we scrub the floors. We sew the linen, the dresses, the bedclothes. Everything we need we make ourselves.”

“And when do you get out of bed?”

“We go to bed at nine in the evening and we rise at four in the morning. Then holy mass and—to work!”

“And the younger sisters and novices do the same?”

“If not more. We want them to know for a certainty that our life is not easy. Then only those will remain who truly have the calling.”

“A beautiful calling, but a hard one. Do none regret entering upon it? Some so pretty... Perhaps more than one would prefer to be a wife and mother rather than the caretaker of other people’s children.”

“Do we stand in the way of those to whose lot it falls to marry?” Mother Apolonia replied in amazement. “Indeed, from our novitiate, or even from my order, come good wives. But the world does not attract everyone. Many a one prefers to endure hardship, to be the mother of orphans and the bride of Christ.”

Magda took a step backward.

“The bride of Christ!” she repeated in a choked voice.

“What is it, child?” Mother Apolonia exclaimed, seizing her hand.

Magda leaned against the wall and rubbed her eyes. After a minute she answered, smiling:

“I used to laugh at nervous people. But now I see that I, too, have nerves.”

The worried nun led Magda into one of the small rooms, seated her on a couch, and hurried out into the corridor. Soon she returned with a small glass of white wine and a few biscuits.

“Drink, child,” she said. “Eat a little. Perhaps you have had no food? Something is the matter with you. Fear God and tell all, as if to your mother.”

The wine and biscuits restored Magda’s strength. She recovered her humor and began to speak in her natural voice:

“Please, ma’am, it is nothing very bad. It is only this: once I attended a session with a clairvoyant who was in her trance. When I came in, she turned toward me and said something like this: ‘Here is the bride, but I do not see the bridegroom, though he is great and powerful.’ So just now, when you alluded to brides of Christ, it affected me strangely.”

“You were afraid that we would keep you among us and perhaps immure you in a cell!” the older woman replied, laughing. “Do not fear. So many candidates present themselves to us that we could hardly accept a quarter of them, even if we had room. We do not seek to enlist them. They ask to join us.”

“And would you accept me if at some time I made up my mind to enter?” Magda asked lightheartedly.

“Those who need only to make up their minds we do not accept at all.”

“But whom do you accept?”

The older woman paused, brooding.

“You see,” she began, “we sisters of charity are flawed beings, just like other people—perhaps even inferior, certainly inferior, to other people. But all those who belong to this group have one trait in common, I do not know whether through instinct or the unmerited grace of God. It is this: in each of our

sisters, personal inclinations are overridden by a desire to serve—each other, the abandoned, the suffering. I know that women of the world have richer emotions than we have, that they are better, more highly educated, more refined and tenderhearted than we. We are simple women, inured to adversity, often tired; so what to persons of the world is true dedication to us is a necessity of existence, even something selfish. For that reason, our merits are to each other not merits, as the year-long green of the pine is not a virtue by comparison with the trees that lose their leaves in winter. And so a person in the world for one good deed may gain access to the kingdom of heaven, to which we may not gain access for wearing the habit and nursing the sick all our lives.

“As a bird is born to fly, so a person who will someday, by the grace of God, be a sister of charity is born to serve the suffering. But whoever does not have that calling in her soul will not be a nun, even if she is immured in a convent.

“And you, my dear, though you are good and compassionate to those in need, will not be a sister of charity.”

Magda blushed and lowered her eyes. She did not have the calling to be a sister of charity! But her life until then had been a continual passion to serve the unfortunate.

“You, beloved, will be in the world,” said the elderly woman, “and there you will do people more good, and win access to the kingdom of heaven more easily, than we here.”

“What is necessary to enter the convent, then?” Magda whispered.

“First of all, this is not a convent, only a gathering of people from which even the sisters go out,” Mother Apolonia explained. “Next, I will answer your question. In order to be a sister of charity, it is not enough to have a need to serve those around you. It is possible to show such devotion in the world, without renouncing freedom and appropriate recreations. With us, in the meantime, life is secluded and strict, our labors are great, and we lack the freedom for which you yearn.

“That is why only two classes of persons are successful in their petitions to us: either those who have an aversion to the world because it has nurtured them with too much bitterness, or those who think continually of God and eternal life and find nothing for themselves among temporal things.”

“If only that world existed!” Magda whispered involuntarily.

The older woman stepped back and crossed herself, but after a moment said gently:

“You poor child! But it seems to me that you are so good and innocent that God will not deny you His grace.”

In the twinkling of an eye fear seized Magda. She remembered the ominous words Mother Apolonia had spoken earlier in their acquaintance—that sometimes God blocks people’s way in order to bring them to Himself.

Rested and refreshed, Magda said goodbye to the elderly lady. The nun kissed her warmly, but it was clear from her look and tone that she had lingering concerns about Magda.

“And come to visit us. Do not forget!” she said.

When Magda had gone out to the street, she felt something like a twinge of longing for the goodhearted nun, the peaceful hospital, the cleanliness of its corridors, the flock of orphans, the greenery and silence of the garden. The silence that so filled it ran in streams through her soul. If the sisters had rented apartments in their institution, she would have moved there immediately.

“If I were a sister of charity,” she told herself, “I could have been a mentor to Kazimierz without fear of suspicion and rumor.”

And perhaps she would never have thought of Solski, rather than struggling more and more often with momentary but haunting memories of him.

“Oh, Zdzislaw, write to me!” she thought. “You could certainly have written by now.”

For the rest of the day the expectation that unwelcome news would come at any moment left Magda quite worn out. Someone, she thought, would inform her that Kazimierz had died; that there would be another duel; perhaps that her father was ill. She waited feverishly, and waited; her heart pounded every time someone came up the stairs with a rapid step. But there was no bad news.

“My nerves are overtaxed,” she said to herself. “Oh, if I could go to the country! If the good nuns would let me sit in their garden for a few hours every day, I would be better.”

That night she did not sleep; she only dozed and dreamed. She seemed to see some panorama in which, behind glass, shadows larger than life moved about: shadows of Kazimierz, Cynadrowski, Stella, Mrs. Latter. At the same time a voice, monotonous and tired, said didactically:

“This is the value of human life! Mrs. Latter, admired by all, is a handful of dust. On Cynadrowski’s tomb are faded flowers planted by Cecylia. Stella, with whom the young men of Iksinow fell in love while the young women envied the bouquets and applause she received, lies in a nameless grave. Kazimierz Norski, so handsome, clever and cheerful, will soon be transformed into oxygen, hydrogen, grease and iron. This is human life.”

Magda woke, looked at the wall on which the starlight that shone through her window was falling and thought:

“Is there another woman my age on earth whose sleep starts up such outlandish visions?”

But because she was already becoming indifferent to her suffering, she closed her eyes again, only to see other images of the graveyard and to hear the sad, tired voice that spoke of the misery of life, and later of something not even intelligible.

"If Zdzislaw does not write," she thought, "I shall go mad!"

At noon the next day Magda went to see Miss Malinowska, who had returned from the country. It was Sunday, but the school was noisy. Girls and their mothers moved through the halls. Professors and classroom teachers hurried here and there.

Magda, not wishing to take up the headmistress's time, had decided to go away and return later when Miss Malinowska appeared and led her to her room.

"My head is bursting!" said the harassed headmistress. "Two days ago I came back from the country and at once I was in the thick of things. How are you, Miss Magdalena?"

She was troubled and uncomfortable, but Magda attributed it to the press of post-holiday business. Not wishing to infringe on her benefactress's time, she said without preamble:

"I have come to apologize to you because I cannot be a classroom teacher here—"

"Really?" Miss Malinowska interrupted, and her face brightened. "What are your plans?"

"I want to go to my brother, who is director of a manufacturing enterprise near Moscow. In a few years we will return here, my brother will establish a factory, and I will be his housekeeper and open a school for the children of our workers."

"You do excellently in going to your brother!" Miss Malinowska exclaimed enthusiastically. "Instead of the hard bread of a teacher, you will have your own home, you can marry, and above all you will be away from Warsaw. Unbearable city! When do you want to go?"

"I expect a letter from my brother any day. Perhaps I will go in a week."

"I wish you success," said the headmistress, kissing Magda. "A very good idea. Come to me before your departure, and—escape, escape as far from here as possible!"

Miss Malinowska hurried to her office. Magda returned home, wondering:

"What does this mean? Why did she tell me to escape from Warsaw? Ah, I understand! She is weary of the work of the school, and more so today, when she has just arrived from the country and stepped into this chaos. But she is right; Warsaw is unbearable."

A painful time was beginning for Magda. In the home of her remaining pupils, who were now entering school, lessons had concluded, so that, apart from a few hours with Dembicki's niece, she had nothing to do.

Each morning she was beset by an urge to go out, but what for, and where? So she sat alone at home, distressed because she was doing nothing, and waited for a letter from Zdzislaw.

“Surely it will come today,” she thought. “It did not come in the morning, so it will come in the afternoon. It did not come today, so it will come tomorrow.”

Every time she heard the postman’s familiar step on the fourth floor, she ran feverishly to the door.

“And is there a letter for me?” she would ask. “For Brzeska?”

“There is nothing, ma’am,” the postman would answer with a bow and a smile.

“That cannot be! Please search in your bag.”

The postman would take out a packet of letters, and he and Magda together would glance through it. There would be nothing for her.

“Not well done, Zdzislaw!” she would whisper, aggrieved.

She consoled herself with the thought that he might have gone away for a few days or a couple of weeks, and—when he had returned to his factories—would summon her immediately. Now and then, however, the thought came to her that her brother might have gone away for a holiday and might stay for another month. Then despair overwhelmed her.

“What will I do during that time?” she said, fearfully envisioning sleepless nights and endless hot days without work, without friends, without even a reason to go out of the house.

Once she decided to go to Iksinow, if only for a few days, but she gave up the plan. She thought of the gossip about Stella and her child and her courage failed her.

For how would her old friends there receive her? How many questions and remarks about her refusal of Solski’s proposal would she have to listen to? Finally, the letter from Zdzislaw might arrive.

Once, after finishing the lessons with Zosia, she took the girl to Lazienki. They walked until evening, fed the swans, and imagined how fine it would be if they were permitted to sail a little boat around the pond. After that outing Magda felt her energy and cheerfulness return. But when she had taken Zosia back to Dembicki at the Solski palace, she saw Ada’s lighted windows and a terrible sadness gripped her.

She would never return here. She would never see Solski! Many things could change even now, if it had not been for that unfortunate stroll with Kazimierz. Why had she walked with him? Why had he kissed her and undone the bond that attached her to Solski? For certainly, after what had happened then, she could not be Solski’s wife.

Kazimierz had paid for his action; but what would happen to her now? It was already happening, for she had begun to understand that only Solski could reconcile her to life and reveal unknown horizons of happiness. With him she could find peace and purpose, with him her soul would heal and thrive—her

soul, which today was full of doubt and ambivalence and drying up like a leaf plucked from its branch, which does not know where fate will fling it.

After dinner one day during the week following Kazimierz's duel, a tired Dembicki made his laborious way to Magda's room. He apologized for visiting her so rarely, explaining that it was very difficult for him to reach the fourth floor. He asked if she had work, if she was well. He rubbed his head behind his ear and in the end began to chat about the weather with the air of a man who is trying in vain to avoid bringing up something troublesome.

"Dear professor," Magda interrupted with a smile, "surely you did not visit me to speak of the heat. I assume you have something unpleasant to tell me, and I would like to hear it as soon as I may."

"No, indeed; something pleasant. But... but... I must enter upon it diplomatically!" he said, waving a hand.

"Exactly. That will be best."

"The thing is this. You know that Norski was in a duel..."

"Has he died?" Magda asked anxiously.

"Nothing of the sort! Kazimierz would cheat the gallows if it were short; only a high one could harm him. You see, it was on behalf of that fortunate man that Miss Ada came to me today. She knelt before me and directed me to kneel before you, which of course I will not do, and begged—and do you know for what?"

"I cannot guess."

"For this," he went on, "that you, madam, not stand on ceremony and that Norski not stand on ceremony, but that the two of you marry, also unceremoniously. For Miss Ada is aware that you love Norski and that he loves you. So if you are in difficult material circumstances, Miss Ada begs you on her knees to accept thirty thousand rubles from her to establish your household..."

At this point Magda burst out laughing so heartily that the mathematician opened his mouth as if to yawn, and executed several absurd movements which he considered expressions of extreme merriment.

"I have more to tell you," he continued, waving his hands like a plucked goose that wants to fly, "still more to tell you. Miss Ada herself is infatuated with Norski. Yesterday she traveled to Bielany and today she was there again. Miss Ada adores Kazimierz, and if she wants to make a match between him and you, she is making a sacrifice of the highest order: she is immolating herself for the ungrateful!"

"Let her not immolate herself," Magda replied. "I swear to you, and I am ready to repeat to Ada and Kazimierz, that if he were the only man in the world, I would not marry him. There were moments when I thought I loved him. But today—knowing him better—I am convinced that he is no more to me than a tree or a stone," she added with a blush. "I understand that a woman must sacrifice

herself—must lose herself—even for an imperfect man, but on condition that she believes in his competence and character. I have lost that faith.”

“I will tell Ada,” said Dembicki, “that you do not love Norski. About your opinion of him I will be silent.”

Magda applauded the professor and began to laugh again. Her companion helped her as he could with expressions that were supposed to signify a passionate burst of satisfaction, and in fact signified nothing at all.

Chapter XVII. Darkness and Light

At the moment when Magda was flushed and tearful from laughing and the learned mathematician was grimacing like a severed head under the influence of an electric current, the door of the room opened. On the threshold stood a strange man.

He was young and fairly tall. He wore a long coat. His dark beard and whiskers contrasted painfully with the unhealthy pallor of his complexion. When he removed his hat, large gray eyes surrounded by dark rings could be seen, and hollow temples.

The newcomer looked at Dembicki, then at Magda, who gazed at him with a fading smile and rose from her seat on the sofa.

“Do you not know me?” the visitor asked hoarsely.

“Zdzislaw?” Magda whispered, frightened.

“You see, you did not recognize me at first. I must have changed!”

Magda ran to him with outstretched arms, but he pushed her away.

“Do not touch me! You will be exposed...”

Magda threw her arms around his neck passionately and began to kiss him.

“Zdzislaw! Zdzis! Dear Zdzis! What are you saying? What does this mean?”

The visitor did not resist her, but maneuvered his head in such a way that she could not kiss him on the lips.

“Well—enough. You had better introduce me to this gentleman, who is looking at us as if we were lunatics.”

“My brother Zdzislaw... My very good friend, Professor Dembicki,” Magda said breathlessly.

Zdzislaw shook hands with Dembicki, sat down on the sofa, and said sententiously:

“Enemies follow our funeral processions to make certain that we have really died and are buried for good. Our friends follow for the fun of it.”

Magda looked at him in amazement.

“Where did you come from? What is happening to you?” she asked.

“I gave up work and I am looking for a comfortable place to die. Why do you look at me that way? It is very simple: I have galloping consumption, and I am in the last stages. If it were not for the fear of death, which in some incomprehensible way augments my remaining strength, I would be dead. For three weeks I have been sleeping in an armchair. If I were once to lie down, in an instant my head would fall down into the pit of eternal night with which I am

struggling, but which today or tomorrow will get the victory. What a monstrous thing: to exist for a little while, only to turn to nothingness forever. Forever!”

Magda went pale as she listened to him. From time to time she put her head in hands. Dembicki fixed him with a mild, steady stare. Excited by their attention, the sick man spoke on in a tone full of emotion:

“You, healthy people, have no conception of death. It presents itself to you as a lyric poem, not as a darkness in which an abandoned corpse putrefies and stinks. You do not ask yourselves questions that may spawn dreams in a brain being slowly suffused with decomposed blood. What is it like for a man’s remains, when sand and vermin fall on his face instead of air and sunlight—”

“Merciful God, how horrible,” Magda whispered, covering her eyes.

“And above all, how ugly,” Dembicki remarked.

“Eh?” inquired Zdzislaw.

“And preposterous,” Dembicki added.

“Tell that old gentleman, Magda,” the sick man said angrily, “that I am a chemist and a director of industrial installations, not a schoolboy!”

“I educated some thirty such directors as you,” Dembicki said serenely. “That is why I tell you that your chemistry did not teach you to think clearly, nor your directorship to master yourself.”

Brzeski leaned back and looked at the professor in astonishment.

“A character!” he muttered. “I have never met such an impertinent person.”

“Because you have never yet had occasion to frighten young ladies with visions which may seem dramatic to them, but which only turn a thinking man’s stomach.”

Brzeski started up and said in a hoarse voice, shaking his fists:

“But, my dear sir, I am dying. I will die today or tomorrow. And you are healthy as an ox—”

“For many years I have had a serious heart ailment,” Dembicki replied. “There is not a minute in which I can be certain that I will not die. Nevertheless I do not terrify ladies—”

“You have a heart ailment?” Brzeski broke in, grasping the professor’s hand and pressing it. “How very pleasant for me! Very pleasant to meet a colleague. Perhaps you would poison yourself along with me, for it is foolish to wait. I have some excellent prussic acid.”

Magda looked at them and wrung her hands. Her head was beginning to spin.

“And you think about such matters constantly?” Dembicki inquired.

“A humorist! And what should I think about, what can I? On a day when I am looking at people and the fever of their life, I feel alien among them and I

imagine the moment when all the wisdom, the collective shout of all humanity will not be able to waken me and remind me that I was once as they are. In the night I do not put out the light, and I continually look over my shoulder, because it seems to me that the inapprehensible shadow will slip through any fissure. In no time it will fill my room, the whole world, the universe, and plunge me in such bottomless oblivion that if some superhuman wisdom transfused fresh blood into my veins for a second time, I would not recall that at some other time I had existed. Everything would be strange to me, even our garden in Iksinow. Nothing would move me, Magda—not even your astonishment or our parents' weeping."

"Oh, Zdzis, dear! Zdzis, what are you saying?" Magda whispered, her eyes streaming with tears.

"For a dying person, you are exceptionally verbose," said Dembicki. "I do not know if you will die of consumption, but you could enter a hospital for those whose wits are wandering, that is certain."

"My mind is clear!" Brzeski stormed, for the professor's words had struck a nerve. "Everyone has the right to speak about what occupies his thoughts. Well, surely the termination of life is a subject of interest to one who is losing it."

He began to pace around the room, shrugging and muttering.

Magda was gazing at him aghast. Was this her brother, that cheery, unruly Zdzislaw with whom she had played when they were children? It seemed only yesterday that he had swung in the top of the lime tree, and today he was talking about death in a way that was driving her to despair.

Magda perceived at once that Dembicki was making a strong impression on her brother. She almost sensed that in the sick man's soul, another fear was manifesting itself along with the fear of death. Could he be afraid of the madness to which the professor had alluded? In any case, that Zdzislaw's attention was being diverted from one subject was no bad thing.

"But Dembicki—where did he come by that insolent, sarcastic way of speaking? I have no idea how a man so soft-spoken could take such a tone," she thought.

Her brother never stopped his pacing. His mutterings grew more and more articulate:

"Upon my word, this is a splendid fellow! The devil knows what he comes straying into my sister's room for, and he will not let me, her brother, talk to her about what ails me. In a month, perhaps in a week, I will lie in a dark coffin in a cold church, alone. Then I will be out of everyone's way. But he wants to make a corpse of me today. And for the sake of stupid conventions that teach that it is indecent to complain, he stifles my individuality and interrupts my train of thought—my last, perhaps!"

"You are resolved to cling to your obsession," Dembicki remarked.

"Take your psychiatry and go to the devil! Am I speaking incoherently?"

“You cannot go beyond the periphery of one thought. That is monomania.”

“But consider, sir,” said Brzeski, breathing with difficulty and shaking his fists next to Dembicki’s nose, “consider that that one thought—is a great thought! After all, in the pit where you will throw my remains, it is not only a man who will decay, but the entire universe: the universe that is reflected in my brain, that lives, and still today—is. But tomorrow it will not be. For you my death will only be the disappearance of one individual, but for me it will be the annihilation of the whole world: all the people who live in it, all landscapes, the sun, the stars, all the past and future of that world. Understand: that which to you is a commonplace development (as long as you yourselves do not undergo it) to me is an all-encompassing catastrophe. Nothing that I see or have seen or have ever thought will remain.”

“Briefly stated,” Dembicki said, “it seems to you that after so-called death there follows so-called nothingness?”

Brzeski looked at the professor attentively.

