

BEGGAR
MY NEIGHBOUR





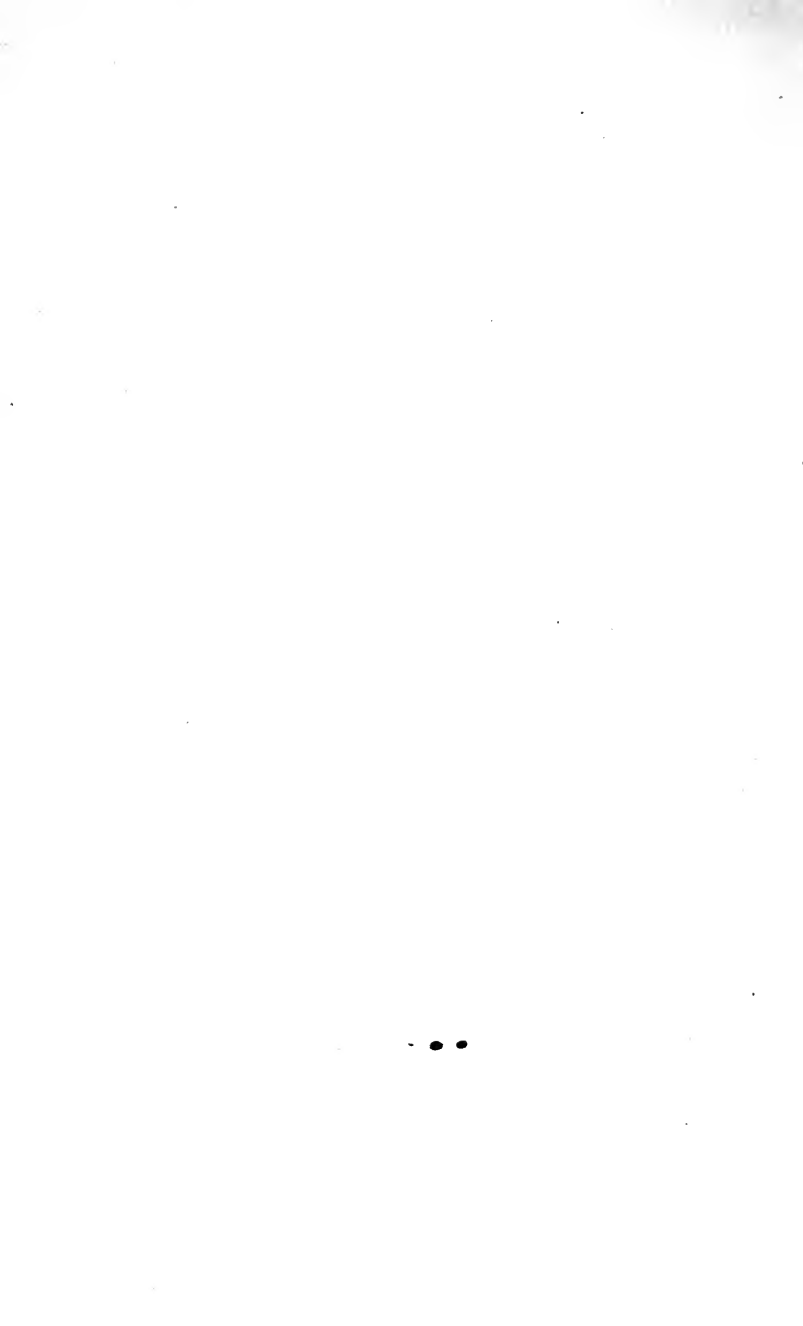
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BEGGAR MY NEIGHBOUR

A NOVEL

BY

E. D. GERARD

AUTHOR OF 'REATA: WHAT'S IN A NAME'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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BEGGAR MY NEIGHBOUR.

INTRODUCTORY.

THREE boys were playing at cards; and the game they played was "Beggar my Neighbour."

Not, strictly speaking, "Beggar my Neighbour," for that is an English game, and these were Polish boys; but on every spot of earth, whether it be in England, Poland, the tropic or the arctic regions, there is always some way of begging one's neighbour, if only one has the will and the talent for doing so. In different countries the process has got different names—at cards; the result is everywhere the same.

A large and lofty room, with tall windows, curtainless; a polished floor, carpetless; stiff red velvet chairs, which scarcely lessen the look of emptiness; an enormous mirror, hanging out of the perpendicular,

which makes the room emptier, larger, more stately, more dreary, and throws back a puny image of the three children at their distant card-table. Far away and dwarfish they look in their quaint costume, their broad white collars and short green jackets. Their voices wander up to the ceiling and waken echoes,—three little figures swallowed up in their surroundings, lost against their background. And not in the mirror alone is an image of the card-players to be found. A row of old portraits, dingy, and framed in dingy gold; Roman-nosed Polish heroes, and simpering Polish beauties, would make a spectator look from the canvas to two at least of those boy-faces down there.

The eldest card-player—Kazimir by name—whose age is eleven, has brown wavy hair, and eager, resolute brown eyes, which correct the softness of his smiling lips. He plays his cards with determination, but scarcely with prudence; for calmness has given way at sight of the brilliant prize at stake,—an old battered silver watch, I think it was.

Marcin, the second card-player, a year younger, is like his brother—but as a blurred photograph is like the original, as a face in the water is like a living face. He does not play his cards at all, unless he be reminded to do it.

The youngest card-player never misses his turn, and as the game reaches the climax he grows a little pale.

At the age of eight it is surely permissible to turn pale because of a silver watch, even a battered watch, which requires winding-up four times a-day. Lucyan is not like his brothers, nor like the pictures on the wall. He has coal-black hair and a sallow face.

There, on the red velvet sofa, sits a pale woman with just such hair, elaborately curled; she is the mother of the three boys, and she is watching their game.

So earnestly is she watching that she does not hear the far-off door open, nor notice the entrance of a tall man in an embroidered dressing-gown, and holding a long Turkish pipe, who now with rapid strides approaches the group. He is a man scarcely past the prime of life, in face the very copy of those pictures on the wall; but there is a worn look on his handsome features.

“Cards again!” says a high and passionate voice. “Have I not forbidden them?” but before he has reached the table, little Lucyan has thrown down his last king (the kings and aces always did find their way into Lucyan’s hand, no matter how the cards were dealt), and, clutching the battered prize, has retired into the background. He knows well enough that the best policy lies in keeping his treasure out of sight, until his father’s anger is spent, as it will be spent in ten minutes, perhaps in five.

“Poor children! they have had but one game,” pleads the mother; but the passionate man retorts—

“I will not have my children shown the highroad to gambling!”

What an exemplary father! what a weak indulgent mother! you say. So much for appearances.

Madame Bielinska is almost as wise as she is fond, and Bogumil Bielinski is the most desperate gambler to be found for miles around. Here is the family history in brief.

This lofty apartment is the chief room in the residence which stands on the Bielinskis' chief estate. There are other estates belonging to this family, and there have been more estates belonging to it which now belong to other families, or which have been swallowed up by a great insatiable monster, which in Poland they call “the Jew.” When “the Jew” has once had a taste of any one's ancestral houses and lands, it is very difficult to check his appetite.

Every one of the ancestors on the wall has helped towards this end. All those haughty magnates and fierce warriors have worked their part; the beauty in cream-coloured brocade has contributed her mite. It takes a long time to run through a fortune which draws its strength from miles of rich land, tilled by vassals, over whom the master holds the old feudal rights; but free living, large-hearted, short-sighted

Polish hospitality, open-handed bounty, when continued steadily through half-a-dozen generations, will do their work at last.

It needed only one thing to accelerate the downhill speed of the Bielinski fortunes, and this need had been supplied by the present head of the family. Other Bielinskis had gambled and had paid the penalty, but it had been as a recreation in the intervals of respite from graver business. This one gambled as a business; it was his one solitary passion, his darling and only vice; it filled him mind and soul; it was the idol, the love of his life.

Of course he lost. It is always the losing gambler who plunges again and again into the whirlpool that is to engulf him. But Bogumil Bielinski lost in a quiet, gentlemanlike style. He carried his bad fortunes with an easy grace; he lost his money, but he did not lose his head. He himself was beyond curing—his wife knew that, his friends knew that, he knew that himself; but his children might still grow up wiser men than their father. This was the secret of his stern prohibition of cards. He meant to bring up his sons according to the high moral principles in which he firmly believed, and on which he never acted. The hope of making them as different as possible in every way from himself, gave a zest to his existence; and his system was carried out rigorously

in details. While puffing the smoke luxuriously out of his long Turkish pipe, he would hold forth at length upon the baneful effects of tobacco; wrapped negligently in his silk-embroidered dressing-gown, he would severely reprimand the slightest slovenliness in dress. The only instance in which his preaching coincided with his practice was the use of a cold shower-bath in the morning. Early rising was one of the virtues which he most cultivated—in his sons. Therefore, the three boys, having been shaken out of bed at six A.M., were brought into his bedroom and sent in turn behind a tall screen, to wince and pant under the icy shower. In an evil day some ill-natured domestic betrayed poor Marcin. Marcin hated cold water as much as it was in his nature to hate anything. It was much pleasanter to run round and round the shower, and no one at the other side of the screen was a bit the wiser. Then came the cruel sentence: no screen, no possibility of escape! The high-principled father watched the execution of the sentence from the depth of his feather pillows, and over the edge of his satin coverlet. Then, the three victims dismissed, he would turn over for another doze; and later on, when the boys were hard at their books, he would come down, refreshed by his own bath, to pass their studies in review.

Bogumil's wife was held by most people to be a

fond, foolish, and bigoted woman; too phlegmatic to attempt any check upon her husband's reckless course. But these people did not quite read her. She was a woman who had so many outward signs of the weak-minded: ready tears, hysterical symptoms, an affected lisp, and, on occasion, fainting-fits—that few people found out that she was not weak-minded. She had weak nerves, and a strong will, which she had never as yet cared to use, and perhaps was a little indolent about using. She had long ago discovered that her husband was incurable, and she had long ago foreseen what the end would be. With that end only would come her time for action. When Bogumil should have gambled away his last farthing, then her fortune alone would stand between her children and beggary; and her fortune he should not touch. But that time was some little way off yet; many acres of land still divided them from ruin. For a few more years she might enjoy life in luxurious ease, as she loved to enjoy it, and as she had enjoyed it ever since, as an orphan girl, she had left her convent-school, in her wedding-dress, hardly knowing what her future was to be, and knowing little more about her past, nor from whom she had got her pale Greek face, and the depth of her oriental eyes.

She agreed in the main with her husband's system of education; but she did not see why the poor chil-

dren should be half frozen to death on winter mornings, nor why they should be forbidden to play a harmless game at cards.

So, while the mother pleads, the father scolds. "Cards make gamblers; take them away!" and very quickly they are taken away—and once out of sight, Bielinski's passion vanishes too. Now only his real manner becomes evident; for he is a man intellectually refined; when in good temper has a sweetness and fascination perfectly irresistible; but is, when contradicted, entirely without self-control, and therefore extravagantly passionate.

With characteristic ease he has now dismissed the unpleasant side of the subject from his mind, and draws his eldest son towards him. One train of thought wakes another. "Be anything but gamblers when you are men," he has said; and an eccentric impulse moves him to make his children choose their professions, now, on the spot. He never resists an impulse.

"Kazio, what will you be when you are a man? Let us see what your buttons say: tinker, tailor——"

"Soldier!" shouts Kazimir, without waiting for the oracle to decide. Not much need of an oracle either,—witness the tables slashed with sabre-cuts, the gaping sword-wound which disfigures the canvas limbs of that

white charger on the wall, the broomsticks turned into lances,—these are answers enough.

“Ha! of course, a Polish soldier; but we have no army yet.” Bogumil, as he says it, looks very like that haughty warrior on the wall. “A pity, boy,—a great pity! Patience, it must come. But you must learn your work from strangers; better Austria than Russia. By the time you are a man we shall be a nation again.” His boys’ future is in danger of being submerged in dreams of Poland’s future. He rouses himself to turn to Marcin.

Marcin has no opinion; and when pressed for one, looks as if he would like to cry, if it were not too much trouble.

“And Lucyan? Will he be tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, apothecary, or thief?” But Bogumil is not thinking of Lucyan; he is looking at Kazimir, and picturing that round boy-face under a *tatarika*, and that strong young arm working the salvation of his country.

No one hears Lucyan’s answer, as he says to himself—

“I am going to be a rich man.”

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE CARDS ARE DEALT.

“ Whence art thou? what canst thou be?
Exquisite creature, fashioned so fairly !”

—LORD LYTTON.

A SOLDIER, a do-nothing, and a rich man. The two first of these prophecies have come true; the third shows no signs as yet of coming true.

It was in the year 1858, just about fifteen years after that summer or winter's evening, whichever it had been, on which the three brothers had played that game at cards, that Kazimir Bielinski found himself, one November afternoon, travelling homewards from his Tyrolese garrison, in answer to a hurried summons which had reached him.

The home to which Kazimir is hurrying is not that large and cheerless mansion with the drearily magnificent state-room and the stiff and frigid furniture. Some years ago that last and largest of the Bielinski estates has been sold, and the family is now living on

Madame Bielinska's personal estate, a country place of the name of Wowasulka.

Madame Bielinska's time for action has come. Until Bogumil had gambled away his last florin, she had been in the background. When Bogumil for the last time rose from the card-table, and this time a ruined man, then she stepped forward and took the reins into her hands. From that moment her husband was dependent on her for the very bread he ate.

When Bogumil had risen from the card-table a ruined man, his blood was all burning with the excitement of the last ten minutes. He did not fly into a passion—it was never at cards that he lost his temper, his passions were spent on smaller matters—but the chances of those last ten minutes had been so strange,—good fortune had been so nearly weighing down the scale on his side, only to make it fly up again with such cruel irony,—that Bogumil felt every single pulse throb in the moment of revulsion. He was blind with excitement. He had staked his last farthing against another man's estate; he had played for it and won it.

“Double or quits,” said his adversary. “My two remaining estates against all you hold.”

“Stop!” said his friends, holding their hands over his cards. “Take luck when you get it; you are not bound to play again.”

“If he asks for his revenge I shall give it,” said Bielinski, haughtily. “I am at your service.” He bent his head to his adversary with the perfection of old-world courtesy.

A few seconds of breathless silence, a few pieces of pasteboard thrown down on the table, and then Bogumil Bielinski rose to his feet knowing that in the whole wide world there was not a farthing he could call his own.

He did a very foolish thing then. His chief sensation at that moment was burning heat; his sole longing was for cold. He must have something icy, something to check the mad pace at which the blood was racing through his veins. His shower-bath had been his firm friend for years; he had recourse to it again. But his deadliest enemy could not have done him more harm than did this once faithful ally now. An instant stroke of paralysis deprived him of consciousness at the moment, and of the use of his left arm for life.

From the time that he recovered he was a changed man. The feverish interest which had bound him to life was gone. Hitherto pleasure-seeking and sociable, beloved even by those who blamed his faults, he became all at once a hermit, a morbid recluse. He could not abide the sight of a card; he shunned with horror the faces of all his old friends. No syllable of

complaint passed his lips; hardly could he be got to accept the necessaries of life which he now owed to his wife alone.

Towards Wowasulka then it was that Kazimir was hurrying. The summons had not been unexpected; for he had heard of his mother's severe illness, the violent attack of typhus from which she had seemed to recover, only to fall into a decline, which could end but one way. Therefore the letter which he received from his aunt, Robertine Bielinska, grieved him more than it surprised him. It puzzled him also; for there was a haziness about the terms of the letter which left him in considerable doubt as to the real facts of the case.

“MY DEAR NEPHEW,—I take up my pen to prepare your mind for the painful changes which await you in the bosom of your family. You have, I regret to say, been made acquainted with the fact of your mother's illness (although I always considered it an unnecessary disclosure); but you cannot possibly form a clear conjecture as to the real situation in its entirety. It is so very distressing to have these circumstances discussed outside the family circle, and committing anything to paper is always such a risk. In my opinion your presence here is *very* undesirable, as every additional face, voice, and step, only tends to agitate and weaken

your mother. But she foolishly persists in wishing to see you again, and, I fear, she must be humoured, especially in her present deplorable state, which in many ways reminds me of that of my late sister (respectively your late aunt) Rudolfine.

“I should not refer to this fact if I had not been aware that you knew it already, and as an additional reason for never mentioning her name to anybody.

“You will be sure, I trust, to burn this letter *as soon* as you have read it, and not to let any one know from whom it is.”

The letter was wrapped in a double fold of white paper, sealed several times, registered, and marked, with directions that the seals were on no account to be broken by any one but the person addressed.

Kazimir's perplexity will be understood when it is explained that his late aunt Rudolfine suffered not only from derangement of health, but also from a slight derangement of mind. Had his mother's mental powers given way? On the outside of the envelope Kazimir had discovered a few lines in his youngest brother's handwriting. The purport of Lucyan's message was strenuous advice not to let himself be disturbed by anything that might have been said in his aunt's letter; that his coming was not urgent; and that, should there be any difficulty about getting leave of

absence, he, Lucyan, would undertake to explain this to the family.

Fortunately for aunt Robertine's peace, she had remained serenely unconscious of this indiscreet communication, thus openly displayed to the light of day.

But Kazimir had not availed himself of Lucyan's offer. Not only was his alarm aroused, but his conscience was pricked. It was some years now since a sort of coolness had arisen between mother and son, on the subject of Kazimir's profession. Madame Bielinska, having at length realised that there were no immediate hopes of a new Polish kingdom, discovered that her eldest son, instead of learning to be a Polish hero, was simply serving the Emperor of Austria, like any other officer. She had immediately written to Kazimir, announcing that there was no need for his continuing in the army; but, to her absolute amazement, was answered by a flat refusal to quit the service, coupled with a good deal of what she put down as boyish enthusiasm regarding his profession.

She had been too much hurt to refer to the subject since; and Kazimir, hearing of her danger, felt a pang of remorse, and having with some difficulty obtained leave of absence for the whole winter, had bidden farewell to his comrades in November.

“You will have to be back before your term,” they said to him at parting. “We shall be on our way to Italy in March.”

“I shall be back whenever I am wanted,” said Kazimir; “don’t go and cut up the Italians without me.”

The last part of this long journey was the most wearisome; for here the railway ceased, and Kazimir was boxed up in a huge, lumbering construction, by name a hired carriage, but by nature an ark on four wheels. Never had its Hebrew possessor touched it with a renovating hand; cushions, doors, windows, and hinges had been left to take the chances of life, just as they came.

Under ordinary circumstances the drive should have lasted four hours, but the circumstances which attended this drive of Kazimir’s were not ordinary, and the drive itself was therefore much longer.

The first hour was comparatively bearable, the second hour he began to find irksome. Kazimir changed his position fifty times in hopes of dodging the rain-drops which trickled in plentifully, for it had drizzled continually since the moment he had left the railway. In tugging at one of the cushions, out flew a cloud of tiny moths, for the first time disturbed in their mouldy seclusion. Half suffocated, Kazimir had quick recourse to the window, but the handle gave way at the first pull. It was no use calling to the driver,

for every single part of the carriage was rattling against the other, drowning even the monotonous trot-trot of the gaunt long-legged screws, innocent of the smallest attempt at grooming.

The third hour was wellnigh unendurable. They were jolting over ruts and stones, in and out of holes and puddles, with that large-minded disregard to horses' legs and travellers' bones which characterises the Polish coachman. The continued jingling of the dirty panes was not to be borne any longer. One more vigorous attack on the window, and now Kazimir could breathe fresh air; but the driver glanced round in dismay, for the glass had flown into pieces, scattered along the mud.

It was a day late in November, and the first hint of dusk had begun to overshadow the bare brown fields, which lay side by side in long strips, curving over the swell of hillocks, and sinking down into the little hollows of the undulating country. They passed by a village—a double row of thickly thatched mud-huts, with minute square windows. The women were at work stacking dead leaves and straw along their house-fronts as a shield against the coming cold. Pigs wallowed in the mire at the door-steps, and troops of shrieking geese, driven by children with bleached yellow hair, flew before the big carriage as it splashed heavily up the road.

There had been some woodcutting on a gigantic scale somewhere in the neighbourhood, for they overtook many peasant-carts laden with newly felled trunks.

The landscape was wintry and waste, but no snow had yet fallen. It must fall soon, thought Kazimir, as he leant back wearily. His heart was heavy with the thought of what awaited him at home. He had not seen his mother for two years; would she be much changed? And his father . . . and Lucyan . . . how cold it was! . . . Kazimir suddenly opened his eyes from a sound sleep to the consciousness that the splashing and rattling had ceased, and that the carriage was standing stock-still.

At home already? He put his head out by the broken pane. How sharp the air was! The rain had ceased, but it was freezing hard, and it was almost dark.

No, this was not home; it was some distance from home still. This was the foot of a steep hill, and the edge of the great forest which ran as far as Wowa-sulka, and over the country for many miles.

What exactly was the matter did not immediately become evident; but that something must be the matter was obvious from the confusion of voices on all sides. The two gaunt horses stood patiently rubbing their noses against each other, abandoned by the

driver, who, as Kazimir now perceived, was exchanging violent language with half-a-dozen peasants at some little distance. There was a peasant-cart without horses, and heavily laden with wood, hard by the carriage. There was another behind and another in front, and more further on; while one half-way up the hill struggled slowly onwards, amidst the shouts, and oaths, and wild gesticulations of the peasants; and from yet higher up, round the bend of the road, more shouts came ringing down from the black forest beyond.

“What is the matter?” asked Kazimir; but he asked it of the air alone.

It was no use staying boxed up in this ark, and in another minute he was out of it.

The scene was unlighted, save for a solitary yellow glimmer from the hole which served as entrance to a sort of earth-cellar, a low hovel cut in the bank at one side. The Jew who spent his life there, serving out spirits to the woodcutters and drivers who passed that way, was now moving about from group to group, a noiseless black figure; quietly making the most of the occasion, and eloquently persuading the not unwilling listeners that an unlimited consumption of *wódki* was the first and foremost step towards getting out of their present difficulty. The present difficulty was a serious one. Upon the rain of the afternoon had succeeded a

sudden frost; the hillside was like glass. It was a bad hill at the best of times, steeper than any in that part of the country; but now it was all they could do to get their carts up one by one, dragged by four, or sometimes six horses. Of course this could not be done peacefully. Each man would have his cart drawn first, and there were bargainings and loud-voiced quarrels—and the wild-looking peasants, with their matted black elf-locks framing their toil-worn faces, and their long sheepskin coats hanging down to their heels, talked fast and cursed fiercely; and standing in the light of the Jew's hut, tossed off their *wódki* and fell to cursing more fiercely still.

No sooner had Kazimir realised the emergency than he saw that out of it there was only one way, and that lay through his purse. These two long-legged horses could never, unaided, drag this ponderous vehicle up that hill. It was beginning to snow now, to enhance the situation. The very first snow-flakes of the winter were floating down through the air. Have not the first snow-flakes, like the first flowers of the season, a special and individual charm about them?

But Kazimir just now was callous to this charm.

“Which of you wants a florin?” he called out loud, holding up his purse on high.

There were shouts and a general movement. Some horses appeared with magical rapidity in front of the

carriage, and then the quarrelling began again worse than before. Those who had missed the chance swore at those who had not, and drank more *wódki* to make up for it. Then, amidst a great cracking of whips and vociferous shouts, the lumbering carriage began slowly to move upwards.

“*He, Hajta—he, Wista!*” shouted the wild drivers, as they ran alongside; and the little horses strained every nerve, and pulled on bravely, making each yard with pain. Kazimir was expending his strength behind, supporting the carriage to the best of his power.

“*He, Hajta—he——*” the shout broke off, and the carriage stood still so suddenly that Kazimir was nearly thrown over.

“What is the matter now?” he asked, emerging from the back.

There was an obstacle in front blocking the passage. Not a trunk-laden peasant-cart, but a carriage, less large and less clumsy than his own conveyance. It was at a total standstill, and surrounded by a circle of voluble peasants.

“Fellow-sufferers,” thought Kazimir,—and he approached with some curiosity, ready to offer whatever help might be in his power.

From the inside of the carriage there was issuing the sound of what seemed to Kazimir an unlimited number of female voices, far more than the size of

the vehicle could explain. There were tones of supplication, of terror, of indignation, of querulous retort, all mingled inextricably. At any rate, it was clear that the occupants of the carriage, whoever and however numerous they might be, were sorely in need of some masculine guidance. Kazimir pushed out his elbows, made his way through the circle, and stood beside the carriage-door.

“Can I be of any service?” he asked, through the chink of window, which was all that was opened.

The voices all ceased simultaneously, and there was something like a start, and the very faint beginning of a shriek, speedily suffocated. The close vicinity of an educated voice speaking thus suddenly out of the darkness, in sharp contrast to the unmodulated organs of the other spectators, might well be startling.

The pause was for no more than an instant. Polish etiquette fought a quick, sharp battle, *versus* the unprotected female instinct, and victory declared on Nature's side. Perhaps, after all, it might not be positively incorrect to let their lives be saved by an unknown gentleman.

The voices all began to talk again. The barbarians refused to take them up the hill; they had had to beg for the florin from the Jew almost on their knees; and they could not have guessed about the snow; and how could they be asked to walk in thin shoes? and the

swearing was so dreadful. They paused and began anew in the next breath: would he ask them to stop their dreadful language; and they were quite sure they were going to be killed in the forest, and perhaps get their feet wet in the snow.

“If the ladies would be so very kind as to speak one at a time,” observed Kazimir, deferentially, “I think I could be of more use.”

Then at last one voice spoke alone. They were on their way home; owing to some unfortunate chance they had only two horses instead of four, and two horses could not get the carriage up the hill: the peasants would not lend their horses without money, and owing to another unfortunate chance they had no money with them. The Jew had lent them a florin under protest; and now that they were half-way up, those wretches had stopped and refused to move a step without another florin. They were unharnessing their horses already, and the Jew would certainly not lend another florin.

“No need, either,” said Kazimir, with great indignation. This was a tolerably composed account, and being in possession of the facts, he proceeded to action.

“Back there!” he shouted, as he stepped away from the carriage. “Leave your horses where they are,” to the fellow who was sullenly loosening the coarse rope-harness.

“Blockheads every one of you! *Gatgan jeden*

i drugi" (which might be translated as indicating in a general way that the persons addressed are destined to the gallows). An immediate transformation took place. That voice raised in indignation vibrated through the dark. Instantly the men around ceased their wrangling, and fell back in attitudes of the most servile humility. The tone of Kazimir's voice, the gesture which accompanied it, and the glimpse of his face which they could catch through the darkness, told them that this was one of that class before which they were wont to cower like frightened dogs. By the unanimous silence which fell on the circle, they recognised his right to rule them. Confronted by unprotected women, they had dared to be exacting and merciless; at the sight of a man, willing and able to enforce his rights, they shrank back outwardly, into what they were at heart, abject serfs, the slaves of their master's will.

The spirit-selling Jew, down at the bottom of the hill, hearing that loud impatient voice in the wood, thought it wiser to slink back into his low mud-hovel in the bank.

Kazimir approached the carriage again.

"In the first place, I must ask you to let down the window entirely."

There was something murmured about "cold air;" but his demand was complied with.

“ Now I am afraid I must ask you to get out of the carriage.”

“ Impossible !”

“ Our shoes are too thin.”

“ Our dresses are too long.”

“ It is snowing.”

It was indeed snowing. Thickly and silently the flakes, like great, soft, white moths in the darkness, were hovering leisurely through the air. They clung to Kazimir's hair, and stuck in his eyelashes blindly. They had begun to fill the broad ditch by the side of the road, and they had put a white cover on the carriage-roof, and a white rim on the wood-logs in the carts.

“ It is the only chance of getting up the hill,” said Kazimir, commanding his impatience.

A little more hysterical parley, and then, very reluctantly, the door was allowed to be opened. There was a great rustling of silks and pushing aside of rugs, before some one, with satin-clad feet, stepped daintily and fearfully out.

“ One, two, three,” Kazimir counted, and peered into the carriage for more. Three females were hardly enough to account for that Tower-of-Babel sort of sound which had assailed his ears. It was rather disappointing.

“ Now, move on in front!” called out Kazimir to the

peasants, as he closed the carriage-door, "*gatgan* that you are!" and something followed about beating them all within an inch of their lives, if they were not at the top of the hill in much less than no time. It acted like a charm. The grim-faced peasants relaxed almost into a smile, cheered by the familiar language. Vigorous abuse and violent threats are the surest and safest means of earning the love and respect of Polish peasantry. That amiable smooth-tongued address, which your English butler expects as confidently as he expects his daily beer, will here make you into an object of contempt and pity.

"*He, Hajta—he, Wista!*" Whips cracked, harness rattled, wheels creaked, and woodwork groaned; but they are going up fast now, cheered on by the elated bystanders.

Kazimir turned back to the three figures that stood shivering on the edge of the road.

One of them was short and stout, and unmistakably an attendant. Two of them were tall, and as unmistakably ladies. All three were clothed in long, shapeless, fur-lined cloaks; no less disfiguring in the case of the attendant than of the two ladies,—differing only in the distinction that lies between silk and wool,—blue fox and vulgar rabbit. All three travellers wore hoods, which covered their hair and shaded their faces.

“Will either of the ladies take my arm?” asked Kazimir, looking from one figure to the other. But even before he had completed his offer, his arm was seized convulsively by a hand. That hand, encased in pale kid, was narrow and delicate; but there was the strength of a sudden fright in its clutch, while the flounced silk train dropped unheeded to the ground.

“Oh, look! what is that in the ditch?” gasped a voice beside him, and the other delicately gloved hand pointed to a long formless object in the roadside ditch. The object was only an unwise peasant, who, having listened too willingly to the loving voice of the *wódki* dispenser, had rolled over into this ready-made resting-place, and was sleeping the sleep of the just, in happy unconsciousness that his cart was at the bottom of the hill, and his horses helping other people’s carts to the top, while his whip has been stolen by a sober and sharp-witted fellow-creature.

“Only a drunken man,” said Kazimir, reassuringly; and he turned to the second figure with an offer of his second arm, trying to make the most of himself for the occasion. The second figure seemed to be in possession of a little more self-command; for, though visibly nervous, the offer was declined with a shade of stiffness, which had to do service for composure of manner. The third figure, that of the dumpy attend-

ant, marched along in silence, rustling her garments ostentatiously as they began slowly to mount the hill. Kazimir was between the two tall figures. That slender hand had not changed its position on his arm. The satin-clad feet were moving charily along over the broken ground.

“My poor feet!” sighed the owner, looking down at them compassionately; “to have to go up this hill after dancing all last night!”

“Those details can hardly interest this gentleman,” said the voice at Kazimir’s other side, with a little asperity.

Kazimir took an instant prejudice against the owner of that other voice. He did not feel at all sure that those details would not have interested him very much.

“I know I shall be ill to-morrow,” murmured the other.

He could not see their faces ; he could only distinguish them by their voices. One was an ordinary woman’s voice, with just now a touch of temper in it. Respecting the other, Kazimir could not make up his mind whether it tinkled through the darkness like a crystal bell, or whether its sound was more to be compared to the music of a silver flute.

The flute was silent now—chilled by a sharp reprimand ; or perhaps the steep hillside, growing steeper every moment, called for all the breath she had. She

began to pant a little, and now and then glanced fearfully into the dense shadows.

The great dead forest stretched up the hill from this point and thence for many miles. Broad trunks stood in shadowy array, dying off into impenetrable blackness. The carriage had got round the turn of the road and there were no more carts passing just then. The cries of the peasants reached them now only in broken snatches.

But another sound was beginning around them. The topmost branches of the trees shivered first; then the rustling sound crept downwards and shook the bare boughs out of their lethargy. They groaned as they yielded, and creaked as they swept upwards again; the wintry skeletons shuddered first, and then they rattled their dead limbs noisily. Afar in the forest-depths the trees were moaning; and here close at hand the flakes were beginning to whirl wildly.

“That sound—it must be wolves!” gasped the voice by Kazimir’s side.

She was struggling for breath against the quickly rising wind, and with one hand she was fighting to keep the hood on her head. The wind would have its way. The hood slipped back; and Kazimir, looking, could just see a pale face, and a pair of frightened blue eyes gazing at him through the falling snow.

“It is only the wind in the trees,” said the other

voice, trying in vain to sound steady amidst the choking gusts. "How can you be—so—fool—ish?"

The fierce air carried away the end of the word, and the speaker succumbing, abandoned her flapping train and leant upon Kazimir's second arm.

On all sides the dead trees were tossing their dried arms high. The white moths have gone mad; they have taken wing wildly, and fly hither and thither, helplessly huddled in troops; or chase each other with lightning speed, round and round the black tree-trunks. Everywhere the wind is undoing the snow's work. From off the ground it catches the freshly fallen flakes, and whirls them in powder down the hill. Clouds and columns are rushing past: visible for an instant, and very palpable, as they shower over the travellers, to disappear next moment in the darkness beyond.

To Kazimir's right, there was a sound of hysterical sobbing; and the weight on each side grew heavier. "It needs but the attendant to finish me," he thought, as with an effort he succeeded in throwing open his heavy fur travelling-cloak at the neck. Light-blue cloth and gold hussar-cording gleamed in the uncertain light. It produced a curious effect; for there were two distinct starts, and both the hands perceptibly relaxed their grasp.

"An Austrian officer!" thought both ladies with

terror. An Austrian officer had dragged them up a hill in the dark. Horrible thought!

But just then there was a slip and a shriek. The figure to Kazimir's right staggered, and but for his arm would have fallen. For an instant she stood clinging to him, while the wild wind showered the snow-flakes right over her. Again that vision of blue eyes, and that half-seen glimpse of an oval face.

She gasped out faintly that she thought she must die (like the far-off echo of an Æolian harp, Kazimir found; for the rude wind caught each word from her lips and carried it off on its wings); but the second voice faltered a scarcely more audible, though unquestionably chilling reply, and the Æolian harp spoke no more.

How harsh that second voice was! What a want of pity she showed to her poor delicate sister! thought Kazimir, as with a final effort they stood at last panting on the hill-top beside the carriage.

He knew that he had done his duty, and that all that remained was to put his charges safely in the carriage. Both ladies were busied with the arrangement of their hoods and trains; while the maid, with an apoplectic flush on her face, was pulling about the furs in the carriage.

"I hope that the ladies will not have caught cold," said Kazimir, earnestly. He belonged to that class of

men who believe that no women ever dress warmly enough, and that they should be in a continual state of changing their shoes and stockings, if they are to keep in health.

“I trust not,” replied the lady with the ordinary voice, making him a demure curtsy. Kazimir was not conscious of having expected much thanks for his service, but he was conscious of feeling chilled now. He turned towards the other. “You will be sure to put on dry shoes,” he said with greater earnestness, looking down at the soaked black satin slippers, half buried in the snow. What was this? another curtsy, quite as graceful as any curtsy ever executed on a parquettèd floor, but quite as demure as the first.

“*Mille remerciements, Monsieur!*” From what a height of icy pinnacles the silvery voice sounded down!

The dangers were passed, the hill was surmounted. Etiquette now recovered that upper hand which Nature for a brief space had unjustly usurped. The hands which two minutes ago had clung to him so convulsively, would hardly touch the tips of his fingers in mounting the carriage-step. The door was closed; the furs were put to rights; in another minute they would be gone. An impulse of invincible curiosity seized upon Kazimir. “I hope your drive is not a long one,” he said, with his hand on the door.

“Thank you; it is rather long,” replied the ordinary woman’s voice. “Will you kindly tell the coachman to drive on?”

“May I hope to meet the ladies again?” said Kazimir, desperately.

No answer; only a frigid and shadowy inclination of both heads.

“You have not got rugs enough; perhaps my fur——” making a movement towards tearing his big cloak off.

“Oh no, thank you!” Even in the dark the start could be seen, with which the two ladies recoiled before this indelicate offer.