“What you mean, ‘seems to me?’” he replied. “It does not seem to me, it simply is. How does it seem to you?”

“I am convinced that death is succeeded by a longer continuation of life, which differs from the present existence only in this, that it is a fuller life.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“I would not think of it. I am certain of my position. Thanks to that certainty, though I am at higher risk than you, I am always in an even humor, while you are in a melodramatic frame of mind.”

Magda was hanging on every word. Her brother was speechless with amazement. Suddenly he asked Dembicki:

“I beg your pardon, professor. Are you a theologian or philologist?”

“No. I am a mathematician.”

“And you say—or rather, you believe—that death—”

“Is a longer, fuller continuation of life,” Demicki concluded.

Brzeski moved away from him and sat on the sofa. Magda felt that an arduous and unexpected struggle was taking place in her brother’s heart. The thought crossed her mind that it was cruel of Dembicki to arouse such hopes, but at the same time she was seized with curiosity. On what grounds had he spoken as he did? It was true that he had hinted at a belief of this sort more than once in the past.

“Nothingness and—eternal life... eternal life...” At the very thought, such wild joy awakened in Magda’s heart that she felt prepared not only to assuage her brother’s anxiety but to die with him, if only she might sooner enter into that fuller life.

“And you, sir, a mathematician, say that,” Brzeski said challengingly, “in defiance of conventional wisdom, which in place of metaphysical delusions posits

two axiomatic certainties: energy and matter. These two," he said abstractedly, "create a constant flow of existence on which individual waves appear, endure for a time, and dissipate, giving place to other waves. I am one of those waves—and, see! I am reaching the end of my term."

"And what are this energy and this matter?" Dembicki asked.

"They are what act on our senses, on chemical reagents, on scales, thermometers, manometers, galvanometers and so on," Brzeska answered, and fell to brooding again.

"Science told you that and nothing more?"

"Nothing."

"Well, it was kinder to me. Mathematics tells me about various types of numbers, only one of which is apprehensible by our senses, and also about forms and dimensions that our senses can in no way perceive. Physics teaches that the energy of the universe is indestructible, and chemistry informs us that what we call matter is equally indestructible and is composed of atoms inapprehensible by the senses. Biology shows me an endless richness of life forms, the origin and nature of which are beyond our experience. Finally, psychology counts an entire litany of properties and phenomena that cannot be grasped by the senses, but are more or less perfectly known to anyone who observes himself.

"And now, if you please, where is the evidence that nothingness follows death?" Dembicki continued after a brief pause. "And what precisely is this nothingness? What sensory observation has discovered nothingness in the universe, whose tiniest fissure is filled either by heavy or light matter and real ether?"

"I am not speaking of a void in the material world, but of the extinction of psychic processes that endure for a certain time and then are extinguished for ever."

"How do you know that psychic processes are extinguished? In what way does this being extinguished manifest itself?"

For the first time Brzeski smiled.

"You are comical, sir! Deep sleep, coma, states of anesthesia—what are they?"

"A momentary suspension, not of psychic processes, but of our awareness of them, after which that awareness returns."

"But after death there is no new awakening, since our organism undergoes dissolution."

"Is it a chemist who speaks? If your point involves the dissolution of the organism, it dissolves constantly. Every second. And let us not leave the matter there. Our organism alters itself completely at least once a year. Not one particle in it remains the same; it is certainly a creation foreign to its former self. The result is that at least once a year, seventy kilograms of human flesh become a

corpse, and you, sir, who are perhaps thirty years old, have given your organism back to the air and the earth thirty times. None of those thirty deaths annihilated you or even disquieted you; only at the thought of the thirty-first do you make a scene, wax sentimental about your remains, and even set up an alarm about the end of the world. How, on the other hand, are those, the newest remains, more worthy to be mourned than the previous thirty? By God, I do not understand.”

“Ah, well!” Brzeski exclaimed, and to his sister’s amazement he laughed. “If these are your arguments, professor, you have me at your feet! He expounds old theological humbug that even priests’ housekeepers laugh at and thinks it is philosophy.”

“Perhaps I will expound some more recent humbug,” Dembicki began.

“Oh, do speak! Do speak!” cried Magda. She jumped up from the sofa, kissed the professor on the wrist, then backed away, embarrassed.

“This philosophy of which you are so proud,” Dembicki continued, “and which so exquisitely prepared you to face death, this philosophy believes and asserts that there are no real effects without real causes. Is that not true? On that premise, if the column in a barometer rises, we say that the atmospheric pressure increases, though we see neither the atmosphere nor the pressure. Similarly, if the needle in a galvanometer connected to a circuit inclines downward, we say an electric current runs through that circuit. In a word, we judge that changes taking place in a mindless column of mercury and in a mindless magnetic needle must have real causes though we do not see them, we do not hear them, we do not smell them, and so on.

“Let us now examine another fact. For many centuries, millions and hundreds of millions of people have felt instinctively that their lives would not end at the time of death. Likewise, long ago many powerful minds—the greatest geniuses of humanity—have consciously believed and formulated to themselves quite definite concepts of the soul, eternal life, a world beyond the apprehension of the senses, and, finally, of God.

“So we have an effect, one that manifests itself in the most perfect of mechanisms: in human beings. And if the motions of a magnetic needle bear witness to an active current, why should the motion of minds in the direction of an invisible existence not have a cause in reality?”

“That is also a vapid argument,” Brzeski retorted. “There are no existences apart from the material. There is only a strong craving for life in people, a self-preservation instinct. And that builds dreams around the theme of futurity.”

“Thank heaven! So we have an example of a nonutilitarian instinct. If a stork or lark flies south in autumn, we know that he finds there a warm country with abundant resources for him; but when a man longs for eternity, we say that his hopes are fictions. What a fine thing this positivism is!”

“And what if that is the case? In the end, the human instinct for self-preservation is useful for the maintenance of our species. It allows healthy

individuals to frame far-reaching plans which others can execute, while sweetening the final moments for the sick and dying.”

“Aha!” Dembicki countered. “So God or nature, or in any case some higher power to which we owe all existence, devised a whole series of transcendental deceptions to spare you boredom or anguish in the last moments of life? A peculiar confusion of concepts! After all, according to you materialists, nature is truth itself and never lies. Only today have we found out that it lies in one case: when it endows a man with an aversion to death!

“With your permission—I am of a different opinion. Aversion to death means simply this, that between death and the soul there exists a deep disharmony. A fish taken from water and put into air, or a bird submerged in water, writhes and is in distress in the same way as a man who thinks of nothingness, for nothingness is a poison to the soul. You feed yourself on contemplation of it, and so you are full of alarm, you are going mad. I do not believe in nothingness, but in life, and so I make a joke of death. Morally, you are sick; I am well.”

He rose and began to look for his hat. It was already dark outside.

“You are leaving, professor?” Magda exclaimed, taking his hand.

“I am tired,” Dembicki answered in his usual voice. The orator in him had gone quiet and he was an infirm old man.

“Professor,” Brzeski spoke up, “go to the hotel with me, and let us have dinner together, the three of us. I will stand you champagne. You know, little Magda, I have three thousand rubles on my person, and I am insured for twenty thousand. You all will have them when I am gone—”

“You are falling into that mood again!” his sister broke in. “You see, professor: he was more cheerful as long as you were speaking, and now that you want to leave—”

“The professor was chastising me, for certain,” Brzeski said cheerfully, “but I must admit, the medicine did the trick.”

“You will not have a relapse?” Dembicki asked with a half-smile.

“Well, that will not happen. You called my attention to the fact that I could go mad before I died, and that brought me to my senses. Do not be surprised at my behavior. For several weeks I have been alone, constantly beset by thoughts of death. Yet a man is a social animal, and I cannot be continually preoccupied with one subject.”

“Zdzis, dear,” Magda exclaimed, “you will be well, I swear to you. He does not have consumption, does he, professor?”

“Perhaps not.”

“Oh, if that were true—if he wanted to cure himself and began to think like you, professor, do you know what? I would marry you!”

“That would not be worth your trouble,” Dembicki answered. “But only say that you want to marry and I will find you a husband, and a good one.”

“Never,” she replied in a subdued tone, with such a look of regret that Dembicki abandoned the subject. He took his leave and went out, promising to visit the Europejski Hotel, where Brzeski was staying. Just as he reached the stairs, Magda hurried after him and whispered, squeezing his hand tightly:

“What do you think about Zdzislaw?”

“I think he is gravely ill.”

“But he walks... he speaks...”

Dembicki shrugged and began to make his slow way down the stairs.

When Magda had returned to her room, her brother said indignantly:

“How funny you are with the secrets in the corridor! I know that you asked about my health. But whatever he said, that philosopher of yours, it does not alter my conviction. I am doomed. There is no getting away from it. I will die any week now. All the same, the old man has done me a service. I will manage to fill my remaining time, meditating on his faith in a future life. Happy man... idealist... optimist! We people of today cannot be like that.”

“So you do not believe what he said?” Magda asked, surprised.

“My child, those are old hypotheses, but they do not amount to evidence, and even less to facts. One believes facts, not phrases.”

“You know, Zdzislaw,” Magda said suddenly, “I will telegraph to father that you are here—”

Her brother seized both her hands in a tight grip. “God forbid!” he said fiercely. “I will flee the country to avoid seeing our parents.”

“I will go with you, then. I have money—”

“You—will—not—go!” he answered in the tone of one who will not be opposed. “Let me at least die as I please. I do not want goodbyes—tears—scenes—”

“Zdzislaw!”

“Listen, Magda: we must settle this issue once and for all. If you tell father or mother, if one of them comes here or if you insist on going with me, I swear I will poison myself. Do you understand?”

Magda began to weep quietly.

“Comfort me as you like,” he said irritably. “Bring Dembicki, provided that doctors do not come. Do with me what you like, but—no scenes, no maudlin displays. I have lived without all of you for so long that it would be torture to me to die among you.”

“What—so we must abandon you?”

“You must. And you, Magda, above all.”

“Oh! What are you saying?” she cried, kissing his hands.

“Enough. Please! Do not badger me with tears or I will jump out the window and onto the street. I have told you what I require and to what you can push me with your sentimentality. And now, if you like, take me to the hotel.”

He said that with a wild look; he was short of breath and extremely agitated. Magda understood that there was no opposing him. She wiped her eyes, dressed for the street, and, stifling her sobs, helped her brother into his coat and accompanied him to the hotel.

Zdzislaw was fretful all the way. When they found themselves in his room, he began to look at his tongue in the mirror and take his pulse. Then he took a thermometer from his valise and put it under his arm.

“I cannot believe that you are really so ill,” Magda said. “How did this happen to you?”

“I got a chill. I had pneumonia. I neglected my condition and—now it has all gone awry.”

“We thought you were completely cured.”

“So I thought at first. Later it made no sense to alarm you. There was nothing you could have done.”

He sat with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He was feverish; every few minutes he felt his pulse. In order to divert his attention from the thoughts that hovered over his head like a flock of ravens, Magda began to tell him what had transpired in her life during the last two years. For her it was an exercise in soul-searching, but her brother was not listening closely. When she asked what he thought of her, he replied:

“My dear, can a man standing over his grave think of anything except that grave? All else is folly!”

“And you can speak so after what you heard from Dembicki?”

“Phrases!”

They were both silent. He looked with flashing eyes at a candle. Magda bit her lips but did not burst into tears. Around midnight she asked him if he did not want to sleep.

“No more of that!” he retorted. “Do I ever sleep at night? I am afraid that death will take me unaware. I nap during the day, for amid the hubbub I feel safer.”

“Lie down now, dear,” she said, kneeling beside him.

“Have you lost your mind? I never lie down because my blood might choke me.”

“Try tonight. I am here, after all. It is not sickness but sleeplessness and disorderly habits that have exhausted your strength. If you slept comfortably in bed every night, you would see that you are not so very ill.”

She pressed his hot, moist hands. Zdzislaw brooded and finally said:

“Yes, sleep in bed seems pleasant to me. But I am afraid—”

“Try it. I will prop the pillows high. It will be as though you were in a chair.”

Brzeski looked at the bed.

“I would try—but what if I died on your hands?”

“Have no fear, dearest. I will watch over you. I will put my hands under your back and if I notice that you are uncomfortable, I will raise you.”

Brzeski smiled, walked over to the bed and sat down. He made an effort to lean back on the pillows, but fear gripped him. Then Magda made him sit down on the sheets and carefully began to adjust his legs. He resisted; he trembled and said with a spasmodic smile:

“Well—enough. I am sitting on the bed. I have made enormous progress, for I was avoiding the bed before. Let me be... Magda, dear... darling... do not make me lie down. I will certainly die before your eyes.”

But Magda had already laid him on the pillows.

“What—does that feel bad to you?” she asked.

“It feels good—only how long will it feel so? Push those candles away from the table, dear, for they are looking me straight in the eye, as if I were a corpse. Ah... only hold my hand or raise me...”

Magda pulled away from him, got up and quickly moved the candles from the table to the dresser.

“You see,” she said, sitting beside him and taking his hand again, “nothing happened to you even though I went away.”

“But how my heart is pounding,” he whispered.

Slowly, however, he grew calm. Magda sat by him, listening to his rapid breathing and feeling his pulse.

“Your Dembicki is a singular fellow,” he said. “I see him before me all the time. What fancies! He made me a bit giddy!”

“Imagine,” he began again after a moment, “some time ago, when night fell, I saw something like a black molding just at the ceiling. It was really a black curtain that gradually lowered itself into the room. I understood that when it reached down to the top of my forehead, I would cease to think, for beyond that veil there is nothing, only blackness. Infinite blackness, reaching to the edges of the Milky Way, the nebulae... and so dense, dense as iron. The awful mass surrounded me on every side and smothered me.

“Later it seemed that I was a dot—that I was nothing, and that I lay in an unfathomable void that the universe had filled at some time. The universe had disappeared together with my life, as the image of a man disappears on turbulent water. The universe disappeared and only a void remained, a void without color, without form or direction. Ah, if you knew how that tormented me—”

“Do not think of it, then,” Magda whispered.

“Indeed, I think of it even at this moment,” he replied with a smile, “because something strange happened. I see a black veil now, as it hangs from the ceiling above my head. But do you know what? Tonight that blackness does not seem so very thick, so very dense. Only throw some light on it and it retreats like a shadow. And beyond it there is still a vastness, but—a vast amount of room—a whole infinity in which there may be something.”

He rested for a moment, then said:

“Now I see that void without color and direction that frightened me so terribly. But, looking at it in a less fearful state of mind, I begin to notice some obscure shapes. There is nothing definite, but there is not that deadening sameness amid which nothing could be created. All this is the result of your Dembicki’s fables.”

“So you are beginning to be convinced?”

“Oh, no!” he protested spiritedly. “It is a very natural process. Onto the gray, empty background of my ruminations he threw a handful of phrases that were bound to etch themselves on my imagination. He did a job on me, the old fox! From now on I will not be able to think of nothingness as it deserves; whenever I see it, I will see the results of his inquiries at the same time.”

The vigor of his speech subsided. “My Magda,” he said in a muffled voice, “if I fall asleep, wake me right away, because... you see... And if you notice that I stop breathing, take my arms and make me sit up on the bed. Even sprinkle water on my face. Is there water here?”

Within a few minutes he was sleeping. As she looked at him, Magda thought that it was impossible that this man was sick enough to die. He was ill, but above all he was unnerved and exhausted because of the lack of order in his life.

Her hopes rose when Zdzislaw woke around five in the morning and declared that he could not remember when he had had such a fine night’s sleep. He coughed a little—he felt a bit tired—but that came as no surprise to Magda.

“He is better than I thought at first!” she told herself.

Chapter XVIII. Untitled

At around ten in the morning Zdzislaw, at Magda's suggestion, dressed from head to toe in clean linen and fresh clothes. That put him in such an excellent humor that he began to hum in a hoarse voice; declared that he had the appetite of a wolf; and ordered a breakfast of tea, raw cured ham, and eggs.

But when the attendant brought the meal, Zdzislaw consumed one egg, put a piece of ham to his lips, made a face and spat it out.

"There! You see," he said to Magda, "this is my life. The organism burns away at an abnormal rate and the appetite does not make up for the deficiencies."

He began to look in the mirror at his wasted, sunken face, his yellowish tongue, his parched lips. Then with his watch in hand he counted his pulse and exhalations, and finally he put the thermometer under his arm.

"Darling," said Magda, clinging to him, "call in the doctors. I believe that the greater part of your illness is in your imagination—"

"The devil take the doctors!" he said vehemently, pushing her away. "I have had enough of them. They have already sounded me and listened to me with their instruments from every angle."

"What harm does that do you?"

"It wears me out. I killed myself with ten consultations, and when I think of an eleventh, I feel as if I were going to the scaffold!

"As long as they lay me on the couch," he added more calmly, "and do not hover over me, as long as I cannot see their silly faces, I can delude myself. It is only their stethoscopes, their hammers, their raised eyebrows and their hangman's tact that reminds me that I am sentenced and there is no appeal."

"But, Zdzis, dear, you are not that sick. Ask to see a few of the best and simply demand that they tell you the truth."

"To hell with their truth! I have already tried that. At first each one says that it is nothing; later, when I press him, he admits that I am terminally ill, and in the end, thinking that he has frightened me too much, he wants to turn it all into a joke."

As he spoke his face grew very warm and red. He began to walk around the room and resumed his tirade.

"What do I want with doctors? Do you think that I have no books, that I have not studied about consumption, that I do not examine myself? Fever at nightfall, sweats in the morning, failure of appetite, rapid, irregular breathing and pulse, continual loss of weight..."

"But you do not cough much."

"Of what significance is that?"

“And in spite of some debility, you are still strong—”

“A momentary improvement, after which my condition will worsen again.”

“So you do not want to be treated!” Magda exclaimed in despair.

“Indeed I do,” he replied. “They ordered me to go to Meran. Tapeiner, the leading expert on consumption, will examine me there and give his opinion, and I will abide by it.”

Magda folded her hands, looked at her brother with brimming eyes, and said pleadingly:

“I will go to Meran with you. I have money...”

Zdzislaw reflected.

“Certainly,” he said. “After my consultation with Tapeiner, I will write to you.”

“What for? I want to go with you now. I—”

Her brother backed away from her and, striking himself on his chest, answered angrily:

“Listen, Magda. If you let our parents know of my condition, or force yourself on me, I swear I will poison myself. Here, in this room! Let me do what I please for a week—for two weeks.”

Magda understood that she must do as he ordered. But she could not help but hope that her brother was not seriously ill.

“You will see!” she said. “You will see. You will recover.”

“How amusing you are!” he retorted. “Do you think I never assume that? Science tells me that I have consumption of the lungs, the throat, even the bowels. But hope sometimes cautions me that I may err and that there exists a one-in-a-thousand possibility that I will not only recover my health, but be able to work.”

“Oh, yes! Always speak so!” Magda said ardently, throwing herself on his neck. “But will you send for me immediately when you arrive in Meran?”

“Immediately after my consultation with Tapeiner.”

“And will I be with you all the time?”

“Until I die,” he replied, kissing her on the forehead. “If you escape, I will hunt you down. I know that only you can nurse me... only... do not oppose me.”

“Well—then go to Meran!” she said resolutely.

“Very soon; patience! Give me a few days to rest.”

They both laughed.

“Oh, you... you hypochondriac!” she scolded.

“Perhaps it is hypochondria.”

“You know,” she remarked after a moment, “since you are so rich, take a cab and let us go for a couple of hours in the air.”

“What air you have here!” he rejoined. “I will have air in the mountains, but here I prefer to wait for that extraordinary fellow. For the first time in my life I have seen a mathematician who maintains, with a straight face, that he believes in the immortality of the soul.”

“He truly believes, and must have reasons.”

“Happy man!” Zdzislaw sighed.

At noon Dembicki arrived, turned out in his best clothes. He had a brown coat, rather tight in the back, a white pique vest that hung loose in the front, and light gray trousers with a little stain below the right knee. He held his hat and cane in one hand and his summer overcoat in the other. One of its sleeves trailed on the floor.

At the sight of the professor in that outfit, neither of the Brzeskis could keep from smiling.

“Aha!” exclaimed Dembicki. “Consumption gives way before your sister?”

Magda greeted him warmly. “Do you know, professor,” she said, “that Zdzislaw slept in bed for the first time last night? He was dressed, but he was lying down.”

“And what is more interesting,” Brzeski added, “is that against the background of posthumous nothingness, forms began to appear to me—movement—”

“So quickly!” Dembicki replied.