“Can I do nothing?” said the baffled man; but already they were passing away. The horses, delighted at having level ground under their feet, plunged off into the dark. His last glimpse was of two figures leaning back exhausted, and the last words he heard were from the apoplectic maid, apparently resigning her situation. “I am not accustomed to this, *Pani Xenia!*” reached Kazimir’s ears as they drove off.

He was alone in the dark and the snow; his own conveyance was half-way down the hill. Just now the fury of the storm was lulled for a little. Very furtively the falling flakes began their work again; whitening over each little twig, and filling each tree-

hollow with soft powder which the next gust would scatter away.

Kazimir reflected upon the expediency of thrashing somebody, for he felt very much inclined to play clubs just now. Should he thrash the Jew at the bottom of the hill, who had been so chary of the loan of his dirty paper florin? But that would entail another ascent of the hill. Perhaps some of those wrangling peasants, whose guilt was certainly greater? Which peasant? He would need to thrash half-a-dozen at least, in order to make sure that he had thrashed the right one. How infamously they had behaved to those two unfortunate ladies—to that delicate, timid girl! even the elder sister had been wanting in tenderness. Xenia! such a harsh, uncompromising name, exactly suitable to an unamiable elder sister! He roused himself just in time to escape being run over by his own lumbering conveyance. Here was the carriage at the top of the hill, and now there was no more time to thrash anybody.

It was only when the ark on four wheels had carried him on some hundred yards that another thought struck Kazimir. It was a pity, after all, that he had not gone down the hill to thrash the Jew; not so much from a sense of the justice of the castigation; but because the man to be chastised might have given him some clue to the identity of these sisters.

Then, as an afterthought, came the reflection: the man thus castigated might not be inclined to supply information of any kind.

At any rate, it was too late now. The chance for to-day was past: to-morrow, perhaps, might bring another.

CHAPTER II.

A NON-PLAYER.

“ Life went a-Maying
 With nature, hope, and poesy,
 When I was young.
 When I was young! Ah, woeful when!
 Ah, for the change 'twixt now and then!”

—COLERIDGE.

WHEN Kazimir reached home, it was too late to see either his mother or father that night. He was put into a large square room, heated to suffocation, and told to take his rest in a bed covered with the finest of linen, and the most costly of satin quilts. In the morning he was given a minute basin of solid silver, placed upon a wooden chair as washhand-stand; he was, in fact, regarded as a guest, and as such treated with that profusion of luxuries and absence of necessaries which is never failing in a Polish house. Kazimir had to confess that a long estrangement from his native soil had made him degenerate to no small extent. So far from being a narrow-minded man, he

was accustomed to take broad, in fact exceptionally broad, views of life; but he now became speedily aware that so trivial a detail as the want of a looking-glass was a nuisance, and that the absence of soap and towels disturbed his mind considerably. He looked round in despair; the splendid walnut wardrobe seemed to smile at him ironically, and to say, "Try me!" He could see his face almost in the shining surface; but having tried the wardrobe, he sank down discouraged into a chair of old tapestry that would have delighted the heart of an antiquary. "Why don't I ring?" he said, impatiently; but the answer was obvious, for there was nothing wherewith to ring. He put his head out of the door, and was about to indulge in a resounding call, when the thought of his mother checked him. There, at the far end of the passage, a small figure was visible—a little barefooted girl biting a crust of bread. A stray beggar devouring a charitably given morsel, she would have been taken for anywhere else; but Kazimir was still familiar enough with the ways of his country to know that this must be what in England we call a housemaid, and that she was taking her breakfast in the orthodox fashion. A pantomime of beckoning resulted in the ten-year-old housemaid taking to her heels in dismay. Hope being quenched on that side, Kazimir had recourse to the other. He knocked at

the door which he knew to be that of his brother Marcin, and he knocked loudly, for his spirit was beginning to chafe.

The sound of gentle snoring broke off at Kazimir's first knock, but there was no invitation to enter. He knocked again, and hearing only a prolonged yawn, entered uninvited. Marcin contemplated him with sleepy blinking eyes from out of his pillow depths. "May I ask what you have been doing to my door?" he inquired, lazily.

"I wanted to come in. I need soap, and a looking-glass, and towels."

"I daresay; but what did you make that noise for?"

"I was knocking at your door. Why did you not answer?"

"What was I to say?" yawned Marcin.

"Why, 'come in,' of course. Do you never knock at people's doors?"

"Never! What a strange idea! Life is a great deal too short for that sort of thing." Marcin looked languidly amused, then closed his eyes again.

"I want towels, and a looking-glass, and soap," began Kazimir again hastily, for fear of his brother relapsing into slumber.

"I know there was some soap in the house a week ago," said Marcin, drowsily. "You can have it if you like, but I think it is done. Nobody has been to

Lwów lately. Aunt Robertine had it last ; go to her room."

"Where is her room ?"

"At the other side of my father's."

"How can I get to it, then ?"

"You can't get to it," said Marcin, sweetly.

"Do you mean to say that nobody else in the house has got soap ?" asked Kazimir, aghast.

"Oh yes, Lucyan has got soap," murmured Marcin, in a muffled voice ; "white rose soap, and new-mown violet scent, and *pâte aux amandes du printemps*. Kazimir ?"

"Yes ?" Kazimir turned at the door.

"Don't make that noise at Lucyan's door ; what do you call it ? Knocking the door ?"

"Am I to go in without knocking ?"

"Certainly ; when you are at Rome you must howl with the Romans."

"What on earth do you mean ?" asked Kazimir, bewildered at this novel mixture of proverbs.

"Perhaps I mean the wolves," said Marcin. "Kazimir ?"

"What next ? Am I never to get shaved to-day ?"

"Don't go to Lucyan at all."

"Why not ?"

"He is horse in the manger, don't you know ? Never lends anything to anybody."

By hook or by crook Kazimir got shaved, and then turned his attention to the view outside.

The world had undergone a wonderful transformation since yesterday, when it had lain dull and brown, waiting for its winter cloak. The cloak had fallen on it now, and covered its nakedness; but it was a cloak of strangely uneven texture. All night long the wind had fiercely lashed the innocent snow with its merciless whips; it had driven white mounds up against the house; it had piled soft dazzling cushions on the window-sills, darkening the panes at intervals. The trees here and there were girt with deep white. The rose-bushes in the garden, which were Lucyan's special pride and treasures, and which he himself had wrapped in their winter garb of straw, stood waist-deep in snow. Nature had been at work with a lavish but an unequal hand. She had smothered the garden benches in snow so deep, that their outline could but dimly be discerned, like overgrown grave-mounds; and again the capricious wind had laid bare the unsightly row of dead asters, in all their desolation of withered leaves and bleached stalks. Further off, where the ground, growing bare and rocky, sloped up gradually from the garden to the forest-edge, it was all a heavy and unbroken mass of white. Snow and wind had suspended their work; but the dull white sky was brooding more changes.

“When can I see my mother?” asked Kazimir, after breakfast.

There was no one in the room but his youngest brother, and at the question, Lucyan looked up from a seedsman’s catalogue he was studying; for it must be understood that, although Lucyan was a lawyer in embryo, he was at heart a gardener.

“It is scarcely likely that aunt Robertine will let you see her to-day,” he answered. “My mother is very easily agitated.”

Kazimir gazed out of the window and reflected. The veiled hints in his aunt Robertine’s letter, did they really hide a real mystery? His mother had always been remarkable for her clear judgment; was it possible that she had lost her reason with her health?

“My aunt’s letter gave me a great fright,” said Kazimir, turning from the window. “Surely you do not think that there is anything wrong with my mother,—beyond her health, I mean?”

Lucyan looked up inquiringly.

“I mean mentally,” completed Kazimir, with an effort.

Lucyan paused for a minute, with his eyes fixed on his brother’s, and the point of his pencil keeping the place of *Zinnia elegans* in the catalogue.

“I do not exactly like to say that she is irrespon-

sible for her actions," he answered slowly; "but there certainly are some subjects on which she is very excitable—strangely excitable."

"Have *you* seen my mother to-day?" asked Kazimir, suddenly.

Lucyan looked up again from his catalogue without betraying any impatience.

"Yes, of course I have seen her. I read aloud to her every day."

"And why am I to be kept out of her room if you are allowed in?"

The question was so direct that Lucyan, before answering, rose from his chair and took a turn in the room. At the same time, he drew a little ivory comb from his pocket, and pensively passed it through his black hair, which grew up thick and straight from his low broad forehead. This was a trick of his, a mere mechanical habit, into which he had fallen, no one knew how. His comb was to him a talisman, what to a coquettish woman is her fan, or to a bandmaster his *bâton*. Perhaps the mesmeric contact of the ivory roused and assisted thought.

His face was in character the same as it had been at eight years old; but though Lucyan was only twenty-four, the short coal-black beard stamped him as a man, and by contrast made his skin more colourless. His eyes moved quickly, and now and then

shone as brightly as though a spark had struck them. Round his lips there hovered perpetually a faint, a very faint smile, which was sometimes mirrored in the eyes, and which was just dimly to be read through the black moustache.

The faint smile was just now a shade more distinct than usual, as he paced down the length of the room, passing the comb through his hair.

“Why are you to be kept out of the room if I am allowed in? Eh, *cher* Kazio; the matter is simple enough. She is used to see me, and she is not used to see you. Anything in the shape of a—a what shall I say?—a stranger——”

“A stranger!” repeated Kazimir.

“Well, *que voulez-vous?*” with a shrug, which exactly matched the smile. “You are virtually a stranger; and besides”—Lucyan stopped combing his hair, and threw a glance over his brother’s tall figure—besides, I am not sure that you would know how to move in a sick-room.”

“And you know how to move in a sick-room, I suppose?” said Kazimir, for him almost bitterly.

Lucyan inclined his head. “Yes, I can walk like a cat when I like.” He laughed; but Kazimir did not join him.

“Come, Kazio,” said the younger brother, pocketing his comb, and laying a delicate white hand on the

elder one's shoulder. "You are not going to turn sulky, are you? Just be sensible, and consider how trying to an invalid your resounding martial step and your cavalry movements would be."

"Why was I sent for?" asked Kazimir, not yet relenting.

Another very slight shrug of Lucyan's shoulders. He withdrew his hand from his brother's arm, and began a minute inspection of his carefully trimmed nails.

"You will remember that I did not send for you."

Kazimir, thinking of the P.S. to his aunt's letter, remembered that well.

"I told you then that your presence here would do no good. There were none but sentimental grounds to advance for your coming; but if it is any relief to your feelings, of course you are welcome to stay."

There was a slight air of concession about the words; the tone of the master of the house offering the protection of his roof to a stranger. Since his mother's illness, Lucyan had been virtually the master of the house: Marcin was as useless as a six-year-old child, and Bielinski was now a cipher.

"You look quite out of place in a dull country-house like this," said Lucyan, still soothingly. "You are a soldier all over, Kazimir."

Lucyan's eyes rested again on his brother with a glance of admiration, scarcely mixed with envy.

Nearly a head taller than his younger brother, with brown hair waving off a high forehead; brown eyes, rather long in shape and full of life; nothing but a short moustache shading his well-cut lips,—Kazimir indeed looked a soldier all over. He was handsome; but his was not only the beauty of features, it was also that of expression and grace. He had in his face a little of each of the twelve ancestral portraits on the wall. The dusky knight in armour had given him that hawk-like sweep of eyelids; the beauty in cream-coloured brocade had given him that peculiar sweetness of mouth which softened the otherwise hard features; all the men combined had given him their nose—a high-bridged, clean-cut nose, with those proud sensitive nostrils which belong eminently to a well-born Polish nose. Kazimir's face was the sort of face which has gone out of fashion; for types of feature go out of fashion as well as types of character. You do not see it often nowadays, unless upon mouldering canvas, framed in tarnished gold, and hung upon the walls of some turreted old castle. Thus may that grim-visaged old warrior on the white charger have looked when first he drew the sword with which in later years he cut down so many of his country's foes. But though so distinct in feature, it was in expression

a face younger than its years, perhaps almost too young for its years. The glow of ardent life was upon it; but as yet it was a face without a history. That man, you felt instinctively, had been scathed by no passion, had looked upon no dreadful sight, had suffered no violent grief. The face was too unmarked for that, the glance too serene, the smile too boyish. According to people's individual views of life, this would be considered either a merit or a defect.

"Never mind, Kazio," Lucyan was saying, "you will see my mother now and then, no doubt, if aunt Robertine can be persuaded to let you have 'a little peep,' as she calls it. But I hardly know how I shall be able to entertain you in this dull place. After your horses and soldiers, you could never stand this life for long.

Kazimir had quite relaxed by this time; bad humour was a thing too foreign to his nature to endure long. He did not even notice the but half-concealed sneer in his brother's words and tone, which might have implied that horses and soldiers were capital toys with which to keep little boys amused.

The result of this conversation was to make Kazimir wonder why he had been in so great a hurry to leave his regiment. Nobody seemed to want him. Lucyan and Marcin were the only members of the family he had seen as yet. Even aunt Robertine

remained invisible; and it was late in the afternoon before his father sent for him.

Bogumil had become an old man since his son had seen him last; all that careless yet graceful ease, which had been his charm, was gone. His eyes betrayed his utter want of interest in the world and in life itself,—the weary eyes of a man who, having been used to the excitement of strong stimulants, finds himself cut off from them, and droops into listless dejection. With his right hand he held his long Turkish pipe, sole companion of his self-chosen solitude; his left arm hung powerless by his side. Thus for years past Bogumil had passed his life, too proud to utter a complaint, too proud to express the most trivial want; suffering rather his one consolation—his Turkish pipe—to hang unused on the wall for days, than so much as to mention that his tobacco-pouch was empty. If by any chance his dinner had been forgotten some day, he would rather have starved than asked for it.

“When shall you see your mother?” repeated Bogumil, in answer to his son’s complaint. “It is no use applying to me; I am a cipher in the house, Kazimir; understand that once for all.” He smoked on in silence for some minutes, then resumed.

“When your aunt Robertine does give you entrance to the sick-room, your mother’s first word to you

will be a persuasion to leave the army. Are you prepared for this?"

Kazimir was quite prepared.

His father paused again—a longer pause this time—while the white rings of tobacco-smoke curled above his head.

"I have no right to give you any advice," he began, after that pause; "for I have nothing to leave you in legacy except the remembrance of my folly. If you care enough for my advice to ask for it, Kazimir, you can have it; if not, I shall never refer to the subject again."

"But I do ask for it, father," cried Kazimir, touched by the proud reserve of the tone; although in his innermost mind he registered the firm resolve only to take that advice if it coincided with his own wish.

"Then listen. When I made you into a soldier, I and others fully believed that Poland would in a few years be a new kingdom, with a new king and a new army. That dream of mine is gone—every dream of mine is gone—ah! no matter. If I could have foreseen what was coming, I should not have put you into the army."

Kazimir started, but he held fast to his resolve.

"Now that you are in the army, my advice to you is to stay in it, whatever——"

"I *will* stay in it, father!" burst in Kazimir raptur-

ously, taking his father's wasted hand and kissing it in a transport of filial gratitude. The advice against which he had been so resolutely steeling himself a minute ago was now enthusiastically accepted; and his mind was pervaded by a satisfactory glow of virtue—a pleasant feeling of having shown himself a good and dutiful son.

In Bogumil's world-weary eyes there shone for a moment a light at sight of this glow of gratitude. It was like a breath of hillside air—a breeze out of his own youth, wafted across a long, long waste of years, out of the time when the world was not the weary empty place it was now. It is bad to be old: old age is an evil thing devoid of sweetness; but old age—ugly, misery-burdened old age—has one poetry which belongs to it by rights, and that shines out of the eyes of our children.

The faces of Marcin and Lucyan had never moved this thought in Bogumil's soul in the way Kazimir's face did now.

“Remember that I have not tried to persuade you, Kazimir,” said his father. “My vote is powerless. You owe duty and gratitude to your mother; you owe nothing to me.”

It was said bitterly yet sadly; and Kazimir's burst of rapture melted quickly into pity,—pity at the sight

of this change, at the recollection of his father's once gay and gracious countenance—and pity also, more dimly felt, that so much that was noble and great should have fallen to wreck upon reefs with which a more commonplace nature would not have been threatened.

CHAPTER III.

ONE OF THE KNAVES.

“Jedes Land hat die Juden die es verdient.”

—K. E. FRANZOS.

IN the midst of the anxieties and impressions of this first day, Kazimir's thoughts ran continually on his adventure in the snow. At the moment, the two figures had appeared distinct enough from each other; now, in recollection, he could not so well separate their individualities. They had both worn pale kid gloves. One had had a common voice and the other an uncommon one; one had grey eyes and the other had blue eyes. When he thought of the grey eyes he remained unmoved; when he thought of the blue eyes he thrilled with something more than curiosity. He had questioned his brothers and father to no purpose. In the evening, as the three brothers sat in their father's room—the one hour in the day in which Bogumil allowed intrusion on his hermitage—they reverted to the subject again.

“We know little of any of our neighbours,” said Bogumil, “and I know less than nothing.”

“The only pair of sisters within reasonable distance are the Zuminskas,” said Lucyan; “but one of them is hunchbacked and the other lame.”

“That will not do,” said Kazimir; for although a hunch might conveniently have been concealed under the monstrous cloak, lameness was not compatible with reaching the top of that hill.

“There is that girl with the box on her ear,” put in Marcin from the sofa.

“Box on her ear?” repeated Kazimir, in interrogative bewilderment, for he was scarcely used to Marcin’s fashion of conversation. This meeting with his brothers was almost like making acquaintance with strangers. They were, in fact, more strangers to him than his playfellows had been, and than his comrades were now; for since at the age of twelve he had been placed in a military academy at Vienna, all his visits home had been but flying ones.

“Ask Lucyan to explain; I can’t,” said Marcin, helplessly.

“He means Mademoiselle Walenska,” explained Lucyan, with ready civility. “Her mother once at a ball boxed the ears of a man who had forgotten to dance an engaged *mazur* with the daughter.”

“But if she has no sister she will not do: think of some one else, Marcin.”

Marcin closed his eyes and made the heroic effort of thinking.

“The only other people I know are the three Merinkas; won't they do?”

“Is there a pair of blue eyes between them?” asked Kazimir, hopefully.

“Yes—no; I fancy their eyes are rather fishy.” Kazimir's face fell. Marcin brightened up. “But I remember that they once wore yellow gloves; and—let me see, I know something else about them—they have got forty thousand florins each.”

“Oh no,” corrected Lucyán, smiling; “you mean that the youngest is forty years old.”

“Well, I knew it was something about forty,” said Marcin, in languid triumph; and he sat up almost straight for a moment, with a conscious and pardonable feeling of pleasure in finding his memory thus unusually accurate.

“Forty years old!” sighed Kazimir. That voice that had followed him into his dreams had not been twenty. Was the clue never to be supplied? Were they mere birds of passage which had crossed his path, to disappear again without a trace? Had that meeting been but an isolated fact, or was it to be the first link of other things to come?

Brooding over these thoughts, he fell into silence, but presently was roused by a request to join in a new and general subject of interest.

There was a discussion going on about horses. The Bielinski's last carriage-horses had come to grief quite lately; and as even a ruined family in Poland cannot exist without one, if not two pair of horses, the Jewish factor had come to report upon a pair in the neighbourhood.

There scarcely passed a week in which this factor was not to be seen at Wowasulka; for was he not one of that nation who are at once the slaves and the masters of Poland? Drawing gain out of the indolence of Polish character, the Jews have, little by little, got the strings of the whole national life into their hands. They have crept into the machinery of public life, and have wound and wormed themselves in behind the very veil of privacy.

They cannot be kept away or pushed back; for you cannot fight with their own weapons: they do not push, they crawl. Like a network they spread over the country: a nation of detectives, bound together by the bond of their religion, and by that national *esprit de corps* which will always make a Jew help a Jew, hold a Jew's secrets inviolate, if necessary conceal a Jew. They have their own secrets of success, but this last is not the least. You cannot ignore them, reptiles

as they are ; the best you can do is to reconcile yourself to them, and that is what every Pole does. He treats them as the scum of the earth, uses any amount of violent language towards them, and on occasion kicks them down-stairs. And next time he wishes to save himself trouble he sends for his Jew, and the Jew comes with the same cringing smile, obsequious and oily-tongued, as though they had parted the best friends. Whether you want to buy a horse, engage a cook, sell a piano or a property, or get married in a hurry, you cannot do without a Jew ; and above all, if you want money you cannot do without him. He will tell you all the horses for sale for ten miles round, and what each is worth ; he can give you the accurate amount of the fortunes of all the young ladies of the neighbourhood ; and the ragged wretch, slipshod and out at elbows, will put at your instant disposal thousands of florins, which he presses on you with loquacious and irresistible persistence.

Every family of rank has its own particular factor, just as much as it has its own coachman ; and Aitzig Majulik was the particular factor of the Bielinski family.

Aitzig Majulik was a Jew unwashed and garlic-scented. He was generally called "old Aitzig," and had always been called so, even before he became old. No one remembered his ever having been young. When

he was forty, he had looked like fifty; and now that he was sixty, he looked like fifty still. Kazimir, who had not seen him for ten years, thought that Aitzig must have been standing still, instead of going on with the time. His nose had the orthodox hook, and his face was framed in the orthodox corkscrew curls, one at each side. He had brows so protruding as to throw his eyes into deep shade; and he had hands long and thin and yellow, which might have made a fanciful person think of claws.

His long gown had turned greenish in hue, from extreme old age; a tattered cord was round his waist; with one yellow claw he waved about his battered hat,—which on entering he had removed, leaving visible a greasy black skull-cap,—with the other he gave furtive pulls to his corkscrew curls. He had not stopped talking since he entered. His hungry shining eyes wandered round the room.

“You will never have seen anything to come near that pair of horses, gracious Pan! *Gott und die Welt*,” cried Aitzig, in his nasal mixture of Polish and German, “but they are grand horses! That is what you will call them when you see them. There is something about the limbs of those horses, I tell you, noble gentlemen——”

“We shall see about that,” interrupted Lucyan,—“but what is the price?”

“No money at all; a price hardly worth mentioning; I blush to mention it to you,” gabbled Aitzig, with his shoulders drawn up to his ears, and his ten fingers spread out like fans. “I will whisper the price into your gracious ear, for fear that strangers should overhear this wonderful bargain.”

“Keep where you are, you garlic-smelling hound!” cried Bogumil, with a spark of his old temper, as the factor was gliding towards his chair to impart the secret.

Instantly the Jew retreated, cringing in dog-like humility. “I will whisper it across: seven hundred florins! No money at all! You will drive out with those horses, and you will say to your friends, ‘These are horses of a thousand florins,’ and they will believe you; and you will remember that it was the factor Aitzig Majulik who got you those horses.”

“Hold your chattering tongue,” broke in Kazimir, losing patience. “What is the height of these paragons?”

“If you ask me what is their height, I will say it is fifteen-one; but when you look at those horses you will say that they are twice fifteen-one. Those horses have got a leg—gracious Pan!—a leg——” and Aitzig Majulik, whose rhetoric apparently could furnish no epithet worthy of describing the leg which those horses had, closed his eyes and smacked his

withered lips with an expression of exquisite appreciation.

“Fifteen-one is no height at all,” remarked Kazimir.

“If you could see those horses lift their legs, noble gentlemen, you would not say that fifteen-one is no height. They lift their legs in this manner:” and Aitzig, having recourse to illustration, began stepping round the room, with his slippered feet drawn up alternately to an impossible height.

“Where are these horses to be seen?”

“It is only two hours to drive in a sledge,” said the Jew, pausing in his high-bred stepping.

“Of course no one will be mad enough to give seven hundred florins for a pair of carriage-horses,” said Lucyan, quietly. “If the price had been named at four hundred, the matter might have been considered.” Lucyan knew perfectly well that when the Jew said seven hundred he meant six, or perhaps less; and the Jew was equally aware that Lucyan’s four hundred meant a hundred or so upwards.

“Four hundred!” Aitzig Majulik indulged in a sort of cackling sound—a sickly attempt at a laugh. The gracious gentlemen were pleased to be merry this evening, they were only joking with poor old Aitzig. Four hundred! He could hardly recover from the shock. Even when he had said seven hundred, it had been against his conscience.

Might his body be burnt in deepest hell-fires if the horses were not worth one thousand florins! One thousand! What was he saying? One thousand five hundred should be their price. Might his name be no longer Aitzig Majulik if those horses were not grand horses, and if they were not worth one thousand five hundred florins!—and so on, and so on; the poor wretch went on talking himself hoarse, for the sake of the couple of florins he would get from either party, should the bargain be concluded.

Kazimir broke in again, with questions about age and race.

“If one of the gentlemen would drive out himself to Pan Rogdanovics, he would see with his own eyes!”

“Rogdanovics,” repeated Bielinski. “No, that will not do. I cannot have any transactions with him.”

“Why, have you quarrelled with the man, father?” asked Kazimir. “Is he your enemy?”

“He was my best friend once,” said Bielinski, “and that is the very reason.”

Kazimir had never so realised his father's morbid dislike to seeing a known face.

Aitzig was wringing his hands and swaying his body at the thought of the florins escaping him. “Wai, wai!” he groaned piteously; but with the persistence of a bull-dog,—“they are grand horses,” I say.

“May Aitzig Majulik be buried in a nameless grave if they are not grand horses! Aitzig is but a poor old man who desires to serve the gracious Panowie, and who works for his bread with his hands; he is not one of those fortunate among the children of Abraham, who are blessed with luck, such as is Naftali Taubenkübel——”

“Hold your tongue,” interrupted Lucyán, sternly,—for the superior luck of Naftali Taubenkübel was a perpetually sore subject with Aitzig, and one on which he was apt to become overpoweringly loquacious.

“But, father,” said Kazimir—not out of regard for the Jew’s feelings, but because the prospect of inspecting a pair of young horses was a congenial one—“you need not meet your old friend. Let me drive over and look at them.”

“Yes, let him drive over and look at them,” moaned the Jew in the background.

“Let him drive over and look at them,” echoed Marcin, worn out with the effort of listening; “any thing for a quiet life, I say.”

Bogumil resisted no further. Kazimir should drive over as soon as the road was passable for a sledge. It might be to-morrow or the next day. Aitzig Majulik, seeing things in this promising vein, glided from the room; and went off to sing the praises of a faultless cook, to an old lady, five miles distant; to buy up old

clothes from another, and to offer money at 120 per cent to a young scamp of the neighbourhood. Though he should get no supper to-night, he will be happy, as he chews his garlic, to think that his pains of to-day must bring him in a few greasy paper florins.

To-morrow, at early dawn, he will find some corner in a peasant-cart on its way to Lodniki, and he will assure Rogdanovics that no other factor but Aitzig Majulik could have procured him such a splendid price as five hundred and fifty florins for his two raw under-bred horses.

“By the way, Kazimir,” said Lucyan, later in the evening, “why did you not think of asking old Aitzig for the names of your two fair acquaintances in the snow? If they are not mere creations of your fancy, he is sure to know them.”

“I did not think of it,” said Kazimir, excitedly—and he left the room in hopes of discovering Aitzig still lingering about the premises. But Aitzig was far away by that time; having already concluded a satisfactory bargain with the old lady for her old clothes, and having received fifty kreutzers for his trouble in procuring a cook—to say nothing of having been kicked out of a third house by the indignant father of the young scamp.

“He is gone,” said Kazimir, coming back discour-

aged. "But," as an idea struck him, "who is that Rogdanovics who has the horses?"

"Has he daughters besides horses? you mean," completed Lucyan, laughing in his own peculiar manner. "Yes, I believe he has, but only one."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Kazimir, ruefully. "Have you ever seen her?"

"Never, *mon ami*; but I am quite sure—only one."

CHAPTER IV.

TWO OF THE QUEENS.

“ We were two daughters of one race,
She was the fairest in the face.”

—TENNYSON.

Two girls are talking in their room. A large apartment littered with evidences of a very feminine presence; such things as French fashion-plates, lace handkerchiefs, several pairs of shoes and stockings, a fan or two, and a hat which must surely have seen Paris in its day. The good days of that hat are past now; it has been tossed aside, and lies suffocated by a heavy fur muff, weighing down its once crisp and curling feather. Here on a chair lies a fan, with its white ivory bones starting from its pink silk skin; its broken pinions, incapable of raising the faintest breath of air now, droop helpless and dejected. The delicate white stockings, with cunningly traced silk clocks, are unimpeachable as to quality, but hardly so as to conservation and colour. The shoes, which lie in

a miscellaneous heap, satin and kid, amicably blended, have some of them left muddy marks on the floor; and though the marks are two days old, they have not been thought worth removing. In one corner there lies a soiled primrose glove, turned inside out, and abandoned by its wearer, as well as by its fellow.

The two girls who are carrying on conversation in the midst of this picturesque disorder, look perfectly at home and perfectly in keeping with it. One of them is sitting before the glass, the other is reclining on a *chaise longue*, wrapped in a flowing dressing-gown.

They are very like each other; from a little distance, and at certain moments, you might mistake them for each other. Yet there is a difference between them, only one difference, but a mighty one; one of them is plain, and the other is beautiful.

The girl on the sofa has got chestnut-brown hair, of a peculiarly bright tint. Just now it floats down unbound, in ruffled waves, with here and there a thread of ruddier gold, where it catches the light. Her face is a narrow oval, tenderly tinted, and delicate almost to transparency, blue veins wandering on the white temples; a little mouth, red and fresh as a flower. The blue eyes are large and full of light—more luminous than deep, more beseeching than commanding. A perishable hothouse flower she looks, scarcely suited to this land of ice and snows. And

yet she is a blossom which could have sprung out of no other but that rugged stem ; she is most distinctly Polish. The cast of her features proclaims it, as does also the exquisite finish, if I may say so, in every detail of her beauty. She lies with her hands clasped under her head, and her feet in loose slippers, appearing from under the pale-coloured dressing-gown, which falls in clinging folds all down her tall slight figure. This dressing-gown is of a pale lavender colour, much streaked and faded, showing the original tints only where the seams are sprung, which they are both on shoulders and arms ; very deficient as to buttons and hooks, the elaborate trimming held to its place sometimes by nothing more than a weak yielding pin. Not a becoming dress, certainly ; but it would take much to disfigure that face and form.

The girl who sits before the glass is attired in a loose white dressing-jacket and petticoat ; both of which have lost their first, their very first freshness. She, like the other, has a pale face and brown hair, and a tall figure. But the paleness here strikes not as flower-like, but as sallow ; the hair has the shades, but it has not the bright chestnut lights of the other's ; the eyes are grey, not blue. What an irony of nature to make two faces so alike, and so different ! There is hardly any reason why this one should not be as beautiful as the other is ; and yet no one has ever

called her as much as comely. A duller tint of the hair, a shade less crimson in the lips, a harder line about the chin, a mere suggestion of greater robustness in the figure, have robbed the elder of that bewitching *ensemble* which constitutes the beauty of the younger.

"I do not think it is worth while dressing to-day," says the fair wearer of the lilac dressing-gown, yawning for the third time in five minutes. "Don't you think so, Vizia? My cough is still so bad." She breaks off, and burying her face in a silk handkerchief, coughs a low, subdued little cough, and then throwing back her head on her arms again, closes her eyes exhausted.

"Your cough is not nearly so bad as you make it out," says Vizia, from behind the shower of hair which she is busied in brushing out.

"I cannot help it," answers the other meekly.

"What is the pleasure of staying on a sofa all day?" inquires the other a little impatiently.

"What is the pleasure of getting off it, I wonder?" with another yawn. "There is nothing to do. I have read through all the *feuilletons* in the fashion papers, three times each; I can't play the piano in that cold room; I have got no letters to write, and nobody has written to me. I should only bore myself to death all day."

“There is only half the day remaining to bore yourself in, at any rate. It has struck twelve. Don’t you want any dinner, Xenia?”

“But I had breakfast only two hours ago,” says Xenia, pushing away the tray on the table beside her, where cold remains of coffee and stale scraps of bread still linger. “My appetite is quite gone, ever since that dreadful night in the snow. I wonder who that officer was who helped us up the hill! Don’t you, Vizia?”

Vizia continued brushing her hair in silence.

“How well he spoke Polish! But what a pity there was nobody to introduce him to us! It would have been so much less awkward, wouldn’t it? I hope I did not pinch his arm too much,” continued Xenia, kicking off her slippers, and crossing her small feet, one over the other, on the edge of the sofa. “I should not have done so if I had known that he was an officer; but then I was so frightened!”

“Xenia, this is ridiculous!” broke in the elder girl, turning from the glass. “You have kept harping upon your hardships and your fears as if you alone had been the sufferer. Was *I* not cold? was *I* not wet—yes, and frightened too, as well as you?”

Xenia’s under lip came out with a decided pout; her chin sank down.

“How unkind of you, Vizia! I cannot help it; I

am not as strong as you." The pouting red lips quivered, and something glistened for a moment in the corner of each blue eye. In the next instant the quickly risen tears were stealing down the folds of the soiled lilac flannel.

That shade of angry colour which had sprung to Vizia's cheek melted quickly—that hard look on her face softened on the instant. The brush was flung on the table, whence it slipped unnoticed to the floor, but fell on soft ground luckily, for the folds of a silk mantle received it in their midst.

"Xenia, what a wretch I am!" She was on her knees beside the sofa; with one hand pulling away the lace handkerchief which Xenia had pressed to her eyes, with the other stroking the shining chestnut hair in pitiful tenderness.

"Forgive me, my own Xenia—my only, beautiful Xenia; I cannot see you cry."

The lace handkerchief was removed by this time; the blue eyes smiled out through a soft veil of moisture. Vizia's arms were round Xenia's neck; the dull brown hair and the bright brown hair hung together, mixed for a moment.

"Do not mind what I said—forget it, Xenia," whispered Vizia. "I have not an angel's temper like yours!"

Peace was established between smiles and tears.

Xenia lay back again on her sofa, while a sob now and then still quivered through her frame. Vizia rose from her knees, hunted for her brush on the table, and not finding it, took another and returned to her work of brushing. As she met her own eyes in the glass, some shade of bitterness came over her again.

Oh yes! she too had been frightened and cold like Xenia;—but she was not Xenia. She had no right to the pity which would be given to the beautiful Xenia. She was not, in the vulgar sense of the word, jealous of that frail loveliness, which called forth homage everywhere—oh no,—she worshipped the delicate flower too deeply to admit of real envy. Vizia had never tasted that intoxicating homage; she had stood by and seen the incense burned to another, and she had been used to this from childhood. But yet there would come moments when her heart rose in rebellion at this injustice of nature. She would look in the glass and scan her features, wondering why she was not beautiful like Xenia. Had she not the same features, the same figure almost, the same hair? She had missed beauty by an inch, by a line, by a mere shade of colour, and for all her days she was doomed to the fate of a plain woman. Yes, it was hard.

“Vizia, why are you sighing?” asked Xenia, coaxingly.

“ I am not sighing.”

Another silence. Xenia gazed down pensively at the little pink toe, which peeped impertinently rosy from the point of her embroidered stocking.

“ Vizia?”

“ Yes.”

“ Don't you wish that some one would come and visit us?”

“ But the roads are blocked with snow.”

“ They are not blocked any longer. Mariska says it is a beautiful sledge road. Perhaps some one will come to-day. We have so few visits here.”

“ We had two visits last week,” corrected Vizia.

“ Yes, but they were both old ladies. Don't you think old ladies are dull?” objected Xenia, looking down again at the coquettish pink toe, which was slowly but surely working its way out, to the increasing destruction of the embroidered stocking. “ I should like somebody more amusing.”

“ But what is the good of their coming, since you are too ill to leave the sofa?” laughed Vizia.

“ I like living in a town so much better,” continued the other, not hearing. “ I used to see people there every day, and here I see nobody; and oh, Vizia, Pawel says that he heard a wolf howl in the forest two nights ago. Only fancy, we might have been eaten by wolves the other night!”