“The inevitable effect of yesterday’s conversation with you, sir. Normally, closed eyes see only darkness; but when the glaring light tires them, apparitions may be seen against the dark backdrop.”

“A good sign,” said Dembicki. “It proves that your sense of what is spiritual has not died.”

“Oh, how good you are!” Magda exclaimed. “Go on speaking as you did yesterday and I am certain that Zdzislaw will be converted.”

Brzeski smiled. Dembicki replied coolly:

“I have come to finish yesterday’s conversation. But I must warn you, my friends, that I have no intention of converting you. I am not an apostle and you are not the lost sheep of my fold. You are to me what the reagent is to the chemist and the thermometer, the galvanometer, to the physicist. I admit that to begin with.”

Dembicki’s tone was so dry that a shadow of dissatisfaction flitted over Magda’s face. But Zdzislaw pressed the professor’s hand.

“You impress me again, sir,” he said. “In reality, the theory of the immortality of the soul, expounded for the purpose of comforting the sick, would be—I beg your pardon—a cheap placebo. I—please do not take this for

conceit!—know too much to be imposed on by phrases, and you are far too honorable to be capable of that.”

Dembicki put his hat over the teapot and the butter. He stood his cane in the corner; it fell down. He sat in an armchair, folded his arms, and without preamble asked Zdzislaw:

“Why do you not believe in the existence of the soul as separate and distinct from the body?”

“Because no one ever saw it.”

Magda quivered. A strange feeling had come over her when she heard the question put so simply.

“And why,” Dembicki continued, “do you believe that the phenomenon called light comprises four hundred to eight hundred quintillion vibrations per second? Who has seen those vibrations?”

“What is known about those vibrations is the result of calculation based on the fact that two rays of light, striking each other, may extinguish each other.”

“And is this—that you and I and all people think and feel—not a fact as valid as the reciprocal extinguishing of rays of light?”

“But the fact that people think in no way proves that the soul is something separate from the body. Indeed, it may be, and certainly is, a motion of brain cells. Without the brain there is no thought.”

“And how do you know that? Until Gilbert’s time it was thought that electricity existed only in amber; today we know that it may exist throughout the universe. Ordinary people think that in a place where water freezes, and even more where mercury freezes, there is no heat, whereas physicists are certain that, two hundred and fifty or even two hundred and sixty degrees below the point at which water freezes, there is still heat.

“From this we conclude that, although today we detect the soul only in the brain, our successors may discern it in a plant, in a stone, even in what is called a barometric vacuum.”

“Well,” said Zdzislaw, “those are only suppositions. Meanwhile it is a fact that thought is a function of the brain.”

“Oh—just so! Perhaps you would care to prove that?”

“You know the proofs, so I will only enumerate the main points. We see in the animal world that the most expansive development of the brain corresponds to the greatest development of the intellect, whereas we know from the human world that an excessive or a meager flow of blood to the brain weakens or extinguishes thought itself. That alcohol, coffee, tea, as they stimulate the circulation of the blood, stimulate the process of thought. That when the brain withers in old age, the intellectual capabilities weaken at the same time.

“The experiments of Flourens were decisive in this regard. He obliterated consciousness in pigeons by excising layers of their brains. When the brains grew back, the pigeons recovered consciousness.

“At any rate—what more can I say? You know the second volume by Moleschott entitled *The Circulation of Life*. And you, Magda, could at least read the eighteenth letter, ‘On Thought.’”

“Now I am the one to ask that you not think me conceited,” said Dembicki. “But I must say, for many years I could not help but marvel that such astute people as Molleschott or Vogt were so naive about questions of evidence. To put it briefly, all the experiments done on the brain—examinations of temperature and chemical products of the brain, such as electric currents—and all forms of damage to the brain, deliberate or accidental, proved only one thing: that the brain is the organ of the soul. A man with a damaged brain thinks poorly, or cannot show that he does think, as a man with a damaged eye sees poorly or does not see at all, and a man with an injured leg walks poorly or does not walk at all.

“Meanwhile, in nature the phenomenon of movement is by no means exclusively associated with the muscles, nor sensitivity to light exclusively with the eye. A falling stone moves though it has neither muscles nor nerves; a photographic plate and the element selenium are sensitive to light though they possess no optic nerves.

“So if mechanical motion can exist apart from muscles, and sensitivity to light apart from the eye, why should thought, feeling and consciousness not exist apart from the brain? Without the brain there is no thought; without amber there is no electricity! Think, sir, if that is not childishness.”

“Excellent!” cried Brzeski. “Now, professor, it only remains for you to show us the soul in a stone or a barometric vacuum.”

“No, sir. I cannot show you the soul, or that chain by which the distance between the earth and the moon is measured, or four hundred quintillion vibrations per second. For there are facts inapprehensible by the senses. But I will do something else: I will pose new questions for your consideration.”

“That is not really the same.”

“It comes to the same thing. In the meantime, listen. More than a hundred years ago, someone asked Voltaire: ‘Can the human soul live after death?’ The great satirist answered: ‘Can the nightingale’s song remain after the death of the nightingale?’

“Hidden in the witticism is a great truth. But do you know what happened slightly less than a century after that ingenious reply? Along came Hirn, Joule, Meyer—and they proved that after the death of the nightingale the nightingale’s song does not really survive, but the energy contained in it remains, and will remain for all eternity. In other words, the song of the nightingale as a vibration of the air operating upon our hearing disappears; but the product latent in it of half of velocity squared times mass—or that which constitutes the soul of

the song—will live forever. There is no power in nature that could destroy this invisible, and yet real, form of existence.”

“Well, that is still not the same as the immortality of the individual soul, of a person’s ‘I,’” Zdzislaw interrupted.

“Wait! This is not that, but there is always something, or rather there are two ‘somethings:’ a real, though invisible, existence, and an eternity—not the one old ladies at church speak of, but the eternity of physicists. Remember, then, that there are realities that are not perceived by the senses, and that immortality may be proved scientifically—”

“But not for my soul.”

“That will come, too; not immediately, but it will come. At the moment I will call your attention to this, that the immortality of energy and matter, proven by facts and calculations only in our time, was felt intuitively for thousands of years. The Greek philosophers formulated those intuitions quite articulately, while Spencer is of the view that a sense of the indestructibility of matter and energy inevitably impresses itself on every mind. So in this regard science has not made a new discovery, but only confirmed what people at large had obscurely felt.

“You will certainly not deny that humanity possesses this intuition of the immortality of the soul, though not all people possess it to an equal degree. The race does not see this truth clearly, but makes out the general contour of it; the universality of the feeling constitutes an important indicator.”

“There are, however, people who do not have it,” Brzeski interposed.

“There are also people who are insensitive to light—who are blind. You will be glad to know, however, that—just as by way of compensation there are people gifted with such exceptionally fine vision that they see the moons of Jupiter without the glass—there are also people gifted with an exceptionally strong sense of the spiritual. They talk about the soul and the supernatural world as we do about Saxon Square, at which I am looking this minute.

“The aversion to nothingness, innate in human nature, is the more remarkable because we visualize nothingness as a deep sleep. Why, we are as familiar with deep sleep as with the state of wakefulness. So a deep sleep is even a very pleasant phenomenon, but contrariwise, life and feeling are now and then filled with suffering. Nevertheless the thought of eternal sleep frightens us, and the thought of eternal wakefulness, even though not free from pain, fills us with consolation.

“Human nature abhors nothingness; the attraction to eternal life is almost universal. So if there exists a school of philosophy that believes in and proclaims its belief in nothingness, it needs to have powerful evidence. For those who share a universal faith, or rather a universal instinct tending in a certain direction, do not offer evidence, but those who point in a new direction.

“See—as you will conclude, the system of physical proofs not only has no scientific value, but is based on absurdities so flagrant that they are astounding.”

“I am already beginning to be astounded,” Brzeski observed, “but—at what you have said.”

Magda stared at the professor as if he were a creature from another world. She hardly dared to breathe.

“I will tell you a story,” he continued. “A certain person, confronted with the fact that ordinary people were enchanted with lantern slides, decided to investigate the matter personally. To that end he went to a lantern slide show, but in order not to be unduly influenced by the reaction of the crowds, which is very often fallible, do you know what he did? He sealed both his eyes—”

“You go too far, professor!” Brzeski exclaimed.

“Wait. Our philosopher, then, sits at the spectacle with sealed eyes, hears the music of the barrel organ and the applause of the crowd, and draws his conclusion.

“‘I note,’ he says to himself, ‘that this audience claps most often when the organ plays sad tunes, but laughs when it plays lively ones. The viewers in the first row are the most animated, since they sit in cushioned seats. During the last series of pictures a solemn silence prevailed because the lantern began to smoke and the smell of burning filled the hall.’

“So what would you say about such an investigator of lantern slides?” he asked suddenly.

“That he is a fool,” Zdzislaw replied.

“You are right. Such an investigator is a fool, for he used the wrong sense for an inquiry into a certain group of phenomena, and what is worse, he sealed off the appropriate sense.

“Now I will tell you another story. Another learned man wished to investigate the properties of light. To that end he lighted a naphtha lamp and conducted a series of experiments with it that showed that impure naphtha gives a poorer light than pure; that at the raising of the wick the light shines brighter, and at the lowering of the wick it shines more faintly; that the light also weakens when mildew grows on the wick, or when we press the wick with a stick; and so on.

“Finally he finished his experiments and on the basis of them reported that light is a function of a wick and naphtha; without a wick and naphtha, light does not exist. Light has no other properties but those that can be investigated on a wick with the aid of a screw and a stick. After the wick burned down the light went out; and so on.

“Meanwhile someone familiar with optical phenomena rebutted him, pointing out that light can exist apart from its source, as is proven by the stars, which can be extinguished for centuries, while the light from them nevertheless streams through infinite space. That light has other properties than a wick: it

reflects, it refracts, it divides into individual colors, it polarizes, and so on. That, finally, one would have to be a fool not to distinguish light from a wick, or to base optical science on the products of the combustion of naphtha.

“See, dear Zdzislaw! A man comprises three different things: an organism, which corresponds to a wick; a physiological phenomenon that corresponds to the beam that arises from the burning of naphtha in air; and—the soul, which corresponds to light. That soul has its extracorporeal properties and its phenomena beyond the physiological. The soul is not a product of the digestion and oxidation of food, but is the original form of energy or motion that has its place, not in the substance that makes up the brain, but in something else entirely—perhaps in the ether that fills the universe.”

“I do not grasp the purpose of your comparison,” Brzeski put in.

“You see, I meant that materialism gained something like a factual basis from the time when some wished to use physiology to explain, and perhaps replace, psychology. What came to light? This—that by injuring the brain it is possible to induce paralysis, eliminate the faculty of speech, bring on derangement, even efface consciousness. In other words: by damaging the wick, it is possible to cause smoking of the lamp, even to extinguish the light.

“But does physiology explain the nature of the soul to us? Not at all. For it was not physiology that discovered that the fundamental manifestations of the soul are thought, feeling, will; nor does physiology say that we possess passive capabilities, memory, creativity, sympathy, purposefulness. Physiology, then, with its whole system of dissecting and tying, electrifying, poisoning and so on, is not the proper organ for the investigation of the soul, as smell or hearing are not the proper organs for the investigation of lantern slides.

“The nature of the soul—its multifold capabilities and the infinite chains of spiritual phenomena—was not discovered for us by sight or by the scalpel, but by internal observation, by our sense of ourselves. So that sense is the proper sense, the only sense, with which we can carry out a direct investigation of the soul.

“I do not claim that anatomy and physiology have nothing to contribute to psychology. Indeed, discoveries relating to the speed with which the mind processes sensory information, the heating of the brain when it is at work, its utilization of certain materials, its electric currents, and a host of other findings can be of enormous consequence on the practical level. Thanks to anatomy and physiology, we are acquainted in more detail with the astonishing factory in which the most wonderful actions in nature are executed. The time may be coming when those sciences will describe and explain for us the structure of every executing mechanism of which our nervous systems are composed. But they never will describe and explain the fundamental property of the soul, which is feeling.

“I feel the color red and the color green. I feel high and low tones. I feel hardness and softness, heat and cold. I feel the aromas of vinegar and roses, I feel

hunger or difficulty in breathing, the movements of my hands and feet. I feel joy and sadness, love and hate; I feel that I desire something, that I fear something, that I am remembering the past. Finally, I feel that some of my mental constructs correspond to facts perceived by my senses, and others are my own creations.

“In a word—I discover a whole world of phenomena that are only various forms of feeling, of that strange feeling that feels even the existence of itself. And at the same time I notice that neither physics or chemistry nor cell theory nor all physiological experimentation taken together tell me: what is feeling? For it is an elemental fact, unique to each person.

“I know that millions of suns wander and burn in space, that millions of beings live all around me, that all people think, enjoy, desire, remember. But I know as well that feeling—which I possess and with which I encompass the whole world—that my feeling is like nothing else in nature. I cannot feel anyone else’s feeling and no one can feel mine. I cannot peer into the depth of anyone else’s feeling, and no one can peer into mine. In this regard I am exclusive and irreplaceable. And on this point you were correct when you stated yesterday that if your soul, or your feeling, were extinguished, one universe would perish with it.

“This feeling, this ‘my feeling,’ is not a property of that which we call the material organism.”

“This begins to be interesting,” Brzeski said meditatively.

“You will allow me one digression,” said the professor. “Materialist views easily gain popularity, particularly among young people who are beginning to study natural science. That is because they are not well educated in philosophy, because of the passion for novelty which characterizes youth, and, finally, because of the clarity of the natural sciences and the order that prevails in them.

“These are, however, secondary causes. But do you know the fundamental reason for the popularity of materialism? It is hardly possible to believe, but indeed it is this: the reason people so easily accept materialistic views is—guess what: a certain grammatical abridgement!

“We usually speak in this way: ‘Fire burns.’ ‘A stone is heavy.’ ‘Two and two are four.’ ‘The sun is twenty-one million geographic miles away from the earth.’ Meanwhile these are abbreviated forms of speech; to be precise, one should say, ‘I feel that fire burns.’ ‘I feel that the stone is heavy.’ ‘I continually find that two and two are four.’ ‘On the basis of observation, or sensory awareness, I conclude that the sun is twenty-one million miles distant from us.’

“There is a vast difference between these two forms of speech. For a person uneducated in philosophy, when he says for short that the stone is heavy, imagines that he voices an unconditional truth which exists apart from him. But when we say: ‘I feel that the stone is heavy,’ we understand as we speak that the heaviness of the stone is not a revelation of reality existing outside ourselves, but a formulation of the state of our feeling.

“Note this: all our judgments about the external world, all the loudly touted ‘observations and experiments,’ are based on these fundamental facts: I feel something, I know something, I believe something. Does the real world truly exist? And does it appear as we see it? Or is all nature an illusion of our senses, a lantern slide that lasts only as long as we ourselves live? We are not certain.

“But one thing we cannot doubt: that we have a sense of ourselves and of something that is not ourselves. That is to say, we feel our own souls, on which external influences operate.

“From this explanation two important conclusions may be derived. The first is this, that it is illogical to explain spiritual phenomena with reference to material phenomena. It is illogical to explain a more certain truth by reference to a less certain truth.

“What we call nature is the sum of our feelings—of our sight, touch, musculature, hearing—the product of our souls. We have no more right, then, to take ourselves for the product of nature than a clockmaker has to say that he was built by his clocks. Even less do we have the right to assert that our souls are epiphenomena of brain cells, or of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, hydrogen, phosphorus. For if what we call, for example, phosphorus is the sum of the sensations our soul is experiencing, then that sentient soul is something other than the sum of its sensations—is at least the canvas that receives the impressions.

“The second point is still more interesting. Materialists say: ‘Nature is composed of energy and matter,’ whereas one should say: ‘Nature is composed of energy and matter, and, above all, of the soul, which feels and describes nature.’ So that which we call reality is not bipartite (comprising energy and matter) but tripartite (comprising spirit, energy and matter), and we are more certain of the first of its three parts, namely spirit, than of the other two, energy and matter.

“And so from that observation flows a conclusion of enormous consequence: if physics and chemistry proved the indestructibility of energy and matter, they proved by the same token the indestructibility of spirit. For spirit, energy and matter are not three things independent of each other, but three sides of the same triangle. My spirit, which rose to such a level as to perceive the immortality of its own creations, must itself also be immortal, only richer, fuller than they in expressing the grandeur of immortality.”

At this point Magda wept.

“Why are you sniveling?” her brother asked.

“You do not hear...”

“I hear a treatise that amazes me. But it is only a philosophical system, a mental construct—”

“But I find it more comprehensible than your grease, phosphorus and iron, which poisoned my life... and yours, dear Zdzislaw... and the lives of many others!”

Brzeski's eyes flashed and a hot flush came over his face. Dembicki sat in an armchair with his hands propped on his outstretched legs and his lip thrust out, as calm as if he did not see the young people whose emotions were stirred, only his own chains of reasoning.

"I am quite overwrought!" Brzeski whispered. He began to pace around the room, rubbing his forehead now and again.

"Eh?" the professor inquired. "What is it? Are you worse?"

"On the contrary, I am better!" Zdzislaw replied, smiling. "Much better! But I have tired myself. You are opening a new universe so different from the one I know, so laden with its own richness of fancy, that my head is swimming."

"I understand," Dembicki said with a wry look. "You have read so much about your dyes, oils, cells and atoms that you have not had time for philosophical questions. So you are tired, like a man who mounts a horse for the first time."

Chapter XIX. Untitled

Both the Brzeskis invited Dembicki most pressingly to eat the afternoon dinner with them. He agreed on the condition that they allow him to go home and look in on Zosia.

Within an hour he was back, and the three ate dinner in Zdzislaw's room. During the meal Zdzislaw, who was in an excellent humor, told them about his career in industry, and how he could have made a large fortune and secured the future of his parents and sisters.

"You will make a fortune yet!" Magda exclaimed with conviction.

"Pshaw!" he retorted carelessly. "Perhaps I will. But first I must speak with Tapeiner."

Magda looked gratefully at the professor. It would have been hard to find more compelling evidence that her brother's disposition had changed for the better.

After dinner, at Magda's suggestion, they went to the Saxon Garden. They sauntered slowly, like old men going to a wake, and when they found an empty bench by a walkway off Marszalkowska Boulevard, they sat down. Zdzislaw moved a little apart from the others, and Magda whispered to Dembicki:

"Do you know—he is not talking about death."

Her brother heard her and rejoined:

"Not only am I not speaking of it, I am not even thinking of it. I do not know if we will ever meet in another world, but it is more pleasant to think of matters relating even to a fantasy of immortality than of rotting in one's grave.

"Professor Dembicki is correct: we young people are not well educated in philosophy. We even have an aversion to metaphysics. Meanwhile, metaphysics teaches that it is possible to look at the world from another point of view than the materialistic one. And we have nothing to lose from this new view. For if nothingness is our fate, at least we have not lost time grieving ourselves about it too soon. But if beyond the gates of death there really is a more perfect world, materialistic philosophy does humanity a disservice...

"Although—everything may be only a dream!" he said after a moment. "Yet I, living on the edge of my nerves, may be soothed for a few days by metaphysics. But if all people forgot about reality!—"

Dembicki smiled.

"How difficult it is," he said, "to shake off strong habits! For you the soul, in relation to matter, always seems less real than the body, whereas the soul is more real than the body, is the only reality. You are afraid humanity will lose itself in dreams, in contemplation of the spiritual world. But we must be occupied with this world. We are this world, it is in us, it is our being and our future. At any rate, it is at least a mirror in which sensory nature is reflected. People will not forget

about nature and real life. Hunger, cold, thirst and a thousand other incentives are excellent mnemonic devices. It is only necessary to maintain a balance: not to lose ourselves in our interior life, not to dissipate our life into the senses, but, walking on earth, to hold our heads in heaven—until we can remove ourselves there entirely.

“Concerning metaphysics, which materialism so abuses, ah, Mr. Brzeski, how little that materialism knows about modern science! It is certainly common knowledge that great science unapologetically violates the boundaries of the senses and sails out onto the ocean of metaphysics.

“Take astronomy, which says that light, traveling one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second, must take four years, twenty years, five hundred years and thousands of years to reach the nearest stars. What means do you have to apprehend that kind of distance with your senses?

“Take physics, which, as it attempts to elucidate dimensions of the atom for us, provides this example: on the head of a pin are eight undecillion atoms. If we counted them by removing one million atoms from that pinhead every second, we would finish our calculation in two hundred and fifty-three thousand years. It is no wonder that after such an exercise Clerk Maxwell said: ‘What we see is made of what we do not see.’