“ I hardly think so,” said Vizia, who, having slipped into her dress, stood now with her fingers on the door-handle. I must go now, Xenia, and give out *kasza* for the servants, and I have not seen papa to-day.”

“ And I am to stay alone—all alone?”

“ Listen ; what is that ?” interrupted Vizia, pausing. There was the faint sound of a tinkle floating towards them from the white landscape outside.

“ It is a sledge coming this way,” said Vizia, standing at the window, and rubbing the frozen pane with her handkerchief. Xenia rose languidly to her elbow, while they both listened and waited.

“ Can you see it yet ?”

“ No, it has not turned the corner ; yes—there it comes.”

“ A peasant-sledge? But the bells have such a good sound.”

The tinkle rang out clearly now through the winter air, louder every instant. Then it lessened, then it burst upon their ears close at hand ; they could hear the dull tramp of the horses.

“ What is it like ?” questioned Xenia.

“ It is not a peasant-sledge,” said Vizia, craning her neck as she held back the curtain. “ There is only one person in it. I think I see a bonnet.”

“ Another old lady !” sighed Xenia, sinking back.

“Yes,—no, it is not a bonnet—it is a gentleman. He is driving straight to the house.”

“A visitor! An amusing visitor! Thank heavens!” cried Xenia, springing off the sofa electrified, all the languor replaced by a childlike eagerness of tone and mien. “I don’t think I am too ill to dress. Where are my shoes?—where is my comb?—where is Mariska to do up my hair?—where is my new silk dress?”

“Shall I put on my new silk dress, too?” asked Vizia, eyeing herself doubtfully in the glass.

“Oh yes, let us both put them on; they look better together,” said Xenia, eagerly, while hunting for a truant garter among the miscellaneous burdens of chairs and tables.

No, it did not matter what she put on, concluded Vizia, turning from the glass. Silk would not make her prettier to look at than wool.

But now it was Xenia who paused before the mirror.

“*Boze!* What a fright I look!” she exclaimed, regarding her fair image with an expression of the most exquisite disgust.

She did not look a fright by any means; only her eyes were one degree less bright, and there was a shade more pink upon her nose than was strictly becoming.

“Vizia, how can I show myself with this cold?”

“ I have a cold too.”

“ Yes, but——” Perhaps Xenia dimly felt that there was a difference. A plain woman with a cold can only be a shade more plain, whereas a beauty with a cold might just miss being a beauty ; and for a beauty, who is nothing but a beauty, what darker fate could there be ?

So, as Vizia, in her plain woollen dress, left the room, Xenia sank back on her sofa, shedding a few silent tears on her lavender dressing-gown, at the thought of this self-imposed imprisonment, and half wavering in her resolution, as the sound of bustling footsteps outside reached her ear.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE COURT OF THE SPADE KING.

“ There came a youth from Georgia's shore,
 A military casque he wore,
 With splendid feathers dress'd.

And with him many tales he brought
 Of pleasure and of fear.
 Such tales as told to any maid,
 By such a youth in the green shade,
 Were perilous to hear.”

—WORDSWORTH.

Two days after the interview with Aitzig Majulik, Kazimir was awake in the morning by the welcome intelligence that the road to Lodniki was passable.

All the long hours of the night before last, the wind had slept, while the snow had come down softly, patching up deficient places, filling up holes, and making the whole uneven texture even. Now the peasant-sledges had cut their way through, the *sanna droga*, the sledge-road for the winter, was moulded into shape. A sledge-road with us means a welcome change from the monotony of wheels, a good excuse

for some gay freak, or an easy opportunity for display. With the Poles it means something different,—not an amusement, but almost a necessity. It means distances cut down to half their length—business and traffic deprived of half their trouble; an event expected with anxiety.

Kazimir, impatient for a change after two days' imprisonment, was soon out of the house and in motion, his sledge-bells tinkling with each step of the horses. It was the last time, he hoped, that he should drive with hired horses, for he felt sanguine as to his mission to-day. He was in high spirits altogether. The winter sunshine, which had broken its way at last, stared down from a pale-blue cloudless sky, pouring light-floods over the earth.

Kazimir's road led down the centre of the garden; then, as the garden on either side died off without definite limits, the road ran up the gradual but rocky slope, and plunged into the woods beyond,—the great deep forest, which seemed to be everywhere, and to lead everywhere. But before turning his horses' heads in that direction, he had a glimpse of the open country at the other side; a white world of fields and roads and hills, all spotless and untouched, stretching in snowy widespread waves to the horizon; all giving back the sun's light with blinding brightness; with silver sparks struck here and there, and diamond-dust

scattered everywhere. The windows of the low house blazed as though they were on fire.

As Kazimir drove towards the forest, he could trace footsteps of some animal, coming from between the trees, crossing and recrossing over the flower-beds. Hungry foxes, no doubt, driven to dig for roots.

In the forest it was lonely, and on a dull day would be dark; but to-day the silver sunshine peered through the branches, and the blue sky showed between the tree-tops. The green leaves, which in summer so jealously curtained the entrance to the forest sanctuaries, were lying dead and buried under the snow; and at either side the eye could plunge into a vista of retreating stems. Every branch and bush was laden with snow; every tree-hollow was filled to overflowing; every tiny twig which could hold a snowflake, had its load. The thorny arches of wild-rose bushes, which in summer flowered pink, now nodded under white burdens. There were more tracks of animals here, passing in and out between the trees, but there was no life, except when at times a solitary bird, startled by the approach of the sledge, darted from its perch, while the recoiling twig, with a spring upwards, shook itself free of the clinging flakes. Neither was there any sound in the wood, but an occasional fall of snow, as some overladen branch discharged its burden on the white carpet below.

It was all a new experience to Kazimir. He had been so long away from his country, that he had grown almost to forget the delights of this gliding magical swiftness with which they were flying along close to the hard surface. The frost was keen; the breath of the tramping horses curled away like smoke into the sharp air. Kazimir, muffled up to his ears, and buried down to his toes in fur, heartily pitied the poor driver, whose ears from pink had become red, and from red were fast turning purple. Leaning back in luxurious enjoyment of the motion, he drank in intoxicating draughts of the pure winter air, and feasted his eyes on the sparkles which hung on every branch, and which flew away in shivers from under the horses' hoofs.

The thought which had underlain all other thoughts during these last three days, rose now to the surface of his mind, with a sanguine hope, engendered by the brightness of this white winter day. Surely fate had something good in store for him—surely his cards were all trumps to-day—surely he would recover the clue to those two rescued sisters, whom he had seen so dimly and so vaguely.

Tinkle, tinkle came the sound of another sledge-bell along the road. Kazimir's spirit leapt up in hope. It seemed so easy to hope in the midst of this glittering splendour. Why should not that sledge con-

tain the solution to the mystery? He leant eagerly out. Alas! only a rude wooden construction, with half-a-dozen peasants, men and women, huddled together on the top of it; while the two little rough *koniki* tore along madly through the snow, their clotted manes shaking with each step, their sides rubbed bare into streaks of shining leather by the friction of the hard rope-harness.

Kazimir sank back disappointed, and in the same moment experienced a chill of another description; for a shower of snow came flying down from a branch overhead, and treated the passing traveller to a cold and unwelcome embrace. There were no more false hopes either raised or crushed before they emerged from the forest road, and found themselves close to the term of their journey.

Lodniki would have been in many respects the ideal of an American settler's hut. The large low building, with some smaller buildings to the rear, stood in a sort of bay of the great forest; which bay had evidently been but lately cleared—witness the unevenness of the ground, where tree-stumps and roots stood close together, and where trunks of forest-trees lay at their length in the snow. The house itself was turned with its face towards a vista of sloping fields.

The back buildings appeared to have been planned

on a large scale; but most of them were unfinished, and roughly roofed-in for the winter. There was a shadowy indication of something traced out on the ground, hedged-in in a necessitous fashion, which something might be destined to be in future a garden. Everything bore the stamp of the new and the unfinished. In an open shed some agricultural machines stood covered with straw, peacefully sleeping their winter sleep. Two large watch-dogs, with their hair hanging in unkempt fringes all over them, received the stranger noisily and savagely.

Before Kazimir could struggle out of his furs, the host had appeared at the door, and, amidst smiles and bows, warmly invited the visitor in. No matter that he was a total stranger; to ask for hospitality in Poland is to receive it.

There was so much warmth in Rogdanovics's manner already, that there seemed scarcely room for more when he learned that this stranger was hardly a stranger, being the son of his old friend Bielinski, with whom in old days he had gambled, and hunted, and passed his time in so many other pleasant, if unprofitable, ways. Was this really the little Kazimir whom he remembered in a short green jacket and a wide white collar, whom he had once protected against Bogumil for some boyish offence,—it was running his toy-sword through a picture, if he remembered right?

Ah, well, that was long ago; and what a pity it was that Bogumil had made such a hermit of himself! He, Rogdanovics, had only bought this estate some months ago; but he had not ventured to intrude. Kazimir could hardly get to the explanation of his errand, so delighted and so talkative was the old gentleman.

Of two or three long narrow buildings, half stables, half sheds, Rogdanovics's breeding establishment consisted. There is rarely a Polish *Panie* who does not in a small way dabble in horse-breeding; but Rogdanovics's experiments had been more extensive. His mind was eminently of the sanguinely speculative order. The horses, all huddled together, showed every stage of youthful rawness, from long-legged foals to tall unfinished colts. There was a general sound of chewing, and an occasional stamp on the straw-covered ground,—a peasant-groom was carrying about something hot and steaming in a pail.

The choking atmosphere notwithstanding, Kazimir lingered long in each shed; but his errand was not destined to be accomplished to-day, for one of the carriage-horses was away to be shod. The solitary specimen visible was so far from coming up to Aitzig Majulik's epithet of "grand," that Kazimir, doubtful about the bargain, was glad of the excuse of postponement.

“That will insure me another visit,” said Rogdanovics, as they walked towards the house. His humour was waxing more radiant every minute. He grew communicative as to his life, past, present, and future.

“Ah! you must come and see me in summer, when my fields will be in bloom,” he said, button-holing Kazimir on the door-step; “it will be a pleasure to look at them then,” waving his hand towards the vista of fields. “Every one of these tree-stumps is going to be cleared off this year. I have heard of a new machine, a brilliant speculation; extracts these roots as neatly as teeth. See, there is my garden—my future garden. To the left I shall grow asparagus and artichokes. Artichokes have never succeeded yet in this country, but I am ready to wager that mine will succeed. To the right my daughter shall have her flowers.”

“Have you only got one daughter?” put in Kazimir, with a faint glimmer of hope.

“Only one daughter. I suppose you can’t give me any advice about steam-ploughs? I am hesitating between two kinds; there are *pros* and *cons* on both sides.”

“I am afraid I know nothing about steam-ploughs,” said Kazimir, crest-fallen.

“To be sure, you are a soldier. But you shiver—

come, and I will introduce you to my daughter at dinner."

The drawing-room was a larger room than at Wowa-sulka, and bearing evidences of greater wealth. Tables, chairs, and sofas, were rich and solid; and though there were nothing *but* tables, chairs, and sofas, without any of these accessories which in an English room speak of occupation and habitation, still it was unmistakably the room of a rich man. On one table there stood a vase with a faded bouquet.

The daughter could not have been unprepared for the summons, for she quickly appeared. She had a plain brown dress on and a scarlet shawl wrapped round her; she had grey eyes and smooth brown hair. She inclined her head stiffly, but in the same moment she glanced at the visitor furtively and curiously. Kazimir, meeting that glance, wondered what it meant. There was nothing either in her height or in her figure which forbade the possibility of her having been one of those two distressed damsels in the snow; but yet Kazimir felt himself touched by none but the very faintest feeling of recognition; and when he heard the name of *Vizia*, his interest all but collapsed.

"You have not got a sister, mademoiselle?" he inquired, nevertheless, after they were seated at table, and were attacking their pink beetroot-soup, the much-famed *Barscz* of Poland. There was a fourth plate of

pink soup on the table, which must belong, Kazimir thought, to some poor relative; one of those nondescript hangers-on, old aunts, or penniless cousins, who, in almost every Polish family, are allowed a corner and a plate under the patriarchal roof.

Kazimir had been observing Vizia, and it had struck him more forcibly that, after all, she *might* have been one of those two damsels—the least interesting, of course, if either.

“Certainly I have got no sister,” answered Vizia, raising her eyebrows perceptibly.

“Not a younger sister?” persisted Kazimir, disregarding every previous assurance he had had to the contrary.

“Certainly not,” repeated the lady with a shade more primness, perhaps because Kazimir had laid such a stress on the adjective used.

“That was a fearful snowstorm the other night,” was Kazimir’s next attempt. “I hope you were not in it?” He looked at the daughter, but the father broke in—

“Not I; I have better things to do than that. My time is gold, you know. I had plenty to do in stowing away potatoes for the winter. I have a capital in potatoes lying in that barn”—pointing with his fork out of the window. “Anything will grow in land like this; every spadeful turns up gold, I say—

ha! ha! A spade is all a man needs to make his fortune with here." Rogdanovics patted his fork as approvingly as though it had been the vaunted spade, and dug it vigorously into the viand before him. "But the people are fools. I am going to grow rice next year; it will be a grand speculation. I suppose you cannot give me any hints about systems of sowing? How do they do it where you are stationed, down in Tyrol?"

"I am afraid I never noticed," confessed Kazimir.

Here the talk was interrupted by the domestic Pawel, who serenely announced that there was only one partridge for three people. Pawel was a brisk young fellow, wearing yellow livery gaiters, and a green and grey jacket, which gave to the upper half of his person a doubtfully sporting character.

"Ah! our larder is getting low in this weather," remarked the host, with undisturbed equanimity. "We had plenty of partridges a fortnight ago. Are you a sportsman? Pity you were not here last week. Got fifty head of game in two days."

"Fifty-three," corrected Pawel from the side-table.

"Well, Pawel, I suppose you know best. You were our crack gun that day. You shot that five-antlered stag."

"Seven-antlered," rectified Pawel, brimming over with pride.

“The snow has spoiled the sport, you see,” said Rogdanovics.

“And the foxes eat my hens,” said Vizia.

“Just wait till the cold has given them confidence, and I am ready to wager that we shall get rid of them somehow.”

Thus conversation flowed on; but it was scarcely more than a monologue, carried on by Rogdanovics. It was hard to show interest in the lists of agricultural machines, and in the hundred and one speculative schemes upon which Rogdanovics proceeded to expatiate. There was a fortune to be gained by doing something to the marshy stream in the meadows; there were thousands of florins lying dormant in the wool of unborn lambs; he had some splendid system for feeding cows upon beetroot-refuse which would instantly double the supply of milk and butter; and as for the forest! why, there were millions staring the people in the face, if they were not too blind to see it. But he, Rogdanovics, would show them the way. He was not going to sit with his hands tied in the midst of all this untold wealth, only waiting to be gathered. And then, crowning point of all, there was the railway; a railway in the clouds as yet, but it would come down to the earth some day. And thus on and on Rogdanovics pranced and curveted on his private hobby-horse—never pausing to reflect that

the paces of that hobby-horse might interest the spectators less than they did the rider. He was of a genial nature ; a well-wisher towards every one of his fellow-creatures—except, perhaps, towards an inconvenient neighbour, who happened to possess a more successful mowing-machine, or a higher breed of pigs than his own,—but yet, Rogdanovics's best wishes were always for himself.

It was almost a relief when, after dinner, the talkative host, having caught sight of some irregular proceeding in the courtyard, left the room precipitately.

Kazimir drew a long breath ; it was a pleasant change to be able to talk ; and for the last twenty minutes he had heard his own voice only in solitary and far isolated monosyllables.

“Do you take one or two lumps of sugar in your coffee?” said a voice from the table over there. Vizia was pouring out the coffee. Kazimir left the window.

“Two, if you please.”

The hand which held out the coffee-cup was a well-shaped white hand,—Kazimir's eyes travelled up further. She was not so very bad-looking after all. If her complexion wanted freshness, it was at least pure ; the grey eyes were well set ; the colour of her plain brown hair harmonised with her plain brown dress. She was neither pretty in face nor particularly attractive in manner. It would require positive at-

tractions of mind to redeem her from the imputation of being a commonplace woman ; but Kazimir did not belong to that class of men who, on first beholding a woman, set to work instantly to analyse and classify her charms and her defects. Every face has, we are told, its caricature and its ideal ; and it lay in Kazimir's nature unconsciously to look for the ideal rather than for the caricature.

“ Your father seems to be heart and soul in his farming,” said Kazimir, as he sipped his coffee.

“ He is always heart and soul in whatever he does,” said Vizia, almost with apology. “ He cannot help it.”

“ Why should he help it ? what can be better than energy ? ”

“ But it does not do to see all *couleur de rose*.”

“ Better than seeing everything black,” said Kazimir, smiling. He himself very much preferred the rose-colour to the black.

Vizia smiled too. The first crust of etiquette was beginning to yield. The want of the sweet and smiling element in her nature had made her stiffer and primmer at first than even Polish etiquette demanded, but it was difficult to keep stiff with Kazimir Bielinski.

“ But there are a great many shades between rose-coloured and black ; now papa's fields, and horses, and lambs are always pure rose-coloured in perspective.”

“I have got no fields and lambs, but my horses are always rose-coloured too.”

“Even when they are black?”

“Even when they are black,” said Kazimir, and he laughed. His laugh was so infectious that another shade of stiffness melted from Vizia’s manner. First she smiled, then she laughed; and after that they felt that their friendship had made a stride. There is nothing which brings people so quickly together as a little nonsense. Half an hour’s sedate conversation will not do as much as one harmless though possibly meaningless joke.

“I hope you do not much dislike hearing about spades and ploughs,” said Vizia, putting down her coffee-cup.

“No; although they are not the things that I earnestly dote upon. I hope it is not rude and selfish to say so. Are you going to tell me more about them?” This a little anxiously; for this conversation was so pleasant, that somehow he dreaded a revival of the plough and cattle subject.

“You had too much of them at dinner,” said Vizia, not as a question, but as an assertion. She was looking at him straight, and Kazimir thought that he had never seen so straight and unwavering a gaze, with something of defiance, too, in its very candour. It would be hard to dissemble under that full gaze, but Kazimir did not think of dissembling.

“ I had rather more than I was prepared for, if I may say so. I have a deep reverence for agricultural instruments, but I do not think that I know a sickle from a spade. The sword is the only blade for me.”

“ A Pole should wear none but a Polish sword,” said Vizia.

“ Mademoiselle Vizia, we shall quarrel about this if we go on. If you say one word against my profession, we can never be friends.”

“ You are enthusiastic,” she said, looking up at him. “ You could be as enthusiastic about your sword as papa about his ploughs.”

“ Yes, and I could talk about it by the hour.”

“ Then why don't you ? ”

“ Take care ! you don't know what you are bringing down upon your own head. You have no notion what I am when I get on that subject. Lucyan never listens, and Marcin always goes to sleep. It would weary you most awfully.”

“ I shall tell you when you begin to weary me.”

“ Thank you ; that is so kind,” said Kazimir, gratefully. Her tone had been quite matter-of-fact ; but Kazimir's heart warmed instantly at the half-implicit invitation. He did not wait for a second. He talked, and she listened and questioned ; and after ten minutes of discussion and description did not look weary yet.

“And you see that we can be friends in spite of my hussar-cording?” asked Kazimir, at the end of those ten minutes. He wanted to be friends with her, as he wanted to be friends with everybody.

“Yes; we need not be enemies on that account,” said Vizia, with a warm flush on her cheek. He really did not look as if he wanted to be her enemy. “We need not even quarrel any more.”

“Have we been quarrelling?”

“Well, I think we were nearly quarrelling about spades and sickles.”

“Yes, because I said I had no opinion of them.”

“But you are wrong to despise them, even from a soldier’s point of view. In almost every national war they have played a part.”

“By national wars you mean revolutions?”

“Yes; and in revolutions the sickle has many times done the work of the sword. I hope it may do so for us still.”

“I hope not,” said Kazimir, excitedly, for the subject was near to his heart; “that would be folly, pure folly.”

“You talk as if you were not a Pole!”

“I am a Pole, but an enlightened one.”

“That means a cold one.”

“That does not mean a cold one,” said Kazimir, springing from his chair and pacing the room. “Made-

moiselle Vizia, it seems we are going to quarrel again, after all."

"Then, will you fight with us when we rise, as surely we shall rise some day?" asked Vizia, with a quick turn of her head, for the subject lay near her heart too. She looked at him as if she almost thought that if he did fight with them, their cause might have a chance of being crowned.

"I cannot, for I am an Austrian soldier."

"And yet you are a Polish patriot."

"That is just what they all said to me at the time, and a hard time it was to me," said Kazimir, stopping beside the table.

"What time?" said Vizia, anxious to hear more.

"I will tell you, if you like. In '48, my regiment was in Dukla; and the second division was stationed some miles off. You know, I daresay, that the moment the revolution began, the Hungarian ministry called in all Hungarian regiments. They sent the order to us too; to the colonel first, but he did not publish it; then to the major commanding the second division. He published it, and the second division went mad on the spot."

"And you went mad with them?"

"No, I did not—perhaps because I was not a Hungarian; although there were Poles and Bohemians among them who went quite as mad as any Hun-

garian. Our turn would come, they said; this was the beginning of universal liberty; help them and they would help us, &c. Some of them had doubts, but they managed to argue and drink themselves up to the point, except one unfortunate man with a conscience, who shot himself, because he could not make up his mind whether he would be behaving like a great hero, or like a great blackguard, if he went. For my part I never could see where the difficulty lay, nor what there was to argue about. Either they meant to break their oath of allegiance or they did not. I did not mean to break mine, so I stayed. It never puzzled me for a moment, but it hurt me for many days."

"And how many stayed altogether?"

"How many? Oh, nobody else stayed of my division. I stood behind a tree and watched them ride off one splendid autumn morning; they were all singing and shouting: and when I had seen the last sword glitter, and heard the last hoof-fall die away, I turned back, and, Mademoiselle Vizia—I——"

"Well?"

"I cried," he finished with half-comical pathos. "I was very young, remember—scarcely seventeen; the youngest lieutenant in the regiment. Please don't laugh at me."

Vizia was not laughing; she was not quite sure

whether she was so very far from crying herself. He had told the story with such perfect simplicity, with such an utter want of self-consciousness, that it was impossible to suspect him of attempting to attitudinise as a hero. It was, in fact, the first time he had ever told the story at all.

“But I was right to stay, was I not?” asked Kazimir.

Vizia’s nationality was struggling with some other feeling in her breast. She did not say whether he had been right or whether he had been wrong, but entirely on impulse she put out her hand to him, and Kazimir took it.

“And if it had been a Polish regiment?” she asked with a not quite steady smile, and in a voice which might have been made hoarse either by emotion or by her cold; “and a Polish revolution, which you were called upon to help?”

“Then perhaps I should have cried a little harder,” said Kazimir, half laughing and half moved; and quite as impulsively as Vizia had held out her hand, Kazimir raised it and kissed it.

At this very moment the door opened, and Rogdanovics put in his head.

“I am a shameful host, Bielinski; but they are all tearing me to pieces outside. I hope Vizia is doing her part better. Aha! yes, I think she is,—better

than I could have hoped," with a chuckle of delight. "You will excuse me for another five minutes; the new guano has just arrived."

He was gone again, before any answer could be made.

Vizia had hastily withdrawn her hand, and moved her head distinctly upwards. The twinkle in her father's eye had alarmed her pride. Why should she allow herself to treat this man as an old friend, when, after all, he was but a stranger? This *tête-à-tête* was altogether irregular; an infringement of Polish etiquette. It was very disagreeable; or at least it ought to be very disagreeable. Vizia bit her lip with vexation, and, as a sort of tacit protest against further intimacy, put her hand into her pocket and drew out a pair of pale kid gloves. Kid gloves, even though slightly soiled, were the best protection against a stranger.

"Please do not be angry with me," said Kazimir, as he watched her proceedings with a puzzled air; "but you remind me a little of a lady whom I met the other day."

"Really?" said Vizia, with forced coldness; carefully drawing on her gloves. She was conscientiously trying to freeze back into the icicle she had been at first.

"Yes really; a lady who wore gloves like these,—only I think her hair was lighter than yours."

“Oh, I daresay!” How hard and unamiable her voice sounded now!

“But you have no sister.” He said it with a sort of vague hope that there might be a sister concealed somewhere.

Vizia hesitated for one moment. She had slowly but surely come to the conclusion that this was the same man whom they had met in the snowstorm; she was quite sure of it now. She saw that he was puzzled, and she knew that one word of hers could explain the mystery. That word—she did not feel inclined to speak it. Some instinct, much too subtle to bear analysis, told her to be silent. Had the beautiful Xenia been well enough to appear, then the mystery would have become clear long ago; for who, having once seen her, could fail to recognise her? But then, would they two, would she and Kazimir, have got on so well together? That *tête-à-tête* which she was endeavouring to condemn, Vizia suddenly became aware that she had not succeeded in condemning at all. It was not disagreeable; it was new, and it was pleasant.

“No, of course I have no sister,” she said quickly. It was the perfect truth, and yet it was deception; and indirect though it was, to her particular nature it was unbearable. She lost for a moment the self-possession which so rarely forsook her. Looking round for any-

thing to change the subject, and leave this perilous ground, her eye was caught by the faded bouquet on the table.

“Do you care for flowers?” she asked, with a sort of gasp.

Kazimir did not care for flowers, and he said so honestly. It was the first entirely conventional question she had put that day, and the abruptness of transition surprised him much.

Did she care for flowers? Yes, rather,—that is to say, some flowers—camellias, for instance.

The few dead camellias in the middle of the bouquet had probably suggested the idea. If there had been turnips or cauliflowers there instead, Vizia would certainly have seized upon them equally as a subject of conversation.

Kazimir displayed a deplorable masculine ignorance on the subject of camellias; and perhaps it was in return for the instruction he received that he said at parting—

“I shall try and bring you some of these flowers you are so fond of.” He was always chivalrously inclined to further any wish, however slight, of any lady; but how could Vizia know this? “I hope I shall not have forgotten the name when I come back again on Saturday.”

“When he comes back again on Saturday,” thought

Vizia, after he was gone. Somehow, for no reason that she knew, her interest in camellias had suddenly become real. She was really anxious to get that flower on Saturday. Perhaps if she had been promised a cauliflower, she would have looked forward to it with an equal longing.

“After all, a pretty face is not everything,” she said, standing before the mirror. “Some men look deeper than that;” and even as she said it, it struck her that her own face had never before looked, not so pretty, but so little plain. That smile which sat upon it so well, replacing the frown which sat upon it so ill, why was it so seldom there? and what meant the wave of warm colour in her cheek? and what was this dim and dawning feeling of a delight, scarcely real yet, still trembling on its insecure foundations, and never before known to her?

The primrose gloves were on her hands still; she drew them off now slowly. For these last ten minutes they had been nothing but a hollow mockery.

The ice cannot choose but melt when the sun shines upon it.

CHAPTER VI.

FINESSING.

“La parole a été donnée à l’homme pour déguiser sa pensée.”

—VOLTAIRE.

KAZIMIR had been three full days at home, and he had not yet seen his mother. Even his aunt Robertine he had seen only distantly, disappearing down passages and into doorways. On the fourth day, however, she entered the room where he was sitting.

A sort of black walking pillar (such was Kazimir’s impression) glided in. This must be a woman, to judge from the sweeping garments more than from the face; for a black woollen shawl covered her head, and deeply shaded her features, ostensibly a protection from the cold draughts of the passages; but in some vague manner the spectator wondered what mystery it hid. Was there some dark secret enveloping her past?—was there some black cloud which hung over her present?—had she a beard, or had she no nose?—people asked themselves aghast. Even her

relatives, well as they knew her, could never quite suppress a half-unconscious feeling of surprise whenever, on throwing back her shawl, she showed herself to be an ordinary woman. She *had* a nose, and with a vengeance too. Every one of the canvas noses on the wall might have shrunk away humiliated before this one. The hereditary bridge, in this instance, should have been enough to endow a whole generation. The hereditary height, the hereditary shape of eyelids, and the hereditary largeness of muscles, had found their full expression here. She was a Bielinska all over, as she proudly proclaimed.

Mademoiselle Robertine had found herself forced to be instrumental in summoning Kazimir to his mother's side ; but to make up for it now, she did her best to keep him away. She had fenced and parried as long as she could ; but on the fourth day of Kazimir's stay she was compelled to begin lifting the veil, inch by inch, and evidently under protest. It was absolute pain to her to lift it at all.

There are some natures that revel in darkness, and Mademoiselle Robertine's was one of them. Innocent mystery, harmless obscurity, was the air she breathed, the food she lived on.

Madame Bielinska was not much worse than usual, she admitted to Kazimir ; and, his aunt regretted it much, but his mother desired to see him. He was,

in fact, to have his first little peep. After many whispered instructions outside the door, and injunctions to avoid talking, and walking, and breathing if possible, Kazimir was beckoned noiselessly into the room; and even then, though he advanced on tiptoe, his aunt looked daggers at him, as his spurs jingled faintly against the polished floor. Kazimir was not used to sick-rooms; the warm scented air choked him; the light, stealing in sparingly through heavy green curtains, was darkness to him. He came in contact with something which he supposed a screen, and was terrified by a low groan in his ear. He fully expected to hear his mother shriek next, but she did not; only in the big arm-chair at the far end of the room there was a movement of some living thing.

Then Kazimir felt his arm caught by some one, whom in the dark he barely recognised as Lucyan. There was a whisper in his ear: "Remember on no account to allude to money matters; it is that which agitates her." His arm was relaxed, and Lucyan glided out, moving as easily in the dark as if all had been light and clear.

Kazimir's nerves were strong by nature, but this mysterious ushering into the sick-chamber, combined with all these warnings, and the vagueness attending them, were beginning to chafe his nervous system.

"Kazio, is this you? Why have you not come to

me before?" It was his mother's voice, but, ah, how changed! The remainder of the dark space was traversed in two strides, which quite upset Mademoiselle Robertine's calmness, and Kazimir knelt by his mother's side, pressing both her wasted hands to his lips.

Somehow that slight shade of coolness which had existed between mother and son melted at once when they were face to face. There was much more hope in Madame Bielinska's talk than Kazimir had dared to expect. "Yes, I may be among you in a day or two," she said, answering her son.

There was a great clatter over there among the empty bottles. Kazimir looked round inquiringly; it was only an effort of aunt Robertine's to drown this indiscreet admission.

"Please, dear Robertine, do not take any more trouble with those bottles," said the invalid; "you are fatiguing yourself, and Kazimir and I have so much to talk about."

In order to humour the patient, without taking the hint implied, Robertine left the medicine-bottles and began dusting the prayer-books on the *prie-dieu*. There were about fifteen prayer-books there of different sizes, so the prospect was dreary—Kazimir's patience gave way at the third.

"Would you mind dusting the prayer-books a little

later, aunt Robertine? I think my mother wants to speak to me alone."

It was difficult to believe the testimony of her own ears—well-trying organs of hearing though they were—she was positively being asked by the son to leave him alone with his mother.

"Yes, dear Robertine; Kazio will take care of me for ten minutes."

It is the last straw which breaks the camel's back. Here was the mother asking to be left alone with the son. Robertine was so staggered by the unexampled audacity, that she actually laid down the red and yellow feather brush, and only venting her feelings in a long low groan of anguish, slowly dragged her steps from the room. Where, oh, where could Kazimir have picked up this intolerable habit of plain speaking, this odious fashion of saying the thing he meant to say in so many cut-and-dry words? Yes, assuredly, the military profession was the perversion of youth. She felt powerless against a soldier's bluntness—she would go and seek in an ally consolation, perhaps help.

"We shall not be left long alone," said Madame Bielinska, with a faint smile; "I must try and explain to you all that I wish, before we are interrupted again."

"What is it about, mother?"

"It is about money!"

With Lucyan's warning still fresh in his mind, Kazimir was painfully anxious to avoid the subject of money, but his mother eagerly clung to it. It certainly was true that towards that point her thoughts seemed to be striving incessantly.

"There is great need to talk of it," she persisted, when he demurred; "you must understand your position clearly, as well as that of your brothers; and you must make your choice with your eyes open, as to the way you will follow. No, don't interrupt me; for the present you have made your choice. Ah, Kazimir, you were too strong for me there; but later, when I am——later, you may change your mind."

Kazimir did not say "Never," much as he should have liked to do so.

"You have never paid much attention to money matters, Kazio, but you must know that we have not one quarter of what we used to have."

It was quite true that Kazimir knew very little about the state of their fortunes. All he knew was, that they had been great people in the days when he had been a child, and that they were small people now. He knew that the rooms had been large and stately then, and the furniture of velvet; and that now the drawing-room had but three windows, and the chairs were covered with green rep: that the portraits of his ancestors had once hung upon high

walls, and that now they hung upon low ones. He had not learnt to set much store by money, and he could not have dreamt of making an estimate of their probable income, even had the idea occurred to him. Corn, brandy, and cattle, and all other chief features of a Polish property, were meaningless to himself. He could not have hazarded the wildest guess as to the value of land ; a field of grain, where an expert would have seen golden ducats waving from every full ear, was to him a field of grain, " and it was nothing more ; " or, if anything more, it was a place which might be good for a canter after harvest time.

" No, mother ; I have never cared about money matters," said Kazimir, trying to speak with resignation, for he saw long explanations impending.

" Then attend to me," said the invalid, sitting up. " The management of Wowasulka is a troublesome thing, as you will find when you have to take it into your own hands."

He would rather be without it, thought Kazimir, as unwillingly he listened to his mother's exposition. What struck him most was, that though she evidently had her subject much at heart, and went into it deeply and earnestly, she did not show any signs of that baneful agitation, against which Lucyan had so warned him. She was as clear and calm as Kazimir had ever remembered her ; with her sad slow voice and

her half-affected lisp, her scent-bottle and her elaborately curled hair, her little weaknesses and her great strength.

At the end of five minutes he had gathered a general impression of valuable soil, not fortunately situated; of certain advantages, of which he understood nothing, neutralised by certain disadvantages, of which he understood, if possible, less. As yet he had received no general impression, he had not grasped the outline of their situation.

“So the wood is valuable?” ventured Kazimir, rather vaguely, wishing to show some interest.

“Yes, but it is not there that our chief strength lies. You know the line of little spirit-shops that lie along the highroad?”

“Yes, hideous little huts,” said Kazimir.

“Well, those hideous little huts are the very life of Wowasulka; by far the most valuable part of the estate. The lease has been held by faithful old Naf-tali Taubenkübel for years, though we have constant applications for it. I believe it is Aitzig Majulik’s ideal of happiness to get the Propinacya into his hands. If you give me the account-book over there, you will understand it better by looking at the totals of sums taken for *wódki* last year. There, that little green book under the big missal.”

Kazimir groped his way towards the missal.

“Of course the value of the land is fluctuating always ; but should it ever be advisable to sell Wowa-sulka, I do not think that each of your portions should realise less than——”

“Lucyan, is that you?” said Kazimir, startled, as a hand was laid on his sleeve. “How did you come in here?”

“By the door, of course.”

“But what have you got on your feet? I never heard your boots creak.”

“I never wear creaking boots; they don't do for sick-rooms.”

Madame Bielinska sank back with an impatient sigh. Lucyan's eyes followed the movement. “I knew it, Kazio; you have tired her with talking.” He bent over his mother and kissed her hand.

“Are you going to take him away?” she asked fretfully.

“I must, for aunt Robertine is languishing outside with your cup of *bouillon*. We must both go. Come, Kazio; never mind that little green book. I have something I want particularly to show you up-stairs.”