“And do you recall those hundreds of quintillions of vibrations of ether per second? Or take the ether itself. It must be a thousand septillion times less dense than water, but it is neither gas nor dust; rather it is a stable, constant substance, a type of jelly. Ether must be a billion times less rigid than steel, but every English inch exerts seventeen trillion pounds of pressure. Tell me if that study in metaphysics does not carry us far toward the realm that you call fantasy. And it is, after all, only the conclusion derived from scientific observations of material bodies and phenomena.”

“So one must always doubt ! One will never know the truth!” Zdzislaw burst out bitterly, striking the ground with his cane.

“You cannot touch the truth with your finger or glimpse it with your eye, but it may be found by the spirit, and in the spirit,” replied Dembicki.

Because a chilly wind sprang up, they left the gardens and returned to Zdzislaw’s room. Dembicki sat in the armchair and Magda helped her brother into a half-reclining position on the sofa.

“The professor owes us an explanation,” Brzeski began. “You said, sir, that feeling—this ‘my feeling’—is not a property of the material organism. So of what—”

“I will explain. But first, tell me: how do you imagine, on the material level, a thought process? What happens in the brain?”

“Anatomy and physiology have not found clear answers to that question; we do not know what happens, we only guess.”

“My Zdzis, let this drop,” Magda broke in, “or you will become a materialist again.”

Zdzislaw smiled and said:

“We must remember that nerve cells are machines of quite varied types. Some help the muscles contract, others are receptors: some of light exclusively, some of sound exclusively, others of heat, still others of smells. And because nerve cells are marked by such a variety of capabilities, it is reasonable to suppose that some of them possess, in combination, the capacity for thought. Every time some change occurs in a cell—most certainly a chemical change, accompanied by heat and electricity—something like a spark of mental process awakens in that cell. And as a great beam of light is created by individual sparks, so from spiritual processes that are rudimentary and inarticulate because they exist on a small scale arises thought, far-reaching, articulate thought...”

“Ah, Zdzislaw!” Magda exclaimed, “do not speak so. You will see that it will be bad for you.”

“She always thinks she is at school,” her brother retorted.

“Yet I must confess,” he continued, “that the psychic aspect of thought does not present itself to me clearly. What chemical changes are necessary for feeling to awaken in a cell? Is every chemical process a form of feeling, or do only brain cells have that high function? I could not answer.

“I must add that brain cells are capable of retaining, as it were, traces—old impressions—and that capability is the basis of memory. I have finished.”

Magda looked inquiringly at Dembicki.

“It is not necessary for me to refute or to prove what you have said,” the professor replied. “I prefer to prove something else: that feeling together with its extensions—which we call perception, deduction, awareness and, in general, thought—that feeling can in no way be a product of the brain. One’s own feeling, which each of us possesses, is an elemental fact. If it is impossible to enable a blind man to comprehend what color means, even with the aid of the most intricate combinations of sound, odor and touch, it is still less possible, with the aid of whatever motions of the nerves, whatever physical or chemical processes, to explain the phenomenon of feeling.

“Feeling unveils the whole world to us, yet one million such visual and tactile worlds do not explain feeling. Perhaps some day chemistry will break down the chemical elements, perhaps some day it will succeed in turning lead into gold. But no one will ever reduce to constituent parts the elemental fact: I feel, and no one will make feeling through chemical and physical processes.

“And if you ask for evidence, I will answer: such is our deepest sentiment on this matter, such is the conviction of our soul, the power that gives us our awareness of all nature and decides, by itself alone, what is true and what is untrue. Consequently, if some physiologist opened a living, healthy human brain for us, if he displayed its microscopic wave motion and explained that this

vibration denotes anger, that one love, this one the color yellow, that one a sour taste, we would see and perhaps even remember the forms of those vibrations, but we ourselves would not feel that sourness or that love or that yellowness. We would feel nothing.

“On the other hand, if that ‘my feeling’ is an illusion, then everything is an illusion: man and nature, matter and energy, life and death. There would be nothing to care about, talk about, think about. Then it would be most fitting to take in the illusory hand the illusion called a pistol and blow up that other illusion called the brain.”

Dembicki broke off and looked at his hearers. Zdzislaw lay on the sofa with closed eyes; Magda sat by her brother with his hand in hers and gazed at the professor.

“Are you not tired?” Dembicki asked.

“Not at all!” she exclaimed.

“On the contrary,” Zdzislaw added, “we are very interested. I feel that you are moving closer to some conclusive evidence—”

“You are right,” Dembicki said. “I am getting nearer to the crux of the question. Whether the proofs I will cite for you are new I do not know. In any case they are mine, and certainly because of that I consider them valid.

“And now, several questions. Do you agree, sir, that in all the realm of our knowledge the greatest truth is the fact that we feel, we have feeling?”

“That is understood,” Brzeski replied.

“Do you agree that our feeling is a fundamental fact? That means that feeling informs not only our concepts relating to the existence of energy, matter, light, the laws that govern us, but even our concepts relating to the nonexistence of those things. Indeed, we may think that the world will perish some day, that its laws will change, that chemical elements will be broken down; but as we think of these catastrophes, we cannot rid ourselves of the feeling, the consciousness of our own existence, that accompanies our thoughts. Even when we imagine our own death and oblivion, we do it on the basis of feeling. In other words, we even imagine nothingness against the background of feeling.”

“Well... of course, that is so,” muttered Zdzislaw. “Though the question seems convoluted to me...”

“But, my dear,” his sister admonished, “do not say so! What is convoluted about it?”

“Very well; let it be simple.”

“Please weigh what I say very carefully,” Dembicki urged. “For I state as fact that the mechanism of our feeling is more expansive than the mechanism of the part of nature that we see and touch. In our feeling exist, not only mirrors that reflect the actual phenomena of nature, but also compartments in which conceptions quite at odds with reality take shape. For example, no one has seen

a cold sun, a shattered earth, or even his own body laid out as a corpse. But we can imagine all those things.”

“In other words,” Brzeski broke in, “you are saying, professor, that a person is capable of fantasizing.”

“I am saying only that. But the existence of fantasy proves that our soul is not simply a photographic plate on which the sensory world is reflected, but a machine that reshapes perceptions emanating from the world.”

“I understand.”

“Excellent! And do you believe that through the course of time our soul, that is to say our feeling in its fully developed state, is inscrutable to others? That means that I cannot penetrate your feeling, nor you mine?”

“Yes.”

“Better yet! And do you agree that our feeling, or soul, is something unified and homogeneous notwithstanding its extensions, which are the external senses, the internal senses, memory, imagination, desire, joy, anger and so on?”

“Well, more could be said about that—”

“But very briefly,” Dembicki replied. “With your permission, that which we call nature comprises a multitude of separate objects. There are separate trees, separate cows, separate flies, separate grains of sand, separate people, separate beams of light and separate changes that those beams undergo. In our soul, meanwhile, such a powerful force for unity exists that we impose that unity on nature and we say the forest, the herd, the swarm, the shoal, society, optics. All scientific theories and all works of art, all human work and technological output arise from this, that our soul imposes its unity on the infinite variety that exists in nature.

“It is true that there are things that appear homogeneous—a table, water, a wall. But that homogeneity is based on imprecise information from the senses, for at the most elementary level a table, water and a wall are composed of particles, particles of atoms that are discrete and do not adhere to each other.

“Briefly put, our souls are so unified that they impose their unity most forcefully on everything. They only acknowledge variety when they are forced to by the senses, which every moment hinder them from creating unity.”

“It really seems so,” Brzeski murmured.

“And now I will prove a fundamental assertion to you. It runs like this: ‘The material in which the phenomenon of feeling takes place cannot be what we call matter in the chemical sense.’ And so neither grease nor phosphorus nor a combination of them, nor any nerve cells or fibers...”

“No doubt you are going to perform a miracle,” Zdzislaw whispered.

“If the brain were a substance possessing the power of feeling (and we know from physiology that the brain does not have feeling), then, first: every atom of oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus and the like that goes to make up the

brain would have to possess feeling. Secondly: there would have to be one atom to which would flow the experiences of the other atoms, and that central atom would constitute our soul—our immortal soul, one must understand, since atoms, according to science, are indestructible.”

“Why do you assume that atoms without feeling cannot form an aggregation with feeling?” Brzeski interposed.

“For exactly the same reason that a group of blind people does not form an aggregation that can see.”

“But atoms are capable of creating aggregations with entirely new properties. Hydrogen sulphate, for example, is completely different from sulphur, oxygen and hydrogen. It is a new thing, not to be understood with reference to the properties of its elements.”

“No, sir,” Dembicki replied. “Hydrogen sulphate is not a new thing. It only has a new form of chemical energy into which the chemical energies of its elements have been absorbed. What is more interesting is that hydrogen sulphate possesses less potential energy than the sum of its constituent elements. In that respect the chemical bonds are like a financial partnership. Mr. A. puts in a hundred rubles, Mr. B. two hundred, and Mr. C. three hundred; together they have put in six hundred rubles, but a part of that sum is sunk into premises, furnishings, the books needed for maintenance of the partnership, and hardly a hundred, two hundred, perhaps four hundred rubles will be the working capital, or potential energy, of the partnership.

“But if A., B., and C. individually do not have a penny, that partnership will not have a penny either, however we arrange the gentlemen in relation to each other.

“Let us suppose, however—and such a thing is not impossible—that atoms possess feeling and even consciousness. Still, an agglomeration of them does not create a whole with collective feeling and a collective ‘I.’ People, after all, are thinking, feeling, conscious beings and can engage in reciprocal communication of their thoughts and feelings. But what of that? If two people or a million people came together, if they understood each other profoundly, exhaustively, even if in the same second they experienced the same feeling—love, joy, anger—they still would not create together some new form of existence with collective feeling which could say: ‘I, the collective entity, feel thus and so.’ For each of them will possess only his own feeling, which does not combine with any other and does not create a higher feeling, a higher ‘I.’

“One thing could occur: this mass of people might choose one person, communicate its thoughts to him, and in that way evoke in him something in the form of a collective mentality. But then that person’s feelings, even as influenced by their thoughts, would only be the feeling of one person.

“The case is the same with the atoms of the brain. Perhaps each of the various atoms possesses its own feeling; perhaps they even communicate their feelings to some one atom, which in that way would connect various sensations

within itself by a unity of feeling—in other words, would be our ‘I,’ our soul, which is immortal, as that atom is. Unfortunately, physiology teaches us that the atoms of the brain constantly change, and even if a central atom existed, that one would leave the brain within several months, and with it our ‘I’—which, after all, with very minor changes, is always the same ‘I.’”

“Well, yes!” Brzeski murmured after a moment’s reflection. “But why do you speak of atoms by analogy with people, who, we know to begin with, have feeling and consciousness?”

“Because I am not a philosopher who establishes a theory of light by concentrating, not on light, but on a wick and naphtha. I speak of feeling, I want to explain feeling, so I must not look for anything else—only for feeling, and I must look where feeling is, in myself and other people. Give me a way of observing feeling in an animal or plant as I can observe it in myself, and then I will speak of animals and plants and even of minerals and chemical elements.”

“You see,” Brzeski remarked after a moment, “what you were saying is like a kind of evidence, but does not have the ring of strong evidence.”

“What do you call strong evidence?”

“Even a little calculation—”

“Very well. Add up as many entities without feeling as you like; multiply them by whatever number you like; and that calculation will convince you that you will not get feeling.”

“Yes... Well, an experiment?” Brzeski smiled.

“Take a mass of feeling, conscious people and you will be convinced that you can group them together as you like and you will not get collective feeling or consciousness.”

“That would be an analogous experiment, not a direct one.”

“And where do you have a direct experiment even on the question of the earth’s distance from the sun? Mechanics, astronomy and physics as applied to ninety-nine phenomena out of a hundred are based on deduction and analogy, and in spite of that they are called exact sciences. So why cannot deductions in the field of psychology be exact? Why, they are based on feeling, and feeling is a more certain thing than any other fact in the world or in science.”

Brzeski, lying down, rested his head on his hand, gazed at the professor, brooded, then finally said:

“You are right: our generation is not conversant with philosophy or dialectic, and that is why I, for example, cannot refute your views. But... what do you think of Taine?”

“He is a great thinker and stylist.”

“You see that,” Brzeski continued. “And indeed, between that great thinker and yourself there is enormous disagreement, for you speak of the unity of our ‘I,’ which cannot be composed of atoms, while Taine proves that our ‘I’ is composed

precisely of something like atoms, or of infinitely small sensations that are so close to each other that they seem to create one being. So our homogeneous 'I' is really an illusion."

"By your leave," said Dembicki, "whoever alludes to an author must be mindful of what the author is talking about and what he intends to prove. Taine, as far as I understand him, in his book *On Intelligence* wanted to show how mental images of the external and the internal world are created from small sensations proceeding sometimes from the outside world, sometimes from inside ourselves. He explained that in his view, those images are like mosaics, which from a distance look like a painting, but at close range prove to be a collection of tiny varicolored stones.

"But what is the base to which the stones affix themselves? What is that being, that entity or nonentity, which deludes itself with the integrity of its mosaic images? He says nothing about this. I remind you, however, that in the end of his work, Taine admits the possibility of metaphysics and the legitimacy of its investigations. The soul belongs, meanwhile, to the realm of metaphysics, though in my opinion all today's mathematical physics, with its atoms, theory of gases, and optics, belongs to the same metaphysics.

"As soon as we say that an atom is two millionths of a millimeter in size, that a particle of hydrogen in one second hits against the particles next to it nine billion times, that red light consists of three hundred and eighty-seven quintillion vibrations per second—at that moment we abandon the realm of experiment and are transported to the ocean of metaphysics.

"There is no help for it! Either we must renounce the summits on which today's great science stands for the lowlands of skepticism, and believe only in what we can touch with our fingers, or we must be reconciled to the fact that 'things seen are made of things unseen,' and that the real world truly begins beyond the limits of our senses."

"You open a strange horizon before me," Brzeski remarked. "Well, but—the soul! The immortal soul! Speak of it."

"I have proved, to the degree that these things may be brought under the rubric of evidence," the professor answered, "that the soul cannot be the product of phenomena arising from divisible material—from that which is apprehensible by the senses. Now I will attempt to explain what the substance must be in which our feeling—'my feeling'—has its being.

"In the first place, the spiritual substance must be continuous; it cannot consist of separate particles like a material body, and in particular the brain. In the second place, a certain mass of this substance must be individuated from its surroundings, from other spiritual masses, since otherwise my feeling would spill through measureless reaches instead of being concentrated in my 'I'—in which case I would feel your sensations and you would feel mine.

"In the third place, that substance must be receptive not only to such strong influences as, for example, touch or sound, but also to such subtle ones as light,

heat and the like. In the fourth place, in that limited mass of spiritual substance there must be accumulated a certain stable quantity of energy. To the existence of this energy even our mental creativity attests, and our transports of feeling, and our will. These conclusions flow, some from our observations of ourselves, some from our observations of external phenomena.

“And now imagine a sphere or cube or other mass built from a substance with feeling and continuity as properties. If nothing acted on this mass, some monotonous movements would take place inside it, and its feeling would take a somnolent form. In a moment, however, if the mass were subjected to touch, if a sound or a beam of warmth or light struck it, new motion and feeling would be aroused within it. The point on which an external influence acted would experience a sensation, and the rest of the mass would feel that a change had occurred in it, and would say within itself: ‘I feel a sensation,’ if one may use such a figure of speech.

“In a word: in a homogeneous mass possessing the capability of feeling, every external stimulus would evoke a dual response. First, there would be motion proceeding from outside, to which the sense of externality would respond; then there would be a collision of the new motion with the existing motion, to which the mass’s sense of itself—its ‘I’—would respond.”

“But you are describing what happens in the brain mass!” Brzeski exclaimed.

“No, sir. I am speaking of what can happen in a homogeneous mass with feeling, whereas the brain is neither the one or the other. The brain is only a conductor; through its mediation the material world acts on the mechanism built from the spiritual substance.”

“In that case you have concocted a substance that does not exist—”

“The good news is that such a substance may exist, though not so as to be perceived by the senses. Psychology did not discover it, nor metaphysics, but physics. It is ether, a weightless material that penetrates heavier matter, more delicate than the subtlest gases, homogeneous, and at the same time continuous: that is, not consisting of separate particles. This ether fills interplanetary and interstellar space and the space between atoms as well. It is a reservoir of such forms of energy as heat, light and electricity, and it is probable that what we call the gravity and motion of material bodies owe their existence to certain wave-like actions of ether. Here you have a substance which—only except that it lacks feeling—might be called spiritual.

“But there is still one interesting detail. William Thomson discovered, with the aid of calculation, what he expressed in the following statement: ‘If the creative force in a homogeneous mass of ether produced ring vortexes (like rings of tobacco smoke from the lips of dexterous smokers), those ring vortexes would not only be individuated from the mass of ether, but what is more, they would be indestructible, or immortal.’

“It seems to me that the theory of ether and Thomson’s statement constitute a bridge that could connect physics with psychology and with people’s generally existing faith in the immortality of the soul.”

Because Brzeski put his hands to his head now and then, the professor broke off and after a few minutes took his leave of the brother and sister.

“But you will come to us tomorrow?” Magda ask pleadingly.

“Yes, indeed,” he answered as he stood in the doorway.

Chapter XX. Untitled

Zdzislaw slept in bed the next night. Magda slept in a chair. Only at five was she awakened by her brother's coughing. She ran over and looked at him: he was perspiring, his eyes glittered and his face was flushed.

"Are you worse?" Magda asked, frightened.

"What put that into your head?" he asked calmly.

"You are coughing."

"No cough to speak of."

"You have a fever..."

"That is foolishness. In fact, the sleep so restored my strength that I began to suppose... Tish! I am going soft, that's all!"

"But, Zdzis," she exclaimed, hugging him, "just believe that you must be well, and you will get well."

"Perhaps," he replied.

"It's a wonderful thing to lie in bed," he went on. "If you had been with me when I had that miserable pneumonia, I would not be in this predicament today."

"Why did you not send for me?"

"I did not dare. You wrote so much about your work and your independence, about how happy you were that you were not a burden and a superfluous addition to our parents' household (do you remember?), that it would have been wrong to deprive you of that satisfaction. Finally, I felt proud to have such an emancipated sister—"

"I was never that," Magda whispered.

"You were, my child, you were!" Brzeski replied with a touch of sadness. "The spirit of the time is such that all young men are positivists and all women emancipated."

"Now," he added after a moment, "when I have been standing over the grave, and above all when I listen to that quaint Dembicki, I feel regret. Ah, how differently I would have led my life if I had believed in immortality!"

"I was unhappy as well," Magda put in. "Today I cannot even imagine how it would be possible not to believe."

"The recovery of faith comes more easily to you," Zdzislaw said. "You read less, you argue less. But we! Beyond even the arguments that seem reasonable we see question marks. For is Dembicki's theory anything more than hypothesis, more than fantasy? Although... that lecture on 'feeling' certainly drove a wedge into my mind."

"Do you know what has occurred to me?" Magda exclaimed suddenly.

"Well?"

“Go to Meran as soon as possible—and take me.”

Brzeski shrugged and looked somber. Magda understood again, as she had understood too many times to count, that her brother would not yield on that score.

Before eleven in the morning Dembicki knocked at the door. Magda and her brother received him with cries of joy.

“What is it? Is it well with you?” asked the professor.

“Imagine!” Magda replied. “Zdzislaw slept all night! He is full of courage—”

“Do not exaggerate,” her brother interjected. “I simply came to understand that neither eternal nothingness nor my consumption are necessarily axiomatic. It is possible to debate about them.”

Dembicki thrust out his lower lip.

“Oh!” he murmured. “Why, you are healthier than you suppose, and even than I thought.”

The three of them burst out laughing.

“You know, professor,” Zdzislaw said, “this evening I am going to Meran.”

“Very good.”

“And he does not want to take me with him,” Magda put in.

“So much the better.”

“So you are against me, professor?” she asked, feeling aggrieved.

“But the professor owes it to us to present the conclusion of his theory,” her brother said quickly.

“Indeed, I will conclude.”

“About the soul, professor? About the soul, which I want to believe in and cannot?” Zdzislaw said vehemently.

“Excuse me,” Dembicki responded, seating himself in an armchair, “you have surely heard of two new inventions in the field of acoustics. One is a telephone—a kind of telegraph which transfers not merely noise but tones, song and human speech. The other is a phonograph—an odd machine that records, as it were, articulated sounds on tin foil, preserves them, and reproduces them when called on to do so! I confess to you that each of these pieces of news made me laugh at first. But I read the descriptions of each apparatus, I saw drawings, I deliberated about them, and they no longer astonish me. I would not be surprised if I saw with my own eyes that telephone relaying and that phonograph preserving human speech.

“It is the same with every new truth. At first it frightens us, staggers us, amazes us. But in the end we grow accustomed to it and even marvel that it was ever possible to doubt it.”

“You are entirely correct, professor,” Magda said.

“Yes,” echoed Zdzislaw. “But if the soul is distinct from material phenomena, it ought to possess some unusual, nonmaterial functions.”

“With your permission—the functions of the soul are usual, not unusual, to us, but at the same time they are outside the realm of the material. For example: you know that our eye is like a camera with a sensitive plate locked into it. Images of objects record themselves on that plate in such a way that we see each object only from one side. You see me from the front, not from the back and not from the side, and you do not see what is inside me at all. Mark, please: our imagination possesses a property that allows us to visualize a person all at once, not only from the front, the back and the sides, and from up and down, but even his lungs, heart and stomach—in a word, internally.

“To put it another way: our material eye at its best encompasses only three facets of a body with parallel surfaces, and then only in an abridged form, whereas our imagination encompasses all our surfaces and what is inside us.”

“But, professor, that phenomenon simply involves associations!” exclaimed Brzeski.

“A moment’s patience, please. According to the theory of association, which is a subterfuge of psychology, every surface and the internal organs and tissues have special cells in the brain which at a given instant act together. But this is not a matter of possible or impossible play of the cells, but of the fact that I, at one instant, can feel things that nature never shows me at one instant. For example, I can imagine—or feel in my memory—even myself in childhood, youth, maturity and at my present age. No one ever saw such a thing or ever will—in this life, at least.”

“But this is association of recollections, or memory!” Brzeski interposed.

“And what is memory? Memory is X or alpha, and imagination is Y or beta. And what do these expressions teach me? Nothing. In all nature we find traces of memory. Traces of axes can be found on trees, traces of rain on a field, traces of geological epochs in the crust of the earth. It may be that there are traces of that kind in the brain, but they are not memory. They are not the present feeling that embraces impressions of whole years in the distant past.

“I tell you finally that those traces in the brain seem very doubtful to me. If a man received only sixty impressions an hour, that would amount to more than seven hundred in a day, more than two hundred and fifty thousand in a year, and more than twelve million in fifty years. Where in the world is there room for all that if the simplest impression (according to our psychology) takes up several dozen, even several hundred cells?”

“The brain is made up of trillions of cells.”

“Just so! But where are the cells that maintain order in that orchestra of trillions? And can those various cells, composed of separate atoms, create unity of feeling?”

“For the rest, dear Zdzislaw, compare the two views. I say the soul is a simple entity; true, I do not understand its structure, but I feel its simplicity. On the other hand, materialism teaches that the brain is a terribly complex organ—an organ you do not understand—and that you cannot comprehend the feeling of an individual at all. Which of these theories makes more sense?”

“What is the brain, then?”

“The brain is a vital organ of the soul in its earthly life. As rays of light converge in the eye and sounds in the ear, so in the brain all the stimuli that come to us from the outside world converge.

“The brain is the lens that brings into focus the sensations from our sight, hearing, touch, smell, our muscles, stomachs, lungs and so on. That is why it has a complicated structure. The external world is so varied that it introduces complexity of the highest degree into the architectonics of the brain; but it is precisely that architectural richness that constitutes palpable evidence that the brain does not generate feeling. It generates stimulation, movements of particles, which are felt by the noncomposite soul.”

“You say ‘the noncomposite soul.’ How do you explain the fact that in the case of certain mental illnesses, a person believes that he is someone else? How do you explain the double consciousness of which Taine and psychiatrists speak?”

“I will not deal with this matter in full because I do not have time. So I will speak briefly on condition that you do not take me for a lunatic.

“Our ‘material person’ is a three-dimensional mass, whereas the spirit is a form of existence understood to have at least four dimensions, as I understand it. Now, that four-dimensional entity can envision itself not only as two but even as four three-dimensional persons. Then the ‘double consciousness’ constitutes fresh evidence of the difference that exists between spirit and matter.”

“So why do those suffering from dual personality not recognize themselves in the second person?”

“And would you recognize yourself if I suddenly showed you your photograph made, for example, from behind?”

“My head is spinning!” Brzeski exclaimed with a smile.

“And I have no intention of lecturing further on these areas of psychology, which are not entirely clear and require long preparation. Take my word for it: the human soul, in spite of its simplicity, is full of mysteries that it is safer not to become involved with in this life. For the present phase of the eternal process, God has given us material, three-dimensional bodies and allows us to investigate three-dimensional nature. Let us remain within those limits and fulfill His will within them.”

“And who knows His will?”

“You will know it. Only listen intently, in your deepest desires, in the quietest whispers of your own soul. And if it is a question of a catchword, all the

more excellent confessions propagate one: Through earthly life and work to the life beyond; through eternal life and work to God. All the wisdom of the world, and the worlds that have ever existed and ever will exist, is in that.”

“But you must admit,” Zdzislaw said after a moment, “that everything we have heard is only hypothesis. The soul of ether, four dimensions, the eternal process! All that may exist only in our minds, but not in reality.”

Dembicki nodded.

“My dear fellow,” he replied, “do not dig a great chasm between the soul and universal spirituality, for such an abyss does not exist. Our soul is a small universe, a little watch in a gigantic clock. Only because of that do we experience natural phenomena, comprehend them, and solve the riddles they pose. Only because of that is our individual development like the development, and our creativity like the creativity, of all nature.

“As a grain of gold has the same color, specific gravity and ductility as a hundred kilograms of gold, so our spirits have the same properties as the universal spirit. For that reason I am of the view that a man, even if he has the most peculiar ideas, can think of nothing that would not exist in reality, provided he did not overstep the boundaries of logic or the laws of nature. As evidence, keep in mind even the various mathematical formulas which in the beginning seemed like fantasies, but sooner or later became iterations of concrete phenomena.

“Imagine an accounting machine that displayed expenditures in twenty digits, and think: will even one of those figures not correspond to some actual amount if the machine is working accurately? The only flaw in the machine is not that it emits a multitude of figures, but rather that its figures hardly even amount to a particle of reality.

“It is the same with our minds. Their boldest theories, provided they are logical, must correspond to some real phenomena, even phenomena that escape observation. The difficulty is not that the creativity of our minds does not always agree with sensory experience, but that our creativity is too poor to embrace reality. It is a drop of water in the ocean, and we ourselves, with all our fantasies, are like moles who do not guess that their cramped molehill lies in the midst of wonderful parks, among statues and extraordinary plants.

“We, with our few senses, know as much about the reality that surrounds us as an oyster growing on a rock knows about a sea battle being fought on its waters.”

“What is the purpose of all that? What is this rich reality for?” whispered the sick man.

Dembicki smiled sadly.

“That question is answered by every highly developed religion. Unfortunately, we pay little attention to them because it is not fashionable.

“The only God, almighty and infinite, desiring to have around Him free, happy beings who know Him, created spiritual substances—ethers, or I don’t

know what. He gave them the ability to feel, and measureless energy. But, wanting to make them as independent as possible, and so happy and perfect in the highest degree, He did not create them with internal mechanisms already operative, but allowed them the task of developing themselves. Because of that we see formless cosmic material, then defined chemical elements, then chemical bonds, then crystals, cells and lower organisms. All that is half-conscious individuality, which by degrees achieves complete consciousness, higher and higher consciousness, consciousness more and more capable of knowing God.

“For that reason I think it probable that with the passage of time that universal spirit is not only shared out to form an ever-increasing number of conscious persons, but realizes itself better and better and acquires experience. In the era of chaos that science and religion alike speak of, the universal spirit operated blindly. So in that time there was no law of nature, that is to say, no law governing the proper development of natural phenomena in the direction of least resistance. The regular motion of waves, the diffusion of energy along straight lines, chemical balance, the law of mass and distance and so on, appeared as time passed.

“Today we live in an epoch during which that universal spirit has established territories here and there on which individual, conscious life can come to fruition. I do not doubt, however, that the time will come when all the universe will be imbued with consciousness, when the period of trial and error will be over, and everything there is will create perfect harmony. That will be the kingdom of God in the universe.

“From this theory,” Dembicki continued, “follows a simple explanation of evil in the world. ‘If there is a God who is entirely good and all-powerful,’ say the pessimists, ‘why did He not create a perfect, happy world instead of allowing evil and suffering?’ Here is why.

“God wanted to create us, to the extent possible, independent even of Him. So instead of instant perfection, He endowed us and all nature with the gift of gradual, self-generated perfection. And so that everything would perfect itself by searching for new paths—by sometimes erring—errors also occur in nature, and they constitute evil, the primordial source of suffering.

“With time, however, that universal spirit acquires experiences, remembers them, and because of that moves onto a higher rung of perfection.”

“But suffering is a painful thing,” Brzeski pointed out.

“Painful, yes, but also invaluable. Suffering is the shadow that highlights pleasant moments and more clearly defines our awareness, our personality. Suffering and desire are goads that excite creativity, that prod us to perfection. Suffering in the end is one of the strongest bonds that reinforce solidarity between people. Happy is the man who, instead of complaining about suffering, learns from it.”

“But that entails—proximity to the grave!” Zdzislaw said after a moment. “If someone had expounded theories like this to me a year ago, I would have

laughed at him to his face. Today I am listening to them with pleasure, and I even use them to fill the void of death that so frightens me!”

“So you do not believe yet?” Magda exclaimed.

The sick man shrugged.

“There is nothing wrong in that. Your brother must think over what he is hearing, must reason it through for himself,” Dembicki said.

“And why am I not reasoning it through?”

“Because not as many theories and doubts have come between you and the faith you were taught in childhood as have come into your brother’s life. He has been in contact with the skeptical spirit of the time more than you have.”

“That cursed skepticism!” Magda whispered.

“Excuse me: skepticism is one of the spurs that motivate us to search for truth. I myself for decades doubted everything; yes, indeed! Even the axioms of logic and mathematics. And I traveled a long way before I understood that the most essential religious doctrines—God and the soul—could not only be reconciled with the exact sciences but are, quite simply, the foundation of philosophy. The human being with his unconquerable strength seeks a theory which embraces and explains not only so-called material phenomena but his own soul, its multifold nature and very real desires and hopes. What, then! As God, the soul and the spiritual world open before us an expansive horizon with room for all we think and feel, by that same token, without God and the spirit, even the sensory world, its orderliness notwithstanding, turns to chaos and hell. We understand nothing; our own existence is a torment to us.

“We have two theories, then. One clarifies everything, ennobles everything, and in an incredible way enhances our strengths. The other destroys everything, obscures everything, ruins us, paralyzes us. So which of these hypotheses can be true—if we add that in nature truth consists of harmony, of mutual support between various objects and phenomena?”

“And how do you envision eternal life?” Brzeski asked suddenly.

“In a way that is very real, though not material. That demands some preliminary explanation. The mathematician Babbage, whose thought is profound, once remarked: ‘If we could observe the most minute phenomena in nature, each particle of matter would tell us about everything that ever happened. The boat gliding over the surface of the ocean makes a furrow that is fixed forever because of the action of particles of water that continue to flow. The very air is a giant library in which is inscribed everything anyone ever said aloud or whispered. Here are remembered for ever, with altering but indelible reverberations, a baby’s first cry, the last breath of a dying person, the wedding vows broken, the oaths not kept...’

“In a word, according to Babbage, no earthly phenomenon perishes, but endures for ever, even if only in two such mutable elements as water and air. So

much more, then, do we have the right to assume that similar inscription and immortalization of phenomena are occurring in the mass of ether—”

“Which, however, we do not see,” Brzeski interjected.

“And do you see the eight hundred quintillion ultraviolet vibrations I mentioned before? Or the one hundred to four hundred quintillion caloric vibrations, or the infinite number of less rapid ones? The vibrations of ether, called light, are so precise and subtle that because of them we know colors, shapes and the dimensions of objects. But do you think caloric vibrations are less subtle, and that if we had the appropriate sense, we could not distinguish the form, size, and other properties of objects with the aid of a beam of heat? Remember that vibrating motions are like paintbrushes, etching needles and chisels, tools with which every object and phenomenon will be inscribed forever in the spaces of the universe, in the mass of ether.

“In this minute I speak: my voice, one might say, disappears, is transformed into a form of heat energy, and—is inscribed somewhere. The flame goes out, but the vibrations of light and heat that it started up are inscribed forever. In the same way every crystal and cell, every stone, plant and animal, every movement, sound, smile, tear, thought, feeling and desire is inscribed somewhere in space. And if we had eyes capable of apprehending rays of heat, and if we could perceive them in interplanetary space, we would see the history of the world in all ages past—and finally the histories of our own lives in the most minute and secret detail.”

Magda shuddered. “How dreadful!” she whispered.

“More than one astronomer,” Dembicki said, “asked in wonder why there was so much empty space in the universe, and why all the stars, taken together, are just a drop in the ocean compared to the mass of ether. Ether, meanwhile, is not completely empty. It is full of phenomena and life flaming on suns and planets. Each sun, each planet, each material being is only a spindle which in the sentient mass of ether spins the threads of eternal, conscious existences.

“Take our earth. She does not move through space in an elliptical orbit, but in a line like an enormous corkscrew with every turn around a hundred and thirty million miles in length. So a year is not an abstract concept, but a line traced in the ether, while fifty years of human life does not mean fifty illusions, but fifty turns on a spiral as long as seven billion miles. So our personal actions take up a fair amount of space in the universe.”

“With luck the ether may be so rarefied that no one will read our histories in it,” Brzeski smiled.

“Do not delude yourself. Ether is such a strange substance that, on the one hand, masses of matter move about in it as freely as shadows, but on the other hand, it is a dense substance. Young, deliberating on the phenomenon of light, reached the conclusion that this ether must be as hard as diamond!

“Beautiful, durable sculptures may be executed in such material. And do not be surprised if some day you see our planet in the first epochs of its existence;

if you encounter colossal monsters of whom we have only the remains today; if you meet Pericles, Hannibal, Caesar, for they are there! But above all keep this in mind, that in a new life you will meet yourself in infancy, childhood, boyhood, for everything was photographed and sculpted. Keep in mind as well that every deed done here on earth may exert an influence on our happiness or unhappiness in that world.”

“Tales from *The Thousand and One Nights!*” Brzeski burst out.

“In any case,” replied the professor, “these tales are strangely in harmony with the newest triumphs of the exact sciences and clarify many enigmas concerning the material world. What is more, they explain certain utterances of inspired souls. ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him,’ says one of the fathers of the Church. And St. Teresa adds: ‘I feel alarm in the face of life, not death... For I see such worlds before me there that this earthly one is a grave of mourning.’”

“If only it were so!” Zdzislaw said. “Instead of fearing death, we would seek it.”

“There is no reason to seek it, since in this life we accumulate capital for the future life. But to fear it! The fear of death that is so shameful, and so common in the present generation, is a sickness that results from a neglect of spiritual hygiene. The health of the spirit requires that we think as often of God and eternal life as of food and recreations; and because we do not do that, our spiritual sense declines and we become more disabled than blind people. From that proceeds the feverish, unbalanced character of our life, the low selfishness, the immersion in trifles, the lack of high purpose and the slackening of energy. Contemporary civilization, which gives prominence to chemical elements and forces instead of God and the soul, is poor and mean on the face of it and must end in bankruptcy.”

“Well, you rail against the apotheosis of matter and energy, but you yourself, it seems, are a pantheist,” said Zdzislaw.

“I?” Dembicki exclaimed in amazement.

“After all, you called ether the universal spirit.”

“We do not understand each other. You see, according to my hypothesis, sentient ether is a spiritual substance, a material from which souls are generated and which itself aspires to consciousness. But this ether—this ocean in which float a hundred million suns—is a finite mass, perhaps with the form of an ellipsoid. But beyond that ocean, that spirit in which we live and of which we are part, may be millions of other oceans of ether inhabited by billions of other suns. Among those oceans entirely different forces may operate and different laws may govern which we have no conception of.

“Each such ocean may be a separate universe of spirits more or less advanced in development. But they are all the work of one Creator, of whom we know only that He is, and is all-powerful.

“Conceptions of size and time do not apply to Him, since His works themselves have no beginning, end, or limit in space. This world in which we live and at which we look is extended into three dimensions and one continuum of time. But God encompasses an infinite number of dimensions and an infinite variety of times. He creates space from nothing and fills it with the universe. He is the center and the source of energy, not for the stars and nebulae, for stars are lowly specks of dust, but for those oceans of the ether in which stars and nebulae ride.

“And here is a remarkable thing: that measureless Power does not terrify us at all. We think of Him without alarm, with hope and trust, as children think of their father, though between Him and us exists a gulf that all the eternal powers cannot fill.

“What is death in relation to Him? Is it possible to suppose that in the realms of His power the most minuscule thing turns back into nothingness? After all, whatever is is, in the final reckoning, the work of His will, and must therefore be eternal. Above what appear to be the buried remains of people, things and worlds He moves like the sun over plowed earth in which seed fell, not to perish, but to yield new, richer crops.”

After a momentary silence Magda spoke up.

“What, then, Zdzis?”

“What do I know?” he answered. “Though I begin to think that the human mind, which can conceive of such things, is not only composed of grease and phosphorus—”

“Would you be afraid of dying now?” whispered his sister, taking his hand.

“No. I would think of the greatness of God and I would say: ‘I do not know what You will do with me, Lord, but whatever You do, it will be better than my theories.’”

Chapter XXI. Going Away

After dinner, at which the professor was present, Brzeski announced that he would leave that evening, and asked his sister to buy him a few articles of linen.

Magda looked at her brother with an expression so inquiring and so sad that Dembicki felt sorry for her. But Zdzislaw grew somber, turned away from his sister, and began to look out the window at Saxon Square.

There was no help for it; Magda had to give up her plan to accompany the sick man on his journey. But when she had gone to town to do the shopping, the professor said:

“Why do you so firmly refuse to take your sister with you? Would it not be more comfortable for you, and would she not be less anxious?”

“Do you think so?” Brzeski answered bitterly. “And if after a week or ten days I am not there? What would she do among strangers, and worse than alone—with a corpse?”

“You cannot shake yourself free of such fancies—”

“Eh, my dear professor—let us not keep up the comedy. The odds are one in a hundred that my illness is not dangerous, that it is a cold that has settled in the lungs and stomach, from which it is possible to recover. But there is a ninety-nine-to-one chance that it is consumption, which will reach the end of its course very quickly, or for a year or two will incapacitate me, poison my life, eat up the fund I amassed... Well, and I do not have the qualifications to be an invalid.”

As he spoke, Zdzislaw waved a hand. Dembicki gazed at him and was silent.

Brzeski went to his valise, took out a large envelope, handed it to the professor and said:

“I have a favor to ask you. Here is my insurance policy for twenty thousand rubles, and the receipts. Take them. If I meet with any unpleasantness on the road...”

Dembicki put the envelope in his pocket.

“...this money will be for my parents and my younger sister. Apart from that I have three thousand rubles in cash, which I would like to leave Magda. If an untoward development occurs, I will transfer it to you. Let her have it. It will be useful to her. And advise her to marry.”

“If only she wanted to!”

“Today’s women are funny,” Brzeski said. “Each one thinks she is called to do great things, but they do not know that the greatest art is to bring up healthy children. I do not want my sister to grow old propagating emancipation!”

A little later Magda returned from town. Dembicki told the Brzeskis goodbye, promising to come again in the evening.

“I bought you two suits of knit underwear so you will not take a chill, six shirts, a dozen pairs of socks and a dozen handkerchiefs,” Magda said with a motherly air.

Zdzislaw smiled.

“They will bring everything from the shop directly. And here,” she added, “you have a dozen envelopes and some letter paper.”

She sat down at the table and began to address the envelopes to herself.

“Have you gone balmy?” asked her brother, watching her at her singular work.

“Not at all,” she answered. “Because you must send me a letter every day, I am making the task easy for you. They need not even be real letters. Write only, I am here or there, I am well—and the date. And in a week at most—well, ten days—send a telegram and I will come to you. In the meantime I will try to obtain a passport. Remember, I give you only a ten-day leave. I am sure that if you see this Tapeiner without delay, you will summon me very soon.”