Lucyan's private sanctuary, rarely entered by any one but himself, lay at the top of the house. It was a small square room with a good view from its one window. By reason of its small size, or else by reason of its occupant's character, it had a look of greater

comfort about it than any other room in the house. It had curtains to the windows, and a blind which could really pull up and down; a piece of carpet on the ground; a genuine washing-table, on which stood several mysterious flagons, together with the piece of perfumed soap, of which Kazimir had heard before. There were also an unbroken looking-glass, a deep-seated, though shabby arm-chair, and a book-shelf, where both gay and grave elements were represented; for beside such titles as, "The Laws of Wills and Executors," together with more intimidating Latin names, frowning down from dingy leather, there were yellow paper covers, the widely known uniform of the lightest if not most unexceptionable French literature. The third element in the book-shelves, perhaps the third interest in the owner's life, found expression in some elaborately bound volumes on horticulture, and various small pamphlets, with such titles as, "The Florist's Guide," "Hints to the Rose-Lover," &c. In the window there was a long green box with some very young and sickly plants in a row; also some half-dozen more or less promising flower-pots. The whole of the small space bore the impress of having been made as habitable as circumstances would permit: a well-feathered nest, made cosy with every stray shred which forethought and care could collect.

"What is it that you want to show me so parti-

cularly?" demanded Kazimir, looking round him. He was put out by the abrupt termination of his interview down-stairs; not that he wanted to hear anything more about the money subject, but he resented his brother's interference.

"Come here; I want to show you my flowers: you have not seen my window-garden yet."

"Your window-garden! Nonsense, Lucyan! You know that I have no patience for flowers!" exclaimed Kazimir, in extreme disgust. "Is that what you brought me here for?"

"Well, not exactly, *mon cher*," said Lucyan, as with deft fingers he began tenderly picking the dead leaves off a fine azalea plant. "But, you see, I warned you against conversations of that sort; and when I found you engaged in one, you had to be got out of the room."

"And you held out that green box full of weeds as a bribe?" said Kazimir, still incensed.

Lucyan gave no answer, except with his shoulders, which he slightly raised. He had no particular objection to Kazimir calling his flowers weeds, and his window-garden a green box.* He was not going to dispute with him about mere names.

"I wish you would speak, instead of pulling about that detestable bush."

"I shall be delighted, when you have done. I thought you had more to say."

“Oh, nothing; except that I don't see the use of my being here.”

Lucyan took up a miniature watering-can, and began watering the window-garden.

“Come, Kazio,” he said, with his imperturbable good temper, “you know so very little about invalids that you really must rely upon other judgments. *Que voulez vous?* Aunt Robertine and I are agreed—what is that you said?” for Kazimir was heard to mutter something not very complimentary to aunt Robertine.

“Never mind, go on. Aunt Robertine and you are agreed about something.”

“We are agreed that peace and quiet are the most imperative conditions of my mother's improvement. I warned you expressly not to touch on agitating subjects.”

“She was not in the least agitated.”

“Perhaps not at the moment; the reaction is later.”

“I did not begin about it,” said Kazimir, doggedly.

“Oh, you did not?” with a point of interrogation. He went on watering his plants, while Kazimir stared at the prints on the wall.

“What an idea you have of making yourself comfortable!” remarked Kazimir, after a silence. “And what a lot of pretty women you have got on your

wall! Why, you have nothing *but* women, I declare, and they are all pretty."

"Well, I flatter myself that I am rather a connoisseur," said Lucyan, quietly.

"That girl there is almost as pretty as my heroine in the snow," and Kazimir pointed to the French print of an impossibly perfect fruit-seller. "That print would be my favourite."

"It *is* my favourite," said Lucyan, looking over his brother's shoulder, "among the *blondes* at least; but I prefer *brunettes* on the whole," with a laugh much too cynical for his twenty-four years.

He resumed the watering of his plants, and presently observed, suggestively—

"I suppose she spoke about the rents, and the brandy-making, and the cattle?"

"Who? my mother? Yes, she did."

"And about the corn and the labourers?"

"And about the woods and the potato-fields, till I felt quite giddy."

"Ah! no doubt. Poor Kazio! that is not much in your line. I thought that sort of conversation could not interest you much."

"No, especially as half of it was Greek to me."

"Of course; but yet you must have gained a good deal of knowledge to-day?"

"Not I. I am as wise as I was before. She was

going to have shown me something in a green book, but you came in just then."

"That is well," said Lucyan, putting down the empty watering-can with a sigh of relief.

"What is well?"

"This azalea, my pet azalea. Come and look at it. There are two new flowers opened this morning."

"I wish you would not try and cram your flowers down my throat, Lucyan; but oh, to be sure, I did promise to bring some sort of a flower to Mademoiselle Rogdanovics."

"You did, really? What does she want it for?"

"I don't quite know, and I have forgotten the name. I daresay it was one of these—what do you call them?"

"Azaleas."

"That sounds rather like it. I know it was a soft sort of a name that melted in your mouth like a lump of sugar. You may as well give me one of those."

"Not that one!" cried Lucyan, springing forward to protect his favourite pot, towards which Kazimir had put out his hand. "I will give you one when you go there on Saturday."

"Won't you come with me on Saturday?"

"I don't feel particularly tempted."

"Are not three stables full of young horses a temptation?"

“ Three stables ! I did not know he had anything of a stud.”

“ Oh, hasn't he ! ever so much quantity if not quality.”

“ And how does it pay him ? ”

“ I can't say. He seems to have plenty of money to spend.”

“ I did not know that,” said Lucyan, meditatively. “ He has come here so lately, that I know very little about him.”

“ He is a genial old chatterbox.”

“ Oh, I don't mean that ; but what is the house like ? Does he seem to be farming on a large scale ? ”

“ On an enormous scale, I think. You had really better go with me on Saturday. You can talk to old Rogdanovics about reaping - machines and steam-ploughs——”

“ While you are talking to Mademoiselle Vizia about azaleas ? No, thank you ; I think not. What is she like, by the by ? ”

“ Not pretty at all, but with plenty of—what shall I call it ?—character, I think I mean. She really has got something in her head besides ribbons and laces.”

“ That is as clear as Marcin could have made it.”

“ At all events, I like her very much.”

“ Oh yes—that could not be clearer, at any rate.”

“ Talking of Marcin,” began Kazimir, after a minute, “ do you know, Lucyan, I do not understand him at all. Why does he go mooning about the house in that manner ? ”

“ That is only his way,” said Lucyan. “ Marcin is always vague.”

“ Perhaps,” said Kazimir, doubtfully ; “ but he seems to me to be several degrees vaguer than usual. Have you noticed the way in which he wanders about the house with his hat on, smiling at things by the hour ? ”

“ What sort of things does he smile at ? ”

“ Very strange things. Yesterday I found him standing in the passage with a smile of ecstatic admiration on his face, and there was nothing to admire anywhere within sight, except a broken pot with a label marked ‘ Leeches, with care—not to be shaken.’ There was nothing marvellous in that, was there ? ”

“ No, nothing.”

“ And this morning, when I came into the drawing-room, he was tenderly stroking a pill-box. He does not do that sort of thing always, does he ? ”

“ No, not always,” smiled Lucyan, looking out of the window.

“ What is it you are studying ? ”

“The snow. I am afraid it is going to be an exceptionally hard winter.”

“For the poor peasants, yes.”

“I don’t mean the poor peasants; I mean my poor plants. Do you see those tracks in the snow? They are foxes. No other beast walks in that straight line, one foot before the other. When they get a little bolder, they will grub up my flower-roots.”

“Oh, is that all? The country seems overrun with foxes. Mademoiselle Vizia was complaining that they ate her hens.”

“If you were a sportsman, Kazio, you might have rid us of some of them.”

“Poor beasts! why should they not live? I should certainly eat hens if I were a hungry fox.”

Lucyan shook his head.

“Oh, you will never do for a farmer, Kazio, if you do not take the part of the hens against the fox.”

Long after Kazimir had left him, Lucyan went on working at his window-garden—weeding, and watering, and pruning, and carefully tending each plant, down to the tiniest and sickliest of the green sprouts. The faint smile still on his face, showed that he was following up some train of thought; but not one inch of the window-garden was neglected for that—not one dead leaf did he omit to clip off.

Lucyan possessed that quality of great men: the

power of applying his mind, in all its force and entirety, upon whatever object he had in hand, whether great or small. It is a valuable quality, and one which is sure to serve the owner well in all phases of life.

CHAPTER VII.

QUEEN OF HEARTS.

“ Klar auf einmal fühlt ich's in mir werden :
Die ist es, oder Keine sonst auf Erden.”

—SCHILLER.

SATURDAY was not nearly such a fine day as its immediate predecessors ; neither was Kazimir in such good spirits. The prospect of seeing the fellow to a rather clumsy-looking bay was not positively exhilarating ; the prospect of another conversation with Vizia alone seemed to promise some enjoyment.

We are such deplorably sensitive creatures after all, so easily cheered or distressed by the mere fact of the sun shining or not. Life seems easy one day because the sky is blue, and difficult the next, because it is grey ; and yet the grey day may bring us better things than the blue one, and the gift will be the more precious from being the less anticipated.

At first it seemed as though this second visit was going to be but a repetition of the first. Vizia sat on

the same sofa and listened, while he sat on the same chair and talked. It is true that Vizia wore a silk dress to-day, and it is true also that they met almost like old friends, and that Kazimir said as much, and was not rebuked for it. He began to wonder how he could have found her manner unattractive at first; every trace of ungracious coldness was gone. The other day he had taken interest in her, only on account of the vague memory which connected her somehow with that figure in the snow; to-day he began to like her for herself. His liking increased in proportion as those memories weakened.

When Kazimir made the remark about meeting as old friends, Vizia did not answer, but looked past him through the window. He was always confident that his friendship would be accepted with the same warm frankness with which he was used to proffer it. How could he be conscious of the thrill which went through Vizia's heart? How could he guess that his manner and tone said so much more than there was to say?

"You must be rather in want of friends in this lonely place," suggested Kazimir.

"Rather — not much," faltered Vizia, with hot cheeks, for she was practising a deception which she detested, but to which she yet clung. What madness had moved her to pass over Xenia's existence in silence? Xenia could not be concealed for ever.

Vizia had left her before the glass, trying to decide between the merits of mauve and blue. Any moment might bring a step down the passage. Things must take their chance, thought Vizia desperately; what would have been easy to explain at first would be difficult to explain now. A few more minutes of this strange enjoyment, and then—and then what? Things need not change; oh, surely they would not change!

“It is beautiful here in summer,” she said, talking fast; “when you come to see us then——”

“In summer I shall be gone.”

“Gone! Of course; I forgot that you are a soldier.” Vizia laughed at her own tone of consternation.

“And I may have to do a soldier’s work soon. I think we shall fight the Italians in spring.”

“Who talks of fighting?” inquired Rogdanovics from a distant table, where he was employed in drawing some plans. “Never talk of fighting. It is against my principles to expect any but the best things from fate. I am ready to wager that there will be no such thing as war.”

“That would be a great disappointment to me,” said Kazimir.

“Oh, that is the way your wishes lie? Well, then, I am ready to wager you will come back covered with glory and decorations,” and Rogdanovics reapplied

himself to the finishing touches of his plan, which marked a row of future glass-houses, wherein pine-apples and muscatel grapes were destined to grow and thrive in a degree hitherto undreamed of, except in Rogdanovics's sanguine brain.

"That will do, I think," he said, laying down his pencil. "The melon-beds in front, and the vineries behind. I had thought of building an extensive conservatory too; the flowers would have realised a round sum at the Lwów market. But I am afraid I must wait; there does not seem to be much chance of the railway passing through here just at present."

"Nor for another century either," said Vizia.

"That reminds me," said Kazimir, rising, "I have brought that flower for you, Mademoiselle Vizia; I must have left it in the sledge."

Only just this moment had Kazimir remembered the unfortunate azalea which Lucyan had so carefully wrapped in silver paper. What was an azalea to him? He could not know that Vizia, looking for the promised flower when he entered, had sighed with disappointment at seeing him empty-handed; and he as little noticed the light of pleasure which came to her face now.

"Don't trouble yourself to go out," she said.

"What! Go out? Who wants to go out?" echoed Rogdanovics from his distant table.

“Only to fetch a parcel,” said Kazimir.

“It is so likely I should let you fetch it for yourself,” retorted the host, striding towards the door. “What is your parcel like? Round? Square? Oblong? Short?”

“Please do not move,” said Kazimir, as he reached the door before his host. “I hear some one in the passage; perhaps it is a servant. Ah!”

As he opened the door the handle was at the same moment turned at the other side. Kazimir heard a rustle of silk, and found himself closely confronted by a lady—a young lady—a beautiful young lady! He reached this conclusion with a bound.

It had taken all this time to array Xenia in that long-trained, close-fitting silk, swelling in balloon-like fashion all around her—for this was the time of crinolines—and to encase that chestnut hair in a mauve *chenille* net, which did its best to conceal what it was supposed to be adorning; but through the lattice-work the glossy waves shone, like sunbeams escaping from prison bars. Such, at least, was Kazimir’s impression, in this first bewildered moment, although the simile would scarcely have stood investigation. Ribbons to match the net, and fringed out in some incomprehensibly feminine fashion, fluttered at her waistbands and wrists. There was an artificial rosebud nestling at her throat. Her silk was a slighter and a shabbier one than

Vizia's, and the mixture of colours was not strictly in accordance with a severe taste; nevertheless, both the silk and the ribbons, and even the artificial rosebud, seemed imbued with a certain subtle grace which came from the wearer alone. For the matter of that, she might have worn a tartan shawl and a poke bonnet without looking vulgar.

“I have found her!” was Kazimir's inward cry. Not for a moment did he doubt her identity. What had been a mere passing recollection in the other, was certitude here. Here were the very same eyes that had looked into his through the falling snow; that was the shining hair which had been blown rough by the unmannerly wind. The interest which, although keen at first, had been gradually weakening with the lapse of days, leapt back into full life all at once. He need no longer grope after uncertain clues, for he had found herself.

It all shot through his mind while he inclined himself profoundly, and while Xenia went through a curtsey, quite as graceful but quite as ceremonious as the one she had executed in the snow at the hill-top.

“Mademoiselle Xenia Rogdanovics!”

Kazimir's first impulse was to look reproachfully towards Vizia. “You told me you had no sister!”

Vizia was leaning forward, with her hands clasped, as she watched the scene by the doorway. “I have no

sister; Xenia is my cousin." Her voice had stiffened back into her first tone of rigid ceremony, but Kazimir scarcely noticed it.

Her cousin Xenia! So this was Xenia; that was how he had made the mistake. How could he have been so stupid? Why had he taken for granted that they must be sisters?

There was now a scene of general recognition and hand-shaking, Kazimir being acknowledged as the saviour in the snowstorm.

"What a fearful storm it was!" said Kazimir to Xenia, who had sat down demurely beside her cousin, and who had not uttered a word as yet.

"Yes, it was a little windy," she replied, with an air of great gravity. The silvery voice was clouded, not with an unbecoming grating hoarseness, but as though wrapped in a soft veil.

"Very windy," echoed Vizia; and Kazimir wondered why he had not found out before that she talked as if she had just swallowed a woollen comforter. This is another point on which nature indulges in unjust caprices. A cold may be becoming or unbecoming, according to its symptoms; and Kazimir now for the first time became aware that the symptoms of Vizia's cold were not becoming. The same cause which had afflicted her with watery eyes and a heightened colour of nose, had given Xenia an interesting little cough,

and but delicately touched the small fine-cut nostrils into the semblance of a pink-tipped flower. Moreover, Vizia's cold had been gradually getting worse, while Xenia's had been getting better.

"I am afraid you must have suffered a great deal from the snow?"

"Thank you; it was not very pleasant, was it, Vizia?" and Xenia looked appealingly at her cousin.

"It must have been a dreadful fatigue to you to get up that hill?"

"I don't think the walking was very good."

"No, hardly," thought Kazimir, as he remembered the style of his progress uphill, weighed down on each side by clinging hands.

It was not that Xenia was forgetful of these facts, or ungrateful to her preserver. This little prim fencing was but the tribute paid to that tyrant Etiquette. She was still at the pale kid-glove stage of acquaintanceship with him; Vizia had had the start of her in that respect. Affectation and primeval simplicity are nowhere more successfully blended than in this country.

"I hope you changed your wet shoes," said Kazimir, earnestly.

It was Xenia's duty to look surprised, and she fulfilled it; but, though the pink-tipped flower was raised perceptibly, Kazimir could not fail to see that the eyes were not displeased.

“I suppose you have not attempted to go out since?”

“Oh no, I never go out in winter, except when I must. Do I, Vizia?”

“Then it was necessity which brought you to the foot of that hill?”

“Yes; it was a ball we had been to.”

“You are fond of dancing?”

“Oh, very!” She did not need to look at her cousin for assistance here. The crimson lips opened in a smile, the first smile which she had yet allowed herself. Her whole face lighted up with pleasure, for Xenia was only seventeen, and at seventeen dancing is a word with magic in it.

“You surely cannot get much of it here?”

“Not here; but I danced at Krakow last year. I went to—Vizia, was it three or four balls?”

“Three,” said Vizia, drily.

“Happy Krakow!” thought Kazimir, as he watched her pretty air of childish triumph. “How dull Lodniki must seem to you!”

“Yes, I think it does; and I have never lived in the country before. The days are so long here.”

“How do you spend them?” asked Kazimir, moving his chair a quarter of an inch nearer.

Xenia looked at her cousin, as if she would prefer Vizia to answer for her, but Vizia held her tongue.

“I play the piano, and then I read.”

Music and literature ! The very pursuits he would have chosen for her ; innocent, refined, and intellectual.

“ Is it poetry or prose that you prefer ? ”

“ Oh, I think I—I read both ! ”

The field was widening. Could he not read poetry in the blue light of her eyes ?

“ Which are your favourite authors ? ”

Xenia looked staggered. “ Oh, I don’t know, I am not sure.”

“ I understand. You have so many favourites that it is difficult to choose. Do you care for Mickiervicz’s poems ? ”

“ I think rather ; but I read French usually. The last thing I read was by Seraphine de la Rosière.”

Seraphine de la Rosière had no place in Kazimir’s memory.

“ What was the story called ? Perhaps I may remember it.”

“ It was called ‘ Les deux bagues mystérieuses, ou les Fiançailles de Palmérie.’ ”

“ I am afraid I have not heard of it,” said Kazimir, blankly.

“ Of course not,” suddenly put in Vizia. ‘ You are not likely to read the ‘ Journal des Demoiselles.’ ”

“ But the story is very interesting,” said Xenia, eagerly.

“ It is not finished yet. I am so anxious for the

end to come. It just broke off when Palmérie discovers the will of her great-grandfather hidden inside the sapphire ring which she has worn all her life; so, of course, now she has got an immense fortune, and I want to know whether she marries Alphonse or Raoul."

"And what is there inside the second ring?"

"I don't know; because you see that dreadful Barbarin, who is really Palmérie's half-brother (although she has not found that out yet), and who has murdered all the rest of the family, has buried the ring in a deep cave strewn with bones."

"The bones of the murdered family, perhaps?" suggested Kazimir; but he was all wrong, it seemed.

"Oh no—for the cave was in a quite different place; somewhere in the Alps, or—Vizia, was it the Pyrenees?"

"The Pyrenees, probably, since it is in Spain," said Vizia, curtly.

"But surely either Alphonse or Raoul will find this out?"

"I hope so; but I am afraid they are going to have another duel with pistols: they have had two duels already."

"I see; and all about Palmérie?"

"Yes, all about Palmérie."

"It must be an engrossing story; I hope you will let me know the end."

“ Oh yes, if you like.” The demure reticence of Xenia’s manner was fast giving way to childish confidence. Alphonse, Raoul, Palmérie, and her iniquitous brother Barbarin, had all helped towards this end. No wonder that Kazimir felt disposed in their favour. This was enough on the subject of literature ; Kazimir turned to the second branch of Xenia’s pursuits.

“ You said you were fond of music ; do you swear by Mendelssohn or Beethoven ?”

“ Was it they who wrote the sonata about sunshine—or moonshine ?” asked Xenia, grasping at the most distinct idea which Kazimir’s question awoke in her mind.

“ Yes ; that is to say, one of them did—I am not quite sure which,” said Kazimir, frankly. “ But perhaps you are too true a Pole to play anything but Chopin ?”

“ What is Chopin like ?”

“ Well, he looks very black upon paper, but he is very delightful to listen to ; that is all I know.”

“ I think I like Strauss best ; does Chopin write waltzes ?”

“ Yes, I fancy he does ; he is a great favourite. Every one admires him, and Poles adore him ; I am sure Mademoiselle Vizia adores him.”

Vizia appeared not to have heard ; she was twirling a ring round her finger.

“Perhaps you are not as ultra-national as your cousin. Mademoiselle Vizia has confessed to having felt a great prejudice against my uniform at first!”

“Vizia, where are you going?” asked Xenia, distressed, for her cousin had risen and was moving away. “Please stay near me!” said the pleading blue eyes; but their pleading was not answered.

“I am going to fold up papa’s plans over there;” and she walked to the end of the room.

“I am afraid you must have felt the same prejudice against my gold cords,” Kazimir was saying.

“I don’t know; why?” asked Xenia. The very first sight of the hussar cording in the snowstorm had certainly acted chillingly upon her. She was taught to believe that it must act chillingly upon her; but she had never attempted to analyse the causes which produced the effect.

“Well, but you are a real Pole, and have lived all your life in Poland,” persisted Kazimir, who thought that a little political discussion, such as he had had the other day with Vizia, might be very pleasant; “and I have found since my return home that my uniform finds favour nowhere.”

“Really?” Xenia leant back on the sofa and looked a little bored.

“Then you do not share the universal prejudice?” went on Kazimir, pressing the point.

“No, I don’t think so; I find the gold cords very pretty.”

“Do you? but——”

“The hussar uniform looks very well in a ball-room,” broke in Xenia, with a return of animation.

“Perhaps,” said Kazimir; and then he felt silenced for a moment, but only for a moment. “Your cousin was quite hard upon me the other day for not upholding revolutions. Are you too a supporter of the revolution?”

Xenia leant back again with a pretty shrug of her shoulder, and pulling a truant curl through her fingers, “Oh, the revolution? yes, I know. That was the time when mamma’s diamonds were stolen; and we never got them back; was that not dreadful?” Her eyes looked so earnest and innocent, that Kazimir felt it indeed to be dreadful. It was a shame to have robbed her of the chance of wearing diamonds.

No, politics would not do: how should this youthful flower-like creature know anything about fierce strife and cruel bloodshed? He made an abrupt transition from this ground back to the often discussed loneliness of Lodniki, which seemed to him more cruelly lonely now that he knew it to be her abode. The transition was successful; to confide her fears to a ready listener was just what suited Xenia best.

“Oh, you do not know how frightened I was when I came here first, a few months ago! It felt so strange after Krakow, that I could not sleep when the wind blew among the trees; and only two days ago I got such a fright!”

“A robber?” said Kazimir, jumping to all sorts of horrible conclusions.

“No, but a fox! It had come quite up to the house, and looked in at me through the window. I never saw such a big fox in my life before; it had such a white chest. I don’t know, in fact, if I ever saw any fox before. I think I must have turned quite pale;” and at the remembrance of how pale she had turned, Xenia almost turned pale again.

“Frightful!” ejaculated Kazimir, following her changes of expression with delight.

“Don’t you think it was a great chance that we were not eaten by wolves on the day of our unlucky drive in the snow?”

“Unlucky? do not call it unlucky!” pleaded Kazimir; “it was a lucky drive for me.”

Xenia dropped her eyes towards the hem of her dress, but she failed so entirely to make her expression forbidding, that Kazimir ventured to add that he should have liked the hill to be six times as high, and the storm a hundred times as violent, in order to prolong the pleasure of assisting and protecting her.

Xenia looked up half alarmed—for she was so very young, and so entirely inexperienced, that she had scarcely yet got accustomed to receiving compliments; and this one, somehow, sounded more real than any of the few which she had chanced to hear. She looked uneasily towards her cousin for guidance, but she was spared the necessity of doing anything decided, for just now Pawel had entered and placed a little parcel on the table. Kazimir pulled the silver paper open.

“ Ah, a flower, a pink azalea; how pretty! but you have not treated it well; look!” as two or three pink blossoms dropped on the table.

“ Do you think it pretty?”

Of course Xenia thought it pretty, lovely, adorable. She doted upon flowers—upon azaleas in general, and upon pink azaleas in particular; and of course in another moment this particular pink azalea was nestling in her waist-band.

Shortly after this Kazimir's sledge came round to the door. The talk with Xenia had been followed by some general conversation. Kazimir had learnt the difference between camellias and azaleas. He had also remembered with a start, that the flower he had brought with him in silver paper, had been destined for Vizia and not for Xenia. This he had remembered at the moment of parting, when he saw Vizia's face, and he had immediately apologised for his for-

getfulness. "It does not matter after all, because, you see, it was not the right flower," he had said.

"Of course not," she had answered, rather scornfully, as it had struck him. He did not know that whether it were called azalea or camellia, it would have been the right flower for her.

Now he was gone, and the girls stood alone in the room.

"How do you like him, Vizia?" asked Xenia.

"I—I don't know; not at all!" She was standing at the window, with her forehead pressed hard against the glass, watching the sledge through the frozen pane.

"I thought he was very nice," Xenia ventured; then looked down and smiled, while she played with the flower in her belt. "He did talk some nonsense, of course. Did you hear all he said about wishing that the hill had been higher and the storm stronger the other night?"

No answer; only a sort of gasp from the window embrasure.

"But you must have heard it," said Xenia, again.

"Why should I care what he said to you?"

"But, Vizia——"

"I wish you would stop chattering," cried Vizia, turning almost violently from the window. At sight of her face the timid Xenia shrank to one side.

“Vizia, what have I done?” she implored; and how sweet her voice sounded after the other’s ungracious tone! “You are angry about something; is it the azalea?” with a bright inspiration. “It was meant for you; won’t you have it?” and she plucked it from her belt and held it out to her cousin. “Won’t you have it, Vizia?”

It was done graciously and lovingly, for Xenia loved her cousin; but it would seem that this proffer of the olive-branch had been the last thing wanting to upset Vizia’s equanimity. She took the azalea indeed which Xenia pressed into her hand, but it was only to throw it to the ground and stamp it under foot, crushing the life out of the two frail blossoms which had survived their brethren.

There let them lie and die, since her dream was dead—short-lived dream that it had been!

Meanwhile Kazimir was driving home through the forest. It was a much colder drive than his former one; but to Kazimir’s eyes, nevertheless, the world was a more brilliant place than it had ever before been.

Xenia! what a sweet, soft-sounding name! How exactly it suited her delicate beauty, her childish openness of character! And all the way home the

name rang in his ears; and the russet twigs of the bushes made him think of chestnut-brown hair; and the patches of blue sky overhead—much less blue than last time, but to him brighter—shone down on him like innocent blue eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARCIN'S CARDS.

"I do remember an apothecary,—
 And hereabouts he dwells."
 —*Romeo and Juliet.*

"THEY must be either poisoned, trapped, or shot—that is clear," was the phrase which met Kazimir's ear as he reached home.

"Poisoned, trapped, or shot! In heaven's name, Lucyan, who?"

Lucyan was standing at the foot of the door-steps, very carefully wrapped up; and the expression of fierce vindictiveness on his face made Kazimir start almost more than the words he had said. It was a very wide leap which his own thoughts had to take, from the dreamy direction they had been following, to this abrupt talk of poisoning and shooting.

"What is the matter, Lucyan?"

Lucyan unmuffled one arm, and pointed silently in the direction of the flower-beds; and Kazimir,

straining his eyes through the dusk, could see nothing but a little scattered straw.

“My best *Niphotos* rose; or is it the *Paul Verdier*?” went on Lucyan, peering anxiously towards the scattered straw. “I would give—yes, I would give fifty kreutzers to know.” Lucyan always was moderate in his expenditure, even in imagination.

“Why don’t you go and look then?” asked Kazimir.

“And wade up to my knees in snow! No, thank you. I respect my boots too much for that. Perhaps traps would be better than poison.”

“But what are *they*, in the name of wonder?”

“Foxes, of course!” Lucyan pronounced the word with an accent of concentrated hatred.

“Foxes! Oh, is it foxes again?” Kazimir began to show a sudden interest. “They have been frightening her by looking in at the window. Yes, they must be shot or trapped by all means. I will help you.”

It was Lucyan’s turn to stare. He looked at his brother very keenly as he asked, “And who may *she* be?”

“She! Oh, Lucyan! have I not told you? It is she herself. I have found her! I will tell you all about it.”

Lucyan had no objection to being told all about it, but he had an objection to being told all about it in

the cold. They went in ; and Kazimir talked, while Lucyan listened. Kazimir's nature was not one to attempt any concealment, nor was he as yet aware that there was anything to conceal. Presently some word of his seemed to have touched Lucyan's interest.

“Would you mind repeating that again, Kazimir?” asked Lucyan, raising his head. “I did not quite catch that.”

“About the colour of her hair? Just a shade lighter than——”

“Not about the colour of her hair,” and Lucyan put out his hand with a deprecating gesture ; “but about the value of the wood cut down on the estate.”

“Twelve hundred,” said Kazimir, “or it may have been fifteen hundred ; I really can't remember.”

“I don't see how there could be so much wood to cut down on the Lodniki estate ; it is a small place.”

“Oh, but Rogdanovics has rented another estate besides the one he has bought. He has got Szybalin also ; she mentioned having driven there once.”

Lucyan took his ivory comb from his pocket, and commenced slowly and gently drawing it through his hair.

“You did not tell me that before?”

“Didn't I? What does it signify?”

“It would need to be a rich man who rented Szybalin.”

“ Well, I have no doubt he is rich ; he looks like it, and he told me so, in fact.”

“ Ah !”

“ And if all his plans succeed, he will be richer yet.”

“ So he has let his own estate, and he has bought Lodniki and rented Szybalin,” summed up Lucyan, compressing the matter into a nutshell, for his own satisfaction. “ And he has only got one daughter ; but what is the niece there for ?”

“ She told me she had no other home ; she is an orphan.”

“ A poor relation,” said Lucyan, mentally, but he did not say it aloud.

Next day the horses were brought over to Wowasulka, and the bargain was finally concluded ; for it was a strange fact that, from the moment of his second visit to Lodniki, Kazimir had been quite unable to see any defects either in the build or the paces of those horses. To his eyes there was a halo hovering round them, which had never hovered round any other horses. It was only natural that he should be anxious to report upon their progress to Rogdanovics, for Rogdanovics had particularly asked to be told how they got on. He was told ; once, twice, oftener still—oftener, perhaps, than was absolutely necessary. He must have been fully satisfied on their account, for during

the whole of December the Wowasulka sledge might frequently have been seen wending its way towards Lodniki. "I promised him to come, you know," Kazimir explained to Lucyan, who had not asked for any explanation; and Lucyan smiled, and examined his faultless almond-shaped nails, while he listened to the narrative of his brother's visits, dropping a question now and then, and quietly reading Kazimir's hand over the edge of his cards. Kazimir talked much at random, touching upon many subjects which sounded trivial. He talked about dance-music and the 'Journal des Demoiselles'; he talked also a great deal about foxes—about one giant fox in particular, which was wont to prowl round the house at Lodniki. Kazimir was accustomed to talk as if he thirsted for the blood of that giant fox. "The very same, I am certain, that looked in through the window and frightened Mademoiselle Xenia."

"And the same, most likely, that steals Mademoiselle Vizia's chickens," said Lucyan.

"Perhaps; I don't know." The other crime was by far the blackest; to have looked in through a window was deeper guilt than to have carried off a chicken.

During this month Madame Bielinska's health showed some slight improvement, and when Christmas was past and the new year turned, she was once or twice moved from her room to the general sitting-

room. Her sons could not help feeling more hopeful when they saw her once again among them. The doctor cautiously admitted that this unexpected revival might or might not be the first step towards ultimate recovery. He proposed two plans which might further the recovery ; one was a sea journey to Australia, the other was a farinaceous food with a wonderful name. Madame Bielinska, whose nerves were weak though her judgment was so strong, greatly preferred the farinaceous food to the sea voyage. The farinaceous food carried the day.

“ The apothecary at Tarajow is sure to have it,” the doctor had said.

Tarajow was the nearest country place ; it lay about five miles to the north, not through the forest, but across the open country.

“ We must send for it this afternoon,” said Kazimir, that same day.

They were sitting together in the drawing-room around the invalid, who was propped up on her pillows.

“ Sending for it won't be enough,” said Lucyan, somewhat incomprehensibly.

“ It is sure to put you all right, mother,” proceeded Kazimir ; “ you are looking quite well already.”

“ She is looking *too* well,” observed Robertine, darkly. This resurrection into life was altogether a

sore trial to Robertine ; there was too much openness and publicity about it. If she could have had her will, even the simplest of household transactions should have been enveloped in impenetrable mystery. She would have loved to throw an enshrouding veil over the very food they lived on, the servants who waited on them, and the tradesmen who supplied them. In how far higher a degree, therefore, should mystery reign in a sick-chamber ! The sick-chamber had been Robertine's field almost since she had come to the age of reason ; and from the moment when she had resigned all matrimonial hopes, which, owing to her more than ample share of the Bielinski nose, had never been very great, it had been more than this, it had been her kingdom. She recognised it as her vocation in life, and she nursed her patients unremittingly, energetically, and uncompromisingly. The darkened space, the scented atmosphere, the hushed steps and whispering voices of the sick-room, suited her mystery-loving nature, as subterraneous labyrinths suit the darkness-loving mole. They satisfied her peculiarities, and they fed them, until her special phase of eccentricity had grown into a distinct mania. She defended Madame Bielinska against her sons, as if the sick woman's life depended on isolation. Of the three, she dreaded Kazimir most, and feared Lucyan the least ; for although Lucyan did find his way to the sick-room

oftener than either of the others, he did so in a manner which won her heart and soothed her alarm. Tacitly he had proved a sort of ally, for he helped to keep out other people.

These being Robertine's sentiments, it will be easy to guess, but difficult to describe, what she suffered on seeing her carefully guarded patient exposed thus openly to the light of the day. In fact the sight was so painful to her that she usually preferred to absent herself from the circle.

"Sending for it will not be enough," repeated Lucyán.

"Why should sending not be enough?" asked Kazimir of his brother.

"Because the apothecary at Tarajow is an ass."

"How do you know he is an ass?" asked Marcin, unexpectedly.

"How do you know he is not? Marcin! *you* setting up for giving an opinion!"

"Well," said Kazimir, "most asses are at least able to read a name if it is written large enough."

"Not such a name as *Neuropoeticon*. You don't know the man; when you write for a cooling drink he is sure to send you a remedy for hydrophobia. I believe we have got three of those remedies in the house at this moment. No; somebody would need to drive over and speak to him about it."

"Very well," said Kazimir, "which of us shall go?"

“ I will go ! ”

Everybody in the room, the invalid included, turned and stared at Marcin aghast. It was he who had spoken. He was offering to drive over to Tarajow and see about the medicine. Such a thing had not occurred within anybody's memory. In the abstract, certainly, there is nothing particularly startling in the idea of a full-grown man of twenty-five driving five miles in a sledge to fetch a bottle of medicine. Marcin was a full-grown man of twenty-five; he had long ago reached and passed the age of reason, in the ordinary acceptation of the word; neither was he exactly a fool, but for the practical sides of life he was as helpless as if his age had been five, instead of five-and-twenty. He had never been known to receive a letter in his life; and on the solitary occasion when he had been known to send one off, it had been despatched open, unstamped and unaddressed. Marcin would have much rather gone without a coat than have taken the trouble to order it for himself; he would not have known how to enter a shop, or address the shopman, or explain what he wanted. He could not have attempted to ask for the change of a florin; probably he would not know what the change ought to be. Putting the case that he could have gained a million by travelling to Vienna, he would most certainly have remained quietly at Wowa-

sulka. The bare idea of having to take his ticket and register his luggage, would have been quite enough to deter him from the enterprise.

After the first universal exclamation, there was a moment of stupefied silence. Then—

“You will never reach Tarajow!”

“You will be lost on the way!”

“I don't believe we shall ever see you back!”

Madame Bielinska was so touched by the unlooked-for mark of filial affection, that, in her weak state, the emotion came near to overpowering her. There were symptoms of tears in her voice.

Marcin sat passive through it all, without once changing his position.

“Come, Marcin, this is too delightful!” said Lucyan, bursting into one of his long but noiseless laughs. “I do believe you will be offering to keep my accounts for me next. Why, we should have to hunt for you all over the country this evening.”

Marcin's temper was faultless, as a rule; but something must have ruffled it now.

“Why are you all trying to take the spokes out of my wheels?” he inquired rather loftily.

“I do wish you would steer clear of proverbs, metaphors, and all figures of speech,” remarked Lucyan, with a smile; “it would be an advantage to yourself and to others.”

“They are the only sort of thing I have got a memory for,” answered the other, still on his dignity. “They save so much trouble, and they make things clearer.”

“And you really want to go? We might try it as an experiment; don’t you think so, Kazimir?”

The novelty of the idea gave to it a flavour of originality. It was decided that Marcin should go; and that he should bring back the farinaceous food for his mother as well as the traps for the foxes.

At one side of the three-cornered Place at Tarajow, with a Ratusz (town-hall) to the left and a burnt-down house to the right, stood the apothecary’s residence. The Ratusz was dirtier, both inside and outside, than most English cowsheds; the burnt-down house had been reduced to ashes eight months ago, and had very little chance of ever rising from them. Three worn stone steps led up to the apothecary’s shop; and up to the lowest of these steps the stone pavement swelled in undulating billows.

Over the scene were scattered the usual groups of peasants in their brown *sieraks*, and Jews in slim black *kaftans*. In front of the apothecary’s shop there stood a sledge, and a bell tinkled now and then, as one horse and now the other tossed his head.

Marcin having traversed the open country, passed the wooden church on the outskirts, and bumped over

the billowy pavement of the place, reached his destination safely; the slip of paper which Lucyan had given him was securely buttoned up in his pocket. He walked up the three steps and into the shop. So far everything was progressing splendidly.

The apothecary was mixing something in a mortar, while a peasant, with his fur cap in his hand, stood at a respectful distance watching the proceeding, and breathing very hard as he did so. The apothecary was a sort of magician to him, and those bottles and shelves, and labelled drawers and ticketed cases, were the secrets of his magic. The perfume which the sheepskin coat added to the already laden atmosphere was the reverse of refreshing, and Marcin thought so as he entered. At the view of this new and distinguished customer, the magician abandoned his magic mixture and commenced a series of inquiring bows across the counter. To these Marcin paid no attention, but sank exhausted on the nearest chair.

“Can I offer you anything?” asked the apothecary, who was a small, dismal, and rather dishevelled-looking man, but who moved more briskly than dismal men usually do. He waved his arm suggestively towards his shelves, where jars, with such enticing labels as “rhubarb,” “sulphur,” and “camomile” were ranged. Marcin’s eyes roamed over them, and settled down

upon a little row of soda-water *siphons*. "You can give me some of that," he said.

"Some of the senna-tea? In a moment," and he moved with gloomy alacrity towards it.

"No, not that stuff," said Marcin; he had some faint reminiscences connected with senna-tea, which dated from his childhood and were not pleasant. "I mean that soda over there: soda and water."

"Soda-water? In a moment!"

Jan Wronski, the apothecary, was by no means quick of thought; he was in fact remarkably slow—perhaps because all his available faculties were wrapped, and had for years been wrapped, round one especial object. Some people go through life with an ideal, a dream, a something for which their ambition strives, but never reaches, and some people go through life without this: Jan Wronski went through life with a dream; and his dream was hydrophobia—or rather, I should say, the specific against it. From the moment that his young wife had died from the bite of a mad dog, mad dogs had literally become the *bêtes noires* of his life. On this one point he was a little crazy, although perfectly sane, stupidly sane on every other. He bought all the works which had ever been written on hydrophobia; he started correspondences (which nobody carried on) in newspapers about hydrophobia; he kept a register of all dogs which had

died of hydrophobia within ten miles round ; he made journeys to inspect interesting cases ; he concocted mixtures and ointments, some of which he called preventives, and others remedies. For nearly twenty years past he had, at intervals of three or four years, solemnly announced that *the* grand specific, which was to make hydrophobia for ever harmless, was discovered ; but as yet there was only one case on record of a bitten child being cured, and even then it was more than doubtful whether the dog had ever been mad. He was not particularly hopeful about his own project, but having once got into the idea, he was not able to get out of it. There was something very ludicrous and also something rather pathetic in the blind obstinacy with which this stupid, dismal, long-haired old apothecary groped after his Will-o'-the-wisp.

He was, as I have said, remarkably slow of thought ; but, nevertheless, at this moment there did dawn upon his understanding some conception of incongruity. It struck even him as peculiar that a gentleman should drive over in a sledge to ask for a glass of soda-water, on a day when the icicles were hanging in a hard clear fringe from his roof. In summer he was used to do a brisk business with his *syphons*. To come in here and drink a glass of soda-water towards sunset was considered fashionable and correct ; and the importance of deciding between raspberry and

lemon juice, as accompanying flavours, was quite enough excitement for the unsophisticated beauties of Tarajow. The trade naturally slackened with the heat, and now had died off into a winter sleep, only disturbed when now and then a case of high fever came within Jan Wronski's limited jurisdiction.

When Marcin had drunk his first glass, which he did very slowly, he asked for a second. He drank it with his eyes roaming round the shelves and towards the door which led to the apothecary's back shop. Then he asked for a third glass. The apothecary looked alarmed. Was not this a case of high fever? or, no—rather was not this—

“Pan Bielinski did not happen to meet any dogs on the way?” inquired the apothecary rather suddenly, but very respectfully. The uninitiated might suppose that this abnormal thirst shut out all idea of hydrophobia; but Jan Wronski knew better. The very newest theories inclined to the belief that excessive water-drinking was one of the surest symptoms of the malady.

“I never meet dogs,” said Marcin, with unusual decision, and he drained his third glass very slowly. While he was draining it the back door opened, and there came in Janina Wronska, the apothecary's only daughter. She was carrying a tray, on which some dried herbs were lying in heaps.

"Do you wish for a fourth glass?" asked the apothecary, in perfect good faith.

"No, thank you. What are those brown things on the tray?"

"They are dried flowers, from which we make tea. Do you wish to taste any of our tea?"

"Does Panna Janina make the tea?"

It did not strike the apothecary as strange that this gentleman should know his daughter's name. Such circumstances never struck him at all. He was not an unkind father; but yet his daughter only had interest for him inasmuch as she might or might not be bitten by a mad dog, and that, in the former case, he might or might not be able to cure her. She was a little creature, not broader than became her stature, with coal-black hair, dishevelled like her father's, gleaming black eyes, and a full baby-mouth, with a perpetual pout upon it. That she was young could be seen by the way in which she reddened on seeing a gentleman in the shop; and how full of life she was became evident by the way in which she set down the tray of herbs on the counter, sending the dried stalks flying away on all sides.

"Of course I make the tea," said Janina, tossing her black head, and sweeping the herbs together again with one little plump brown hand. "I should like to know who would do it if I did not!"

“Ah, who indeed!” Marcin seemed to have become infected with the desire of proving himself helpful, for his hand was on the edge of the tray too. The thin white fingers came against the plump brown ones and lingered there. Jan Wronski was meanwhile weighing out alum and borax for another customer.

“Are you going away?” asked Marcin, as Janina seized upon two stone jars and made for the door.

“Yes; I have no time for idling. I am going to the back-shop.”

“I have no time for idling either,” said Marcin. Janina’s hands were too full to open the door; Marcin opened it for her, and shut it for her too, and then found to his surprise that he was on the same side of the door as she. He had made his audacious movement so unconsciously and so coolly, that Jan Wronski never noticed his disappearance.

“How strange!” said Marcin, looking round him.

“What have you come here for?” demanded Janina, depositing her jars, and turning round upon him with a great show of indignation.

“I cannot in the least imagine.”

“Hadn’t you better try and find out?” The little snub nose was considerably elevated.

“I like back shops.”

“I don’t believe you have ever been in one.”

"No, never."

"Then hadn't you better go out again?"

"I like this back shop."

"But I never invited you into it."

"I think it was because it was so hot in there."

"Cold, I suppose you mean. It is much warmer in here."

"Much. How truly you speak!"

"Will you go back to the front shop?" stormed the little vixen, stamping her foot on the ground, in order to call his attention to the fact that she had black velvet boots on.

"I don't think so," said Marcin, gazing down at the black velvet feet. It was a delightfully new sensation for him to be stamped at. He sat down on the only arm-chair in the room, and prepared to make himself at home. His immovable limpness often gained points which another man's energy would have lost.

Janina turned her back upon him, and began making a great noise and bustle with jars, bottles, medicine-spoons, and everything within reach. It was always her way to make a noise with whatever she touched, and it was remarkable what a variety of clattering and rattling sounds she managed to get out of glass and china; even harmless-looking pasteboard boxes seemed to become noisy under her hands. She began

dividing off some powders, and folding them in papers. Marcin looked on admiringly. It made him feel rather giddy to see any one move about so quickly as she did. It seemed to him, in a sort of indefinite way, that she was a mixture of lightning, quicksilver, gunpowder, express trains, and everything else in the world which conveys an idea of rapidity and explosiveness.

Of course she was delighted that he should be there, and, of course, she was quite resolved that he should not get back into the front shop just yet; but a little show of resistance was more dignified, as well as more exciting. She went on with her work as if resolved to ignore his presence and existence. The room they were in looked out on a narrow courtyard, where stood a snow-covered summer-house, and where also hens and geese stalked about on the frozen ground.

When Marcin had sat admiring for nearly two minutes, he said, "Why were you not in church last Sunday?"

"Oh, you are here still, are you?" remarked Janina, over her shoulder.

"Why were you not in church?"

"I don't go to church to see you."

"But I go to see you."

Without turning round, she shrugged her shoulders, and burst out singing—

“ Ne toho jdu cerkowci Bohuse molyty,
 Lys toho jdu do cerkowci, na lubka dzwyty,
 Oj pzdu ja do cerkowci stanu pid obrazy,
 Podzwlin se raz na popu, na lubku trzy razy.”

(I go not in the church to pray ; I go to look at my love. I stand before the holy pictures, and look once at the priest, and three times at my love.)

“ How nice ! ” said Marcin. “ Songs save so many explanations. Won't you teach me to sing ? ”

Janina looked round, and the perpetual pout became a decided one.

“ What a question to put to a stranger ! You hardly know me a bit.”

“ I have known you all my life.”

“ Ha, ha, ha ! ” she laughed, with the abruptness of a bomb. It was a very hearty childish laugh ; but still it was shrill, and it pierced Marcin's sensitive ears. “ Just listen to that ! You have seen me twice exactly, I believe.”

“ Perhaps : you are always right.”

“ And perhaps you will never see me again.”

“ Perhaps.” All this time he was staring at her steadfastly and without intermission ; and all this time, in the midst of her pouts and her head-tossings, she never for a moment paused in the business of her powder-making. Now she dropped him a curtsey quite as unexpected as her laugh, and said, with mock gratitude—

“ Thank you, Pan Bielinski ! ”

“ How nice ! But don't call me Pan Bielinski. I am tired of that. ”

“ What am I to call you ? ”

“ I don't know. ”

“ What do they call you at home ? ”

“ Marcin. ”

“ Then I will call you Marcin. ”

“ How nice ! ”

Janina held her tongue for a minute after this. She had done her part, and it was clearly his turn to say something now. But instinct told her quickly that with this sort of man one must take the initiative ; so, after a moment, and with a shy glance from under her eyelashes, she asked, “ And what are you going to call me ? ”

“ I don't know. I can't call you Marcin also, can I ? ”

“ But you might call me Janina. ”

“ Thank you, Marcin, I mean Janina ! ”

Another flash of black lightning scathed the willing victim.

“ Why don't you help me with these papers ? Don't you see how busy I am ? ”

“ Help ! ” repeated Marcin, with a faint smile.

“ Yes, help ! Do you never help people ? ”

“ No, never. Life is too short for that. ” No one,

since the commencement of his existence, had ever asked Marcin to do as much as pick up a pin, and now this audacious little creature was actually asking him to help her with papers and powders. The experience was so new that it tickled his fancy. He drew his chair to the table and received his instructions.

"You are to put these powders into blue paper, and these into white. Do you understand?"

"Not at all!"

"Of course you cannot understand, if you look at me instead of at the powders. There is my father coming."

Jan Wronski, having disposed of the commoner customers, had suddenly awoke to the fact that his distinguished customer had disappeared in some mysterious and inexplicable fashion. He had certainly not gone out by the front door, for the sledge with the shivering horses still stood before the house. He would consult Janina; but entering the back shop for this purpose, he found not only Janina but also the distinguished visitor filling powders into paper.

"Pan Bielinski came in here because he was so cold," explained Janina, sitting ostentatiously demure, with her eyes on the powders. She looked such a good, dutiful, and well-behaved little girl as she said it.

Pan Bielinski's alterations from heat to cold must have been rapid, to judge from the three glasses of soda-water a little time ago. For a moment Jan Wronski's suspicions concerning a possible mad dog glimmered into life again, but died away at the sight of the distinguished customer's perfect composure of face. Pan Bielinski was cold? Would he not sit nearer the stove? Would he not like a rug over his feet, or a cloak over his shoulders? No; he preferred to sit where he was. But at least there must be some more wood put on.

"He is qualifying himself for a medical student," put in Janina, unflinchingly, in order to check the flow of her father's suggestions, "and he is very anxious to learn how to make powders."

"So I see—so I see; and you can teach that better than I," said the dismal apothecary, passing his hand over his long hair; "so I shall just go back to a very interesting treatise I was reading, which throws some quite new lights upon the treatment of hydrophobia;" and Jan Wronski withdrew, having gathered the impression that young Pan Bielinski was a doctor in embryo, very earnest about his profession, and in particular very keen about powders.

There followed a quarter of an hour, during which Marcin certainly did not learn the system of wrapping

up powders, although he possibly may have learnt many other things.

“You are not cold now, are you, Marcin?” Janina asked, with her black-poodle head on one side. She had talked, and worked, and teased, and laughed the whole time. Now, for the first time, she took a moment's rest; and rest consisted in leaning forward with both her arms on the table. The table was not a very broad one. Her bold black eyes were gleaming brimful of life as she looked into his face. If she had not been so young and so fresh, even Marcin might have discovered that she was vulgar; as it was, no such suggestion threw its shadow over this new sort of enjoyment he was experiencing.

“I am not cold now,” he said, and as he said it, it occurred to him that he had never felt so warm in his life before. He dropped the powders on the table, and took hold, instead, of those two little busy brown hands which lay close by. They fluttered for a moment in his grasp, and made a pretence of escaping, and yet the plump fingers were much tighter in their grasp than the limp white hands. There was fire in her black eyes—Marcin felt it blazing on him; and then—and then, he did not at all know how it happened,—perhaps he only did it by mistake, or perhaps it was only because the table was so narrow,

—but certainly he had leant across the table and kissed her.

The next thing was startling; for the door burst open, and there entered Jan Wronski in a state of high excitement.

“The horses are perishing with cold, Pan Bielinski, —just perishing!”

“What horses?” stammered Marcin, not yet recovered from surprise at his own conduct, and not at all certain whether Jan had not been witness of it.

“Your horses; they have been standing for three quarters of an hour. The coachman says they will catch their death of cold.”

“More haste, less speed!” said Marcin, rather wide of the mark. “It never does to be in a hurry.”

“Quite so, Pan Bielinski, especially with powders.”

“I have learnt a great deal,” looking at the back of Janina’s head, which was turned towards them. Perhaps she was angry; she had not spoken since.

“Good-bye, Panna Janina!”

“Good-bye, Pan Bielinski!”

No, she was not angry; this much he had ascertained.

Before he had got through the front shop, Janina was throwing up her hands in despair over the discovery that all the powders that should have been in

blue paper were in white, and all those that should have been in white were in blue.

“Is there anything else that I can serve you with?” asked the apothecary, at the door.

Marcin looked round him for the last time.

“Nothing; yes—perhaps one more glass of soda-water.”

CHAPTER IX.

QUEEN OF DIAMONDS.

“The Sabbath is a bride and a queen, and in itself more than all the commandments of the Lord : therefore shall the Jew fitly honour the Sabbath, from the Friday evening until the evening when the Sabbath is closed.”—*Talmud Teaching.*

THE slip of paper was still safely buttoned up in Marcin’s pocket when he reached home.

“Well, Marcin, how did you get on?”

“Famously ; much better than I hoped.”

“And where are your purchases?”

“Purchases? Do you mean the soda-water? I didn’t bring any back with me.”

“But, Marcin! the slip of paper I gave you ; you have lost it, I suppose?”

“Oh, you mean the trap for my mother? I found it was getting rather late, so I——”

“Well?”

“So I did not——”

“Did not what?”

“You see, the horses had been standing a long time,” explained Marcin, apologetically.

“Standing where?” broke in Kazimir, with some indignation; but Lucyan remarked calmly: “So you did not go near the apothecary’s after all?”

“Oh yes, very near!”

Lucyan gave a philosophical shrug to his shoulders, and held his tongue. The long and the short of it was, that Marcin had been to Tarajow and back, and had brought neither *Neuropoeticon* nor traps for the foxes.

Some days after this Kazimir announced: “I am going to drive over to-morrow.”

“Where to? Tarajow?”

“No, Lodniki. Won’t you come with me Lucyan?”

He had put this question so frequently and so regularly that it surprised him when this time Lucyan answered, “Very well, I will go with you to-morrow.” Accordingly Lucyan went, and made acquaintance with the Rogdanovics household.

There has been very little said as to the precedents and position of this family, and it now becomes necessary to say more. The chief particulars, some of which Kazimir had gathered from Rogdanovics, and Lucyan in turn elicited from his brother, were briefly as follows.

At the time when Rogdanovics had been Bogumil Bielinski’s friend—that is, twenty years ago—he had

been comparatively a poor man, but eminently a wandering man; leading a sort of gentlemanly vagabond life; shifting about from one part of the country to another; buying small estates and selling them again; renting others and throwing up his lease; or effecting speculative exchanges and compromises. This nomadic existence, he explained to his friends, was but a preparation for the time when a certain large and valuable estate in Russian Poland should fall to his share by inheritance. This had come to pass only two years ago; and now at last he would be able to air the ambitious schemes with which his brain was teeming. After passing a year and a half on this estate, Rogdanovics explained to his friends that the ground did not lend itself to his plans. No doubt the control of Russian authorities, which makes itself felt even in private life and private undertakings, had unduly oppressed Rogdanovics's free spirit. Letting the place rather suddenly, he appeared in East Galicia, where he bought Lodniki, and rented the neighbouring large farm, Szybalin, threw the two together, and began expending his energies upon this double farm. The large speculative plans in which he had embarked since his appearance, six months ago, were beginning to startle the conservative minds of the small proprietors around. Rumours of a colossal estate in Russian Poland were fully confirmed by the

grand footing on which, from the first, he had placed his establishment. Beyond that, they knew very little about him; or if any one did know anything about him, it was the Jews; and the Jews do not give information gratis.

Foremost among the speculative ideas which had induced Rogdanovics to settle on this particular spot, had been the hope of a future railway. On the strength of this hope he had cheerfully paid a higher price for Lodniki, and a higher rent for Szybalin, than would under ordinary circumstances have been asked.

Such a railway really was projected; but most of the proprietors around shook their heads at Rogdanovics's folly, and declared that he might consider himself lucky if he saw as much as half-a-dozen yards of rails within the next ten years. In face of all depressing arguments, Rogdanovics persisted in being cheerful about his railway. The more his neighbours shook their heads the more he rubbed his hands, and the more fabulous grew the sums which he was ready to wager, that the railway would be there, engines, station-masters, tunnels and all, in less than no time. So confident was he in himself and his projects, and so firmly convinced that he had hit upon the right thing at last, that he forswore his nomadic existence, and sent for his daughter to join him. Vizia had lived but little with her father; who, regarding

her rather in the light of an encumbrance, had been thankful to leave her at Krakow, under the wing of Madame Torska, a widowed sister of his own. This widowed sister had a second niece in charge; for Xenia, the daughter of a younger Rogdanovics brother, had lost her home and her parents in early childhood. The two girls had grown up together, the younger clinging to the elder with childlike reliance; the elder passionately attached to the cousin, whom she regarded more as a sister than as a cousin, and yet more as a child than as a sister.

When, therefore, Vizia was called upon to join her father, the cousins could not be parted; and Xenia, half dreading the lonely country life, and half anxious for a change, accompanied Vizia to Lodniki, where for the present she remained.

This is about the sum total of all that was known concerning the Rogdanovics household; and as yet it had been no one's interest to inquire further. Now, however, there had come a day on which some one was moved to ask for more information. It was not Kazimir—he did not care to look further than blue eyes and chestnut hair—but, strangely enough, it was Lucyan.

That visit he paid to Lodniki with his brother was a long visit; it was very near dusk when the sledge turned from the door.

“Well, what do you think of her?” asked Kazimir eagerly, almost before they were out of earshot.

“What do I think of which of them?” retorted Lucyan, as he pulled his fur collar up to his ears.

“Oh, of both, of course, I mean,” said the other with a start, and a desperate attempt at manœuvring; and then, by way of being particularly deep, he added, “Mademoiselle Vizia is very agreeable, is she not?”

“Yes, very.”

“And don’t you think,” began Kazimir, but his voice was drowned in a jingle of bells, as a heavily laden sledge came tearing towards and past them.

“There is the man I want,” said Lucyan quickly, half rising, and putting a hand on the reins which his brother held. Among that closely packed mass of black figures, nine or ten in all, he had recognised one, and the recognition was at that moment particularly agreeable to him.

“Make the horses stand a couple of minutes, Kazimir,” said Lucyan; “I have something to say to Aitzig Majulik—something about flower-seeds,” he added, as he stepped out of the sledge. “He is going off to buy horses in the Bukowina, and may be away some weeks.”

The Jew-laden sledge had shot on some fifty yards, before, in answer to Lucyan’s signal, it was able to draw up. Lucyan, therefore, had to walk back towards

it, and in so doing, he came again within sight of the Lodniki house. He was near enough to have counted the window-panes, if he had been so minded, and to distinguish quite clearly the figures of the two shaggy watch-dogs at their post; but the falling dusk drew a delicate veil over the outlines of everything. Lucyan must have had his flower-seeds very much more at heart than he had his boots, if it was for the sake of the former that he tramped thus through the snow. But he did not tramp back all the way. As soon as he had got partially out of sight of the sledge, he stopped and beckoned to Aitzig Majulik.

The factor had already glided from his seat, and was plunging onwards through the deep snow—his *kaftan* flapping wildly, his skeleton legs making desperate strides, his corkscrew curls streaming in the wind like two demented snakes. When he got to the spot where Lucyan waited, he could only stand and gasp, with the drops running down his face, and his dirty fur cap sitting all awry upon his head.

Lucyan waited calmly till he should have recovered breath, and as soon as he had recovered breath, Aitzig began panting out something about *Szabas* and the sunset hour, and that he would most assuredly be caught on the road by the first stroke of the holy day, and therefore, still more assuredly, be damned for all eternity. For this was Friday evening, close upon the

verge of the twenty-four hours during which all worldly transactions are rigorously forbidden to the children of Abraham. The nine other children of Abraham, dangling their long legs on the sledge, were beginning to beat their breasts at the thought of this delay. With nine souls on his conscience, no wonder that Aitzig trembled for his own.

“You will reach the town in time,” said Lucyan, “if you give this to the driver to help him on faster;” and at sight of a paper florin, Aitzig’s susceptible conscience experienced a momentary relief, the nine souls of his brethren became perceptibly lighter in weight.

“What is it the gracious Pan desires?” he gasped, still a little short of breath.

Lucyan, perceiving that time pressed, and knowing that even a paper florin cannot keep a conscience at bay for ever, quickly fitted himself to circumstances.

“You know that family, of course,” he said, making a slight movement with his head towards the house.

“I know that family,” assented Aitzig, on his guard at once, and from under his deep eyebrows watching his questioner with that mixture of suspicion and cunning which is never absent from a Jew, even a Jew trembling for the salvation of his soul.

“And all about them?”

“Some things about them, noble Pan,” said Aitzig,

in an abject tone, giving one pull to each of his curls; "some little things does poor old Aitzig know about them. If you said to me, What is the amount of silver forks that they keep in that house? I can give you the exact number written on paper; and if you ask me, Of what sort are the servants that they have in that family? I will answer you that among the servants is a cook who is always drunk; and if you——"

"Silence!" said Lucyan; and though he did not raise his voice to say it, the tone was enough to silence the Jew on the spot. "I do not want to hear about the cook."

Aitzig knew perfectly that he did not want to hear about the cook, but somehow at this moment his conscience grew tender again: "God of Moses!" he moaned, just loud enough for Lucyan to hear it, and he softly wrung his hands,—“if the *Kojchow-huarvis* (the first star of the evening) shall shine out while I stand talking here, then will Aitzig Majulik's soul be damned for ever."

The strength of the one paper florin was clearly spent, and reluctantly Lucyan drew out a second. He was not precisely a miser, and he was too clever ever to become a miser, and yet he had some qualities of the miser in him; he could not let as much as a silver *Zwanziger* leave his hands without a distinct pang of

pain, as acute as though he were parting with a bit of himself.

“Quick,” said Lucyan, “since there is no time to lose. What I want to know is this, Are these speculations safe? Are these grand schemes sound or are they not? Is the fortune to be built upon?”

Aitzig drew up his shoulders in his favourite manner, till they brushed the corkscrew curls, and put on to his face an expression which might mean anything.

That is a great question which you put to poor old Aitzig Majulik,” he cried. “Who is Aitzig, that he should answer such a question? Has he the wisdom of Solomon to guide him? How should he like to say that these grand speculations mean very much, and how should he like to say that they mean little?”

This was much too valuable a fund of information to be imparted thus in a hurried talk, and for the niggardly consideration of two paper florins.

It was clear that he was not to be got at this way. Lucyan tried another. Looking at the house, he had seen a figure step out by the door and stand on the pillared verandah outside. He recognised Vizia's red shawl at once, and with its help he was able to assure himself that this was the plain, and not the beautiful cousin.

“Look,” he said, with a bold move, laying his hand on the Jew's arm, “it is about that young lady that

I want to know. You recognise her?" Aitzig had turned towards the house, and stood shading his eyes with his hand.

"About that young lady—yes," he repeated, slowly. "What does the gracious Pan desire to know of me?"

"The sum of her fortune; quick now, on the spot!"

"God of my forefathers!" groaned Aitzig, dropping his hand suddenly, "let me go, noble gentleman; you would not have poor old Aitzig burn for ever—*wai, wai!* Do I not see the bright lights beginning to shine out of the windows of the children of Israel; and are they not asking of each other, 'Where is Aitzig Majulik, the ever faithful?' *Gott und die Welt!* is it not my brethren who are preparing to leave me? They will drive home, and they will be saved, and poor old——"

"Tell me the sum of her fortune instantly," repeated Lucyan, not moving a muscle of his face. His hand was upon Aitzig's arm, and through his threadbare *kaftan* the Jew could feel that the grasp of that delicate white hand was as firm, ay, and as cold too, as the grasp of a hand of steel. In the background the waiting Jews were chattering loudly, and swaying their lean bodies from side to side, as they beckoned wildly to their comrade.

"Quick," said Lucyan, again.

“Seventy—thousand—florins,” whined Aitzig, trailing out each word, as though it were being drawn from his lips with iron pincers, writhing in mental agony between the thought of his salvation and the thought of the excellent bargain that might have been made of this had time only permitted.

Lucyan’s eyes lit up for a moment in their own peculiar fashion. He threw another glance towards the figure on the verandah, and it struck him that Vizia looked a great deal handsomer in the light of these seventy thousand florins, even though he was scarcely near enough to distinguish her features. But quickly he returned to caution; even seventy thousand florins might easily be swallowed up in one of Rogdanovics’s grand schemes.

“Does that mean seventy thousand florins of her own, or of her father’s?”

“Of her own—of her own!” breathed Aitzig, wriggling vainly under Lucyan’s hand. “Her mother’s money; entirely her own. O God of Abraham!”

“And the investment?”

“Safe as the ark of the covenant!”

“You are not deceiving me, dog?” and Lucyan gave a quick sharp shake to the arm he held. “If one word is false you shall rue it.”

“As true as the Pentateuch,” said the trembling Jew, stuttering in his eagerness to be gone; for the

Szabas dusk was falling fast, very fast now, and the swaying Jews in the background were moving slowly off. "Let my beard be shrivelled to cinders if I speak not the truth; they will be saved—*Gott und die Welt*, they will be saved!"

"Save yourself, then, *Moschku!*"¹ and in the moment that those white fingers unclasped, Aitzig went off through the snow like an arrow from the string, racing as though he were pursuing his truant soul, reached the sledge, already in motion, threw himself on it with the energy of despair, was dragged up by the forgiving brethren, whose salvation he had just been so gravely imperilling, while in a cloud of flying snow the sledge rushed off at a tearing pace, and disappeared like lightning through the falling dusk.

Lucyan found his brother in a state of ill-suppressed impatience.

"Really, Lucyan, you might have considered the horses, instead of standing there conversing about flower-seeds."

"It was very urgent," said Lucyan, taking his place again.

"Well, and is it all right now about those wretched seeds?"

"Yes, I think my flower-seeds will do very well!"

¹ Contemptuous nickname applied to the Jews.

They drove on some moments in silence; but Kazimir was too impatiently eager to hear his brother's opinion of Xenia to hold his tongue for long.

"So you say that you find Mademoiselle Vizia agreeable?" he resumed, tentatively.

Lucyan had not been saying anything of the sort; but, after a momentary pause, he answered readily—

"She could be very agreeable, I think, but I cannot say that she was particularly gracious to me."

"What did you talk about at your end of the room?"

"Well, I tried her with flowers, as you said she was fond of them; but somehow she did not seem to be so very fond of them after all. What used you to talk about with her?"

"Oh, I don't know; all sorts of things. She was agreeable on all subjects, I fancy."

"H—m," said Lucyan. "You have more luck than I."

"And what do you think of Mademoiselle Xenia?" Kazimir ventured now.

Lucyan did not answer at once. The fur collar hid the lower part of his face, and, besides, it was fast growing dark.

"Lucyan, don't you hear me? What do you think of her?"

"I think she is prettier than her cousin."

“Prettier than her cousin!” repeated Kazimir, with some scorn. He had been looking for expressions of rapturous — no, not rapturous, for Lucyan never could be rapturous, but at least undisguised (Kazimir did not know that his brother could never be undisguised) — admiration. He regarded Xenia to a certain extent as his own discovery and invention; he wanted every one to know her and admire her; he had really been anxious that his brother should admire her; and, instead of this, he was chilled by being told that she was prettier than her cousin.

“Is that all the difference you find between them? you who pretend to call yourself a connoisseur!”

“Oh, I find other differences,” said Lucyan, quite calmly.

“What sort?”

“Intellectual differences.”

Kazimir felt inclined to fire up, he did not exactly know why.

“I do not in the least understand what you mean,” he began, impulsively.

“That is because you misunderstand. I am not such a fool as to expect brains in a woman; they are rather a disadvantage than otherwise—the few who have got brains don’t know how to use them. They are very well as they are, I assure you.”

“That is not my way of looking at women,” said Kazimir, with some heat.

“But it is mine,” replied Lucyan, imperturbed; “and I daresay it will be yours when you are a few years older.” It did not strike either of them as the least strange that it should be the younger brother who said this to the elder. Kazimir at twenty-six was a great deal younger than Lucyan at twenty-four.

“Depend upon it, Kazio, whoever asks for brains or character in a woman must be very short of the first ingredient himself. Mademoiselle Vizia has got brains, I am afraid; and it is saying a good deal that, in spite of them, I should like her.” Of course Kazimir could not know that there were seventy thousand florins in the scale, which went far towards weighing down the portion of Vizia’s brains, however large it might be.

“And as for her cousin, I agree with you; she has got the best part of a woman—beauty.”

The tone was quite careless, studiously careless, and perhaps on that account it grated on Kazimir. If it had not been too dark to see, the smile which accompanied the words might have grated on him yet more; at any rate, it would have shown him that his younger brother’s judgment as connoisseur was in no danger of deteriorating.

After this the drive became rather silent. Lucyan

reflected upon his talk with the factor, and examined the new card in his hand ; and Kazimir asked himself repeatedly how any one could talk so coolly about Xenia's beauty. He had experienced a slight and indescribable chill, not the first which had touched him since the beginning of his renewed intercourse with Lucyan. It puzzled and displeased him, for was not Lucyan his brother ? and is it not a universal law that brothers love each other ? Kazimir believed so at least, and told himself that of course he liked his brother, and that these momentary touches, which set some chord within him jarring, could be caused only by the long separation. Time would mend that, no doubt. He did not speak again till they were far on their way, and then he said suddenly : " Mademoiselle Vizia asked me to come to their fox-hunt ; I suppose she asked you too ? "

" She did not condescend so far to me, but her father did, which is the same. "

" Then you will be there ? "

" Yes, I think I shall. The foxes are my enemies, and the traps have failed ; nothing but a lot of starved sparrows fell in. "

" Poor little wretches ! " said Kazimir.

" Horrid little wretches ! " laughed Lucyan. " Are you not rather soft-hearted for a soldier ? They were very funny to look at, I assure you. As stiff

as a dozen door-nails. You don't admire the picture? Well, to return to the point, I shall go to the fox-hunt; you have given me a taste for society, Kazio."

As he spoke the very first star shone out overhead,—that terrible star, which coming a little while ago would have condemned Aitzig Majulik's soul to everlasting torments; and whose fatal beam he had barely escaped by traversing the four miles' distance at a rate which landed his nine faithful brethren with rescued souls indeed, but, alas! with sorely bruised bodies.

CHAPTER X.

CUTTING FOR PARTNERS.

“ Du blickst mild und klar und gut,
 Und bist's auch wohl; doch hüte dich, hüte dich!
 Dort weiter draussen braust das Meer.”

—*Grillparzer.*

“ If she be made of white and red,
 Her faults will ne'er be known.”

—*Love's Labour's Lost.*

IN spite of the cold, or rather because of the cold, the foxes had been having a fine time of it lately. The frost's icy spur had made heroes of them, one and all. Falling a prey to a certain uneasy oppression in the depths of their wintry forest haunts, their noble breasts sighed for the freedom of airy fields, and the palates of their noble mouths watered for the flavour of the partridges that peopled those fields. Partridges by day and fowls by night; what an ideal of fox-existence! They stormed the poultry-yards, they ransacked the duck-ponds, and many was the plump and tender pullet which they carried home in triumph to be devoured in

the bosom of their red-coated families. Bolder and bolder they grew as the cold increased; intoxicated with the blood of fat geese, the clearness of their judgment began to grow clouded. Looked at through a halo of feathers, the world seemed but one vast poultry-yard, and men but the dull-headed slaves who fattened hens and ducks for their majesties the foxes. Their majesties snapped their fingers, metaphorically speaking, at mankind. What fools men were! What fools were all other creatures but foxes! The rash and foolish wolf, for instance, who allows himself to be lured to destruction by the squeal of a struggling sucking-pig. But Master Reynard knows better than that; he is not to be tempted by such clumsy devices; he knows to distinguish between one of those murderer-laden sledges bristling with guns, and a harmless travelling-sledge—such, for instance, as this one which comes spinning across the snowy landscape towards him. Master Reynard was at that moment stalking an uncommonly plump partridge; and what between *gourmandise* and arrogance, he did not consider it worth while to move out of the way for this travelling party,—this gentleman and his good lady, starting perhaps on their wedding-trip. The fox had a good lady himself at home, and he had been young in his day too, and he had even had a wedding-trip into a high-class poultry-yard. He remembered still

with emotion the first succulent guinea-fowl (ah, how succulent it had been !) which he and she had strangled between them. To this day he could never see a guinea-fowl without feeling soft. Altogether the sight of this young couple put him into a state of good-humoured patronage ; and if he had not been afraid of leaving that partridge out of his ken, he would have liked to turn round, wave his red tail instead of a handkerchief, and call out *bon voyage* to the travellers.