Her brother sat down beside her and said, taking her pen from her hand:

“Leave the envelopes alone. You will have a note from me every day.”

“Every day. Remember!”

“I assure you of it. By the way, because we are all mortal—”

“Beloved, do not say that to me!” Magda interrupted almost angrily. “I swear, you will be well.”

“Do not be a child, dear. I may be well, but perhaps the train will be wrecked—”

“I will go with you, then!” she cried, jumping up.

“Sit down! Do not be ridiculous. I understand by now that our life is in God’s hand and perhaps does not end on this earth. Death is like a journey abroad, beyond the borders of the senses, to a beautiful country in which we will all meet. Eternal day reigns there, and spring, over the landscapes of all quarters of the world, of all geological epochs, perhaps even of all planets...”

“Why are you speaking like this?” Magda asked, looking at him tearfully.

“I speak as to a woman of understanding who believes in a future life. Once we prayed from the same book; today we have regained hope together, so we can talk about death. What is so terrible about it? It is like a passage from one room to another. Do you doubt that we will all see each other there, never to be separated? And if you were asked, which do you prefer: that your brother lead a tortured life on earth as a man who has lost his health or go to a happy country, would you have the heart to keep him here?”

Magda rested her head on his shoulder and cried quietly.

“Weep... weep with gratitude to God for opening our eyes in a painful moment. I know something about that! I wore my life away for several weeks, but that is past. If there is another world among the stars, it is one of inconceivable beauty. I loved nature so! I had such a passion for landscapes which I know only from reading.”

“I, too,” Magda whispered.

“You see. So it is not necessary to dwell on death, but on that joyful time when we will be free from sickness and young forever—when we will meet again in meadows of gold and emerald and see regions we have not had either the time or the means to see before.

“Think: can you imagine a country like this? A level plain, and on it a network of rifts. You walk down one declivity. The road goes into a gorge where walls of pine soar before your eyes. After a quarter of an hour the gorge widens into a spacious area. Even in your dreams at night you never saw such a place.

“You see something like a city with gigantic buildings: pointed and truncated pyramids in layers of black, yellow, blue; dark-green pagodas with pale roofs; slender towers with balconies, each a different color; Indian temples; fortresses of large, rough stones; walls many stories high with sapphire, gold and red stripes. And on the squares and fancifully laid-out streets, columns unexpectedly appear—uncompleted statues, the images in stone of unknown creatures—”

“How did this come into your head?” Magda smiled.

“I have read a little about it. But such a view! You stand on a mountain beside which rise walls covered with forests. On the right side you have a waterfall, at your feet an enchanted valley. Its whole length is cut by a winding river. In its depths you see the forest, and between yourself and the forest, more than a dozen parks.

“Even more miraculous, however, are the natural springs, the geysers. Great columns of hot water burst from some, clouds of steam from others. Some are diffuse, others are slender; some are like fans and one is like crossed swords. A veil of fog floats over each one, and on that fog sunbeams paint a rainbow.

“If you traversed the entire length of this fantastic valley, you would encounter innumerable geysers, steaming lakes and pools of hot water. You would hear subterranean rumblings; you would see one red mountain, another of blue glass. If you felt a desire to bathe, you would find a singular sort of bathhouse. It is composed of stone basins like swallows’ nests attached to the rock, with the water on each level a different temperature.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am describing a wilderness in North America called a National Park. It is a land of wonders, which—in that life—first I will visit, and I will take you there when we are reunited. Would you like to take such journeys with me?” he asked, embracing her. Magda threw her arms around his neck.

“But Dembicki will be with us as well,” she said.

“Of course. He opened the doors of those countries to us.”

“And—and do you know, Zdzislaw, who else we will take?” she asked, hiding her face on his shoulder. “Stefan Solski. Pity you do not know him!”

“Ah, that magnate who proposed to you? It is curious that you did not accept him.”

“I was—out of my mind. That is all I know.”

“But you would marry now...”

“Never!” she burst out. “Now I only think of being with you.”

Zdzislaw shrugged. The man who looks eternity in the face loses the instinct for the imbroglios of love, or at best has little concern to spare for them.

“When I leave here,” he said after a moment, “write to Iksinow, but not to our parents, only to the major. Tell him what you have seen. The major is an experienced man and will relay that information to them in a way that will not alarm them needlessly.”

“As you wish,” she answered. “But remember that you are going to send me a few words every day: I am well, I am staying here or there. Just that much—”

“All right! All right!” he interrupted impatiently. Then he began to dress for the trip, and Magda packed his valise.

At eight in the evening Dembicki arrived; at nine they went to the railroad station. When Brzeski had settled into a compartment, Magda went in after him, kissed his head and hands and whispered:

“My beloved... my darling brother...”

“Well, well—but no gushing!” he said abruptly. “Be well, write to the major, and—try to be sensible.”

He almost pushed her out of the compartment and closed its small doors. After a moment the train began to move. Magda called again: “Goodbye!” But Brzeski tucked himself into a corner and did not even glance out the window.

“He was always a bit crotchety!” Magda said resentfully. “He does not even say goodbye.”

“How many times should he say goodbye?”

“Professor—you are just like him!”

Dembicki accompanied Magda home. She could hardly reach her room on the fourth floor; she undressed quickly and slept like a stone, for she was extremely tired.

At around eleven in the morning the next day, Mrs. Burakowska herself brought her her tea. The thrifty lady wore an expression in which worry seemed to be at odds with curiosity.

“What,” she began, “have you lost the habit of sleeping in bed?”

“I am delighted to be in bed. I did not sleep for two nights.”

“You were watching over your brother at the Europejski Hotel. Is he really so ill that you had to care for him in a hotel?”

“I do not know. He says that he is seriously ill, but I think he will be well after a few months’ stay in the mountains.”

“It is a shame that Mr. Brzeski did not stay in a private apartment instead of a hotel...”

“If he could have found an apartment for two days!” Magda answered irritably.

“And if he is so sick,” Mrs. Burakowska said mildly, “it is a pity that you did not go abroad with him.”

“He will send for me when they tell him where to go for his cure.”

“Your brother would be greatly in need of you on the journey.”

Magda turned toward the window.

“What does that woman want from me?” she thought angrily. “After all, I would have preferred to go with him.”

But after Mrs. Burakowska left, Magda’s exasperation died down as rapidly as it had flared up, dissolved in the apathy that accompanies amazement.

“Was Zdzislaw really here, and was I with him? Did Dembicki really convince him that the soul is immortal?”

She sat on her sofa and looked at the ceiling. It seemed to her that she was immersed in an ocean of hard crystal. Through its interior the figures of beautiful people, beautifully dressed, flew like lightning. Their bodies were made of light, their clothing of rainbows. They were full of animation: they talked of something among themselves and looked at Magda. But they could not make themselves understood by her nor she by them.

Later, between two mountains high as the sky, she saw an emerald green valley decked with bouquets in the form of dark green parks, and with a multitude of water spouts exploding in the shapes of fans and columns. But these mountains, the valley, the parks, the river and the waterfalls also appeared in rainbow hues, and every tree, rock and fountain had its own life and soul. They looked at each other, they loved each other, they carried on conversations through the rustle of leaves and water, but Magda did not understand their language.

She was certain that she had seen all this somewhere, that she knew every recess of this valley. But when had she seen it? Where?

Kazimierz’s materialistic lecture had brought terrible images to her mind, but now she felt calm and happy. Nothing alarmed her, and a new, unfamiliar world was drawing her to itself. She felt that she should die just now, or rather be absorbed into those radiant landscapes that spread themselves before her. And when she thought that someone might grieve for her, might detain her in this gray world among lumpish houses and smells of cooking; when she thought

that someone would weep for her as if in envy of eternal happiness; distaste overwhelmed her.

“Would people be so selfish?” she said to herself.

After lunch she took from a trunk a long unopened devotional book and read prayers till evening, daydreaming. Every phrase took on new meaning; every page was full of promises and precious hopes. The room was filled with a swarm of spirits who flew in and out through the window without a rustle, circulating between the parched earth and the heavens that brooded on eternal things.

At seven the next morning she slipped out of the house without eating breakfast, carrying her prayer book. She returned after ten, still deep in her own thoughts. She had been to confession.

In her apartment she found a letter her brother had sent her from abroad. It was written in pencil.

“I feel so strong,” he wrote, “that I am going straight to Vienna. I slept all night lying down. I was born to be a conductor.”

But Magda did not find the letter comforting. It reminded her that her brother had really been in Warsaw, and that he was gravely ill.

A myriad of painful feelings awoke within her. She began to reproach herself for letting Zdzislaw go away with no one to care for him. She wanted to go after him and share his journey, hidden in another car. That in turn reminded her that she had nothing to do, and she trembled at the thought that several days with no purpose or activity lay before her—long, empty, bitterly anxious days. If only she could sleep them away, or go out of the city!

At around two the doorman brought her a visiting card with an inscription: “Klara Howard Mydelko.”

“The lady asks if she should come up,” said the doorman.

“Oh, yes! Ask her to come to me.”

“Mydelko?” Magda said to herself. “Why, that is Solski’s trustee. And Miss Howard has married him? Of course! For why else the second surname? Aha! It is true that she was speaking highly of him. A wise man, an honest man, but—those bowed legs!”

She opened the door wide and in came the former Miss Howard. She wore a black silk gown with a long train and a watch on a gold chain around her neck. Her face was as monotonously pink as ever, and on her flaxen hair sat a small lace hat.

“Pardon me, Miss Magdalena, for sending the doorman to you,” said the lady, who was obviously tired, “but now I must be careful about walking around the city. Indeed, I am married...”

“Congratulations... congratulations!” Magda said warmly, kissing her and showing her to a seat on the sofa. “When did that happen? You did not announce it to anyone.”

“Four days ago I joined my life to another’s,” Klara said, lowering her blond eyelashes and trying to bring a rosier hue to her face, which was impossible. “We took our vows at the Church of the Nuns of the Visitation in the strictest incognito at seven in the morning, and that moment was the beginning of an unbroken continuum of happiness for me. I have a husband who adores me, one on whom the proudest of women could bestow her affections.

“Believe me, Miss Magdalena,” she said fervently, “a woman only becomes a true human being when she marries. The care of the family, motherhood—these are the lofty mission of our sex. I cannot deny,” she added modestly, “that situations come about which are troublesome, even painful. But all that gives way before the certainty that we have made someone happy who deserves to be so.”

“I am very glad that you are so contented.”

“Contented? Say rather, in a state of bliss! I have lived not four—properly speaking, not three—days, but three centuries, three millennia. Ah, you cannot—you cannot even guess...”

The young matron suddenly broke off and added in the tone of one who gives advice from the heart:

“But in order to merit such happiness, a woman must be very circumspect all her life. That is why... permit me to say, dear Miss Magdalena, that sometimes you are not careful...”

“What have I done?” Magda asked, astonished.

“Nothing... nothing, I know. We all know. But—those visits to the foundlings were unnecessary... and to the midwife. And that stay of a few days in a hotel...”

“My sick brother was staying there,” Magda interrupted hotly.

“We know! Dembicki explained everything. But because of these things Mr. Zgierski speaks of you with a knowing smile, and yesterday... yesterday that brazen Joanna accosted me and—imagine!—said, ‘What about that prude, Magda? She put on virtuous airs and—fell on her face!’

“Did you hear, Miss Magdalena? That adventuress, that two-faced woman, dared to say such a thing!”

“May God keep them in His care!” Magda rejoined. “At any rate I am going to my brother in a few days, so gossip does not concern me.”

“You are going away?” asked the newly married woman in an altered tone. “Tell me, but speak candidly: are you really angry at Ada Solska?”

“I?” Magda cried in amazement. “But I have always loved her!”

"I guessed that, knowing what a heart you have. And—if Ada were to come here?"

"Can you even ask?"

"I understand. Ada evidently has some serious business with you, but that milk-sop Dembicki does not want to serve as mediator. I do not know what it concerns. I surmise, however, that Ada will ask you to help smooth over relations between herself and her brother."

"I—smooth over relations between them?"

"I know nothing, nothing, dear Miss Magdalena, only it seems so to me. Ada became engaged to Mr. Norski (what insane luck that fellow has!) and told Stefan, but... I think that she has still received no response, and is afraid—"

"What advice can I give her?"

"I do not know. I do not understand it, and I ask you not to mention my suppositions. In any case, may I repeat what you have said to Ada?"

"She has always known that I love her."

Because Magda was summoned to dinner just then, Miss Howard, now Mrs. Mydelko, told her goodbye very fondly, repeating her request for secrecy and begging that Magda would not engage in behavior that might give rise to rumors.

The conversation at table, the bustling of the servants, the kitchen odors and Mrs. Burakowska's complaints wearied Magda so that she went out to the Saxon Garden.

There crowds of people milled about and the noise of talk intruded, but at least she could see the sky, the trees, the greenery. It seemed to her that she would breathe better in the air of the park, and that among the motionless branches and already fading leaves she would catch a glimpse of tranquillity, that shy bird that had flown from her residence some time ago.

In the walk along which she had passed so recently with her brother and Dembicki she found an empty bench; she sat down and gazed at a chestnut tree. She felt peace beginning to return. Gradually she stopped looking at the passersby, and the noise quieted down. A sweet forgetfulness seemed to come over her, and a flock of idle worries, looking backward as if at the past, fled from her mind. Again she saw that crystalline vastness around which figures born of light and clothed in rainbows swarmed like brightly colored butterflies.

"Do you mind if I smoke, madam?"

Magda started. Beside her sat a young man with a pallid complexion, pretentiously dressed and smoking a cigarette.

"If the smoke annoys you—"

Magda rose from the bench; so did her neighbor. He walked beside her, chatting:

“How painful loneliness is to such a beautiful young lady. I see that you are not a native of the city; perhaps you do not even have friends here. In that case I am at your service...”

Magda turned toward the gate at Krolewska Street and took a quick step, but the young man walked beside her and went on talking. Suddenly she stopped, looked her pursuer in the eye, and said pleadingly:

“Sir, I am very unhappy. Please leave me.”

“Unhappy?” he exclaimed. “But consoling beautiful, unhappy ladies is my specialty! Allow me to offer my—”

And he tugged hard at her hand.

Magda felt her throat tightening and her eyes brimming. Not wanting to make a spectacle of herself, she shielded her face with her handkerchief, but she could not keep from bursting into tears on the street.

The young man was by no means affronted at this but hovered near her, babbling senselessly and laughing in a silly way. Only when he saw that the scene was beginning to attract the attention of passersby did he move away, tossing back a few ugly words in parting.

Magda got into an empty cab and returned home, crying bitterly. Such grief at human cruelty overtook her, such bottomless despair, that she wanted to throw herself out the window and onto the street, but the impulse passed. She sat on the sofa, closed her eyes, covered her ears with her hands and repeated inwardly:

“There is no rest for me... no shelter... no rescue. God, have mercy. God, have mercy on me!”

All at once she raised her head and remembered Mother Apolonia. The current of her thoughts changed at once.

“Why did I go to the Saxon Garden? I can ask the nuns and they will allow me to sit for hours together in their garden. Ah, I never will have any sense!”

Really, what could be a better plan than to spend her free hours in the sisters’ garden? She would have dinner and lodging for the night at Mrs. Burakowska’s and the rest of the time she would sit in the fresh air, in the quiet. Surely Mother Apolonia would not refuse her that, and in a few days her brother would send for her.

Chapter XXII. Waiting

The next day Magda went to St. Kazimierz, where Mother Apolonia greeted her with a little cry:

“Look at you, my child! You must be ill.”

Then Magda told the elderly woman what had happened during the last few days. When she described the sudden appearance of her brother and his despair in the face of impending death, the nun’s lips pursed and a look of angry displeasure came over her face. But when Magda proceeded to give her account of what Dembicki had said and how it had restored her brother’s peace of mind, Mother Apolonia smiled indulgently. The older woman listened until Magda had finished speaking, then said:

“That professor must be a good man, but why did he belabor himself so with proofs? After all, each person feels that God and eternal life exist, provided he has the courage to listen to his own good judgment.”

Then Magda recounted the incident in the Saxon Garden and asked the nun if she might sit in the hospital garden.

“It would only be for a few days,” she said, “for Zdzislaw will send for me from abroad. But I would like to gather a little strength.”

“My child,” the old lady replied, kissing her, “come as often as you like and stay as long as you like. Only you will find it tedious, for we are busy. There are not even books to divert you.”

“Perhaps you will let me have some book of religious instruction,” Magda whispered, blushing.

“Really?” asked Mother Apolonia, looking keenly at her. “In that case, do you know, I will give you *The Imitation of Christ*.”

She led Magda to the garden, brought the book, blessed her and hurried about her business.

Left to herself amid the greenery and silence she had longed for, Magda felt such peace, such delight, that she was ready to embrace the trees, to kiss the flowers and the sacred walls that were giving her sanctuary. But she was afraid someone would notice her exaltation, so she restrained herself and began to leaf through the book.

She opened it at random, and her eye fell on this:

“Why art thou troubled that things go not with thee as thou wishest and desirest? Who is there that hath all things according to his will? Neither I, nor thou, nor any man upon earth.”

“That is the truth,” Magda whispered.

“Truly it is a misery to live upon the earth. The more a man desireth to be spiritual, the more distasteful doth this present life become to him; for he better

understandeth and more clearly seeth the defects of human corruption... Woe to them that know not their own misery; and still more woe to them that make this wretched and perishable life the object of their love.”

“That is about me!” thought Magda. On the next page she found:

“Lose not, sister, thy confidence of making spiritual progress; thou hast yet time, the hour is not yet past. Why wilt thou put off thy purpose from day to day? Arise, and begin this very instant, and say: Now is the time for action, now is the time to fight, now is the proper time to amend my life.”

She was so overwrought, so in the grip of her own emotions, that every word took on the weight of exhortation or prophecy. She decided to go on reading wherever the book opened, and to derive instruction or portents of things to come from what she found.

“Seldom do we find anyone so spiritual as to be stripped of all created things... If a man give his whole substance, still he is nothing. And if he do great penance, it is but little. And if he attain to all knowledge, he is far off still...”

“Yet is there no one richer than such a man, none more powerful, none more free; who knoweth how to leave himself and all things, and to put himself in the very lowest place.”

Magda reflected. Had she been able to put herself in the lowest place? Certainly she had not. But of all human virtues, that was surely the most within her reach.

She read in another place:

“No great confidence must we place in frail and mortal man, useful though he be, and dearly beloved...”

“Even in Zdzislaw?” she asked herself.

“... nor shouldst thou be much grieved if he sometimes oppose and contradict thee...”

“Well, he opposed me...”

“They that today are with thee, tomorrow may be against thee; and they often change to the contrary, like the wind...”

“Ada... Miss Howard!”

“Here hast thou no abiding city...”

“No; hardly even for a few days!” she sighed.

“... and wherever thou shalt be, thou art a stranger and a pilgrim...”

“Ah, how true! Especially when I go abroad.”

“... nor wilt thou ever have rest, except thou be interiorly united with Christ.”

“Bride of Christ?” she said, almost in fright. But in that alarm there was no aversion, only amazement.

She turned the page and her alarm grew, for she found a question that seemed directed squarely at her:

“Why dost thou stand looking about thee here, since this is not the place of thy rest?”

“Not with the nuns, then...”

“Thy abode must be in heaven, and thou must look upon all earthly things as it were in passing. All things pass away, and thou too along with them.”

“Am I about to die? God’s will be done!”

Oblivious to everything except what she was reading, she turned to the chapter entitled “Of the Thoughts of Death.”

“A very little while and all will be over with thee here. See to it, how it stands with thee in the next life. Man today is, and tomorrow he is seen no more. And when he is taken away from the sight, he is quickly also out of mind.

“When it is morning, think thou wilt not live till evening. And when evening comes, venture not to promise thyself the next morning.”

“Like poor Zdzislaw!”

“Be therefore always in readiness, and so live, that death may never find thee unprepared.”

“He lives so. Did he really divine this truth?”

She felt a pain at her heart. To bolster her courage, she chose another chapter.

“It is good for us now and then to have some troubles and adversities; for oftentimes they make a man enter into himself...”

“Dembicki said that very thing,” Magda thought.

“... that he may know that he is an exile, and place not his hopes in any thing of the world.”

“Not even on Zdzislaw?” she said with yet a deeper sadness.

“When a man of good will is troubled, tempted or afflicted with evil thoughts...”

“Oh, I am very troubled...”

“Then he best understandeth what need he hath of God, and that without Him he is incapable of any good. Then also is he sorrowful; he sigheth and prayeth. ... Then also he well perceiveth that perfect security and full peace cannot be realized in this world.”