Just as he had reached this pitch of sentiment, it struck Master Reynard that the young travellers on their side were evincing at least an equal sympathy for him. Straight towards him the sledge came, spinning nearer and nearer over the snow. The male occupant half rose for a moment, and bent towards the driver. With one eye Master Reynard saw this, keeping the other eye on the partridge, and at the same moment it seemed to him that the travelling rug at the bottom of the sledge moved as if it were alive ; and from under the edge what was that that peeped ? A snout ? a canine snout ? a sharp greyhound snout ? Panic seized on Reynard's heart ; horrid recollections darted through his brain ; long-forgotten legends which he had heard from his grandfather's lips, of masked sledges, of disguises, of greyhounds concealed, of pursuit, destruction, death. Were men such fools, after all ? He saw no more partridge, he sighed no longer over his

wedding-trip; he cast one glance across his ruddy shoulder, and beheld the rug torn off and two sharp-nosed monsters leaping to the ground. On one side the open country, not a bush to hide him for miles and miles; on the other the forest, but, alas! nearly a mile away; his last chance—for had he not a good start of those sharp-nosed, slender-bodied monsters? He turned and fled towards the forest like wind.

“Too soon, Panie—nearly a minute too soon,” said the driver, turning to the gentleman in the sledge; “you should not have uncovered the dogs for another minute.”

“We shall have him yet!” cried Kazimir, flushed with the excitement of the sport; and standing up he tore the reins from the man’s hands, seized the whip, and lashed the horses into a furious pace. Over the fields they flew, scattering the snow on all sides, tearing it up under the horses’ feet; and before them the dogs stretched, and further ahead, that red spot fled over the white ground, drawing nearer and nearer to the forest. The dogs held on bravely, though the snow was deep; and the horses, taking the bit between their teeth, raced as though they were racing for their lives. Kazimir cracked the whip, and shouted encouragement to both dogs and horses. Once in the forest the game would be lost, but they were still a good quarter of a mile off.

“Kozak—that’s right—he is gaining—cheer on—another stretch—harder—harder!” shouted Kazimir, upright in the flying sledge. “We shall have him yet! They are all but ahead; ha! what’s come to Wanda? She’s lagging—by heavens she’ll fail us!”

“It is the snow, Panie—the snow! it’s too deep,” cried the driver, clutching desperately to his seat; “too deep by half a yard. See there, it’s all over!” for the second greyhound, dropping back suddenly, sank up to her shoulders in the snow.

“There’s Kozak still,” said Kazimir, with one more fierce cut to the horses; but even while he was saying it, Kozak began to flag—his hind-legs stuck, he struggled free again, raced on a few paces, sank again, and floundered along helplessly. Master Reynard could have laughed in his red sleeve now, but the panic had not left him, and did not leave him until he was safe in his forest haunts; and once there, the first use to which he put his recovered breath, was to vow that taste of partridge should never cross his lips again.

“We have lost him!” and Kazimir sank back on his seat.

“What a pity!” said Xenia, clinging still apprehensively to the side of the sledge. She was used to hard driving, but she had never been driven quite so hard as this before. The last ten minutes had been

almost as nervous work to her as to the fox. Kazimir felt remorseful, begged her pardon, hoped he had not frightened her, for if that were the case, he could not reasonably be expected to forgive himself, no, not if he lived to be a hundred. He was ready to swear never so much as to look at a fox again, with the same fervour wherewith the fox had sworn never to look at a partridge.

And so the poor disconcerted dogs were lugged up into their places, and the party looked about, a little crestfallen, considering what they should do next.

“ I wonder where the others are ? ” said Xenia.

“ There is one of the sledges over there, after a fox of their own ; we must not spoil their sport. Who is it ? Lucyan, I declare ! ”

“ And Vizia ! ” said Xenia, staring in the direction.

“ Your cousin and my brother ! ” said Kazimir, and he smiled. “ They seem to be very good friends, don't they ? Lucyan was half inclined to shirk the sledging this morning. ”

Kazimir fell into a momentary meditation ; and the subjects of his meditation were Lucyan and Vizia. Certainly there was no accounting for some tastes. He had not seen his brother start, for his sledge had been the first to leave the house. The start had been a complicated business altogether, and somewhat stormy too. There had been five sledges in all, drawn

up before the door of Lodniki, and the first rule of the sport was that each sledge should start independently of the others, so as to give to the couple in each the appearance of a harmless travelling party. But then the difficulty of telling off these couples! And how Kazimir had trembled when he saw himself all but allotted to an excellent young lady of forty summers, with soot-coloured hair, and a dust-coloured complexion. What between arguments and manœuvres and counter-manœuvres, and an amiable young giant who had tried very hard to carry off Xenia, and the aforementioned dust-coloured lady who had tried equally hard to carry off the young giant, and a choleric old gentleman who insisted that the arrangements were all new-fangled, and that the greyhounds of the present day were not worthy to hold a candle to the greyhounds of *his* day, and Pawel the sporting servant's undisguised indignation at being kept out of the fun, and Rogdanovics's hospitable efforts to please everybody with the least trouble to himself,—what with all this, it had taken fully an hour before the party had got properly under way. “Rather cold work,” Lucyan had said aside to his brother; “I think I shall stay with the old people,” and just at that moment Kazimir had perceived that the amiable young giant was making preparations to enter Xenia's sledge. “I beg your pardon, that is my place,”

Kazimir had said, looking the amiable young giant steadily in the eyes; and the poor giant had shrunk to half his size, withdrawn the leg which was already in the sledge, and, with a helpless smile, resigned himself to his dust-coloured nymph.

“Thank heavens!” Kazimir had breathed, when they were off. For weeks he had looked forward to this moment; was it likely that he should let himself be frustrated, even by a giant? This was one of the rare occasions on which it is understood that Polish chaperonage relaxes her sway; and as Kazimir drove away, he was struck by the same thought which had struck Master Reynard a little time ago—the thought of the wedding-trip. It was a thought which set his blood on fire, a thought which sent delicious thrills to his heart.

Up to this winter Kazimir had known no higher interest than that of his profession. To his profession he clung with an undivided attachment, which has gone quite as much out of fashion as the type of his features. His profession had, to a certain extent, formed his character. Discipline had given him much control over a temper naturally as high and intolerant as his father's had been; isolation from family ties had made him singularly independent in thought and decision. The interests of military life had been outlets to his naturally ardent temperament. As yet

these interests had sufficed, and Kazimir had no idea that they might one day fall short of sufficing. Not that he had ever shunned society; he had taken pleasures as they came, and enjoyed them keenly at the moment; and society had received him with open arms, and would gladly have made a pet of the handsome, vivacious young Pole, with his youthful old-fashioned face, who moved and talked so easily, who never looked bored and never affected to be *blasé*, and who carried about him a flavour of old-world chivalry, quite distinct from the ordinary drawing-room varnish, which is the only substitute to be had nowadays. But in the midst of it all, Kazimir never looked upon society as more than a temporary relaxation; his profession was the business, and society the recreation, of his life. Once or twice, as with his temperament and at his age was inevitable, the recreation had threatened to become serious. He had knelt at various shrines, but slightly, on one knee only, as it were; he had been bound by chains, but nothing more than rose-chaplets, easily cast off. His captivities had been but short-lived; the main interest had never failed to assert its sway over the interest of the moment. Thus he had escaped unscathed, going on his way and retaining no impression, though possibly leaving some behind; passing unhurt through perils in which colder men than he had fallen. Now, for the first

time since he had reached the age of manhood, he found himself cut off suddenly from his military sphere, and plunged into the monotony of a secluded country place. His thoughts, finding themselves violently taken off from their usual interests, sought eagerly for some other stimulus. Had he met Xenia in his Tyrolese garrison, he might have bent no more than one knee to her, as to the others; but meeting her at this place and at this period, he had gone down on both his knees at once, and unhesitatingly—and doubted not that on his knees he should remain to the end of time.

Now, as, having lost their fox, the little party drove slowly towards the forest, the wild delicious thrill of joy which touched Kazimir was by no means the first, but it was by far the most wild and the most delicious which had touched him during these last two months. They were alone (for a Polish driver does not rank as a man), alone in this vast frozen forest. Ropes of solid ice were twisted round every branch; heavy icicles hung overhead; every dead leaf on the dead trees was coated with frost. It was a dull, sullen, and bitterly cold day—one of many days just alike. For weeks past no snow had fallen, no wind had blown, no sun had shone. Every morning the window-panes had been fantastically frozen; the trees had stood rigid with ice, stiff with hardened snow.

But Kazimir did not miss the sunshine. He saw only that the wintry trees were of a bridal-like whiteness, and that the frosty branches seemed to wreath themselves naturally into dazzling diadems; the weak chirp of a half-frozen linnet hopping across their path, seemed to him sweeter than the song of any nightingale; for no nightingale he had ever heard had sung a song which he could understand: while this poor lean bird was, quite distinctly and audibly, celebrating the delight, the happiness, the sweet intoxication of a fresh first love. It was not Kazimir's way to notice small things; but what that linnet chirped coincided so exactly with his own opinion, that he put his hand to his pocket in the hopes of a crumb.

They had made no effort to regain the open plain; once in the forest, they continued their way through it mechanically, feeling singularly cool about the foxes.

"Does this not remind you," asked Kazimir, suddenly, "of that ride over the Pyrenees of Palmérie and Barbarin, about which you told me? The wood in which he fell on his knees before her, must have been just like this one, I fancy."

"Pan Bielinski!" the blue eyes looked at him in undisguised reproach. "How could Palmérie ride with Barbarin? Don't you remember that he has made up his mind to strangle her the very first time that they

are alone together? And besides, he is her half-brother, you know."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, to be sure; of course it would be no fun riding with her brother, particularly if she is to be strangled. It was the other fellow I meant. By the by, how did the last duel go off between Albert and—and—what's his name? Rudolph!"

"Adolph and Raoul," corrected Xenia, carefully. "It was not quite as bad as I feared; Adolph only lost one ear, and Raoul got two ribs broken, or I think it was three. Vizia would know, if she was here," and Xenia gave a look around, as if in hopes that her cousin might possibly appear from out of the frozen forest. "I think that in the next number of the 'Journal des Demoiselles' the secret will be explained, for the last words are: 'Alors l'inconnu, avec un rire démoniaque, arracha son masque, et à la vue de ce visage, Palmérie tomba en arrière, évanouie.' There are three stars before 'évanouie.' It was at a masked ball, you know."

"Have you ever been to a masked ball?" inquired Kazimir, regardless of Palmérie's sufferings.

"Never; there was one last year at Krakow, but—but——"

"You were not at it?"

"No; because my aunt said that the costume would be too expensive."

Kazimir wished he had not touched upon so delicate a subject, but Xenia, though blushing, was not precisely embarrassed. She went on with her *naïve* confidences.

“ You see, my aunt will give me very little money to spend. I had to wear the same ball-room dress twice over; and I could not have gone to the third ball at all, if Vizia had not given me a dress.”

“ You are very fond of your cousin, are you not ? ” asked Kazimir, thirsting for every word from her lips, not caring much what she said, as long as she spoke.

“ Of Vizia ? Oh, I like her more than any one else in the world ; you don't know how good she is to me.”

“ More than any one else in the world,” repeated Kazimir, aloud, and a pang of jealousy stabbed his heart. “ Yes, and your aunt at Krakow ? go on, please, tell me more.”

“ I like her too ; only she is cross sometimes, and she lets me have so little to spend ; she says I shan't need money till I marry, and then I shall have plenty.”

“ A rich marriage,” said Kazimir between his teeth, “ and I am a poor man. No matter, I shall win her.” His blood was mounting rapidly with every moment that they sped thus along ; the frosty air made him drunk. What was that the linnet chirped just now ?

“Away, away, through the forest! never turn back. Carry her boldly off, and she is yours.” He could scarcely take his eyes off Xenia’s face; off the rounded chin, where childish dimples were for ever peeping, the ruffled curls pressed by the soft fur cap. She wore a velvet *kazabaïka*, and though the dark-green colour was somewhat faded, and the velvet no longer new, the jacket, with its border of silver-grey fur, set off her beauty to perfection. That touch of crimson on her cheek, of blue in her eyes, of bright chestnut-brown on her hair, made a contrast and a harmony of tints which was fast bewitching his senses; and then, the open, timid, yet fearless gaze of those blue eyes! It was enough to make the brain of a stronger and an older man reel. The irresistible charm of her manner was not to be defined by any single word: it was not affected, and yet not free from affectation; it was not pure nature, and yet it was not pure art; if there was vanity in it, it was the vanity of an innocent child; and if there was coquetry there, it was coquetry so unconscious and so young—coquetry scarcely peeping from the bud, with the bloom still so fresh upon it—that not for worlds would you have had her without it. Even those little tricks of gesture, that shrug and half-shy toying with a curl which was her habit, were, in their way, not inoffensive only, but enchanting. Her charm was not that of the wild

brier, which flings its careless branches on the air; it was rather that of a well-trained garden rose, putting out its buds in regular succession, where not a twig is allowed to grow out of the straight way, and not a tendril is suffered to escape. As there are different tastes in the world, it is as well that there should be both wild briars and garden roses growing there.

“And she would not let me dance often,” went on Xenia, continuing her complaints—“she won’t let me go to the public balls; but, do you know, I think we shall dance a little this evening. I have had no carnival at all.”

“I hope you will dance with me,” said Kazimir, losing his head more and more.

“The Mazur?”

“Yes, the Mazur and the quadrille, waltzes and polkas, anything, everything.”

Xenia drew back and gave him a glance, shrinking, inquiring, and coy, and then quickly she turned her face away.

“Perhaps I shall go to Krakow after all,” she said, nervously; “my aunt wants me to come for the last week of carnival.”

“Don’t go,” said Kazimir, impulsively.

“To Krakow? Why not?”

“Because I could not bear it!” began Kazimir, and then checked himself with a violent effort of will. He

was quite clear by this time, that this woman beside him was the only woman he should care to have for his wife, but he must not frighten her, perhaps spoil his chance, by a rash confession. No; these hungry birds hopping along the bushes, with their tempting, insinuating chirp, might mean it for the best, but, alas! they were not acquainted with the usages of the world. It might be all very well for a linnnet to fly off straight with the bird of his choice, and thus to cheat all watchful relations, all ambitious old aunts; but it would scarcely do for human beings.

What would be safe to say next? Change the subject? But the subject was at that moment changed in a quite unexpected manner.

The two greyhounds, crouching under the cover neglected and forgotten, had up to this point lain motionless; but just as Kazimir was wondering what next to say, there was a movement at their feet; the fur rug shivered violently, and one of the dogs jerked his head up into sight.

“What is it, Kozak?—a fox?” asked Kazimir, remembering with a start that they were supposed to be out on a fox-hunt.

Kozak was sitting upright, his neck stretched, his eye fixed; and as Kazimir spoke, he began to whine and tremble.

“Out at him, Kozak! where is he?” said Kazimir,

with an encouraging pat; and he drew the covering off the second dog. But neither Kozak nor Wanda showed any inclination to leap off the sledge: Kazimir gave the signal and they did not offer to obey it, did not even seem to see it, but sat pressed against each other, shivering and whining.

“The dogs are gone mad,” said Kazimir, and he rose in the sledge to look on ahead. There was a frozen stream crossing the road, about a dozen yards in front of them; a bridge of rough planks led over this stream; and right in the centre of the bridge, sitting immovable on its haunches, was a large and shaggy grey beast. Kazimir’s first impression was that this must be a dog belonging to one of the other sledges; but then it was certainly not a greyhound: it had neither the figure nor the colour of a greyhound; its hair was coarse and stiff; there was a suggestion of iron strength in the curve of the haunches, and in the bend of the rigid neck, as with lowered head and dull eyes it stared full and stupidly at the approaching sledge.

“The strangest dog I have ever seen,” said Kazimir, still standing. “Do you see him, Pani Xenia?”

“Yes, I see him—but it is not a dog; it is a fox—I think the same fox that looked at me through the window; I know him by his broad white chest.”

“You must be right; Kozak, Wanda, out at him, cowards! why don’t they move? Touch up the

horses—we shall be close to him in a minute ;” but before he could finish his phrase, both horses, as they reached the first plank of the bridge, swerved violently to one side, reared half up, and refused to advance.

Kazimir, thrown forwards, just saved himself from falling. The driver seemed all at once to have taken leave of his senses.

“ *Wilk ! wilk !* ” he shouted, in tones of terror, lashing the rearing horses frantically. “ The *wilk !* we must fly from the *wilk !* ”

“ A wolf ? ” repeated Kazimir, incredulously.

“ A wolf ! ” Xenia turned deadly pale, and clung shuddering to his arm. “ Oh, save me ! Let us get on ; it will tear us to pieces ! ”

“ The beast shall not touch you, ” said Kazimir, excitedly ; “ see, I am between the wolf and you. Don’t be frightened,—don’t cry, I implore of you ; one wolf could not hurt us, if it tried. ”

They were close alongside of the brute by this time ; but the wolf never stirred ; there it sat still, in its gorged and heavy attitude, stupidly staring with sunk head and glaring yellow eyes. The terrified horses, lashed on by the terrified coachman, plunged without being able to retreat, and without daring to advance.

“ Let me out ! let me out ! ” cried Kazimir ; “ let me get at the wolf ! ” but his left arm was prisoner, and he could not move.

“Shoot, Panie!” screamed the driver.

“No, no, don’t shoot—please don’t shoot,” sobbed Xenia, with her face buried on his sleeve.

“I have nothing to shoot with,—but let me out!”

“Don’t, Pannie, don’t!” cried the man.

“No, no, stay near me! don’t get out—don’t go near the wolf!” Xenia implored; “you will be hurt—you will be killed!”

“I shall not be killed; you do not know how strong I am,” said Kazimir, between his reluctance to shake off that clinging hold, and his desire to do something which might turn him into a sort of hero before her eyes. “I will kill him, I promise you,—strangle him,—strike him dead somehow; let me have a stick, anything. Ah! the whip!” He snatched the whip with his one free hand, and leaning from the sledge as far as he could, struck out with the butt-end, but missed his aim—reversed the whip, and lashed out with all his strength at the wolf. He hit him this time, and the brute, slowly rising, with his neck still lowered, stood for a moment where he had sat. Kozak threw up his head and gave a dismal howl, which struck cold to the very marrow of the bones.

At the second lash, the wolf moved off heavily, slinking towards the brushwood, with his head turned backwards, and his lips drawn up from his teeth in a sullen and hideous snarl.

The horses, bounding forwards, cleared the bridge, and galloped wildly along the road.

"It is all over," said Kazimir, half regretfully. "Pani Xenia, it is all over."

Her face was still hidden on his arm; he could feel how she was trembling with nervous excitement. She looked up now and glanced fearfully around. "Are you sure it is over? are you sure the wolf is gone? Take me home—oh, take me home to Vizia!" she broke out, bursting into hysterical sobs. Her face was so pale that Kazimir thought she would faint. It was his dangerous privilege to soothe her, to comfort her, to support her with his arm, to promise that they should be at home presently, and that till then she must trust to him. There are some men who are repelled by the extremes of feminine helplessness, and there are some men who are attracted by it; some whom hysterical tears harden, and some whom they soften. Kazimir was of the latter sort. The more a woman seemed able to take care of herself, the less sympathy he felt for her; and the more anxious a woman was to lean upon him, the more ready he was to be leant upon. He was the very stuff of which the knights of the middle ages were made of; anything weak, anything in want of protection appealed straight to his honour, and to his heart. Widows and orphans and ill-used people generally were the peculiar objects

of his sympathy. Women who were neither widowed, orphaned, nor ill-used, appeared to a certain disadvantage before his eyes. If Xenia had not been an orphan, he might not have felt so mightily drawn towards her. Of course, as the orphan in question happened to be transcendently beautiful, it did not detract from the effect upon him.

He was half trembling himself as he supported her, and gave her every care which he could think of,—chafing her hands with snow, which he snatched in passing—implored her to rely on him; “for, look,” he said, “we are almost out of the forest now.”

And soon she revived, and the colour flowed back to her cheek, and she begged him not to think her foolish (he only thought her adorable). She was composed enough to blush at the thought of how she had clung to him a minute ago, and yet still flurried enough to leave her hand in his for support.

“And we shall be out of the forest soon,” she whispered. “Oh, how glad I am! The forest will always frighten me now; I should like to get away from it. I should like to go to Krakow; there are no forests there, and no wolves.”

“But if some one begged you not to go to Krakow,” answered Kazimir, in a whisper, too, “would you not stay then?” His pulses were throbbing so intolerably hard, that he could scarcely hear his own voice.

He had been able to check himself a little time ago ; but that was before the wolf—before she had clung to him and hid her face on his arm ; he was no more able to check himself now. He would not now have been deaf to the insinuating chirp of the linnets, and to the delicious temptation they suggested.

“ If some one asked you to stay ? ” he urged, not hearing or not heeding the jingle of approaching sledge-bells.

“ If who asked me to stay ? ” breathed Xenia, almost inaudibly.

“ If I asked you—if I begged you as a favour—if I told you that the thought of your going there made me miserable.”

“ I don't want to make you miserable.”

“ Then make me happy ! ” broke out Kazimir.

“ Ha, Kazio ! is that you ? ” The call was close at hand, the bells were jingling by his ear, and he had not heard them. He started, and beheld, a few yards from him, his brother Lucyan beside Vizia. There was a quiet smile on Lucyan's face. “ Have you been looking for foxes in the forest, Kazio ? and did you find any there ? ”

“ We have got a fox ! ” shouted another voice from another side ; and the amiable young giant appeared abreast of the sledge.

They had reached the place of rendezvous, and that wild delightful drive was at an end.

As soon as they got home, Xenia threw herself into her cousin's arms, and said—

“Pity me, Vizia, I have been so frightened! I was nearly torn to pieces by a wolf in the forest.”

CHAPTER XI.

SHE LOST THE TRICK.

“ Why was I made for love, and love denied to me ? ”

—COLERIDGE.

“ I AM ready to wager,” said Rogdanovics, when the company was sitting round a gay and well-covered board—“ I am ready to wager that we shall not be troubled with another fox this winter; we have done our duty by them, I fancy.”

The young giant blushed because he had brought two foxes home, and Kazimir blushed because he had brought home none. And yet he would not for a good deal have changed places with that gigantic and amiable youth; for it was an understood thing that each gentleman sat beside the lady whom he had accompanied in the sledge.

“ Well, we saw a wolf at least, instead of killing a fox,” said Kazimir, laughing a little guiltily.

“ If it *was* a wolf,” observed Lucyan, coolly.

“ Ask Pani Xenia if it was not.”

“Oh, if Pani Xenia says so!” Lucyán inclined his head with a sort of half-courteous, half-contemptuous surrender, and with nothing more than the very faintest flavour of a sneer mixed with the smile on his face.

“A wolf! and why should it not have been a wolf?” broke out the choleric old gentleman at the foot of the table. “You youngsters make more fuss about one wolf than we used to make of a whole pack of them in our days. Why, I remember the time when you could not take a sledge-drive through this very forest without being chased within an inch of your life. Ah! they were fine times those!”

“For the wolves, no doubt,” remarked Lucyán, drily.

“I have shot more wolves than any one else in the room,” proclaimed a gentleman with a tremendous voice, rolling his eyes round the circle, in the hopes of challenging a denial.

“*À propos* of wolves, they have sent me a new song from my music-dealers,” said a musical youth bashfully. “‘The Wolf’s Lament,’ it is called,” and he glanced at the company inquiringly; but the company, knowing well that when this musical youth once sat down at the piano, there was little hope of removing him from it, displayed a discouraging coolness about ‘The Wolf’s Lament,’ and the musician relapsed into silence.

“No good old times for me,” broke in the host cheerily; progress for me,—inventions, discoveries, steam-ploughs, electricity, railways. Ah, wait a little; when *the* railway gets here—*my* railway, I call it—see if it does not whistle off the foxes and wolves in no time! Ah yes, gentlemen, our ground will then double, treble, quadruple itself; we shall reach Lwów in half a day,—yes, half a day, I tell you!”

The choleric old gentleman gave a stormy sigh. “In my time we used to take four days on the road—unless we were robbed and had a free fight by the way. Ah, that was interest, that was excitement! Life was worth living then!”

“Has there been any more surveying of the country lately?” asked the young giant, who being the heir to a large property, had a serious interest in the question.

“Don’t know, Tiburtio—don’t know, really,” said Rogdanovics; “one never hears any news as long as Aitzig Majulik is away buying up horses. The only thing I have heard is that the church at Tarajow has caught fire again, though they put it out; seems expressly constructed for the purpose; burns down every five years, I fancy.”

“No man present has seen so many wooden churches burnt down as I have,” said the gentleman with the

rolling eyes defiantly ; but this assertion again passed unchallenged.

“News! is any one in want of news?” asked another; “there is plenty of news in the telegrams to-day. The Government stocks are falling as hard as they can; depend upon it, in another month Italy and Austria will be at each other’s throats.”

Kazimir, as an authority on the subject, was stormed with questions. Yes, he said, it was true; the thunder-clouds were no sham thunder-clouds, but real thunder-clouds, which meant to burst presently. When last he had heard from his regiment, he had been warned to prepare himself for an immediate call at any moment.

“They cannot begin before spring. Let me see,—we are barely at the middle of February now—they will have to drag on till March at least!”

“I am ready to wager—ha! what is that? a shot outside?”

The gentlemen put down their forks, the ladies started; Xenia screamed, then hid her face in her handkerchief. There was scarcely the pause of a second before Pawel re-entered the room, looking a little breathless, but betraying otherwise no agitation, as, with perfect *aplomb*, he presented the dish next in course.

“Was that a shot outside, Pawel?” asked his master.

“ Yes, Panie.”

“ Who fired it ? ”

“ I did, Panie.”

“ I hope,” said Rogdanovics a little testily, “ that you have not again been cleaning your guns during dinner ? ”

“ No, Panie ; I cleaned them during breakfast. I was shooting at something now.”

“ What have you shot ?—a hare ? ”

“ A fox, I think,” said Pawel, proudly ; “ but I have not had time to look.”

“ A fox ? That’s right ; go and see ! ”

Pawel went and looked, and returned a minute later quite out of breath and quite scarlet in the face. “ If you please, Panie, it is a wolf I have shot ! ”

“ A wolf ? ” The company were on their feet in a moment. A wolf shot between the roast and the pudding, or rather, I should say, between the pudding and the roast,—that was enough motive to leave the roast untouched on the table, and hurry out to prove the truth of the statement. Even the ladies rose under the influence of excited curiosity, and streamed towards the door. Xenia alone did not rise. When she heard that it was a wolf that was shot, she hid her face again, and shuddered just as she had shuddered in the sledge.

“ A glass of water, perhaps,” suggested Kazimir, in

distress. "Mademoiselle Vizia"—for Vizia, at that moment, was passing on her way to the door—"would you be so infinitely kind as to push me that carafe? I think your cousin is a little—alarmed."

Vizia looked from Kazimir to Xenia; a frown came to her forehead, and an angry flush leapt to her cheek. She pushed the carafe towards him—rather roughly, it seemed to Kazimir.

"You are easily touched?" she said, disdainfully. "It is so very alarming, is it not? especially as the wolf is shot!"

"Mademoiselle Vizia!" exclaimed Kazimir, entirely taken aback at this display of temper, and startled by the angry quiver of her voice.

"What a blessing to have weak nerves! How interesting! how charming! Don't you see that it is all——" she broke off, and brushed past him; but between her teeth he heard her mutter, "affectation!"

Kazimir looked after her aghast. All that he thought was, "What a pity that her temper is so bad!"

The rest of the meal was of a tumultuous sort,—to all intents and purposes, the company dined off the wolf. Even after they had sat down again, the gentlemen, from time to time, felt moved to rise and have another look at the fallen monster. It was a large and heavily gorged beast that had died by Pawel's

gun. Stupidly prowling round the house, it had been an easy mark; and one glance at the ugly carcass convinced Kazimir that this was their acquaintance of the bridge. "I knew I could not be kept out of the sport," said Pawel a dozen times that evening, with proudly beaming eyes. He was the hero of the hour: his health was drunk (one young gentleman, who was unused to a second glass of wine, drank the wolf's health by mistake), his hand was shaken all round; his master presented him with a gold piece on the spot.

The conservative old gentleman admitted that the good old days were not quite past after all; the gentleman with the rolling eyes repeated his statement, to the effect that no one present had seen as many wolves shot as he; and Lucyan remarked, with a smile, "Then Pani Xenia was right after all."

When the general excitement had somewhat calmed, the tables were cleared, and a little unpremeditated dancing began. It was the musical young gentleman who indirectly proved the moving spirit. Bashfully he had produced a large roll of music; and having lured an unfortunate man to the piano, he commenced, amidst burning blushes, to make himself into a general nuisance by wailing forth "The Wolf's Lament." When "The Wolf's Lament" had died off into a long-drawn dismal note, and from that into silence, the man at the

piano, feeling probably the want of shaking off the depressing effect, struck the chord of a *Mazur*, and rattled his hands down the piano. It was as if he had struck a match: the room caught fire in a moment; the gentlemen got to their feet,—heels clicked and silk dresses rustled as they led their partners down the room.

“You do not dance?” asked Rogdanovics of Lucyan, who stood in the doorway watching.

“Never; that is to say, hardly ever.”

“Your brother is a perfect Mazur dancer.”

Lucyan bowed.

“The most graceful in the room,” put in Rogdanovics’s hot-tempered friend; “he has got the old stamp about him. Graceful men are quite out of fashion nowadays.”

Lucyan bowed again.

“Ah, he takes after his father; that was just Bogumil’s manner and look,” said the host. “How is your mother, by the by, Bielinski?”

“Thank you,” said Lucyan, “much better lately, but since yesterday hardly so well.”

“Tut, tut, that’s all as it should be; never say die. It’s always a good sign when a patient does not mend too fast.”

“She certainly is not mending too fast,” replied Lucyan.

“That’s right. There, the Mazur is at an end ; we must have a *Krakowiak* now.”

The *Krakowiak* was a much more noisy affair than the Mazur. This is a dance which leaves much scope for the genius and invention of the dancer. Each gentleman in turn selects a lady, leads her down the room to the sound of the music, and having reached the end, distinguishes himself either by executing some extraordinary *pas*, or singing some improvised verse, drinking the lady’s health, presenting her with a flower, or otherwise paying her some ingenuous compliment ; the principal point of the performance lying in variety, and the great ambition of every dancer being to outshine the last. Each couple for the time being is virtually on a stage, with the eyes of the audience upon them.

Every one danced, young and old. The choleric gentleman selected the dust-coloured maiden, perhaps as a relic of the olden times, and sidling nimbly down the room, with an alternate *chassé* and click of his heels, emphasised his devotion by drinking her health in three glasses of atrociously sweet wine.

Next came Rogdanovics, exciting much wonder by the vigour of his stamps and the length of his strides.

Upon him followed close the musical young man, who, having reached the terminus, sang, in an agony of shyness, a verse to the effect that night and morn-

ing, he would wish to stand under his lady's window and pour out his heart in song, — a prospect which made every one present shudder apprehensively.

The young giant's turn came then. Entering into the spirit of increasing wildness, he performed some astounding feats; but it was neither to poetry nor to wine that he had recourse. His strength lay in muscle; and at sight of the extraordinary activity with which, at every fourth bar of the music, he dropped on one knee before Xenia and shot up again, a murmur of applause ran round the room.

The man with the rolling eyes, who prided himself on having seen more Krakowiaks danced than any one present, and stimulated by the applauding murmur, made a desperate attempt at originality by flying along with the lady's hand held high above his head at an angle almost as picturesque as it was uncomfortable.

Kazimir's turn had arrived. With a flush on his face he stepped up to the still breathless Xenia, who stood beside the big Tiburtio. It was impossible to beat the giant on his own ground, and Kazimir did not attempt it; struck by a happy thought, he knelt on one knee and laid his drawn sword at Xenia's feet.

“Bravo! bravo!” shouted the much excited spectators, while Xenia turned aside blushing.

There was but one more pair now. Kazimir looked up, and to his surprise beheld his brother Lucyan with Vizia. It startled him almost as much as if one of the pictures on the wall had come down to join the revels. There was no reason why a young man of twenty-four should not dance a Krakowiak; but somehow Kazimir never did think of his brother as a young man of twenty-four. After the wildness of some of the last dancers, Lucyan's dancing produced a sort of chill and sober reaction. He was as pale and as cool as ever as he went down the room with a noiseless gliding step, and reaching the end, he bowed low and ceremoniously, and drawing a magnificent red rose from his button-hole, presented it to Vizia.

"Who would have thought it?" said Kazimir to himself; "who would have thought that Lucyan could be so easily smitten?" but "smitten" did not seem to be exactly the word. His brother puzzled him; Lucyan's manner towards women was altogether baffling. He had not the manner of a so-called "ladies' man," nor did he appear to be at the slightest trouble to please. He was cool and watchful, listening more than he talked, never contradicting the most foolish speech, seemingly because he did not think it worth while; and with a sneer ever mixed with his smile. Even when with the customary "*Padam do nog*," he professed to fall at a lady's feet,

there never was absent a lurking twitch in the corners of his mouth, or a passing gleam of his eye, which made of the words almost an insult, instead of the high and courteous compliment which these same words sounded in Kazimir's lips.

And yet, reflected Kazimir, though this was not his own manner of being in love, it apparently was Lucyan's. Why else should he have been in such constant attendance upon Vizia, and have paid her the most marked attentions all day long? and Lucyan, who prided himself on being a connoisseur of female beauty! No, he gave up the problem; there was no accounting for tastes: and feeling perplexed, and moreover heated with the Krakowiak, Kazimir left the room, and strolled out through the passage, to the dark verandah outside. Vizia was a nice girl in her way; but then, near her cousin! Besides, her temper was undoubtedly bad. How sharply did her harsh words contrast with Xenia's acknowledgment of cousinly affection, which he had heard in the morning!

Ah! what a day it had been! There was but one dark spot on the sky, but that spot was large, gigantically large; it was the young giant Tiburtio, in fact. For Tiburtio was a rich man, and he had all evening perseveringly, if awkwardly, been contending against Kazimir for Xenia's smiles. And Xenia had smiled

on him ; but then, to be sure, she had smiled just as much on every old lady-guest in the room. Xenia had one manner for all the world ; and that, no doubt, was one of the secrets of her charm. She was far too young to have acquired that double-beauty manner which is cold to one sex and warm to the other. Vizia's manner, which was cold to both sexes, made a startling foil to her cousin's. There was more sweetness in Xenia's frown than there was even in Vizia's smile. Watching the two, a more cynical man than Kazimir might have been tempted to say : " If this is artificial, then art is charming ; if that is nature, then nature is repelling." But this was not Kazimir's thought ; he was busy weighing his own hopes of success, and he almost thought that his chances were good : " A rich marriage, and I am a poor man," he repeated ; " never mind, I shall win her."

Reflecting thus, Kazimir stood leaning against a pillar, with his head thrown back upon it, his arms folded across his breast, while with an eager thirst he drank in the bitter winter air. In front of him stretched the white country, of a more ghostly white under the moonlight. To the right and to the left of him stood the deep forest ; and the moon, less chary of its beams than the sun had been, touched the heavy ice-ropes till they seemed to grow alive with glittering light, and hung a diamond on every icicle. There was

a little breeze to-night, and the murmur in the tree-tops seemed to Kazimir like the echo of long dead nightingales, come out of their graves expressly to sing for him. Far, far off in the great forest, there was the solitary howl of a hungry wolf. Everything was silent beside.

Kazimir wondered why he should never before have discovered the magic of moonlight silence, nor the poetry of moonlit solitude. Moonlight, roses, nightingales, he had never heeded them before, but he began to lose himself in dreams of them to-night. Nightingales, however, were scarcely enough to suggest the exquisite inflections of that voice which had first bewitched him. Was there a parallel on earth, a single metaphor, worthy of her voice? Kazimir did not think so. Having passed in review such things as splashing fountains, crystal bells, mountain breezes, and silver flutes, he rejected them all as unworthy. It was quite surprising what an unexpected store of poetical images he possessed. They had lain dormant in his mind for years, but now the hour had come and the woman, and they all awoke from their sleep. He was just weighing the merit of angel harps, as the least unworthy comparison, when a rustle of silk and a light step aroused him. He looked round with a start of hope, and saw a woman advancing. Was it possible that she was coming? He peered through the dark

anxiously,—yes, surely—no; she came a step nearer, and he recognised the plain cousin.

“Mademoiselle Vizia!” he exclaimed, perhaps rather blankly, “is it wise of you to come out here? It is freezing hard; look at the icicles!”

Vizia did not look at the icicles, she gazed at Kazimir steadily, and stopped only when she was close to him. Her face was set and somewhat pale, he thought.

“Do you wish to say anything to me?” he asked, struck by her look.

“Yes; I want to say something to you,” answered Vizia, in a low, quick voice. “Pan Bielinski, do you remember my words a little time ago, when the wolf was shot?”

“Yes,” said Kazimir, gravely, “I remember them.”

“I spoke ill of my cousin; I said she was foolish and absurd; I said it was affectation. Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“I have come to retract every word I said. Xenia is not foolish, not affected. I have come”—she paused for a second, and flushed scarlet—“I have come to beg your pardon.”

“My pardon!” cried Kazimir, disarmed in a moment. “You have done nothing which needs pardon; you were excited, and frightened, perhaps——”

“I was not frightened—not in the least frightened ; it was only my bad temper. Never believe me when I speak like that—never let your faith be shaken in her.” The extraordinary energy of her words drove the blood up to her very hair-roots. Kazimir saw it, and he saw also the working of her mouth, and stood silent, staggered by her vehemence.

“Xenia is better, a hundred times better than I am ; an angel—do you understand ?” she said with eagerness, almost with violence. “Do you believe me ?”

“I do believe you,” replied Kazimir, fervently. He did not think it wise to say that he had not believed her before, and that his faith had not been shaken, and could never be shaken, merely by angry words. If he felt any relief now, it was on Vizia’s account, not on Xenia’s ; it was a good thing, at least, that she possessed the courage to undo the effects of her *brusquerie*. He held out his hand with a frank smile. “And now surely we are reconciled ; why is it that we are always quarrelling ? We quarrelled the very first day we met,—about spades, and sickles, was it not ? Do you remember ?”

She had put out her hand also ; but when he said, “Do you remember ?” she drew it back suddenly, before he had touched her fingers, and turning abruptly away, she vanished into the house.

In the doorway she almost ran against Lucyan, but

passed him without a word. Lucyan started, looked after her, then strolled towards his brother.

“Playing Don Juan! eh, Kazimir? You look it to the life, I must say. The moonlight is the very thing for your uniform,—stage decoration.” He was smiling as he spoke, but the smile was a little anxious, and the look was a little scrutinising. “Moonlight and a fair lady—not quite as fair as the other one, though.”

“Nonsense, Lucyan!” said Kazimir, impatiently—and he too entered the house.

Lucyan followed his brother with his eyes. The anxious smile was still on his face, but it was fading already. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“No danger, I think; just the sort of man who will not look further than a pretty face. Confoundedly pretty that cousin is, too; but then—seventy thousand florins! Pity it is not the other way.”

It was soon after this that the company broke up; and presently, the last guest gone, Vizia and Xenia were alone in their bedroom.

“Was it not a charming day?” exclaimed Xenia, all in a glow of delight, sitting up on the bed with her head propped on her pillow.

“Very,” said Vizia. She was plaiting up her hair at the other end of the room.

“And it was better, after all, that there should have been no sunshine; don't you think so? It would only have got into one's eyes. The drive was much pleasanter without it. Don't you think so, Vizia?” asked Xenia, unconsciously playing the part of the fox in the fable. Any bunch of grapes, even the tiniest bunch, that hung too high for Xenia's arm, always and at once became sour in Xenia's eyes. She could not bear to admit that she should have missed a drop of happiness, or even a drop of pleasure, by failing to grasp that bunch; rather she went through life making these little compromises with fate, and gaining through them much ease of mind, as well as retaining much sweetness of temper.

But this was not Vizia's manner of viewing the grapes. The fox in the fable had always struck her as filling the most pitiably absurd position in the world. She preferred to proclaim boldly that the grapes were ripe, and that they were sweet, and to confess defiantly that she could not reach them, much as she regretted the fact. Xenia having asked, “Don't you think it was better without the sunshine?” she answered promptly, “No, I don't think it was better without the sunshine; it would have been much pleasanter with it.”

Xenia submitted at once, sank back on her pillow, and changed the subject.

“I wonder whether you enjoyed your drive as much as I did mine!” she began, somewhat shyly. “I enjoyed mine so much, all except the wolf; and—and—do you know, Vizia, he, Kazimir Bielinski, was so kind when I was frightened, he did not laugh at me at all; he held my hand to soothe me. Is his brother like that also?”

“He did not hold my hand,” said Vizia, pushing aside the red rose that she had tossed on the table.

“No,” laughed Xenia; “but you did not see a wolf. And, Vizia, he seems very anxious I should not go to Krakow; and, do you know, this evening, in saying good-bye, he managed to whisper, ‘Shall you go to Krakow, or shall you stay here?’ And I answered, I think I shall stay here!”

Xenia paused; but her cousin, standing with her back turned, made no comment.

“It was not saying too much, was it?” asked Xenia, humbly.

“I don’t know,” was the short and weary answer.

“And, of course, I shall not go to Krakow now.” Xenia gave a very soft sigh. “I wonder whether the Wieliczka ball will be good!”

Vizia offered no opinion.

“Are you tired, Vizia?” her cousin ventured.

“Rather.”

“Poor Vizia! But we have had such a charming

day. Tell me, did—did—you get on well with Lucyan Bielinski?"

"Pretty well."

"Oh, Vizia!" Xenia gave an innocently mischievous laugh. "Why do you pretend not to understand me? Everybody noticed it. Come near me, close to me; you have not kissed me yet," said Xenia, turning her head on the pillow, and stretching one beautiful arm towards her cousin. "Every one noticed it, Vizia; and Kazimir Bielinski noticed it too."

"How do you know?" asked Vizia, slowly.

"Oh, because he said it. I think he was pleased with it. Do come nearer me, Vizia!"

Vizia came across the room and knelt beside the bed.

"Just fancy," whispered Xenia, putting her arm round her cousin's neck—"just fancy how charming it would be—two brothers, and we are like sisters, you know—if we were to——" she broke off in alarm, crimsoning at the boldness of her own thought; but Vizia understood.

"That shall never be, Xenia; my part of it shall never be. Nothing can force me to marry Lucyan Bielinski!"

"But how do you know? How can you tell yet? Are you not afraid of saying that?"

"Afraid! What do you mean?"

“ I don't know what I mean,” said Xenia, beginning to yawn ; “ but I should be afraid to say that. I am rather afraid of Lucyan Bielinski, I think. He only spoke to me once this evening. I had got my fan entangled in my fringes, and he got it out for me. It was very troublesome ; I wanted to tear it out, but he would not let me. He went on unwinding it quite quietly, and said, with such a queer smile, ‘ I never give up a thing that I have once taken into my head to do ! ’ ”

“ And he got out the fan ? ”

“ Of course he did. He is really agreeable, you know,” added Xenia, afraid of having hurt her cousin's feelings. “ You and he ought to suit so well ; you are both grave. I am sure you like him.”

“ I hate him,” said Vizia, calmly.

“ Oh, Vizia, you are joking ! He is very different from his brother, of course. How sleepy I am getting ! ”

Vizia seized her cousin's hand, with a sudden look of eagerness. “ Tell me this, Xenia—only this one thing ; do you——” she was gazing deep into Xenia's eyes, but those eyes were closing slowly.

“ Do I what ? ” she murmured, in sleepy accents.

“ Never mind ; go to sleep, my darling.” The fringe of lashes touched the cheek already. Vizia remained on her knees gazing at her cousin in spell-

bound admiration. "No wonder!" she thought as she gazed—"no wonder!" One long plait of chestnut hair fell over the coverlet, the lips were softly parted, the beautiful brow was unruffled. She bent over the hand she still held and pressed one kiss upon the round white arm. It was so fiery, that kiss, that the blue eyes opened once more. Drowsily, like a child half awakened, Xenia stretched out her hand towards her cousin's face, moved over it caressingly; then the hand sank down, and the blue eyes shut again. With the smile of a happy child on her face, Xenia was asleep.

Vizia, rising, crossed the room with her bare feet, and stood for a moment beside her bed; then all at once she turned and threw herself upon it, hiding her face deep in the pillow. So still she lay thus, and so motionless, that had it not been for the tightening grasp with which her fingers clutched to the coverlet, she might have been thought asleep. Presently her frame began to work; she trembled, and her breast heaved; with her face thus buried in the pillow, Vizia was sobbing convulsively. She drew the covers up, hoping to choke the sound of her sobs; she swallowed the bitter drops, and buried her face deeper, biting her pillow between her teeth in the frantic effort of self-control. But this energy of grief was not to be controlled. She gasped and panted in the convulsion

of weeping, starting at the fiery heat of her own tears ; for she was weeping with all the strength of a strong heart shaken to the very core. And through it all Xenia slept on, in the sweet slumber of a happy child tired out with a long day of pleasure.

Yes,—she loved him ; boundlessly, passionately, and hopelessly. She loved him, and she had loved no other man before ; she loved him,—and he loved her cousin. With fierce pride she had battled against this love for months, and with this same fierce pride she confessed that she had battled in vain. As she had been too proud to surrender then, so was she too proud to deceive herself now. She hated everything that even distantly flavoured of mockery or sham, she abhorred any evasion from the stern bitterness of truth.

And her pride was not only stern but morbid ; and in this morbid pride lay the key of her nature. She had never forgiven fate for having made her plain, but neither had she ever attempted to persuade herself that she was otherwise than plain. No plain woman had ever so vehemently and so bitterly hungered after beauty than did this plain woman. Of course there are plain women who shine in society by their manners, by their conversation, by their intellectual charms. If Vizia had so willed, she might have shone in that way ; but here it was her morbid pride which interfered. For fear of appearing to strive for a thing

which had been denied her, she rigorously abstained from making herself agreeable ; for fear of appearing to wrestle against fairer women for the attraction of men, she flew to the other extreme and became austere—became, in fact, far more unamiable than nature had ever intended her to be.

For one short week, barely one week, she had thought that what she had never dared to hope for was going to be given her after all ; but that dream had been short. As now, recovering from her burst of grief, she lay on her pillow exhausted, reviewing her situation, she knew also that it had been sweet. To turn her back upon an enemy was to her an impossibility. Stripping off every particle of hope that might obscure her sight, she looked her fate in the face ; and though her lips were quivering, her teeth were set.

It was strange that she should have held out so long, to break down so suddenly ; and yet it was not strange either. That moment in the moonlight, standing alone beside Kazimir, had been too dangerously sweet. Had she not overtaxed her strength when she stepped on to the moonlit verandah where he was standing alone ? Even had she never seen him before, that tall and graceful figure, leaning with folded arms against the pillar, might have taken her fancy by storm ;—having loved him for months, her courage had tottered

and failed. Thinking of the hopes she had been mad enough to foster, during that first short week of their acquaintance—of the charm, the gaiety, and the earnestness of their first talk; thinking, above all, of that moment when, half laughing and half moved, his lips had touched her hand,—she had felt now a stab of pain, as though a dagger, striking her heart, had wounded it.

“Do you remember?” he had said to her a little while ago. Did she remember? O God! would she ever forget?

CHAPTER XII.

“CARTES OUVERTES.”

“And how like you this shepherd’s life, Master Touchstone?”

—*As You Like It.*

“Nicht so redlich, wäre redlicher.”—LESSING.

THE *Neuropoeticon* had not done its duty. Madame Bielinska had not become twenty years younger, she had not been restored to muscle and cheerfulness, nor had she grown “astonishingly nimble”—all of which transformations had been pompously predicted in a flowery advertisement. The relapse which took place about this time proved to be a serious one. Day by day the patient was sinking, slowly but surely: the doctor could name no probable term of duration, but neither could he hold out any hope.

Strangely enough, the weaker Madame Bielinska grew, the more feverishly anxious did she become on the subject of money matters and business. She made more than one attempt to renew that discussion with Kazimir which had been so abruptly broken off. It

was almost as though she had some thought weighing on her mind, and that she was anxious, and at the same time a little reluctant, to impart this thought to her eldest son. At any rate she had never succeeded in the attempt. Either Lucyan happened to be in the room, or aunt Robertine arrived to enforce her authority, and to draw a veil over the sick-chamber. The veil was always drawn with a more savage zest when it was Kazimir who was in the question; for Kazimir's nature and manner, and voice even, were of the very sort which grated most upon his aunt's feelings. His repelling openness of character, and tactless frankness of speech, were continually jarring upon her sight and hearing. Only yesterday he had offended her finer sensibilities by mentioning aloud at table the fact of his mother having dined off the wing of a chicken. If repeated, to what endless misconstructions might it not give rise as to the state of Madame Bielinska's health! how might it not misrepresent their income and their manner of living! Mademoiselle Robertine had never read Pickwick, and therefore could not know to what a dangerous use even chops and tomato-sauce may be put in a court of justice. Her caution was entirely intuitive. And this proclamation of the chicken's wing was by no means his blackest offence. It was more unpardonable still, when, on knocking a china vase off the table,

he had laid bare one of her pet mysteries to the light of day. "I am sorry it is broken," Kazimir had said, picking up the fragments; "but, dear me! how does this big key come to be there?" There was a servant in the room at the moment, and Robertine, with a dark frown, seized the key, and plunged it deep into the abyss of her capacious pocket, crushing down several pocket-handkerchiefs on the top of it. The key of a secret treasure? of a mysterious cabinet? perhaps a bloody Bluebeard's key? Not a bit of it. It was only the key of the press where the jam-preserves were kept; but it was Robertine's rooted habit to hide every key, however harmless, in mysterious places—and, for greater safety, to vary the hiding-places frequently. So mysterious were these places, and so frequently were they varied, that Robertine herself generally lost the clue, and mourned for the vanished keys in secret. If she had disliked Kazimir before the adventure of the broken vase, she positively hated him from that moment, and with all the more vigour did she strive to exclude him from the sick-room. Kazimir himself, seeing his mother's great weakness and increasing irritability, made no endeavour to obtain solitary interviews; he could not avoid agreeing with Lucyan, who declared that every business conversation must now be harmful. He was therefore all the more surprised, when, entering the sick-room

one afternoon, he found his youngest brother engaged in just such a business conversation.

“Enough of that, mother,” Lucyan was saying, as Kazimir, not exactly noisily, but audibly, entered the sick-room. “You are tiring yourself.”

“I am not,” said the invalid, with some fretfulness. “As I was saying, 34,000 to 35,000 florins is what I can leave you, what you can expect: I want you and both your brothers to understand that clearly. If Kazimir cannot be persuaded to leave the army, then you will have to take the management, for Marcin is useless.” A violent fit of coughing interrupted her here, and Robertine seized the opportunity to clear the room of all intruders.

This was the first moment that Kazimir had ever felt his curiosity aroused with regard to business. Why was Lucyan allowed to talk business if he was not? He taxed his brother point-blank with the question. Lucyan was surprised at the attack, but had recourse to his ivory comb, and having passed it several times through his hair, he answered coolly: “My dear Kazio, if you had had your ears open you would have heard, as you entered, that, instead of encouraging the subject, I was begging her to drop it.” That was true, reflected Kazimir; Lucyan certainly had been discouraging the subject just as he appeared on the scene. But his curiosity was not yet pacified.

He began reproaching his brother with treating him like a child, and with keeping him in the dark. Lucyan's answers were both sensible and good-natured; and Kazimir having, in his new-born curiosity, put the question, "Why, for instance, do you keep those account-books from me, as if they were state secrets?" began to feel a little ashamed of his fit of ill-humour.

There were grounds for his ill-humour, however. It was now more than a fortnight since the fox-hunt, and he had not seen Xenia again. In his mother's critical condition he could not well leave the house for six hours at a time, even had the state of the thawing roads permitted it. One day, when she appeared to have rallied, he had made the attempt; for he felt that, after what had passed between Xenia and him, it was necessary to come to a clear understanding; but his attempt had failed miserably. Stuck fast in the melting snow, with one of Aitzig Majulik's "grand" horses turned dead lame, he had been thankful to reach home again on any terms; and here, unable to move from the house, yet excluded from the sick-room, he led a useless and helpless existence.

His fit of bad humour was therefore excusable—at any rate Lucyan excused it. Instead of resenting the unvarnished question, he gave a courteous and strikingly frank answer. Before giving this answer, Lucyan paused for a moment, drawing the comb slowly

through his hair, and throwing an eagle eye over all the bearings of the situation, like a practised general who reviews his forces, and weighs the *pros* and *cons* of covert or open tactics. That mental glance was clear, shrewd, and quick; and the decision, being fixed, was boldly acted upon.

“ Why are these account-books kept from you, as if they were state secrets?” he repeated. “ Well, Kazio, I am delighted to hear you talk in this tone. I did not keep them from you because they are state secrets, but because I thought they would be bores. If you are curious on the subject, or—anxious, why, then, you shall not only see the account-books, but the whole estate, inch by inch, if you like.” Apparently Lucyan had decided for the open tactics.

“ Would not the account-books be less trouble?” suggested Kazimir, a little staggered at being taken so literally by his word.

“ Of course you shall see them; but practice first, theory afterwards: besides, Kazio, if you are to be a farmer some day, you must not talk of trouble now.”

“ Yes, but——” began the disconcerted Kazimir.

“ No buts, *mon cher* Kazio; nothing like acting on an impulse,” said Lucyan, who never in his life had acted upon any impulse whatever. “ I had better take you over the ground immediately.”

“ Do you mean to-morrow?” asked Kazimir, ruefully.

“I mean to-day, now, at once. To be sure it is a little muddy, and we shall have to drive about in a peasant-cart; but a farmer must sacrifice a few pairs of boots as price of his apprenticeship.”

“Now,—at once!” repeated Kazimir, aghast.

“Of course,” said Lucyan, in his smooth, slow, almost languid way; for he never spoke fast upon any occasion. “Why, Kazio! what has become of your zeal? I was beginning to hope that there was the stuff of a farmer in you, after all.”

Kazimir, out of pure shame, had to submit. Met by this startling frankness, his curiosity suddenly grew cool. The more ready Lucyan showed himself to initiate him into all the secrets of the estate, the less anxious did he become for the initiation. But there was no escape now. He found himself hurried into an uncomfortable peasant-cart, where, seated upon straw, they began to splash through the mud. The day was not only damp and raw, but drizzly at intervals; and from every branch and roof half-melted snow was dropping. Kazimir secretly wondered at his brother's equanimity under the trying circumstances. Lucyan, who was generally as afraid of getting his feet wet as any woman, now calmly suffered the splashing and the drizzle,—keeping not only his good-humour, but talking in an almost cheerful strain. When Kazimir faintly suggested umbrellas, as a slight

alleviation of their sufferings, Lucyan suppressed the idea at once, for umbrellas would only embarrass their sight, and he wanted his brother to have a good general view of the grounds.

This certainly beat any military hardships hollow, thought Kazimir, after two hours' endurance. A march on horseback would be a luxury after this. Lucyan was an indefatigable mentor: every ten minutes the cart was stopped, while Kazimir stood in the rain and listened to minute explanations as to the value of single potatoes, or microscopical proportions of wheat and corn. He bore away with him a very distinct idea as to the difficulty of hitting off the exact moment for taking up the potatoes in autumn, and putting in the grain in spring. It appeared to be all but impossible not to be either too early or too late. Then there were the pigs, for instance, and the cows. It was ruin to a farmer should he lose a batch of them, but then it did not seem that there was very much to be gained if they lived. As a general rule, he was to bear in mind, that a fruitful year was not really preferable to a barren year; for if in the latter there was too little to sell, so was there too much to sell in the former; the market was glutted, and the prices went down.

Next there came the *Propinacyas*, the most important feature of the estate, as Kazimir had heard from

his mother. These spirit-shops, of which almost every second house in the village owned one, were each tenanted by a ministering and tattered Hebrew, who held his lease from a larger, less tattered, and more important Hebrew. This important Hebrew, Naftali Taubenkübel by name, held in his turn the lease direct from the mistress of the place, and having proved himself an honest and faithful servant, had long since grown grey on the estate.

“Well, Jacob,” said Lucyan, entering the first of the dirty spirit-huts, followed by his reluctant brother; “how goes your business? No better than usual?”

“No better—Panie, no better at all,” gabbled the Jew in reply. “Ah, it is a miserable time for spirit-sellers!” Of course Kazimir could not know that it always is a miserable time for every Jewish spirit-seller. “What rent does he pay?” he asked, with an heroic effort at evincing interest, for the Propinacya was the only thing which at all presented a distinct idea to his mind.

“You will see all that in the account-book,” said Lucyan; “we must go on;” and Kazimir, thankful to escape from the choking atmosphere, left the hut, and found himself plunged at once into a field of slushy snow.

“We have done enough for to-day,” said Lucyan; “the rest can wait till to-morrow. It will be shorter

to walk home across the field than to drive round in the cart. I suppose you don't mind about your boots?”

Kazimir, whose spirit was broken, and whose boots were already so full of water that they could not well be fuller, answered that he did not mind, and walked on dejectedly; while two paces ahead Lucyan stepped along lightly through the mud, humming a cheerful tune to himself:—

“ Savez vous planter les choux,
À la mode, à la mode ;
Savez vous planter les choux,
À la mode de chez nous ?”

“ Has one got to do this sort of thing often ?” inquired Kazimir, rather moodily, when they were half-way across the field.

“ Often ! Oh, well not so very often ; once or twice a-week !”

“ Isn't it rather hard work ?”

“ Perhaps, when you are not used to it. But you who are so much stronger than I am, will get to bear the fatigues of farming wonderfully, no doubt.”

“ The fatigues are great, then ?”

“ Not so very great ; you have to get up at four, of course.”

“ But *you* get up at eight,” objected Kazimir.

“ Ah, but I have been bred up to the business ! I

could direct out of an arm-chair ; you will need to be on the spot at first, till you have got your hand in."

"And how long would that take?"

"Not so very long ; a few years—five, perhaps!"

Kazimir groaned.

"Cheer up, Kazio," said Lucyan, amiably ; "it is not as hard as you fancy. With strong health, untiring energy, constant application, and judicious management, I daresay you will—after a little experience, of course—manage to get along not much worse than your neighbours. Here we are at home."

"Five years of constant application and judicious management," repeated Kazimir to himself, as he sat in his bedroom, mournfully pouring the water out of his high boots. "I'll be shot if I look at another potato-field in my life!"

He had heard so many explanations that he remembered none. All he knew was that he had been dragged half over the estate in the rain, and had returned splashed up to his eyebrows with mud, to find that, for the last hour and more, his dinner had been slowly congealing on the table.

At the same time Lucyan was changing his boots up-stairs. "I wonder," he reflected, "whether Kazimir will be very keen about those account-books to-morrow?"

Leaving his room in search of his cold dinner,

Kazimir found himself confronted by his aunt. She stood on the threshold, holding one hand in her pocket, and fixing her nephew with an impressive stare. “Anything the matter?” he inquired, carelessly; for not only was he hungry, but those impressive looks had long lost their effect upon him.

“Not exactly *the matter*,” said Robertine, slowly.

“Has anything happened then, or not?” he asked, a little impatiently.

“Not precisely *happened*, either.”

Kazimir began to feel anxious.

“My mother is not worse, is she?”

“I will not go to the length of saying *worse*,” answered Robertine, unable to miss so good an opportunity for throwing out a dark hint. “On the whole her head seems better—on *the whole*, I say; but her feet are perhaps less well.”

“It is not about my mother, then?”

“I cannot say that it concerns your mother—directly.”

“Aunt Robertine, you have news for me.”

“In one sense—yes!”

It was a baffling answer. “I suppose,” thought Kazimir, resignedly, “that she will dole out the information slowly during the next few days.” That was precisely aunt Robertine’s desire; but unfortunately the circumstances of the case demanded haste.

“Is the news good or bad?” he asked, with growing impatience.

“That depends how you take it.”

Kazimir’s patience gave way. “Aunt Robertine, I must know what this means: do you intend to keep me waiting for the explanation till next week?”

Robertine smiled gloomily. “Who knows where you may be next week!”

“Aunt Robertine!” she was slowly drawing a paper from her pocket, disclosing it inch by inch. Kazimir made a grab at the paper, caught it,—it was a telegram,—and unfolding it, he read these words—

“Lieutenant Bielinski, instantly rejoin regiment. Orders for march expected.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CARDS ARE SHUFFLED.

‘Malbrough s’en va-t-en guerre,
Miron-ton, miron-ton, miron-taine;
Malbrough s’en va-t-en guerre,
Qui sait quand il viendra?’

“NOT so loud, not so loud,” whispered Robertine in an agony, turning a bunch of keys into impromptu castanets, in hopes of drowning her nephew’s voice: “don’t you know that the apothecary’s boy is in the house?”

“Instantly rejoin regiment,” repeated Kazimir, rather louder than before. In the first moment of surprise, he was not quite sure whether it was a shock of joy or of disappointment that he felt.

“Orders for march expected!” That meant war, action, glory perhaps,—all that he had always longed for: on the other hand it meant a farewell, an eternal farewell to his mother; and it meant something else,—it meant another farewell, a very bitter and very sweet one—a farewell to Xenia.

He was all in a tumult of excitement; unable to distinguish clearly what his feelings really were; but through the midst of the tumult one thought stood upright. He must see her again, only once again, before going; he must speak one word to her, even if to speak that one word required that he should wade to Lodniki on foot through the mud.

He began in hot haste to calculate the hours that remained to him. The order was express, and Kazimir was far too thorough a soldier even to contemplate the possibility of delay. To-morrow night at latest he must start; it was dark now—scarcely twenty-four hours remained to him. “It must be done,” thought Kazimir, setting his teeth. “It *shall* be done!”

The evening was an agitated one for the household, for in spite of Robertine’s efforts to hush up the whole matter, the truth had leaked out. The news was slowly broken to the invalid. Lucyan expressed much polite concern; and Marcin languidly remarked that, according to his opinion, life was a great deal too short for cutting oneself up in warfare. Bogumil attempted to look more indifferent than he felt.

“We might have time to do the second half of the estate to-morrow forenoon,” suggested Lucyan, obligingly.

“On no account,” was the almost vehement reply.

"I am going to drive to Lodniki, and say good-bye there."

"Oh, just as you please," said Lucyan, and he left the room.

"Father," began Kazimir, on impulse, "I will tell you why I must drive over to Lodniki to-morrow."

"I never questioned you," said the old man, somewhat irritably; "I never asked you to tell me anything."

But Kazimir did tell him, all the same; not in order to ask for his consent—for, never having had any one but himself to look to, Kazimir had acquired the habit of asking help from no one—but merely as a dutiful attention.

Bogumil shook his head and sighed wearily, repeating the old formula, which saddened Kazimir each time; he was a cipher, and his sons must not look to him for advice. The words sounded cold and feelingless, but Kazimir did not fail to see that his eyes were dim; and, mightiest symptom that could be, his pipe had gone out unnoticed. There had always been a peculiar though tacit sympathy between father and son. With all their dissimilarity, there was much resemblance. Without his military training, Kazimir might have been as passionate, as reckless, and as ungoverned as his father, though never such a weak mixture of uncalculating selfishness and improvident

generosity ; with such a training, Bogumil might have been a stronger man.

Kazimir slept little that night ; every hour he awoke with a feverish start, wondering whether it were not daylight already, and time to start for Lodniki. He heard the rain dripping on the roof, and he knew that each one of those drops was making the roads deeper and heavier ; each was an obstacle the more, building a rampart between him and her.

In the morning he looked from the window : alas ! it was raining still ; the road was a stream of turbulent and muddy water. The whole country was flooded with melting snow. Kazimir's courage was very resolute, but even he felt staggered ; was it possible that he could be back from Lodniki in time to reach the station and catch the night train ? Everybody told him that it was not possible. At the mere mention of driving, his brother laughed : " If you said swimming, it would be more to the point," said Lucyan.

" Well, then, riding ?" said Kazimir, desperately. " To Lodniki I must go, whether I reach it alive or dead !" He would listen to no arguments, and he would be beaten by no obstacles. The least bad of the two carriage-horses was saddled for the first time in its life, and Kazimir galloped off through the rain, hardly knowing that it was raining.

He was not quite unconscious of the apparent

insanity of his conduct, but he did not feel as if he could go to the war without having said one word to her. His mind was quite made up, and his plan was fixed—he was going to stake everything upon one card. He wanted only to put a question to Xenia; he wanted only to ask, “Do you love me?” And should the answer be “Yes,” then he would put a second, “Will you wait for me?” He did not mean to bind her by a positive engagement, for, young as he was, and impulsive by nature, Kazimir had learnt a few lessons already. He knew that she was poor, and that he was poor; he had heard of an aunt with ambitious ideas. It did not discourage him in the least, but it made him more careful. He had tasted the bitter flavour of poverty already—in small sips, it is true, but still he had tasted it; for he had served in a cavalry regiment among rich comrades (those were the flowery times of the Austrian army), and he himself had been a poor man among them. It had cost him much effort, and several slips, before he had learnt that a lieutenant who owns fifty florins a-month, cannot, even for the sake of *camaraderie*, keep a carriage, and dine off game and truffles every day, without getting inconveniently short in his cash.

This experience, though unpleasant, had served to temper his natural imprudence. No, he would not bind Xenia to anything but a tacit engagement: if

she loved him she would wait for him; and in the meantime, silence! He had told the truth to his father, but to no one else. Towards Lucyan he had grown reserved. It was not only that his passion, in proportion that it deepened, grew less expansive; but ever since that talk between the brothers in the sledge, and Lucyan's general remarks upon women, Kazimir had felt a strange reluctance to recurring to the subject.

Horse and rider were soaked in mud, when, towards eleven, they stood before the door of Lodniki. Pawel stared hard at the strange apparition, but Kazimir was perfectly callous to that look of astonishment. Was everybody at home? No, Pan Rogdanovics was not at home; he was busy with his new machine for digging out roots; but the young lady was in the drawing-room.

The young lady—ah, which? He did not stop to ask, but rapidly entered the house and the drawing-room, while Pawel, slowly following, wrung his hands at the muddy trail on the floor.

The young lady was there; she was bending over a table. She turned—and it was Vizia.

“I beg your pardon,” faltered Kazimir; “I am only here for a minute—for a moment. Do you think I could say a word to your cousin?”

Vizia stood staring, scarcely less staggered at the apparition than Pawel had been.

“Pan Bielinski, what has happened? what is the matter? My cousin is not here; but please sit down,” she added instinctively, for, after all, she was a Pole.

“Thank you,” said Kazimir, sitting down on a red velvet chair, while the wet began trickling from his hair over his face, and out of his very sleeves on to the cushions. “I have just ten minutes to spare,” and he drew out his watch.

“But you cannot see Xenia,” answered Vizia, still somewhat bewildered.

“Why not? She is not ill? For heaven’s sake tell me the truth!”

“She was quite well when I heard from her last.”

“Heard from her!” A cold suspicion seized upon him. “Where was she?” he managed to say.

“She is at Krakow. She went there last week.”

“Impossible!” In the first shock of surprise, Kazimir got to his feet, and stood as immovable as if he were meditating a rush straight to Krakow. “Are you sure, Pani Vizia?”

“Of course I am sure.”

He stood with his hand to his forehead, trying to collect his thoughts into a distinct shape. Never for a moment had he contemplated this possibility. Ever since she had whispered, “I think I shall stay here,” he had blindly believed that she would stay. At

Krakow! It was very natural that she should be there, and yet it sounded to him very strange at that moment.

Slowly and mechanically he sat down again, for it struck him that his conduct must appear rude.

There was silence for a minute. It took fully that minute to blunt the first keen edge of disappointment. He would have to pass through Krakow to-morrow night, so there was a shred of hope remaining after all.

“At Krakow!” he repeated aloud; “but she said, at least I thought——” he broke off, and looked at Vizia somewhat wistfully. He had come here with the very words he had to say trembling on his lips, and he felt that they would not let themselves be thrust back thus roughly. Might he not glean some hope by questioning her cousin? Vizia was just the sort of sensible and intelligent woman who ought to make a first-rate confidant. He had felt drawn to confide in her on the very first day of their acquaintance, and that recollection gave him the courage to speak now.

“Pani Vizia,” he began, “do you think I should be able to see your cousin when I pass through Krakow?”

“But where are you going to?”

“Did I not tell you? To join my regiment—to the war!”

She made no answer, but she started and turned a little pale.

“That is why I came here to say good-bye; but perhaps I can see her—Mademoiselle Xenia in Krakow? Do you not think so?”

“I daresay you can.”

“I want to see her very much, if only for a moment, before I go. Will it be difficult?”

“I really cannot say.”

“But you can tell me where to find her.”

“I can give you the address.”

“I hope my sudden appearance will not be disagreeable to her?”

“I hope not.”

“It is such a strange feeling, is it not, to go off this way without knowing whether you will ever come back again?”

“I suppose it is strange.”

“At any rate,”—and Kazimir smiled,—“it is a comfort to know that I can go this time, instead of standing behind a tree and watching the others start.” He looked at Vizia, expecting some such sign of sympathy as she had shown on that first day, three months ago; but no such sign came, and suddenly it struck him that she was changed. It had never struck him before. During these three months he had seen her often, exchanged greetings, and good-byes, and passing words;

but never another conversation. For the first time again he found himself alone with her; and without hesitation, he had attempted to take up their acquaintance on the same footing. He saw no reason for the change: he was not changed towards her; his sentiments were as friendly to-day as they had been then. He could not know that they had appeared then, to Vizia's inexperienced eyes, to be more than friendly. But Vizia's eyes were experienced now. Having seen him beside her cousin, she wondered at herself for ever having mistaken that other manner for anything but an amicable interest. Kazimir's manner was, in one sense, his misfortune. It condemned him to go through life as an imposture,—an innocent flirt, who killed his victims with an excess of kindness. In this age of polished deceits and polite falsehoods,—when striplings languish with *ennui*, and beardless boys can find nothing to smile at under the sun,—a nature fresh and earnest like Kazimir's is a far more dangerous nature than that of the most hardened worldling that ever breathed. He was too busy a man to be vain, yet few male flirts accomplished more havoc than did this true-hearted young man, with his unlucky warmth of tone and glances, and his unfortunate propensity for making the best of any man or woman he met.

His friendship was almost as ardent as another man's love; and his love,—Vizia, in her limited ex-

perience, had never seen anything which approached the fervour, the fire, and the entirety of his love. She had watched him, and she had seen how his eyes had hung on her cousin's lips—how he had thrilled at her laughter,—how his words had wandered when unexpectedly she entered the room,—with what reverence he touched her hand, or even any object which belonged to her. Vizia had seen it all,—and only since then had she understood the man, and seen her mistake.