“Then where is my happiness?” she thought, dejected beyond expression.

She opened the book haphazardly and found the chapter “Of the Monastic Life.” It moved her to her very soul. “Can it be that I am being judged?” she asked herself.

“Thou must learn to beat down self in many things, if thou wouldst live in peace and concord with others. ... Thou must become a fool for Christ’s sake, if thou wishest to lead the life of a religious.”

“I was always foolish,” Magda whispered.

“The habit and tonsure make but little alteration, but the moral change, and the entire mortification of the passions, make a true religious.”

“Ah! So I do not need to enter an order, only to alter my habits and mortify my passions.”

“He that seeketh any thing else but simply God and the salvation of his soul will find nothing but trouble and sorrow.”

“Well, good... but if I want to nurse a sick brother?”

“Look upon the lively examples of the holy fathers, in whom shone real perfection in the religious life, and thou wilt see how little it is, and almost nothing, that we do. ... For they hated their lives in this world, that they might keep them unto life eternal.”

“But they were not abandoning a sick brother!”

“They renounced all riches, dignities, honors, friends and kindred.... They were poor in earthly things.... they hardly took what was necessary for life.”

Magda closed the book, full of worry. She felt as if she were conversing with an invisible teacher who had ordered her to renounce everything for the sake of God and salvation. At that moment the prospect of renouncing the world was not painful to her; all the ties that bound her to other people had been loosened if not broken. But how could she abandon her parents, and above all her brother, to whom her care could make the difference between life and death?

Only upon cooler reflection did she realize that she was doing battle with an illusion. Indeed, no one was urging her to renounce her family; even the very author of this singular book recommended only the alteration of habits and the disengagement from earthly passions.

Once more she turned the page and read:

“Help me, O Lord God, in my good purpose, and in Thy holy service, and grant that I may this day begin indeed, since what I have done hitherto is nothing.”

“Yes!” Magda thought. “The school, lessons, meetings of the women’s alliance—it is all nothing. I must alter my habits, renounce passion and devote my life to Zdzislaw. If I had gone to him a year ago, he would be well. Let them scoff at me for living on my brother’s charity and not having work of my own!”

A few hours’ conversation with the extraordinary book, to the accompaniment of the hum of trees, the wingbeats of birds or the hymns of the foster children in the orphanage, exerted an excellent influence on Magda. Her nerves were no longer on edge. Instead she felt a hope that had a great deal of longing in it. It seemed that a delicate fog had fallen on her and on the whole

world. In the fog all earthly concerns flowed away, and from beyond it a new horizon was emerging, full of brightness and peace.

She recalled a picture she had seen at some time, a picture of a grove and a field overgrown with spring flowers. Sainly women moved about the field, and the Holy Mother sat on a stool near the grove, spinning the thread of human generations. Magda had something very like a premonition that at any minute she would find herself in that field, where every twinkling of an eye seemed an eternity of happiness, and eternity—the twinkling of an eye.

“Surely it will not be long until I die,” she said, feeling no sadness.

She returned home around two. Mrs. Burakowska told her that a lady who appeared to be a poor governess had been there and written her a letter, which was in her room.

“The maid wanted to keep an eye on her so nothing would go missing,” said Mrs. Burakowska. “But I argued her down. After all, not everyone in need has to steal.”

Magda quivered as she glanced at the envelope. The handwriting was Ada Solska’s. Apologizing profusely for her boldness, Ada had written that she would be there at four. And because Mrs. Burakowska seemed to be waiting for some information about the author of the letter, Magda told her that that impecunious governess was an honorable person of independent means to whom the entire lodging house might safely be opened.

At a few minutes before four Ada knocked on the door. Pausing on the threshold, she said timidly:

“Will you receive me, Magda, dear?”

Magda ran to her with open arms. But Ada so resembled her brother Stefan that it took Magda’s breath away, and for an instant she did not have the courage to embrace her friend.

“You see... you do not love me!” Ada whispered sadly.

Then they seized each other and, kissing and crying, led each other to the sofa.

“Ah, what I have suffered, not seeing you for so long,” Ada said. “I came here with my heart pounding...”

“The fourth floor,” Magda remarked.

“But not because of that. I was afraid. I thought you were mortally offended with me. And you are always an angel... a saint... you, my darling Magda!”

Again they began to kiss each other.

“Do you know what happened?” Ada went on. “That detestable Kotowski nearly killed Kazimierz! I thought I would die, but we are engaged now. I do not even know which of us proposed, he or I. At any rate, it does not matter.”

“And are you happy?” Magda asked

“Ah, do not even ask me! I am so happy, so terribly happy, that I am always in fear. I feel that I will die... that we will never marry... that his wound will take a turn for the worse. But most of all I am afraid of Stefan! It is a week since I wrote him about everything, and there has been no answer. Do you remember how he disliked Kaz—Kazimierz? Heavens, how fearful I am of what will happen when he returns! I tell you, if there were some misunderstanding between them, I would kill myself—”

“Be calm,” Magda broke in. “When all is said and done, you have the right to marry whom you please.”

“Ah—the right! As if you did not know Stefek. What are anyone’s rights to him if he does not approve? Oh, if you would come and stay with me—”

“I?”

“My Magda,” Ada said agitatedly, “why must we pretend? You know that Stefan loved you, and, I will add, loves you to this day, perhaps even more. If you would be reconciled, if you would marry him, he would be so joyful that he would forgive my attachment to Kazimierz.”

Magda flushed, then went pale. Her reaction did not escape Ada’s attention.

“Do not deny it!” she cried. “You have feelings for my brother. And if so, then you must marry him. You must! You must!”

She began to kiss Magda’s hands. Magda pulled them away and answered:

“It cannot be.”

Ada fixed her with her slanted eyes.

“Perhaps you love Kazimierz, then?” she ventured.

“Look at me,” Magda answered, calmly holding her own against Ada’s burning gaze.

“Then why do you not want to marry Stefan?”

“No doubt you know,” Magda said after a moment, “that I have a brother, too. He is gravely ill. Any day he will send for me and I will go abroad. I must nurse him to the end of his life.”

“And who will keep you from watching over your brother even after you are married to Stefan? Perhaps you think that Stefan would stand in your way? No! Magda, dearest, listen to me: go abroad to your brother now and we all, Stefek, Kazimierz and I, will follow the two of you. Wherever they order your brother to settle, we will settle: in the mountains, in Italy, even in Egypt. And if the doctors order a longer sea voyage for him, we will still be together. Indeed, Kazimierz needs to recover his strength as well, and Stefek and I are excessively fond of traveling. Well, only say the word—one little word: yes—and you secure happiness for Stefan and both of us. Well, say it... say it...”

She clung to Magda.

“Say yes—say it—”

Magda was moved with compassion for her.

“Think, dear Ada, if I can contemplate anything of that kind. My heart is breaking at the thought of my poor brother, who lies somewhere, lonely, with a fever, perhaps without hope, and you ask me to... Tell me, if you were seriously to lay such a demand on me, would it not be cruel? I am unhappy as well.”

“You are right,” Ada said soberly. “To speak of this today is selfish on my part. But sometime, I hope, in the providence of God...”

Magda was silent. She sat with downcast eyes.

Miss Solska suddenly changed the subject.

“What are you doing? Tell me,” she said.

“I am waiting for a letter from my brother—for a telegram in which he will summon me. In the meantime, I go to the sisters.”

“What for?” Ada asked in surprise.

“I sit in their garden to rest in the fresh air and I read Thomas a Kempis.”

“And could you not come to our garden?” Ada asked, then thought better of it and added, “Perhaps that peaceful nook and closeness to the nuns will be beneficial to you, my poor love. Oh! I know what uncertainty is.”

They parted warmly. Magda did not go to the nuns’ garden that day, but wrote a long letter to the major in Iksinow. She told him about Zdzislaw’s illness and asked him to obtain a passport for her without her parents’ knowledge.

From that time Magda began to lead a life that was rather peculiar. She slept soundly, ate little and spent whole days in the nuns’ garden reading either the lives of the saints or Thomas a Kempis.

If she had been asked how much time passed in this way, she would not have been able to say. It seemed to her that she was falling slowly into a blue abyss of indifference to earthly concerns. With each moment the world around her lost its reality, while another reality emerged from some unknown depth. She was like a man who, in the midst of a vivid dream, says, “But it is only a dream; those people are not real, and I am someone else.”

Now and then something nudged her back to the everyday world. A letter came from Zdzislaw, informing her that he was well and staying for some weeks in Vienna in order to see the city. She found a visiting card from Stefan Zgierski in her room, and, another time, a card from Helen Norska Korkowicz. Someone she knew pointedly avoided greeting her on the street, but was it Zaneta, Fajkowski’s fiancée, or Mania Lewinska? Magda did not notice.

One day Mrs. Burakowska reminded Magda with a troubled air that the cashier from the apothecaries’ supply house was returning to her room, and that Magda must arrange for new lodgings for herself.

“Let me move to the apartment beside the kitchen, which is vacant. It will only be for a few days. In a few days my brother will send for me and I will go away.”

“Yes... but that room... prospective tenants have spoken for it,” said Mrs. Burakowska. Then she added:

“For a few days you could move to a hotel.”

Magda was shaken; she suspected that the words carried an ugly insinuation. She looked at the landlady, wanting to ask her what they meant. But at that moment the anesthetizing peace came over her again, and once more she was immersed in that abyss in which earthly things dissolved like icebergs in the sun.

She did not answer Mrs. Burakowska. She went to the nuns’ hospital. It seemed to her that there was no more important business in the world than reading the saintly book, helping the orphans sew linen or singing songs of faith with them.

At dinner the next day Mrs. Burakowska gave her a letter from Iksinow. Magda saw that it was addressed in her mother’s hand.

“I congratulate you,” the doctor’s wife wrote, “on the effects of independence. The whole town says that you lost your place at Miss Malinowska’s school because of bad conduct, that you take walks with unattached men, and even that you stay in hotels. I do not understand the source of these shameful rumors, but I see from your father’s expression that he has heard something, for for several days he has looked more dead than alive.

“I do not ask you how much of this is true; you are reaping the harvest of your wicked emancipation and disrespect for parental admonitions. I am not angry with you, I do not recriminate, and I do not force advice on you. But I remind you that you bear the name that belongs to Zofia Brzeska and Zdzislaw Brzeski, and if you think of continuing to work independently in this way, at least adopt a pseudonym, as your dead friend Stella did.”

Magda went white. She did not finish dinner; she went to her room. She cried quietly, lay on her bed, and an hour later was in the sisters’ garden with Thomas a Kempis in her hand.

“He is not a truly patient man,” she read, “who will suffer nothing, only so much as he shall think fit, and from whom he pleaseth. The truly patient man mindeth not by what manner of man it is he is exercised. ... But how much soever and how often soever any adversity happeneth to him from any creature, he taketh it all equally with thanksgiving as from the hand of God, and esteemeth it a great gain. For with God not anything, how trifling soever, suffered for God’s sake, shall go unrewarded...”

“Daughter, take it not to heart,” the book said in another place, “if some people think ill of thee, and say of thee what thou art not willing to hear. Thou oughtest to think worse things of thyself, and to believe no one weaker than thyself. ... Let not thy peace depend on the tongues of men; for whether they put a good or bad construction on what thou dost, thou art still what thou art. Where is true peace or true glory? Is it not in Me?”

“But that harsh letter came from my mother,” she thought, “who has repudiated me in the name of the family. And for what?”

She felt a pain in her heart and began to peruse another chapter.

“A man ought, therefore, to soar over everything created, and perfectly to forsake himself, and in ecstasy of mind to stand and see that Thou, the Creator of all, hast nothing like to Thee among creatures. ... And whatsoever is not God is nothing, and ought to be accounted as nothing.”

She rested, then looked for the chapter “Of the Desire of Eternal Life.”

“Daughter, when thou perceivest the desire of eternal bliss to be infused into thee from above, and thou wouldst fain go out of the tabernacle of this body, that thou mightest contemplate My brightness without any shadow of change; enlarge thy heart, and receive this holy inspiration with thy whole desire....

“Thou hast yet to be tried upon earth, and exercised in many things. ... What pleaseth others shall prosper, what is pleasing to thee shall not succeed. What others say shall be hearkened to; what thou sayest shall be reckoned as naught. Others shall ask, and shall receive; thou shalt ask, and not obtain. Others shall be great in the esteem of man; about thee nothing shall be said....

“But consider, daughter, the fruit of these labors, their speedy termination, and their reward exceeding great; and thou wilt not thence derive affliction, but the most strengthening consolation in thy suffering. For in regard to that little of thy will which thou now willingly forsakest, thou shalt forever have thy will in heaven. ... There I will give thee glory for the contumely thou hast suffered; a garment of praise for thy sorrow; and for having been seated here in the lowest place, the throne of My kingdom forever...”

When twilight fell and Magda closed the book, she wondered why her mother’s letter had cost her such pain. Had it not been foretold that she must be exercised in many things? And did this suffering not lose its value if she could not bear it with resignation?

Several more days passed and she received no letter from her brother.

“He certainly does not want to write,” she thought. “Perhaps he is traveling. And perhaps he wants to surprise me and will telegraph me any hour to come to him.”

But apart from these suppositions, two fears ran deep in her heart: that Zdzislaw’s illness was worse, or that he had disowned her as her mother had.

Magda not only did not articulate these fears to herself, she did not even allow them to intrude on her consciousness. Every time the phrase “more seriously ill” began to loom large against the background of her anxieties, she whispered, “Hail, Mary,” or took up Thomas a Kempis and immersed herself in reading.

In the course of the week she made her confession for the second time, this time in the nuns’ chapel. She was surrounded by devotional books and through whole days she thought of God, the last hope of the suffering. Her mind was

more and more intently fixed on heaven. Earthly relations were being more and more thoroughly effaced from her memory.

“Whatsoever is not God is nothing, and ought to be accounted as nothing,” she repeated more and more frequently, in ever-intensifying states of exaltation.

Finally one afternoon the lettercarrier brought her two postcards from Vienna at once. In both of them Zdzislaw informed her that he was busy visiting the sights of the beautiful quarters of the city, and that he had not yet arranged a meeting with his consulting physicians.

“How little he cares about himself,” Magda thought bitterly.

Her eyes fell suddenly on the date of one card. It was September fifth, and the other was dated September third.

“Today is the third,” she said, “and the day after tomorrow is the fifth. Why did he write the dates in advance? Is he so sick that he has lost his memory, or—is he so bored with writing to me?”

She did not eat dinner; she only said her prayers and hurried to the nuns’ hospital. She worked for a little while in the sewing room with the orphans, then went out to the garden with her beloved book.

“When a man hath arrived so far”—she read—“that he seeks his consolation from no created thing, then first doth he begin truly to taste what God is; then, too, will he be well contented with whatever happens. Then will he neither rejoice for much nor be sorrowful for little, but will commit himself wholly to God, Who is to him all in all; to Whom nothing is lost or dieth, but for Whom all things live, and at Whose beck they instantly obey.”

“Dembicki said the same thing,” she told herself. That recollection filled her with joy that was all the greater when, leafing through the pages, she found something very like a prophecy concerning herself:

“Peace shall come on one day, which is known to the Lord. And it will not be day or night, such as it is at present; but light everlasting, infinite brightness, steadfast peace, and safe repose.”

“Dembicki said that, word for word.”

Her anxieties fled when, inebriated with delight, she read in an undertone:

“A great thing is love, a great good every way; which alone lighteneth all that is burthensome. Love feeleth no burden, thinketh nothing of labors, would willingly do more than it can, complaineth not of impossibility, because it conceiveth that it may and can do all things. ... Love watches, and sleeping slumbereth not. When weary it is not tired; when straitened is not constrained; when frightened is not disturbed; but like a vivid flame and a burning torch, it mounteth upwards and securely passeth through all.”

It seemed to Magda that she saw the sky opened and heard immortal choirs plaintively intoning a song of triumph:

“Above all things, and in all things, do thou, my soul, rest always in the Lord, for He is the eternal rest of the saints. ...

“Above all gifts and presents that thou canst give and infuse; above all joy and jubilation that the mind can contain or feel; in fine, above all angels and archangels, and all the host of heaven; above all things invisible and invisible; and above all that is not Thee, my God...”

At that instant someone touched her arm. Magda turned her head and saw a young nun.

“What do you wish me to do, sister?” she asked, smiling.

“Mother Apolonia invites madam to the parlor.”

Still bemused and full of heavenly visions, Magda followed the sister. Suddenly reality forced itself on her. In the parlor beside Mother Apolonia stood Dembicki. His cheeks seemed to be sagging, and his complexion was the color of dough.

Magda looked at him and at the elderly nun and rubbed her forehead a few times. When Dembicki began slowly and with a trembling hand to take a paper from his pocket, Magda restrained him and said:

“I know. Zdzislaw has died.”

Chapter XXIII. On What Shores Do the Waves of the World Cast Us Up?

In the middle of September, around seven one evening, a short gentleman wearing a long gray coat detached himself from the crowd that was passing the Solski palace and turned into the courtyard.

There was no one by the iron gate; from the watchman's booth, where a red light flared, floated the sour notes of a violin out of tune. In the courtyard consumptive-looking trees were fading and several children ran about, playing with fireworks. Otherwise there was silence.

The gentleman in the gray coat looked at the silhouette of the palace that was boldly etched against the golden evening light, then at the left wing, over which Vega glittered. He peered into the windows of the dark library, then slowly approached the front door and disappeared between the columns.

The door was open; silence and emptiness stalked the marble floor of the hall. The man walked with even steps to the second floor, took a key from his pocket and opened the rooms that belonged to the master of the house.

Darkness, silence and emptiness were everywhere.

The new arrival did not remove his hat as he passed several salons, where, as if in anticipation of the master's return, the covers had been removed from the furniture. Then he went to Ada Solska's rooms, which were equally quiet, dark and vacant. At last he turned toward the apartment Magda had formerly occupied.

He felt a fresh breeze and noticed that the door to the balcony was open. He gazed at the garden, where the trees were turning yellow and brown, at the golden sunset, and at Vega, a diamond glowing in the skies.

The evening was fine and warm as if with the kiss of the departing summer. But over the vegetation hung the melancholy spell of autumn, the season of elusive fog that penetrates the human being and condenses in the soul like the tears of a grief without cause.

The man leaned on the railing of the balcony. It was evident that he was straining to see the imperceptible forms of the night and to hear the muted melody of autumn, for he sighed often.

At that moment a deep voice could be heard in the summer house that stood almost directly under the balcony:

"These corns hurt me so! I'll bet there will be foul weather tomorrow."

"Then put on your slippers, angel," said a feminine voice.

"Aha!" thought the listener. "Mydelko is taking a honeymoon in the garden house."

"Sometimes I don't want to look for my slippers," replied the bass voice.

“I will find them for you, my love.”

“I still have to pull off my shoes!” growled the bass.

“But I will remove them for you. After all, you are mine... all mine, my pet... my kitten...”

“Oho!” the new arrival said to himself. “The former Miss Howard has embarked on a risky venture. And now, strangely enough, there is this madness of Ada’s!”

He turned quietly away from the balcony and sat down in an armchair. He put his hat on a low chest of drawers, rested his head on the chair and brooded.

All at once he thought he heard the rustle of a gown. He nearly sprang up—it was a dry leaf from the balcony that had drifted into the room.

“Ah,” he whispered, “what have I done... what have I done?”

Now the sounds of footsteps and conversation really did float from the distant apartments. He went to Ada’s suite and through the open door saw two people in the salon. One was short and stocky; the other, dressed in livery, was holding a lighted candelabrum.

“Well, look, where is he? The count is not a needle,” blustered the man with the candelabrum.

“And I tell you the count arrived and went to his rooms a quarter of an hour ago at most. A fine job you make of guarding the palace!” retorted the pudgy one.

The gentleman in the gray coat walked into the hall and the heavyset man exclaimed:

“Oh, you see, you lout!... Your most humble servant, count,” he added, bowing.

The footman was aghast at seeing a strange man in the salon, and nearly dropped the candelabrum when he realized that the stranger was his master.

“Take the light to my study,” Solski told him. “So, Mr. Zgierski, what is new?”

The footman removed Solski’s coat, turned on four gas lamps in the study and went out, pale with fright. Then Zgierski began in a low voice:

“There is important information. Our competitors are obstructing Kazimierz Norski, calculating that through his mediation they will succeed in acquiring a part of the stock in our sugar factory.”