Kazimir felt the change, and wondered. She had chilled his confidence; and it was not till he rose to go, that, all at once, the words broke from his lips—

“Pani Vizia, you know why I must stop at Krakow?”

Vizia was standing now,—they were both standing; and that hard set of her features had all at once given way to a look of painful agitation.

“Yes,” and she met his eyes; “I know why you must stop.”

“Your cousin is like a sister to you: can you give me any hope?”

Her lips contracted, and she frowned. “Don't ask me,” she said, hurriedly; “how can I say?”

“But you advise me to stop, do you not?”

She paused one moment, and paled by another shade: she had never recovered her colour from the first.

“Yes,” she said, with energy; “stop at Krakow,—by all means stop.”

“Thank you,—that gives me hope; and now, good-bye. Will you not wish me success?”

“I wish you success in the war.” She smiled a rather ghastly smile.

“And at Krakow, what do you wish me there?”

“I wish you,”—she would have said “success,” but her conscience cried within her—“Hold! you do not wish that in truth.” “I wish you happiness,” she finished faintly.

The terms were synonymous to Kazimir.

“Thank you,” he said, and with cruel warmth he pressed her hand. “Will you think of me sometimes?”

She nodded, not choosing to trust her voice; for even had she said no more than the one word “yes,” that one word might have been said at the cost of her dignity. And he turned and left her. And if on the way there he had not been aware of the rain, he was conscious of every single drop that fell on him now. The sky was of a dismal grey; the road was deserted, save for a solitary peasant who sang, as he waded through the mud—

“Krakowiaczek jeden
Miał Kóniku siedem,
Miał Kóniku siedem,
Pojechał na wojnu
Zustal sie mu jeden.”

(A Krakau peasant had seven horses, had seven horses. He went to the war and there remained only one.)

“Two o’clock,” said Kazimir, as he entered the house. “Great God! in an hour I must be gone.” He stood still, for he heard his name pronounced. His mother’s door was ajar. He went up to it:

“Are you calling me, mother?”

“Kazio, come here; I am alone, come quick.” He groped his way forward. “I must speak to you before you go. Are you going now?”

“Not for an hour yet.”

“Are your things packed?”

“Nothing is packed.”

“Well, listen then. Go and finish everything, and when you are done, the last thing before you go, come here to me. I must see you alone; I want to speak to you. There is something that I must say to you before you go.” She held her son’s hand and looked at him with a long and wistful gaze. “You understand me, Kazio? You will come to me soon?”

“I shall be back in ten minutes, mother,” and Kazimir hastened to his room, tore off his dripping coat, and began stuffing cravats and boots into his portmanteau.

There was a sound at the door, and he looked up hot and flushed, with his wavy hair all falling into his

face. Lucyan was standing in the entrance, most irritatingly cool and self-possessed. He held in his hand a little packet of paper-covered books.

“Oh, you have not done your packing yet; I thought you might have time to look over these account-books which you wanted to see. This is the account of the Propinacyas, and these are the wood accounts, and this——”

Kazimir sprang to his feet, clutching a handful of collars and tossing the hair out of his eyes. “In the name of the devil, Lucyan, keep your odious books to yourself! Do you wish to drive me mad, or do you not?”

“Now don’t fly out at me, Kazio,” laughed Lucyan. “You said yesterday that you wanted to see them.”

“And I say to-day that if you so much as mention them again in my hearing, I’ll do, I don’t know what, but something violent at any rate. Don’t you see that I am half out of my senses between all these things? I can’t get half of them in: everything has got twice as large as it used to be, except the port-manteau, which has got twice as small.”

“No wonder, if you stick things in in that barbaric fashion. Good gracious! muddy boots and collars combined—this will never do;” and Lucyan, pocketing the account-books, began very deftly folding out some ill-treated shirts.

“Oh, they’re used to that,” said Kazimir, as he rolled his best *Attila* into a round hard ball.

“I suppose we shall not see you for years again,” remarked Lucyan presently, as he bent over the port-manteau.

“H—m, yes,—perhaps,—I really don’t know.”

“See that you bring back plenty of laurels and dozens of decorations: you might bring back a scar or two; that would do no harm; it is just what you need.”

“By way of embellishment?”

“By way of disfigurement. Don’t stare, Kazio; that is exactly your fault. At the present moment you are just a shade too handsome, several shades too young, and several shades more too cheerful.”

“I look uncommonly handsome just now, don’t I?” asked Kazimir rather grimly, as he eyed his heated, dishevelled, and mud-spattered image in the glass. “Positively fascinating, I declare, especially in my shirt-sleeves.”

“I am not joking,” said Lucyan, with his quiet smile. “There, give me those stockings. You are a handsome boy at present, and boys are not the fashion nowadays; now, if you could look a little weather-beaten, or rugged, or haggard, or get a good slashing scar across your nose—or if you could undergo some severe mental anxiety, or shoot a man in a duel and become a prey to remorse, or see a ghost, or lead a for-

lorn-hope, or even only get your heart broken,—you would see how that would improve you.”

“I don’t think I am going to have my heart broken,” said Kazimir, with a rather confident smile; “but I have no objection to leading a forlorn-hope, if I am lucky enough to get the chance.”

“The effect would be equally satisfactory in either case, I have no doubt.”

“Thank you; and what improvement are you in want of?”

“I will do very well as I am, I fancy. I am not handsome, nor have I any ardent wish to be so; except sometimes when I have moments of envy for your looks, *mon frère*.”

Lucyan was wonderfully candid and wonderfully complimentary to-day, thought Kazimir; the impending separation must have caused this change of manner. He himself could not honestly say that he had ever envied his younger brother anything—neither his looks, nor his disposition, nor his tastes, nor even the chance of winning Vizia. “We are very different, of course,” was all he could say.

“Of course we are,—you are a Pole and I am a Greek: there lies the whole difference. Why, here is Marcin; is he going to offer help in the packing?”

Marcin had wandered in by the open door, and after stumbling over one hat-box and sitting down upon

another, observed, as he contemplated the wreck, that it is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Then he lifted a boot from the floor, gazed at it fixedly, dropped it, and wandered out again.

"He is as vague as ever," said Kazimir; "and do you know, Lucyan, he goes on just the same about pill-boxes and medicine-glasses. What can it mean? I can't imagine."

"You have very little imagination then," said Lucyan, who was attempting to lock the portmanteau. "Here, Kazio, you must kneel upon it, or it won't close. Make your mind quite easy about the pill-boxes: it is only that he sees black eyes on every lid and pink cheeks in every medicine-bottle.

"Marcin in love!" exclaimed Kazimir, as he knelt on the portmanteau.

"I did not say that," answered Lucyan, with a shrug; "but undoubtedly he is flirting with the apothecary's very vulgar and very pretty little daughter. It is a harmless occupation, you know, and will do as well as anything else to keep him amused."

Though Lucyan was on his knees, with his head bent, as he tried the key, Kazimir knew that his brother was smiling; and the thought of that unseen smile once more grated upon his sensibilities. It was again one of those moments when he discovered with a start that he had not succeeded in getting fond of

his brother; not *yet* succeeded, that is to say; it could only be a question of time. Was it his own fault, perhaps, that the process demanded so very much time?

“Is that key not turned yet,” he asked, impatiently. “I have barely a quarter of an hour, and my mother is waiting for me.”

“No, it is not shut yet; press harder. There is plenty of time; the carriage won’t be round till three.”

“Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine,” counted Kazi-mir. “It will take quite six hours to reach the station with the roads in this state. I am running myself pretty close as it is.”

“I assure you you are not—(can’t you make yourself a little heavier? this lock is as obstinate as a mule),—your watch must be fast. Now that the packing is done, you would even have time to throw a look over those accounts.”

“Lucyan, don’t forget what I said,” interrupted Kazimir, glowering down threateningly from the top of the portmanteau.

“Well, if you won’t, it is not my fault, remember that. But some day when you have to take the estate into your hands——”

“That I shall never do, rest assured; I have quite enough with the trial I gave it yesterday.”

“But if you ever happened to marry, for instance?”

“Ah, that has nothing to do with it,” said Kazimir with a bright flush. The idea of giving up his profession, even for the sake of Xenia, had never occurred to him. If she loved him, she would be ready to be a soldier’s wife. “It is more likely you will settle down here.”

“Possibly,”—Lucyan bent lower over the lock,—“I might even say probably.”

“Very probably,” repeated Kazimir, with emphasis, as he thought of the evening of the fox-hunt, of the Krakowiak, and the red rose presented to Vizia.

“It does not surprise you, then?”

“Not in the least,” and Kazimir again thought of the red rose. “I am not quite as blind as you imagine me, Lucyan.”

“Ah!” Lucyan bent still lower. In their respective positions neither of the brothers could see the other’s face.

“Well, I don’t mind telling you that my wishes do lie that way. They say, you know, that a farmer must marry.”

“Especially if he is smitten,” agreed Kazimir.

“Who said I was smitten?” Lucyan hastily moved his head upwards, and gave his brother one piercing glance. Kazimir was quite at a loss to read that glance; and before he had attempted to do so, Lucyan’s head was down again.

“Yes,” he was saying, in his usual voice again, “I *am* smitten, deeper than you think.” The last words were beneath his breath, and Kazimir did not hear them.

It touched him most strangely to be taken even thus far into his brother's confidence. They seemed to have changed places for the moment—the reserved Lucyan to have grown expansive, while Kazimir, the communicative, was listening to a confidence, instead of imparting one. For the moment he asked himself whether he, on his side, should not tell his brother of his hopes and of his project. He was about to speak, but something checked the words; at the thought of Lucyan's smile he shrank back with a feeling of aversion, and locked up his hopes within himself.

“I wish you may get what you want,” was all he said. “But, Lucyan, in heaven's name, is that key not turned? Give it me; I will have it round in a moment.”

“There, I have just got it,” said Lucyan, with a final twist.

There were barely ten minutes to spare. Kazimir, with all possible haste, finished his arrangements and left the room.

Aunt Robertine met him in the passage. She had considerably softened since she knew that she was to

be rid of him so soon. At this moment she was almost smiling.

“Yes,” she said, “you can go in to your mother. She is alone now; but no noise, and no agitation.”

Closing the door softly behind him, Kazimir entered. He was alone with his mother at last. The room as usual was half darkened, and in the dim light Kazimir could barely distinguish the figure of his mother on the sofa. She made no movement as on tiptoe he approached. She made no movement yet when he reached her; she neither put out her hand nor turned her head on the pillow.

“Mother,” whispered Kazimir, as he bent over her; but he saw that her eyes were closed, and they did not open at his whisper. He looked nearer; her breath was coming soft and regularly,—she was asleep.

“She will awake in a minute,” thought Kazimir, and he sat down beside the sofa. As his eyes got used to the darkness, he distinguished his mother’s features more clearly. Lying thus asleep, with her face in perfect repose, she looked younger than she had looked for years. The hair, though streaked with silver threads, was still of a jetty black at places, and the spotless skin by contrast appeared of a waxen whiteness; the fine chiselling of the straight Greek features came out with almost startling delicacy under

the hand of wasting disease. Never had Kazimir so vividly realised what his mother's past beauty must have been, as at this moment when he sat gazing at the motionless face, printing it off on his memory as a picture which should never fade. One hand was beneath the coverlet, the other hung by her side; it was wasted almost to the bone, and the heavy rings were slipping on to each other. One of them had dropped to the carpet.

It was a picture painfully beautiful; it wrung Kazimir's heart with the bitter feeling of farewell. He dropped his face into his hands unable to look longer, and he sat thus, waiting for her to awake.

One minute passed, another passed, and she slept on softly. He looked up again with some uneasiness, and drew out his watch. The time was all but up. With his watch in his hand he sat and waited; there was no other sound but that gentle tick-tick. In another moment it was drowned by the rattle of wheels at the door. There was the bustle of luggage being carried through the passage and down the steps. Surely that would awake her? Kazimir rose and leant over her again; but she breathed on softly in her exhausted sleep. What was he to do? Awake her, and tear her from this healing slumber into the

terrible reality of parting? Could she bear it in her feeble state? Would it be kindness or downright murder? He scarcely knew which. She had wanted to say something to him; she had wanted to speak to him alone. Kazimir wondered what it could have been,—perhaps, after all, only an invalid's fancy. Surely it would be more merciful to spare her the last dreadful embrace.

He was still standing thus uncertain, when the door glided open, and Lucyan whispered hurriedly, "Quick, Kazimir, quick; your time is up."

"I am coming," said Kazimir. "Mother," he said once more; and then, as she did not move, he paused for one moment, and, kneeling down on the floor, he raised the wasted hand and kissed it. Not even the hot tears which fell on that hand roused the invalid from her deep slumber. He stood up and turned resolutely away, though he could scarcely see the door for the mist before his eyes. He knew that for this parting there would be no more meeting here below.

The early dusk was falling when a dying woman started up from her sleep, and cried out, "Where is my son? Oh, where is Kazimir? There is something I must tell him!"

But her son was far on his way by that time, and her weak voice could not call him back.

It was too late to give him the warning, so long, half-shamedly withheld, and which, had it but been uttered, might have altered many things in his life.

CHAPTER XIV.

KING AND QUEEN.

. . . "I'll speak to her,
And she shall be my queen"

—MILTON.

It was quite dark when Kazimir reached Krakow next evening. The streets were full of rolling carriages, and the houses shone with lights. "What a gay town!" he thought, as he stared out. He drove straight to the address which Vizia had given him, and rang the bell with all the fury of hot haste.

After a torturing interval, a maid-servant looked out leisurely.

"Are the ladies at home?" asked Kazimir, anything but leisurely.

"The ladies at home!" The swarthy servant stared at him, as if this supposition was of the most insane. "What ladies are at home on the last day of the carnival!"

He had never reflected that this was indeed the last

day of the carnival: he remembered it now. So they were out; but they might not be far.

“Where are they, then?”

“Where else should they be but at a ball?”

“At a ball, of course,” said Kazimir, with a pang of disappointment. “But where? Is it near?”

The girl laughed impertinently. The idea of not knowing where the ladies were! Why, where everybody else—everybody belonging to the society, that is to say—was to-night. Where else but at Wieliczka, attending the splendid festivity which his Imperial Highness had arranged in the salt-mines!

Imperial Highness—splendid festivity—salt-mines! The words darted in by Kazimir’s ears through Kazimir’s brain. The salt-mines were seven miles off. For a minute his spirit sank and his courage flagged, but in the next they rose again. He had made a rapid calculation, and found that he could still reach Wieliczka and return in time for the next train. “Thank you,” he said, with a suddenness which rather astonished the impertinent servant-girl; and ten minutes later he was on his way to Wieliczka.

It was a very close run, but it stood within the bounds of possibility; and in Kazimir’s present state of mind, anything short of flying seemed feasible. He reached Wieliczka after a short eternity, and found no difficulty in being directed to the salt-mines. The

road which led there was crowded, and the entrance most brilliantly lighted. "Card of invitation, please," said a voice beside him, in a quick mechanical tone, which betrayed the weariness of having repeated this question several hundred times that evening; and Kazimir turning, met a pair of expressionless eyes, and saw a hand stretched out towards him. He had never stopped to consider this emergency. Of course he had no card of invitation,—no one had invited him, and no one expected him; but the thought of his helplessness only fixed his resolve. Every obstacle made him more determined that he should not be conquered.

The expressionless eyes were still fastened on him; the gloved hand was still mechanically held out.

Drawing himself up to his fullest height, and gazing steadily at the man, Kazimir, with great distinctness, answered, "I have no card of invitation."

The expressionless eyes began to show a little expression,—they looked surprised.

"But without a card you cannot enter."

"I must enter," said Kazimir, with a calmness born of his despair.

"But your dress——" and the man threw a glance down the figure of this mud-and-travel-stained hussar.

"Oh, that is all right," said Kazimir, haughtily. "Let me pass."

“But the Archduke——”

“It is just the Archduke that I must see; he knows me well, do you hear?” Kazimir had once, at half a mile’s distance, caught sight of his Imperial Highness’s highly imperial back.

The man looked staggered, though he still protested.

“But my orders are strict.”

“I daresay, but *my* business is urgent. It is on account of the war,” said Kazimir, with magnificent vagueness. “I take the whole responsibility upon myself; let me pass; it will be the worse for you if you do not.”

The official, thoroughly intimidated, shrank to one side, feeling an undefined impression that this imperious stranger must, from the very fact of having no invitation, and of being splashed with mud from head to foot, be some extremely exalted personage, else surely he would not dare to stalk past the barrier in this undaunted fashion. On second thoughts the official was inclined to think that he must be some near connection of the Imperial family, and that his business was probably some secret mission connected with the impending war.

There was some little delay before Kazimir found himself safely landed in the lower regions, and caught the sound of music, and was almost blinded with the glitter around him. In the long passages there were

strange figures, standing in rows—mountain spirits they seemed to Kazimir—with the orange light burning over their forehead, and their hammers and pick-axes by their side. He passed through a double row of these workmen, and seemed to be walking into an endless cavern of crystal, which divided at every turn into smaller and various-sized caves.

The music sounded nearer every moment, and the lights shone out more brilliantly. Kazimir, having in great haste traversed several long passages, started back suddenly as a louder burst of music, and a brighter glare of light, warned him that he was near the ball-room. In the ball-room he dared not show himself in his present plight; for, in spite of his unflinching replies to the official at the entrance above, he knew well enough that his Imperial Highness was celebrated for possessing an eagle eye with regard to any deficiency in military adjustment; and the sight of a muddy hussar, making a blot upon the brilliancy of shining salt-columns and sparkling candelabras, could not have escaped him.

He retreated into the passages, scanning every person anxiously, but seeing nothing but strange faces and unknown figures. He spent a quarter of an hour in these regions, having often to step aside into a niche as some party of chattering and brightly dressed women passed him. Refreshments and flowers were

carried by; officers without a spot of mud upon their uniforms, and with magnificently stiffened moustaches, clinked past; and yet not a face came that Kazimir knew. At the end of that quarter of an hour he began to contemplate the possibility of failure. Might he not wander about here for hours without getting even a clue to Xenia? He had reached a comparatively solitary spot now; the little chapel cut in the rock where, once a-year, a solemn Mass is held. Two figures knelt upon the steps,—hooded monks, with heads bent and hands clasped in prayer. Kazimir would have wished to shake one of them out of his devotions, and send him as a messenger to Xenia. But, alas! the monks could not help him; for, like the steps and the altar, the ceiling and the walls, they were of solid salt. For centuries their salt hands had been clasped, and their salt heads been bent, and for centuries more would they pray thus motionless. Had he spent so much energy for nothing? thought Kazimir, beginning to despair. Had he carried down every obstacle by the mere force of resolution, only to gain this? What! And when he knew that she could not be more than a few hundred yards off. No, he would not lose courage yet; and as if in answer to this thought, he suddenly caught sight of a back that appeared familiar. It was a broad black back, belonging to a very large gentleman who was hurrying down

the passage. In half-a-dozen strides Kazimir had caught him up, and laid a hand on his shoulder. The man turned round with a start, and Kazimir saw that he had guessed right : it was that amiable young giant, Tiburtio.

Tiburtio stared hard, dropping one lavender glove in his amazement. "In the name of the marvellous, how do you come here?" he would probably have said, had Kazimir left him time to speak ; but Kazimir did not leave him time. Dragging him aside into the chapel, he put the abrupt question, "Is Pani Xenia here?"

"Pani Xenia," said the giant, staring still harder. "What is that to you?"

"What is that to *you*?" retorted Kazimir, with a sudden pang of jealousy, beginning to wish that he had not met the giant in the salt-mine. "Is she here?"

"Yes, she is," said Tiburtio, drawing on his lavender gloves with an attempt at supercilious triumph. "I am going to dance the next Mazur with her."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Kazimir bit his lip. "Look here : I *must* speak to her at any price, and you see I cannot enter the ball-room."

"I should think not," said the giant, with a smile meant to be sarcastic.

"Well then ; will you be so kind as to take a mes-

sage, privately ; I beg her to speak to me out here, for a few minutes only."

"Oh, but I cannot do that."

"You will do it if I ask it as a favour." Kazimir had a remarkably steady gaze: the giant had grown small under it already on the day of the fox-hunt; he grew small again now.

"She could not come, you know," he faltered, "her aunt is so strict."

"Don't ask her aunt, ask her."

"And the Mazur? surely you don't want me to lose my Mazur?"

"Oh, man, man!" cried Kazimir, with a stamp on the salt-floor, "what does a Mazur matter? I tell you that I must see her; I am going off to the war. It is only to say good-bye,—don't you understand? I shall probably be shot in a month."

"To be sure, yes." The giant brightened up at the idea. "Of course you may be shot."

"Of course; and if you were going to be shot, I would do the same by you—I really would. There, go, like a good fellow, and I shall be eternally grateful."

The giant, fairly carried away by the impetuosity of his rival, went off on the errand; and Kazimir paced about in a fever of impatience.

Faintly the first note of the Mazur reached his ears, and with that first note all sorts of horrible

suppositions were engendered in his brain. Supposing Tiburtio had not been true to his word,—supposing Xenia had refused to come,—supposing the aunt had interfered,—supposing—ah!—Kazimir stood still, rooted to the spot, at sight of the dazzling vision before him.

Through the entrance of the chapel a beautiful nymph was floating towards him; her feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground, as, wrapped in misty blue clouds, she advanced. Silver dewdrops sparkled among the clouds, and crystal flowers flashed in her hair and on her breast. The softest blush was on her cheek, and the shyest smile upon her lips. She was so beautiful that the bright walls beside her seemed to grow dull; so beautiful, that Kazimir, forgetting his hurry, stood and gazed in speechless admiration.

“You want to speak to me?” she whispered shyly, as Kazimir remained dumb. How much sweeter was her voice than he had ever before realised!

“Yes,” he said, still half in a dream. That figure in sea-blue and silver seemed to his excited fancy almost too lovely to be human. She must be a *Majka*, a fairy of the mountains; a *Russelka*, a nymph of the waters; an Undine or a Loreley, with a Loreley’s bright beauty, but not with a Loreley’s cold heart.

“I hope you have not waited long for me?”

“No; it does not seem long now.”

“It was so difficult to get away, just when the Mazur was beginning; it is the last Mazur this carnival, you know. I am afraid they will miss me, but perhaps I can get back before the end. What a pity you can't come into the room and look at the dancing, it is so delightful to-night!” Her eyes were shining, and her lips glowing with the animation of the last waltz; her hair, hanging in soft curls, had got loosened by the movement, and strayed in charming disorder down her back. She was panting and flushed with triumph—her young head still in a whirl at the recollection of the last compliment paid to her. His Imperial Highness had deigned to express the opinion that the girl in blue and silver was the queen of the ball-room, and half-a-dozen voices had whispered to her the remark in an improved form. No wonder if the seventeen-year-old heart fluttered, and the seventeen-year-old blood tingled again and again. “I have danced so much to-night!” She looked at him wonderingly as he still stood silent.

“How beautiful you are!” he said at last. Xenia blushed crimson.

“I think my dress is pretty,” she said, with a smile which was scarcely coquettish. “I copied it from the ‘Journal des Demoiselles.’ I was not quite sure about the flowers, so I wrote and asked, and the

answer was, 'Camellias bleues avec poudre crystalline.' They give questions and answers every week, you know."

"It is the most beautiful thing I have seen in my life."

"Really? And oh, do you know, Pan Bielinski," she gazed at him with large and earnest eyes, "in the last number of the 'Journal des Demoiselles,' the same that had my dress, there were two more chapters of the story; and do you know what the end is? The second ring is found, and in it there is another will, which reverses the first; and so Palmérie has got no choice but to take the poison she has discovered in a hole of the wall. The number just breaks off when she is raising the poisoned goblet to her lips. And Barbarin——"

"Barbarin be d——d!" burst out Kazimir, all at once recovering his full senses.

"Oh, Pan Bielinski!" she started a step aside, "I have never heard you swear before,—and we are in a chapel, too!"

"I beg your pardon a hundred times; I beg it a thousand and million times," said Kazimir, feeling perhaps that he was acting ungratefully by Barbarin, who in the months past had proved a faithful friend, and done him many a good turn.

Of course they were in a chapel, and he had no

right to disturb the devotions of those two salt-monks beside them.

“You must really forgive me; I have gone through a good deal; I have tried so hard to find you. I went to Lodniki first, thinking you would be there. Oh, Pani Xenia, why did you not stay there? You said you would.”

“I meant to stay.” Xenia looked at him somewhat fearfully. “I really meant to stay, but my aunt wrote me such an urgent letter to come for the three last balls; and even then I did not want to go. I asked Vizia what I was to do, and she wouldn’t tell me; she said I must decide for myself: and then a second letter came——”

“You would not have gone if you knew how unhappy it made me,” exclaimed Kazimir, bringing down his hand somewhat violently on the polished shoulder of the salt-monk. “I was so sure that you would stay.”

Xenia drooped her head, and shrugged one white shoulder, pulling forward a loose curl against her cheek. “I would not have come out of the ball-room, if I thought you would talk so angrily to me.” Her under lip was quivering, and Kazimir, on the instant, called himself a brute.

“Pardon me again, only once more; it is only I who am to blame. You are an angel of sweetness and

kindness, to come from that lighted ball-room, where you are admired and worshipped, out to me here, only because I asked you."

"Oh, but that does not matter," said Xenia, while the pout melted quickly to a smile. "I shall be back again before the Mazur is done. I was told that you wanted to speak to me very much."

"Do you know why I want to speak to you now at this moment, and in this hurry?"

"No." She looked up, startled by the sudden change in his tone.

"It is because I am going away."

"Are you? Where to?"

"I am called off to my regiment, and in a fortnight the war may be declared."

"You are going to the war!" the blue eyes dilated with alarm.

"Yes, that is why I begged you to speak to me. I wanted to see you to say good-bye."

"Oh, don't go, don't go!" she cried.

"I wanted to see you, Xenia, because I cannot go away without telling you that I love you."

Xenia shrank back in fear; but Kazimir, with growing vehemence, went on. "You may not have guessed it, I have not betrayed it before; but on the first day that I saw you, I knew that the world had been empty for me till then. I had never guessed that there could

be such happiness as what I felt when I met your eyes. I love you, Xenia; there is no word that can tell you how I love you. Believe me only that you are more to me than sunshine, light, and life itself; believe me, Xenia,—believe me, it is you are the sunshine of my heart and the ideal of my life.”

With one white arm thrown round a salt-column, Xenia stood and looked back at him — shrinking, blushing, and trembling, as for the first time in her young life she listened to the tale of love. And it was a wild and fiery tale she listened to; for Kazimir had given reins to his passion, and it ran away with him at headlong pace. It seemed that never till now had the meaning of that one word Love been understood, and it appeared that everything which had ever been celebrated under that name was mere weak imposture compared to this feeling. He went on to tell her that his love was deep as the sea and countless as the stars of night, and to wish that he had the blood of ten thousand men to shed for her sake. The metaphors were, to put it mildly, imperfect; but fortunately neither of the two people concerned was calm enough to analyse words, for she was dizzy with the delicious agitation of the moment. She could make no attempt to stop him; but remembering the short measure of his time, Kazimir, with an effort, checked himself.

“Listen, Xenia—tell me this: Is there any other man whom you—O God, must I say it?—whom you love?”

“No—oh no,” faltered Xenia, sinking her burning face.

“Thank heavens!” he muttered. “And tell me this still: Your friends want you to make a rich marriage; do you want that too?”

“Oh no; not at all.” She raised her head and looked at him quite openly. It was impossible to doubt for a moment the answer of those innocent blue eyes. They were as pure and as candid as the eyes of any child. “I never thought of that at all.”

“I knew it,” cried Kazimir’s heart, exultantly. “She is an angel of disinterestedness!”

“And there is no man you care for?” he persisted, while the figure of the wealthy Tiburtio flitted through his mind. “No man who is richer than I am?”

“None—none at all,” she repeated.

“And,”—he came a step nearer and took both her hands,—“Xenia, I have not known you long; but I have thought sometimes—I have dared to hope—that you cared for me, Xenia. Was I right—is it so? Is it indeed so?” He was straining both her hands between his own; he was striving to read an answer under the downcast lashes. Xenia was trembling from head to foot. The passionate tremor of his voice, and the

intensity of fire in his eyes, were so new and strange to her as to be almost alarming. It frightened her to find herself loved in this terribly earnest fashion. Her lips were quivering; while the necklace of crystal beads flashed up, and grew dull, and flashed up again, as they rose and fell upon her panting breast.

“Is it so, Xenia—is it so indeed?” urged Kazimir, and he bent to catch her whisper. It was all he could do to hear the one word “Yes.”

That syllable was the key which opened the gates of paradise upon earth; without hesitation or reflection he threw his arm around her and kissed her. Oh the fire and the sweetness of that kiss! All the world seemed to fade around him; nothing to be real but this one spot on which they stood; no one to exist except these two, and those salt and silent witnesses of the scene. Ah! now would be the moment to defy every earthly prejudice—to kneel down on the salt-step before the salt-altar, to shake one of those hooded figures by the arm, and to cry into his ear—“Arise, old monk, and wed us!” Alas! alas that it could not be! This very moment, when all the world seemed distant and dim, was just the moment when they must respect its laws. With a tremendous effort of will, Kazimir let go the hands he held, and made an attempt—a rather late attempt—at calmness. In the momentary silence that ensued, the strains of the Mazur fell upon their ears.

“Xenia, you have said Yes; that is enough for me; it is more even than I dared to hope. I am quite content to wait now, for years even, if necessary; but I hope it may be sooner. I will try and explain what I mean. I am a poor man, as you know, and it would be ungenerous of me if I were to take advantage of your innocence and inexperience to bind you to a poor man’s life. Soon I shall have made my way—this war will help me to make it—and I shall then be in a position to claim you; but it may be years instead of months. I do not want to bind you, my darling, but if you love me you will wait for me. Is it not true?”

“Yes,” whispered the trembling girl; “I will wait. Will it be long?”

“I have told you that it may be years. Is that too long?”

“Oh no, I don’t think so.”

“Are you quite sure you understand me, Xenia?” said Kazimir, struggling all the time to quell his passion. “I do not ask you to give any promise; but when I come back some day and ask you to marry me, you will not be frightened, will you?”

“No, I won’t be frightened,” said Xenia, shrinking at the plain word “marriage;” “we can speak of that then, you know. Oh, I hope this is not wrong; what would my aunt say? I wish Vizia was here!”

"I am sure I don't," said Kazimir between his teeth.

"May I tell Vizia?" she asked, anxiously.

"Tell your cousin, of course; she will help you and advise you; she has guessed it already. Good heavens, my time is nearly up!"

"Must you really go to this dreadful war?" The ready tears started to her eyes.

"I must; and if I should not return——"

"Oh, don't speak like that;" she clung to him for a moment, and the tears sparkled on her lashes and fell.

"I will not say a word to distress you. There is only time now to say good-bye."

"I am so glad I gave up the Mazur," she whispered. "I really don't mind losing it at all."

"Oh yes," he said, with a start. He had forgotten just then that there were such things as Mazurs in the world. He was wondering whether he could not pass the rest of his life in the salt-mines; but alas! again, this also could not be.

"It is good-bye, now—really good-bye. I do not say, 'Don't forget me'—I know you will not; but"—he hastily detached a small coin from his watch-chain—"keep this as a memory of to-night—keep it till I come again; and, Xenia, let me have something in exchange—anything, a flower off your dress—it will help me to wait."

“Yes, but not that one,” said Xenia, as he prepared to pluck one of the crystal blossoms; “here is one that will not be missed. And must you really go? Oh, is there not some one coming?”

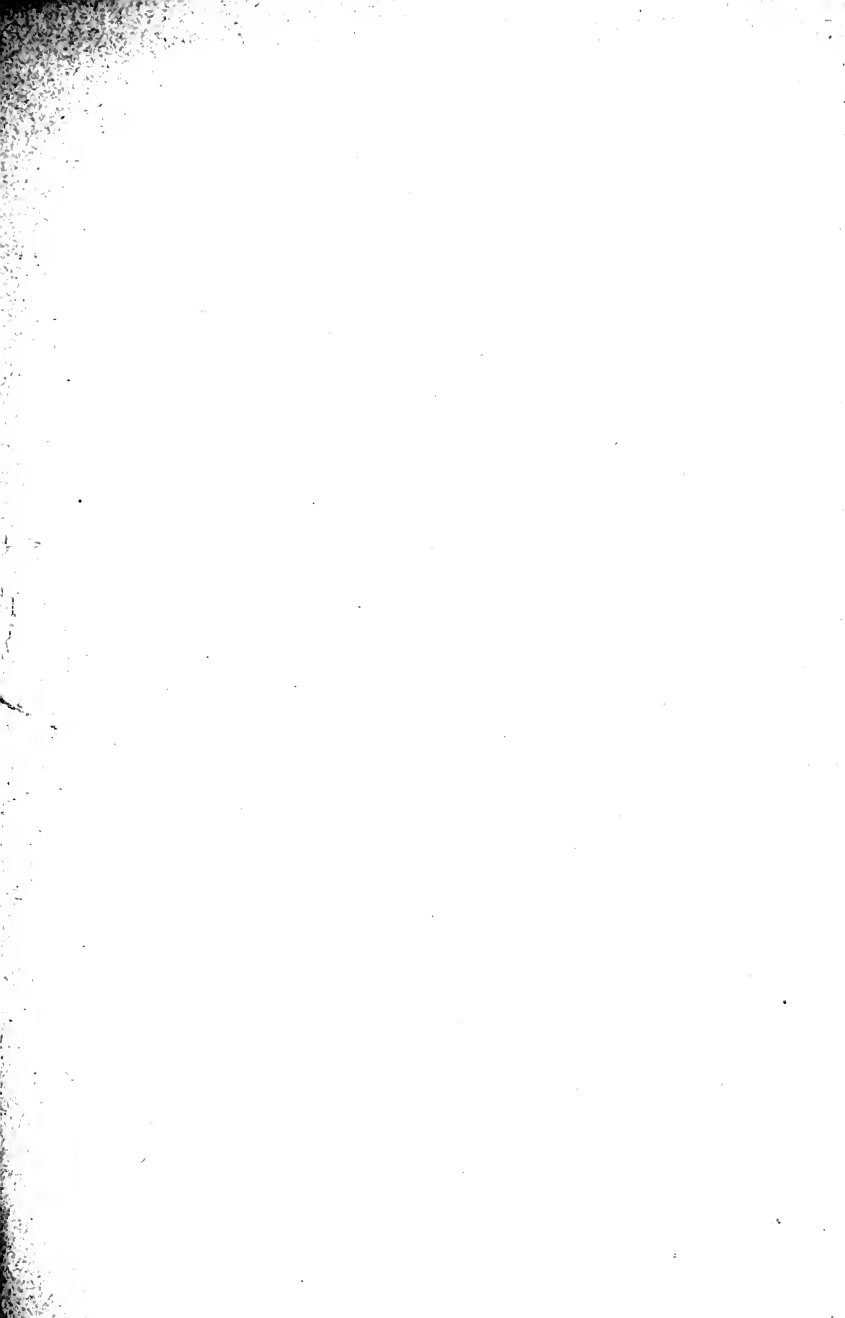
There were steps and voices approaching in the passage. The Mazur music had come to an end. Kazimir caught her in his arms once more. One more kiss, one more word, and they had parted. The beautiful nymph, drying her eyes, floated back into her crystal cave—back to the lights, the music, and the triumphs of the evening; and Kazimir, having stood and watched till she had vanished, turned to go his own way, a way that led through the dark night to duty, hardships, and danger—who knows? perhaps to death.

In the deserted chapel the saline monks prayed on with their salt-heads bent and their salt-hands clasped just as though there were nothing in the world but salt; nothing as sweet as a lover’s kiss, nothing as bitter as a lover’s parting!

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