“I doubt it,” Solski answered carelessly, flinging himself into the chair behind the desk. “My future brother-in-law has too much sense to divest himself of such documents.”

If a thunderbolt had glanced off Zgierski’s rotund form, it would not have astonished him more than that answer. Solski had called Kazimierz his future brother-in-law? It was the end of the world!

There was a moment's silence. But because Zgierski was choking on that silence, he began again, this time in a different tone:

"But what an appalling development! To this day poor Dr. Kotowski cannot get over his grief at the effect of his shot. He has grown thin. He is wasting away."

"Yes. He should have aimed at the left side and a little lower. Well—but that is difficult."

Zgierski leaned on the desk to steady himself. He really was speechless.

"What, then?" Solski said. "Miss Brzeska is always with the nuns?"

"Worse!" Zgierski seized on the question. "Yesterday her father arrived with the old major (do you remember, count?) and gave Miss Magdalena permission to become a nun. Miss Ada, Mr. Norski, Madam Helena Korkowicz—in a word, all of us—are in despair. But what can be done?"

"What, after all, is Miss Brzeska's desire?" Solski asked, resting his head on his hands so that his face was shielded.

"The last drop of bitterness was her brother's death, concerning which I had the honor of writing you. But gossip furnished the true ground—calumny, which gives no quarter even to saintly creatures. For a few months Warsaw simply howled with rumor. And why? Because this true angel in human flesh visited a dying woman, wanted to help an orphan, and nursed her sick brother!

"All her former friends (with the exception of another angel, Miss Ada) abandoned the unhappy lady. What is more, they even made her feel their displeasure. Why, there was a day when Miss Magdalena might have found herself on the street, since her landlady ordered her things to be put out in the corridor—"

"Yes! It seems to me, however, that you hurled a few pebbles into that garden."

"I?" cried Zgierski, striking himself on the chest. "I? Because I considered it my obligation to communicate to you all the information that reached me? Indeed, count, you must confess that I was always exact and never tainted myself with an untruth."

"Well—no. I do not reproach you. At any rate, this development will not influence our relations. You will have eight hundred rubles in wages now."

"So, count, you are not angry with me?" Zgierski exclaimed theatrically. "You have not lost respect for me?"

"I never had any," Solski murmured, but so quietly that Zgierski could not hear.

And it is certain that he did not hear. For he began in an easygoing, elegant style to talk of matters concerning the sugar factory, and within a few minutes said goodbye to Solski with a great show of affection.

In the meantime the servants put on their livery and lighted the salons. A fire blazed in the kitchen; porcelain and silver were taken from the sideboard. A chaise drew up before the main door sometime after eight and a moment later Solski's sister Ada came into his room.

Her dark costume intensified the pallor of her face. But her small figure was vibrant with energy and her slanted eyes were flashing.

Solski rose from his desk and kissed his sister warmly.

"How are you?" he asked in an unusually gentle tone.

Ada stepped back, surprised. Adopting a defensive posture, she asked:

"Did you receive the letter I wrote you at the end of August?"

Solski smiled at her.

"You mean, do I know that you are engaged to Norski? Certainly I know—and not only from you."

"And what do you say to it?"

"I ask God's blessing on you both; and, by the way, I advise you to draw up a prenuptial agreement. I will even assist you in that matter myself, if you require it."

Ada fell on her knees, embraced her brother's legs and whispered tearfully:

"My only brother—my father—my mother—oh! How I love you!"

Solski helped her up, led her to the sofa, wiped her tears and, holding her close, replied:

"Do you really think that I could stand in the way of your happiness?"

"And you say that, Stefek, you? So he may ask you for my hand?"

"Of course. After all, I am your guardian."

Ada wanted to fall at her brother's feet again, but he did not let her. He removed her hat and wraps and reassured her until she recovered her good humor.

"Heavens!" she said. "I have not laughed for so long..."

Dembicki, moving laboriously, came to tea in Ada's study. When the servants had gone out and the three were by themselves, Solski asked with visible emotion:

"What of Miss Magdalena, professor?"

"Why... nothing. She is entering the order. Her father gave permission; today they wrote out applications."

Solski's face darkened.

"The professor is always unruffled," Ada remarked.

"Why should I speak otherwise?" Dembicki answered. "After all, she has a right, if not to happiness, at least to peace."

After a moment's silence he added: "The sick, the crippled, animals, even criminals find shelter and conditions favorable to their survival. Why should a soul of uncommon nobleness be deprived of that right?"

"What?" Solski burst out. "So you think the habit—"

"—will allow her to care for orphans, watch over the sick, help the unfortunate, without exposure to insult and injury. She was always drawn to that; well, today she has found her field."

Solski shrugged and began to drum on the table. At last he said:

"But... but... Ada, do you know whom I met in Vienna? Ludwik Krukowski and his sister. A prize pair of eccentrics! And, listen: they lived in Iksinow and knew the Brzeskis. Ludwik even courted Miss Magdalena, and was refused.

"In spite of that, you have no idea of the admiration with which they spoke of the whole family, and of Miss Magdalena in particular. There is truly something more than human in that woman. But she became the target of the vilest slander from the very time of her stay in Iksinow. It is said that she was involved in a romance with some old major who has bequeathed her a fortune..."

"That major is in Warsaw," Dembicki interjected.

"...and what is worse, it was said that some postal official killed himself because of Miss Magdalena. And it is all a wicked lie!" Solski said, striking the table with his fist. "The postal clerk killed himself, but it was because of another young woman, who had the gall to let the blame fall on Magda. The Krukowskis gave me a detailed account."

"You heard intimations of all this in Warsaw?" Ada asked.

"Of course. That is why I went abroad."

"Why did you not ask me about it?"

"Ah! How do I know? I was half out of my wits. It is true that the professor made me see reason; he explained Miss Magdalena's behavior with regard to us. I was beginning to calm myself when the rumor about the postal official and the major's bequest began circulating. And to think that I, along with a nameless pack of scoundrels, pushed her into the convent!"

Solski rose and paced about feverishly.

"A childish plan," he said, "locking oneself in with nuns! She could do more good living among people than being there. The professor has an obligation to explain that to her. After all, these very shelters, hospitals and I don't know what else, Miss Magdalena can have on her own terms, and influence—incomparably greater influence. This—this is desertion!" he exclaimed in a new voice. "This is a betrayal of society! The world has too many women who think of amusement, clothes, flirtation. But it has a shortage of women like her, and is the worse for it!"

"Stefan is right," Ada put in, looking sternly at Dembicki.

"I did what I could," the professor protested. "I brought a variety of arguments to bear, but—argument convinces a calm mind; it does not heal wounded feelings."

"So tell her that, burying herself in that grave, she betrays the living. No; that is still too weak: she robs humanity! Let her remind herself, if she is so pious," Stefan went on, close to the limit of his endurance, "of the parable of the buried talents. God does not endow people with exceptional qualities so they can escape into the desert. That is worse than hate; it is pride and contempt for her fellow man!"

The professor nodded. "My dear Stefan, you are right," he said. "Not only I, but above all the old major, told her more or less the same thing. He was as furious with Miss Magdalena as you. And do you know what she answered?"

"'Have compassion on me. Do not draw me back there, where I lost my peace and my faith and might have lost my reason. It is well with me here, but there it was terrible.' Those were Miss Brzeska's words."

"Poor thing—she is extremely overwrought; she herself was aware of it," Ada remarked.

"Certainly," said Dembicki.

"But such states pass," Solski said.

"And perhaps this will pass," Dembicki replied.

"Oh! Professor, that calmness of yours is unbearable!" cried Solski.

"And you would be calmer if you saw in this development not betrayal, desertion or overwrought nerves, but the law of nature."

"What now? What?" Solski exclaimed, stopping in front of his old teacher.

Dembicki looked at him and asked:

"You do know that Miss Magdalena is a truly extraordinary creature?"

"I myself have always said so. There is genius of feeling in feminine form. Not a trace of selfishness, only an identification with others, a flowing out into other hearts. She always felt for everything and everyone, almost forgetting about herself."

"You have used an excellent phrase: genius of feeling," Dembicki said in his didactic way. "Yes: there are geniuses of will, who have great aims and succeed in making plans commensurate with those aims, though their resources are not always sufficient. There are geniuses of thought whose vision encompasses a very broad horizon and strikes to the root of every question, but they do not always find hearers. And there are geniuses of feeling, who, as you have well said, feel for everything and everyone, but themselves find no response from anyone."

"You see, then: the common characteristic of extraordinary individuals is the lack of proportion between them and the majority, which is made up of average people. We are perfectly well able to appreciate, for example, beauty,

fortune, success; but we are decidedly lacking in the capacity to assign a value to lofty aims, wide views or angelic hearts—”

“Paradoxes!” Solski broke in.

“By no means. These are everyday facts. Look around you: who play the most prominent roles, acquire fortunes and enjoy success? In ninety out of a hundred cases it is not those with unusual capacities, but those who are more conspicuously mediocre. And that is natural. Even a blind man can assess an object less than a foot higher than himself; but in no way can he judge the merits of a mountain, even if you lead him to its summit.”

“I think you are unjust,” Ada observed.

“Then take examples from history. We who read works by people of genius and the commentaries upon them, or profit from their achievements, are convinced that nothing is easier than to recognize genius. Yet in what case was it recognized at once? Philanthropists were harassed and laughed at. Inventors were called lunatics and reformers heretics. One can safely wager that if two ecclesiastics are in competition, mediocrity will immediately win admiration and applause, and genius will make its audience uneasy. And only succeeding generations will perceive that one walked beautifully along roads that were smoothed for him, but the other created new worlds.

“I knew a mathematician whose formulas reached almost to the beginnings of creation, and he could not get a position that paid over a thousand rubles a year, while his friends who were bookkeepers were earning several thousand. I knew of a naturalist who had made discoveries in a new realm of phenomena, and his opponents reproached him for not knowing how many teeth a dog has, and which ones.

“Finally, of that handful of ladies whom we all have observed, the beautiful Helena Norska acquired a fortune; the flighty Miss Howard got a husband; Miss Lewinska, innocent as a lamb, will have a husband and a measure of security; and all three will be greatly respected by the world. Only Miss Brzeska, flogged by gossip, must flee to the nuns to escape slander. The geese in the coop are happier than the eagles in the menagerie!”

“I know what I will do,” Solski said suddenly, and snapped his fingers.

“Oh, good!” Ada exclaimed, full of faith in her practical brother.

“Where is Dr. Brzeski staying?” Stefan asked. “We will go there tomorrow and the professor will acquaint me with him.”

“They are staying at Dziekanka, for that, according to the major, is the best-run hotel in Warsaw,” Dembicki answered. “If you have a plan in mind, however, do not count on Brzeski’s help, only the major’s. He is a brave old man; he knew your grandfather, in fact.”

“Really?”

The conversation ended there and the group dispersed. But the lights burned in Stefan’s apartment until three in the morning.

At around noon the next day Solski, accompanied by the professor, knocked on the door of a room at Dziekanka. A grizzled old man with a bristling mustache and side whiskers opened the door, holding an enormous pipe between his teeth. Farther into the room, by a window, sat another man, who did not raise his head at the sight of the visitors.

The old man with the pipe noticed Stefan. Shading his eyes by using his hand as a visor, he looked closely at him and exclaimed:

“Eh? And who is this? Solski—isn’t it?”

“Solski,” Stefan said.

“And the word became flesh!” shouted the impulsive old man. “Indeed, this fellow looks as if he had inherited his grandfather’s skin. Come here...”

He looked Solski over, kissed him on the forehead and prattled on:

“Do you know that your grandfather Stefan was the commandant of our brigade? Ah... what a soldier he was! He rushed into fire and water after the flag, and—after the skirt. If you take after him—well, you rascals!”

The professor introduced Stefan to Dr. Brzeski, who sat hunched and motionless in his chair.

“You returned yesterday from abroad, sir?” the doctor inquired. “I lost a son there.”

“Oh, keep still about your son!” cried the major. “If you hadn’t gotten him, you wouldn’t have lost him.”

“It is easy for you to joke. You have no children,” the doctor sighed.

“How’s that? What’s that?” the major exploded. “Indeed, I suffer more because I do not even know what son of mine died, or even what his name was. Son... son... son! We will die too, though we are also sons. We did not fall like frogs with the rain.”

“He was twenty-seven years old,” the doctor said in a lifeless voice. “He worked for his living—what is more, for ours—and he died. We do not know what happened to him. We were waiting for a letter from Moscow, and a telegram came from Vienna. Such a strange death...”

“Particularly strange for you!” the major remarked. “Have you not sent a few people on to the other world?”

Solski looked at the major reproachfully. The old man noticed and said:

“Are you shocked? My dear fellow, if I didn’t pour swill on his head, they would be pouring cold water over it tomorrow. Why must he sit there like an owl in a hollow tree, brooding? Let him curse, let him cry, let him pray and I will help him. But I will jeer at this brooding and rail at him until blood runs down his eyes.”

In fact, the doctor raised his head and looked less apathetically at his visitors.

“And to add to that,” he said, “my daughter is taking the veil. Terrible—how misfortune never comes alone!”

“We have come about that very matter,” Dembicki interposed.

Solski rose from his chair.

“Doctor, sir,” he began, “I believe my name is not unknown to you.”

“No. You and your sister were friends of Magda’s. I know. I know.”

He embraced Solski, who kissed his hand and said with deep feeling:

“Sir, I have the honor of asking for the hand of your daughter, Magdalena.”

“But she is mine!” the doctor replied.

“Fiddle-de-dee!” the major exclaimed. He kissed Solski’s forehead a second time and said:

“Indeed we will give you Magda. Only take her away from the nuns. I tell you, Solski,” said the loquacious old soldier, wagging his finger under Stefan’s nose, “if she gets a good bargain in you, for you, I hear, are a magnate, you will get a thousand times better bargain in her. The devil take me where I stand if you will find a sweeter, nobler girl in all the world.”

And so the old man blustered until he was hoarse.

“We wanted to share advice about precisely that—” Dembicki offered—“ways to extricate Miss Magdalena.”

“Leave it alone,” said the doctor. “After all, they are not holding her prisoner.”

“Advice? Here?” the major broke in. “Solski, my friend, do not advise her father or that other dishrag, the professor. If you have your grandfather’s blood in your veins, just go to the yard where they feed the ducks and look at the drake.

“What does an enamored drake do? Do you think he sighs or shares advice with anyone? Not a bit of it! First he eats his portion and the young lady’s, and then—without madrigals—he takes his sweetheart by her crest and leads her to the justice of the peace. That was the old system and it was a good one. But try standing on ceremony with a woman and you’ll get stuck in a muddle!”

It was resolved that that very day Dr. Brzeski, the major and Dembicki would call on Magda and affirm their support for Solski’s proposal of marriage.

“Foolish—this popping the question!” growled the major. “As long as I said nothing, I was lucky in love, but only let me pay a compliment or declare my feelings and they would show me the door straightaway. Can women babble? Do they understand human speech?”

At around two o’clock Solski said goodbye to his friends at the hotel. The doctor, Dembicki and the major also left the room. Slowly, often stopping to look around them, they made their way toward Tamka. The major spoke of how Warsaw had looked in his day; of which house had tumbled down and which had

been rebuilt; of where the guardhouses had been, and the coffee shops. More than once they stopped in front of a shop window, and the major was irritated.

“These merchants!” he said. “We can see the whole shop through the windows. They look like sick people whose gullets are perpetually open. Would I turn out my pockets in front of any fool and put my fortune on display, as if they suspected that I had stolen it?”

Walking and talking in this way, in a little less than an hour they found themselves in the hospital at St. Kazimierz, and asked to speak to Mother Apolonia in the parlor.

There the major stepped forward and announced to the venerable nun that Magda would not join the order because Stefan Solski, the grandson of the general of the foot brigade, had asked for her hand.

“Certainly it would be best for Magda to marry, but... gentlemen, speak with her yourselves,” Mother Apolonia answered.

She sent for Magda, who appeared after a few minutes. She looked drawn. She wore a black gown and a white cap.

At the sight of her, Dembicki decided not to speak, but the major lost none of his determination to push forward.

“My dear, you look like a scarecrow,” he said. “But that is not the point. Count Solski (listen carefully!), the grandson of my general, asks for your hand. And we all support him.”

Magda blushed, then turned pale. She was silent for a moment and pressed a hand to her heart. Then she said quietly:

“I will not marry—”

“But think,” the major interrupted, “Solski, after all, is asking for your hand. The grandson of my general—”

“I cannot marry.”

“Three hundred thousand dev—!” shouted the major, looking sharply at Mother Apolonia. “Why can’t you marry?”

Magda said nothing.

“I see,” said the old man, turning purple, “that the girl is not only hobbled herself, but her tongue is, too.” He turned to the sister. “Be so kind as to work a miracle so she will enlighten us as to the cause of this decision.”

“My child,” said Mother Apolonia, “tell the gentlemen why you do not want to marry.”

Magda looked pleadingly at Mother Apolonia, but the elderly woman’s eyes were lowered.

“Must I?” Magda asked.

“Yes.”

"I cannot marry," Magda began in a trembling, toneless voice. "I cannot marry because..."

"Because what?" asked the major.

"Because I belonged to another—" Magda finished.

Dembicki looked around from behind his hat. The doctor raised sorrowful eyes to his daughter. Mother Apolonia looked at the floor. Only the major did not lose his nerve.

"What do you mean, 'I belonged to another'? Tell us. You have nothing to hide."

"One man," Magda sobbed, "one man kissed me."

She hid her face in her hands and turned away from her judges.

"How many times?" Mother Apolonia asked her.

"Once, but... very long..."

"How long?"

"Perhaps for five minutes... perhaps ten..."

"That cannot be," Dembicki murmured. "It would obstruct the breath for too long..."

"Pshaw! You are a silly little thing, my dear," the major sighed. "But so that Solski will have one more reason for envy..."

He embraced Magda and kissed both her cheeks, which were wet with tears.

"Now run to the square," he said, "and tell them to shout to the world that I kissed you. My child, if every time we kissed a pretty girl it were inscribed on the sky, we would never see the sun for all that writing."

"You may go, Magda," said Mother Apolonia.

Magda disappeared through the door.

The major spoke up again:

"Well, good! You have sent the girl about her business, and in the meantime we know nothing."

"If I did not respect your age, sir—"

"First of all, do not respect my age, madam, for we do not know which of us is older. Secondly—"

"And secondly," Mother Apolonia interrupted firmly, "only one of us may remain in this room: you or I."

The major was stunned. But he collected his thoughts and said to Dembicki:

"Didn't I say that as soon as I opened my mouth around the women, they threw me out the door?"

He hurried out to the courtyard and began to tamp tobacco into his enormous pipe, which he had concealed in his overcoat until then.

"I apologize for my friend, madam," said the doctor, who was very troubled. "But he is old... he is like a child."

"We see worse cases," the nun said with a smile.

"What can we say to Solski?" Dembicki asked, looking first at the doctor, then at the sister.

Mother Apolonia shrugged her shoulders.

"Gentlemen, you heard," she answered. "I think, however, that first of all that poor child must recover her peace of mind."

"I think so as well."

"Moreover," she added, "in my opinion it would be advisable to repeat today's conversation to Count Solski..."

"Yes... certainly," replied the professor.

They said goodbye to the elderly lady and went out to join the major, who had been peering at them through the window.

At five in the evening Solski was in the parlor at St. Kazimierz, waiting impatiently for Mother Apolonia.

When she appeared, he told her who he was and asked if he might be allowed to see Miss Brzeska.

"I am sorry," the sister replied, "but Magda is in such a nervous state that I would prefer not even to inform her of your visit."

"When, then?" he asked, making an effort to master himself.

"I will speak of it to her within a few days."

"I will not be able to see her for days, then?"

The nun frowned slightly; the urgency in his tone displeased her.

"See her?" she repeated. "That will surely not happen soon."

"I believe you know my intentions with respect to Miss Brzeska?"

"I know them, sir, and I sincerely desire that they may be fulfilled. That is why... please accept my advice."

"I will gladly hear it."

"Above all, allow her to regain the moral equilibrium that she has lost, poor child. Let her recover her tranquility and her health."

"When will that happen—in your opinion?" he asked almost imploringly.

"She will be calm in a few months if nothing new transpires..."

“Madam,” he said, extending his hand, “do you think that there is hope for me? That Miss Magdalena’s heart will ever turn to me?”

The old woman looked sternly at him.

“Only God knows,” she said.

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The End, *Emancipated Women*.